

THE CHILD BETWEEN TEMPORAL, SCRIPTURAL AND TRADITIONAL VALUES.

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The Mythical World of Childhood in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart introduces the reader into a mythical world of the traditional African society before and shortly after the European's intrusion. In fact it is about the Igbo society, Achebe's Kinsmen. He has chosen to narrate the social events in their actuality. This gives, undoubtedly, his novel an air of historical authenticity. The novel deals with the history of the Igbo society (its laws and its interdictions), and an enemy, more or less monstrous, symbol of transgression (of the instinctual satisfaction which is a source of violence). In a particular style which suits the story, Achebe shows indirectly that westernized African characters will never speak like European ones; they will not speak even like the elders of a given African tribe.

Certainly, the author sees that his protagonist Okonkwo is better to present the very ardent tendency of the Africans and their faithfulness to their mores, but his use of other characters such as Obierika (reasonable man), his father Unoka (weak man), his son Nwoye (an innocent child) and Okonkwo's wives and their children, means that he is not full contentment with his protagonist's behaviour the human nature shows that ones' behaviour is not compulsory welcomed among the one society unless it is consented and shared by the whole to make this point clear, Achebe has specified a particular space to, almost, each character in his story. The character of the child (male or female) is given a great of importance. He/it (the child as character) is alluded to not because of the virtue of his nature as human being, but because he/it is one of the vital element of the story.

In deed, Achebe's novel is not an autobiographical account of his life, but since it is almost impossible to express through words all what goes on in his mind, and since it is of utmost significance that he masters language (parole) to be understood and expresses clearly via one single voice 'multi-voiced interior monologue' what goes on in his mind, the author of *Things Fall Apart* has shown his tendency towards character which may in all cases bear his witness, for both Nwoye and Ikemefuna belong to his father's generation. Achebe's novel is likely to be an autofictionⁱ because the author speaks about the experience of his relatives as if he were among them during that time. His novel has then a very strong autobiographical inspiration, but not an autobiography, for the generic criteria set by Ph. Lejeune concerning autobiographical writings are not relevant to the ones of

Achebe's novel. Quite similar features could be noticed in Marie Cardinal's Novel *Les Mots pour les Dire* which is classified also as an autofictionⁱⁱ.

To accept Achebe's story without character of the child is to deny the transformation to which the Igbo society had been subjected to, and to accept the stereotype portrait of Okonkwo as if it were the only available model in traditional African societies. It is may be through the children that Achebe underlines some occulted realities, or sets his criticism to his societies and takes hands in remoulding it.

A child in Achebe's society might be either the embodiment of the social values or the epitome of weakness and failure. Nowye serves as a point of view character, criticising some of the more negative aspects of the Igbo culture which is alleged to be inflexible in a time where ardent beliefs in spiritual practices are widely spread. Achebe's intentions are more than that mere descriptive aspect of the mythical world, i.e. to understand what happened at the very 'beginning of the early times' (as early as humanization).

The author questions psychological principle of the elementary bases, which is inherent to every human. It is that man is unable to desire any thing which had already been desired by some one else, evidently, as far as the three instincts of life preservation (dominance, food, sexuality) are concerned. In this perspective V.L. Tremblay says that *l'homme ne désire pas l'objet en soi, il copie le désir de l'autre (son double)*. Achebe is, therefore, trying to question the human mimesis, without animal innate regulating pattern (dominance pattern), which leads to generalize violence (chaos, indifference, sacrificial crisis) making the social order impossible.

Through providing a considerable position to the child, Achebe is likely to show that a cultural mechanism might be an adequate substitute for the human mimesis, for he undoubtedly believes that violence should be legitimated. This is what victim mechanism does to lead the multiple doubles (multiple subjects miming one another) to derive their antagonism towards one trouble-maker (Scapegoat), symbol of all those who may cause trouble and violence. Thus the victim gives birth to hierarchical community where every body is submitted to particular border and interdictions.

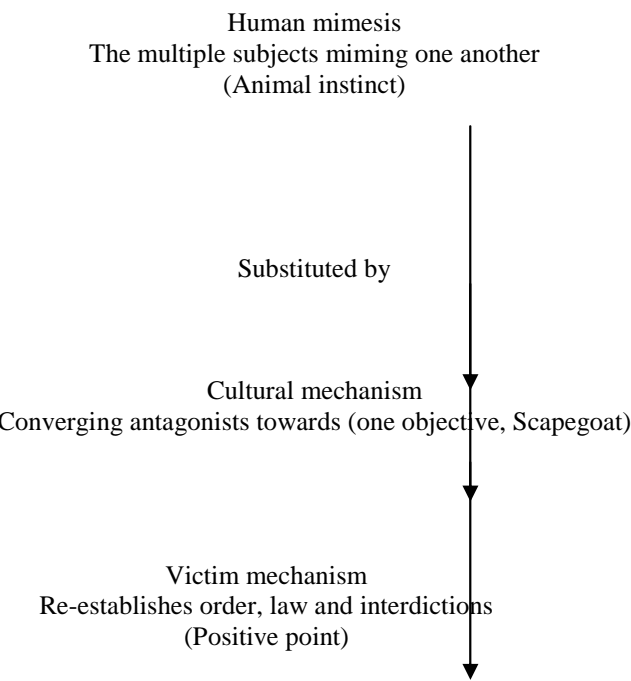


Figure: The triangular Didactic desire from inherent mimesis to established order

It is normal that Achebe in his novel underlines the considerable positive positions attributed to the child in his society; Ikemefuna, the lad and the young virgin (girl) were chose to be the compensation for the murdered Ezeugo, a Umofian woman (p.09) the compensation could have been, for instance, money, piece of land or even an adult, yet it was children. This means that the latter are highly valued in the Igbo society. Moreover if they were offered to the Umofians is that to avoid a bloody war which may destroy human lives, therefore children are seen as symbol of peace

Still a slight difference in terms of sexual differences is noticed. Boys are undoubtedly seen to be the saviour and the embodiment of the social values of their society. Achebe does not deny that fact, for he shows through his protagonist's voice that Nwoye is the finger of his personal god or chi (p. 108). In this sense, one would say that boys have a religious conception in the minds of the Igbo, yet this does never mean that they are ardent believers in their traditional religions: Nwoye's sudden appearance among missionaries in Umofia. (p.101)

The writer suggests that the religious belief has a very straight bound with the child, for the Igbos believe that he is the representative of their ancestors, the spirit of the departed parents this could be just thoughts which are not based on real facts: the dissatisfaction of Nwoye with his traditions and religious practices which are ardently defended and protected even if it were against one's personal will. As instance, Okonkwo's participation in the killing of Ikemefuna who calls him father.

The author seems to be conscious that his task does not consist only in reproducing history. The objects in front of him are segmented into two objects: one which exists really and another which is to be created; one which is visible and another that should be made visible; something is here, but also another thing is lagging behind. Achebe tries to show that the world he presents through his character Nwoye is aridⁱⁱⁱ.

It is evident then that the writer sets himself the task of impregnating some useful principles that should, in all cases, be understood in order not to be prejudiced against his society (Igbo).

Always questions over the possibility of producing an authentic piece of writing remain asked. It is authentic in that, as of representation, it underlines objectively the world in which the actions and events are relevantly interweaving by means of individuals. The children of Achebe, as characters, are an adequate form of representation. To show the negativity of a given group is to set a value judgment, let alone if this judgment is reached through adult character. In this case, one supposes that Nwoye, Ikemefuna or Ezinma (children) have a considerable share in the story making. They are the textual^{iv} elements through which Achebe proves to the reader that the traditional African milieu, like any other social milieu, is subject to transformation and change. But, can this be patterned within one single line? to an answer, it would be preferable to underline the specificities of both the children and the societies to which they belong.

Nwoye, a sensitive child, responds much differently to the religion of the White men (Christianity). He might have found an adequate alternative to flee his father's behaviour, especially that it is the ardent irrational belief in traditional religion which pronounced the fate of Ikemefuna. The latter had become a member of Okonkwo's family in the course of the three years and had had a strong masculine effect on Nwoye who had developed thanks to Ikemefuna. Okonkwo thinks he could find the right spirit in him, unfortunately, he found it in Ezinma (p.46). Okonkwo does not expect from him any masculine act.

Ezinma, Ekwefi's daughter, is involved in some of the appealing moment of the story. One night, for instance, she sits on the floor and listens attentively as her mother tells an Igbo folktale: 'once up on a time... all the birds were invited to feast in the sky...' (p.70); this little lady was the centre of her mother's world; their relationship was not only of a mother and a child, it was rather a companionship of equals; she proves to be an ogbanje or possessed by the spirit, the cause of death of all Ekwefi's past children (nine out of ten of Ekwefi's children died in infancy).

The question that could be raised in this sense is whether this fate has a liturgical or at least a sociological interpretation, and that the author of *Things Fall Apart* wants to acquaint the outsider^v with the African mystical world. In deed, the Igbo people have their way of bringing up children, a way that is not forcibly the same throughout the whole continent. This does not mean that children are, essentially, different. For the child remains a child wherever one goes, not only in Africa but in all over the world. The only difference lies in the rite of passage.

The provided social portrait of the family and of children implies that the children's initiation for the Igbo people means adulthood, otherwise how does one explain Nwoye's and Ikemefuna's help to Okonkwo ? Also, how the stories of blood that Okonkwo tells to his son or even Ezinma's particular position can be translated? To answer these questions without referring to rituals, it is rather to say that the Igbo have no religion. It is because that the spirit of their religion is known when they contrive the belief that human order is not enough for itself and it that it is valueless. J. Cazeneuve shows that the existence of an individual who is integrated into society is determined by initiation and ritual modulation (1958). What is linked to children is certainly linked to the way they are initiated.

That Okonkwo encourages the boys to sit with him in his obi (p.37), or tell them a story that reveals masculinity, stories of violence and blood shed (Ibid) is that he is introducing them to the world of adults, believing himself in that a man should be violent and masculine. However, Achebe shows that although masculinity and violence are good things, wisdom is the best. Because, Okonkwo, the so-called, saviour of his tribe and who, unfortunately, carries within himself the seeds of his own destruction, strives to be everything his father was not (the anti thesis): strong, manly, prosperous, respected. Naturally, he wants his own son, Nwoye, to follow his foot steps. Ironically, however, 'Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and violent, somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell...' (Ibid)

The difference in temperament leads to serious conflicts between the father and his son. One may underline a feature of such rite of passage, which, though relevant to their cultural heritage, it does not seem to be welcomed among some Africans, i.e., the new African generation can not cope with the old way of thinking. If the rite of passage is to germinate a seed of hatred and violence within the spirit of young individuals, it would be better to call it into question.

To speak about the rites of passage in this way, is not to develop a negative halo over one given way of initiation. Therefore initiation has to be approached objectively. In a village like Umuofia, in that period, where there is no school at all, or any relevant alternative, the only suitable alternative is work. It is therefore, seen that Okonkwo takes his two sons to help him in his work; Achebe shows the two sons (Nwoye and Ikemefuna) working on the red outer walls of the compound. This is one of the lighter tasks of the after-harvest season.' (p.39)

It could be supposed that Achebe is not suggesting one single stereotyped view over the rites of initiation in Africa. Through the rite of separation, for instance, Achebe wants to show that the separation of the child from his mother is a crucial decision; and he underlines through his protagonist, through implicitly, that a child needs really his mother: '... Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams' (p.23). This means that the young children are not supposed to be engaged in hard work; instead, they should be provided with much care and affection. This seems to be interpretable: the child who is forced might hate his father and reject all what comes from him. In this sense, the conversion of Nwoye to the new religion (Christianity) is significant. He was thought to have betrayed the spirit of the ancestors, but what is pertinent is that he found in Christianity a way to release the oddities and terrifying elements of the traditional beliefs such as: the killing of Ikemefuna, the problem of twins, violence-worship, etc.

One has to be convinced that the Achebe's intention tends more towards rationalism, i.e., the traditional practices in the African society are to a great extent irrational, and that they must be discussed. To sanction a child by separating him from his mother or even putting him under difficult working conditions is, undoubtedly, to substitute the very nature of the child: that he is so innocent, naïve and weak as to be treated the way an adult is treated, or dealt with as if he were responsible for his behaviour. It is of utmost significance, therefore, to single out that the child's innocence is not more than nature, and that it is for the adults to understand it in order not to deviate him.

Joining John Locke's philosophy that man is neither innately good nor evil, but rather a blank slate upon which sensations create impressions which create conscious experience, a father might be the main cause of his child's deviation. Therefore Okonkwo's behaviour towards his family and sons (beating his wife during the weak of peace, killing Ikemefuna...) urged his child Nwoye to revolt. This revolt consists in choosing a way in life. This is certainly significant as a turning point in the novel. For this act coincides coming of the British to Nigeria and their disruption of the age-old patterns of African village life.

The author stresses the importance of a child in his language, i.e., proverbs, which are regarded as highly valued forms of communication in the African society, bear the essence of childhood. On some occasions, Achebe shows that the elders refer to a child to symbolize courage: '...if a child washes his hand he could eat with kings' (p.06), on another occasion, Okonkwo said: 'A child's fingers are not scaled by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm' (p.47). Even if one speaks about a man in his adulthood, he certainly alludes to childhood. 'Looking at a king's mouth,' said an old man, 'one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast' (p.19). This saying, although, about Okonkwo's fame, underlines that a man was, above all, a child before he became an adult.

The author might, in fact, be the object of his study and be submitted to analysis, if he is a social motor of the culture in which he represents or influences determined strata where the responsibility of liable acts of metamorphosing are directly assumed, or, on the contrary, existing norms of his society are consolidated. This is why one can invoke, at least, his declaration. Yet, still one stands in questioning positions looking whether the author could be excluded from the novel, to be introduced instead to the social context.

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ⁱ The term is defined by its inventor : 'Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut, *autofiction* , d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau' (Doubrovsky, Serge : *Fils* , Galilée, Paris, 1977, '4me de couverture)

ⁱⁱ Since the identity of the names is not formally established between author and narrator (the narrator has not name) and that the autobiographical mentioning does not figure on the cover of the book nor elsewhere on the Paratext, *Les Mots pour les Dire* is not an autobiography according to the established generic criteria of Philippe Lejeune in *le Pacte autobiographique*, 1975

ⁱⁱⁱ Pour Michel Manuel à l'idée que l'Art doit s'occuper de science ou, mieux, que les artistes devraient, avec leurs moyens propres, donner du monde réel de représentations aussi utiles que celles de savants, on oppose d'ordinaire l'argument : « le monde deviendra aride ». Il ne le deviendra pas plus qu'il ne l'est déjà, car aride il l'est déjà, bel et bien... pour que l'homme puisse vivre dans un monde effectivement 'aride' (dépouillé), il doit être transformé. Bertolt Brecht : « Ecrit sur le Réalisme »

^{iv} Characters as textual elements are eye witness. And their action is as well a significant alibi

^v The outsiders are those who have no consistent background on the Igbo culture (Nigerian), and those fail to understand the African psyche and mind.