

POSITION AND BELIEFS OF OKONKWO IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL TIMES: ANALYZING THE CONFLICT OF OPINION AND DIFFERENCE IN BELIEFS BETWEEN OKONKWO AND THE CHANGING IBO SOCIETY IN THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

In *Things Fall Apart* the readers get to know about a few Ibo societies of both the precolonial and colonial times. The protagonist of the novel Okonkwo is shown to have different viewpoints regarding the society of his fatherland, Umuofia of the precolonial and colonial times. He respected and lived by the rules of the society in the precolonial times but after the arrival of the colonizers, there could be seen emergence of different viewpoints and opinions between Okonkwo and the larger society. The society changed a lot as a result of the arrival of the colonizers who brought rules and regulations that were not always beneficial to the society. As Okonkwo found it hard to understand the changing nature of the society and also at times because of holding a different viewpoint than the other tribesmen regarding various ideas and issues like revenge, violence etc. along with regarding the colonizers, he had to suffer which ultimately led to his end.

Keywords: precolonial, colonial, opinion, revenge, violence.

INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe also describes various changes that took place in the society where the novel is set as a result of the coming of some “white man”(Achebe 136). After the reading of the novel the readers get to know that big changes happen in the society as a result of the coming of these men. These changes ranged from religious beliefs to economy to administration and various other fields. These changes deeply influenced the life of the native inhabitants along with the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo. So, in this article, we will try to figure out the changing nature of the society and the conflict of opinion and beliefs between the changing society and the protagonist of the novel.

The novel starts in a precolonial setting. Okonkwo is a member of the Ibo tribe who resides in Umuofia. Okonkwo is described as a very hard working person. Though when his father died he only left his son with a pile of debt but “[f]ortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father”(Achebe 8). Okonkwo through hard work was able to achieve a status in the society. Despite faced with hardships, Okonkwo not only became a famed wrestler, he also became, “a wealthy farmer”(Achebe 8). He had also earned “two titles”(8). Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered(8). So, at a young age because of his achievements Okonkwo was able to become “one of the greatest men of his time”(8).

In the precolonial times, the tribe is shown to have its own way of functioning with its customs and beliefs. Apart from that the Ibo tribe is shown to have their own Gods and Goddesses whom they worship with full faith. This is the society in which Okonkwo was born and raised and he seems to be fully accepting the social structure of this time. Till Okonkwo only had to live according to the rules of his tribe, everything was all right for him. Not only could he rise up from poverty, he was also able to live the life of a respected member of society. He also got to take part in various important rituals and functions of

the tribe. In this regard we can talk about how he was one of the members of “the nine egwugwu”(Achebe 85). Though he had to run for his motherland Mbanta for refuge when he unintentionally killed a tribesmen but he did not have any conflict with the tribe. He fled to his motherland after committing the crime as it was the way according to the tribe. In regards to crime, the anonymous narrator of the novel stated:

The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.(Achebe 117).

In fact, Okonkwo was actually not happy being absent from his fatherland as there was more chance of his thriving in Umuofia, his fatherland during the seven years of his exile. Therefore while living in Mbanta, “he regretted every day of his exile”(Achebe 153). So, in the precolonial times Okonkwo could be seen living in harmony not only with the rules and beliefs of his tribe but also with the tribe or the society in general.

Striking changes came to the society after the coming of the “white man”(Achebe 130). When Okonkwo was still exiled in his motherland Mbanta, “the missionaries had come to Umuofia”(135). In Mbanta too, missionaries came to preach their religion. There were six of them and one was a white man(136). Their religion was different from the beliefs of the Ibo. In Mbanta, “[t]hey asked for a plot of land to build their church”(Achebe 140). The villagers of Mbanta then “offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they cared to take”(141). Though the villagers expected the missionaries to die soon as according to the beliefs of the villagers one will die if it lives on the “Evil Forest” but to their surprise the missionaries did not(141). The church also started receiving followers. The readers soon also get to know about various other negative rules and customs of the Ibo. After the coming of the missionaries to Mbanta, the readers are introduced to a class of people called “osu”(147). They were treated in the society as, “outcast”(148). Two of them were eventually admitted in to the church upon one condition by Mr Kiaga, who was the white missionary’s “interpreter”(141). Mr Kiaga “ordered the outcasts to shave off their long, tangled hair”(148). Mr Kiaga ordered them to do so as it was “the mark of his forbidden caste”(148). When they did what was asked of them by Mr Kiaga they were welcomed in the church. Mr Kiaga allowed them to follow the “new religion”(147). Upon seeing two of their fellow people getting admitted and accepted among the Christians eventually, “nearly all the osu in Mbanta followed their example”(149). The church people also saved the twin babies who were thrown away. Okonkwo's oldest son Nwoye also joined the church. This was just the beginning of troubles for Okonkwo. It was a huge loss for Okonkwo as Nwoye was his son and a member of his family.

During Okonkwo's exile, “[t]he missionaries had come to Umuofia”(Achebe 135). To Umuofia, “[t]he white men had also brought a government”(164). Apart from that, “[t]hey had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance”(164). So, they started ruling the native people of Umuofia.

The daily life of the Ibo people got affected by the rules of the colonizers. Before, the Ibo people could rule themselves but now they had fallen under the jurisdiction of the white people. Though the white people were only a few in number, they had a big number of followers who were actually native Ibo people. As Obierika stated:

Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government.(Achebe 165).

Some clansmen, “have broken the clan and gone their several ways”(193). So, the white rule in a way also divided the native people as some of them were helping the colonizers thus making their own clan weaker in return. As stated by Obierika:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.(Achebe 166).

Now the people of Umuofia could no longer live their lives the way they used to. They probably were also scared as they had heard the stories of Abame. There had been a massacre in Abame which was an act of revenge by the white people. The massacre was caused by “three white men and a very large number of other men”(Achebe 131). They massacred so many people in Abame as the clan had killed a “white man”(130). So, it was an act of revenge by the white people. As said by Obierika about Abame, “[e]verybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose chi were wide awake and brought them out of that market.”(131). This incident also impacted the lives of the people of Umuofia and a fear also set among them regarding the “white man”(Achebe 130).

After the arrival of the colonizers, differences of opinion also occurred between Okonkwo and the tribesmen. The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable (Achebe 172). As most of the changes in the society happened when Okonkwo was not present, so it was more hard for him to comprehend the changes that had taken place in the society. Okonkwo's trouble with adjusting and understanding the changes that took place in his tribe was also because of his exile. When he was absent from his fatherland because of his exile, already a big number of changes had taken place among the people of Umuofia as a result of the arrival of the colonizers who brought along with them a "new religion and government and the trading stores" (Achebe 172).

Okonkwo who had been to various tribal wars could be seen quite unhappy with the position of his tribe in the colonial times. Even during his exile he questioned, "[w]hat is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?" (Achebe 165). From this question the readers can realize that there is difference of opinion between Okonkwo and the other members of the tribe regarding the colonizers. Unfortunately, "[t]here were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation" (Achebe 168). Among other reasons it was because the colonizers "had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia" (168).

During the colonial times, there could also be seen a difference in viewpoint between Okonkwo and the other tribesmen regarding revenge and violence. In Umuofia, "six leaders" of the tribe were punished under the colonial jurisdiction when the church of Umuofia was destroyed by "the egwugwu" (Achebe 183, 181). The destruction of the church took place because a member of the church named Enoch had removed an egwugwu's mask in front of the people. One act of violence against the colonizers led to the suffering of six tribesmen. The tribe also had to pay fine for the release of the six tribesmen. This incident also showed the breakdown of the society as Enoch who was the cause of the unfortunate events was actually a member of the Ibo community before he accepted Christianity. The incidents that took place after this act of punishment helps the readers understand how differently Okonkwo and the other tribesmen looked at the situation. After enduring the humiliating punishment given by the colonizers Okonkwo thought:

If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself. (Achebe 189).

So, Okonkwo wanted to have his revenge. And in the end, Okonkwo killed a messenger but the society did not take part in his actions and let the other messengers flee. Immediately after this act Okonkwo realized the different opinions held by him and the other tribesmen of Umuofia regarding the colonizers. Okonkwo was in support of revenge and as a result also inflicted violence on one of the white people's messengers. On the other hand, after Okonkwo's action the native people of Umuofia were not in support of using violence against the colonizers. This could be because the native people had got to know about the sufferings of both Abame and their own tribesmen who were harshly punished by the colonizers on different occasions. Although Okonkwo too had heard of the brutality of the colonizers and also firsthand experienced it but he thought differently from his tribesmen. This difference in viewpoint could be better understood with the following quoted lines:

He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: 'why did he do it?' (Achebe 194)

These lines also help to realize how Okonkwo got fully convinced that his believes are different from those of his tribesmen regarding revenge and violence in the colonial times. The tribe did not confront or engaged in any conflict with the colonizers after Okonkwo's killing of the messenger. This incident also help the readers realize that the tribe was nothing alike to what it was before or in the precolonial times in regards to certain beliefs and ideologies.

This incident also helps to identify the fear now prevalent among the tribesmen regarding the colonizers. In the end Okonkwo ended up committing suicide as a result of the different viewpoints held by him and the broader society although in the clan suicide was in fact considered to be an "abomination" (Achebe 196). The tribesmen also termed suicide to be "against our custom" (196). He respected his tribe and its customs but ultimately because of the recent changes taking place in the society ended up taking a decision which was in fact not welcomed in the tribe; a decision which turned out to be "an offence against the earth" (Achebe 196). This difference of opinion between Okonkwo and the tribesmen also help to identify the changing nature of the society of Umuofia.

In this way, the article tries to talk about the conflict in belief and opinion between Okonkwo and the changing society. The change was a result of the arrival of the colonizers. After seeing the changes coming to the society Okonkwo could realize that the tribe was not as it was before the arrival of the colonizers. In the precolonial times, “Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours”(Achebe 11). Umuofia had a strong position before the arrival of the “white man”(Achebe 130). And about the tribes position in the precolonial times the narrator stated:

And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle-the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.(Achebe 12)

Okonkwo once said to Obierika that “[w]e must fight these men and drive them from the land”(165). As could be understood from the above quoted line, he did not want the colonizers residing in his homeland. Remembering a tribal war with Isike which took place in the precolonial times, Okonkwo thought that, “[t]hose were days when men were men”(190). But now Okonkwo had come to the conclusion that, “[w]orthy men are no more”(189). Okonkwo also decided to have his revenge so to avenge the abuse he had to undergo under the foreign rule. He also once told Obierika after receiving the punishment that, “I shall fight alone if I choose”(Achebe 191). But the society was not thinking in a similar manner about the colonizers like Okonkwo which unlike Okonkwo in the end did not confront the colonizers when Okonkwo killed a messenger. The tribe was not behaving like Okonkwo, they were no longer in favor of his way of thinking. We can realize this when the Ibo people let the other messengers run away after Okonkwo killed one of the messengers. This reaction of the tribe could also be because the tribesmen had witnessed the brutal punishments and violence which the colonizers were capable of inflicting on the Ibo people along with economic and other reasons. Okonkwo’s action only ended up distancing him from his very tribe. So, in the changed society of the colonial times, not holding the same position with the society regarding the colonizers along with regarding various ideas and issues like violence and revenge etc. ultimately led to Okonkwo's destruction.

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