

Epistemological function of myth in restoring Cultural Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract - Chinua Achebe's works have been a source for the postcolonial generation and writers to understand the glory of precolonial status of their Nation, harsh realities of colonialism and challenging period of Postcolonialism for restoration of cultural identities and history of Africa. This Paper is an attempt to highlight and give an insight into dynamically and epistemologically developed myth of Igbo people that acts as potential storehouse of history in reestablishing the African's Nation and their Identity. The paper also tries to explore Achebe's intellectual endeavors to encounter European's distorted image of African People and their culture through Igbo's native myth.

Index Terms - Myth, Epistemology, Identity and history

COLONIALISM IN AFRICA AND ITS CULTURE

Every society has its myth in various forms like folktales, proverbs, fables, legends, riddles etc. These forms of Myth are passed down from generation to generation with potentially encoded history of the people and function as the basic Cultural Structure of the people. They have been centre of every individual and the society. They also carry out and expose the typical and unique history, culture, social system, and value of every society to the world. They give the people unique Identity. This Myth functions as an alternate history and the principal sources of the past of the society or the community with embedded tradition.

Myth has had even bigger functions to the society that lacks literacy. Even the literate societies' past history depended on the inherited Myth. Herodotus, the 'Father of History' is a good example whose works prove that Myth and history travel on a single track. However, there are a few differences present between History and Myth. While the former is

a static record of incidents, the latter has dynamic functions in recording the incidents. So Myth of every society have wider and deeper meaning in them.

The epistemological functions of Myth in society face many challenges in guiding the people. The intellectual faculties of the forefathers with their typical culturally developed rhetoric tailored their myth to suit the people according to the time and the society in which they live. Even though the Myth is constructed based on the incidents in the society, they at some points of time become an epistemological obstacle for the society to progress due to a few reasons. Among these reasons, Science, Technology and Alien People's skepticism are a few which questions the authenticity and genuineness of the Myth in practice for years.

In Africa from 19th century and till the 20th century, the African civilization and cultures were questioned by the Europeans during the colonization. The colonizers with their Religion, Language and Government gradually infected the mind of the people with rational thought that encouraged them to question their years' long indigenous belief. The trespassing of the Europeans and later their rule in the land brought down the great African culture and identity to shambles. One good example about how the colonizers caused destruction in their occupied lands is described by R K Narayan in *Swami and Friends* through a missionary teacher, Ebenezer, who reject the People's religion and questions their belief as,

"Why do you worship dirty wooden idols and stone images? What did your Gods do when Mohammed of Gazni smashed them to pieces?" (05)

Another example on how the colonizers destroyed the culture of the Native and indigenous people is narrated by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*,

“Does the White man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad”. (126)

EPISTEMOLOGY AND DYNAMIC FUNCTIONS OF THE NATIVE MYTH IN AFRICA

Epistemology deals with the philosophy particularly the human's belief, truth and justification. It continuously seeks to find the origin of the knowledge in every human society according to the geographical conditions in which they live and develop their culture. While Myth is the vehicles of Supreme Truth, Belief and Structure of the Society in the form of stories, Epistemology helps them to adapt and add ingredients to the Myth to help the people to regulate and interpret their lives for their existence. It had been the regular happening until the development of Science and its impact in the human society. Contrary to epistemology and myth that deal with people's knowledge and wisdom, Science deals with experiments.

The rise of Science and widespread colonization suppressed many societies' Myth and Cultural Identity. Similar to Asia that suffered by colonization, Africa did experience the same fate under the colonizers' rule and lost their Myths and Cultural Identity. Among many tribal societies like Maasai, Himba, Zulu, Yoruba etc Igbo Society of Nigeria did suffered hugely by the European colonizers. Even though the Igbo people were culturally developed and lived in structured society that was guided by their myth, the cruel fist of colonisation showed no mercy on them. It crushed the people and their established social norms for the colonizer's Economic advantage till the African countries gained their political Independence from the European.

After the Political Independence in 1960, the writers of Nigeria realized their cultural contamination by the colonizers. People who learned the European's language during the colonization turned themselves to be the writers to rebuild their Nations to free their country from the stronghold of colonizer's concept and references. Among those writers, Chinua Achebe has been a great pioneer of African Literature who gifted his people a typical African literature with native sense and values. His contributions were

recognized and followed by many postcolonial writers.

Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 became an example for writers of once-colonized countries. The Novel from one aspect shows how the pristine culture and society of Nigeria's Igbo were razed down to pieces by the colonizer. Another aspect of it narrates how glorious the Igbo culture was and how the Igbo peoples were bounded by their social belief. Achebe by using the native's Oral Literature and Myth wants to destabilish the colonial mind and attitudes from his people. His role in building New Africa is expressed by Simon Gikandi as,

“It is crucial to understand how Achebe occupies a crucial diachronic role in the history of an Africa literature almost always driven by the desire to imaginatively capture the key moments of African history from the beginning of colonialism to what has come to be known as postcoloniality”. (vii)

His writing in fact has parallel process of reafrikanization and decolonizing the mind of people in Nigeria as well as Africa and the World. His Novel, *Things Fall Apart* is sprinkled with native ingredients of Folktales, Proverbs, Folk Songs and Rituals. He describes in the novel how developed their culture was and the people's intellectual faculties despite lacking written format of language in the land. About the Igbo society and its development that was possible through epistemology of the people, Ponnuthurai points out the cultural development of the people,

“Okonkwo, knowing his culture intimately, seeks to maintain it and live up to its standards” (97)

Each Proverb, Folktale and Ritual used in *Things Fall Apart* exposes other dynamic functions of the Igbo Myth. Achebe overtly reveals the social aspect and the role of epistemology in Igbo society that helped people to have great bloomed culture. The people's intellectual faculties and bringing in dynamic changes in their Myth is expressed by Achebe as,

“Ikemefuna had an endless talk of folktales. Even those which Nwoye knew already told with a new freshness and the local flavour of a different Clan” (25)

It shows how the indigenous tales of Igbo are adapted to the changing time to guide the people. The Igbo gives important to their proverbs and folk tales because these forms of myth help them to know the history of the society. The changes added to each tales

in any society are for the purpose of shaping the society and explain the present problems. Though Myth is not an intellectual explanation for their practices in society they are developed intellectually in a story form to get the attention of all people from children to elders. The folktale of tortoise by its greediness in the novel symbolizes the sudden rise and fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo by his flaw.

Okonkwo's exile in his motherland for seven years symbolizes the suffering every individual and Society need to go through to survive in the world. His returns to his own village, Umuofia acts as metaphor of his Igbo society. Similar to Okonkwo's destiny, Igbo society also suffers in the hands of the colonizers for not adapting to the cultural and religious clashes happened in the land by the arrival of the European.

Achebe has used every mythological element in his novel to tell his people that the society has had its structure and value. These stories created from epistemological point of view by the Igbo ancestors are cleverly used by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Not only the folk stories, every Igbo proverb he used in the novel teaches the people how the people need to adapt and adjust to the situation. For example his use of proverb,

“There must be a reason for it. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing”. (15)

The proverb conveys the meaning of reason behind everything happens in the land. The Igbo believes that everything that happens in the land and the people need to understand it to appease the god as well as prepare themselves to face it. Through toad, the Igbo people use the didactic method of teaching its people. The toad is used as metaphor for every incident that happens in the land. It indicates to the people that they need to be aware of everything happens in the land and act or react to it safely and wisely rather than hurriedly. Okonkwo who was called by his people as ‘Roaring Flame’ doesn't like himself a man of words but action. Though his physical power and actions made him earns many titles and name in the land, his anger, lack of thinking and not acting according to the situation make him to kill himself. Obierika, one of the characters in the novel sadly expresses the death of Okonkwo as,

“That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. you drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog”. (145)

Okonkwo's was more emotional than intellectual. Emotion has not only cast his life but also the great tradition of Igbo and the entire society. Their gullibility also brought curtain to their culture. In spite of the fact that the Igbo were one of the most powerful Villages in the surrounding, its ancestors had not thought of occupying and fighting with their neighbours to show their military and magical power. It reflects that the Igbo were foresighted people and know the aftermath of Cultural clashes and war. Achebe describes the Igbo's Civilization and foresight as,

“The neighbouring clans who knew of these things feared Umuofia and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement”. (09)

The factors that ruined the great culture and the society of Igbo are their gullible nature, not giving due and equal respect to marginalized people of their own clans and lack of centralized leadership system to control and guide the people. Due to unprecedented entry of colonizers the Igbo were not able to take right decisions or choose leaders at crucial times. The colonizer, after setting up their Government in the Igbo land, had also not given time for the native to think and act to dethrone the colonial rule. The native people were treated as and kept slave by the colonizers throughout their rule. They exploited the Igbo's natural and human resources for the economic and the geographical advantage of England. With their political independence in 1960, the African writers like other countries' postcolonial writers are now started writing their own history from the fragments of their Myth.

CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe by his writing has showed his writers what challenges lie in front of them and how they need to be encountered to articulate and restore what is authentically Africanness. His *Things Fall Apart* explores and shows to the World the intellectual capacity of the Igbo forefathers and their mightiness to restore their culture from the native Myth. He believes that people of every country need to get together to tell their own precolonial stories to provide the missing links to rebuilding the new Nation and their cultural identity. His *Things Fall Apart* acts as example in the process of restoring the African cultural identity by drawing on myth.

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