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“African Rhythm and African Sensibility” in Chinua Achebe’s Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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African rhythm can be visualized from different perspectives. It represents different facets of social reality. Each approach presents a certain truth regarding the African culture and society. The present paper is my own humble interpretation of African music with reference to Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*. I have tried to present a coherent description of African music within its social and cultural context. My hope is that it will complement those studies which analyze the abstract and formal musical structures.

African rhythm is a way of understanding the background of cultural forms. It has a major role in the making of the community. In the words of Leopold Sedar Senghor (translated by John Miller Chernoff):

This organizing force which makes the black style is rhythm. It is the most perceptible and the least material thing. Even in the nightly drumming, black music is not a purely aesthetic manifestation, but brings its faithful into communion, more intimately, to the rhythm of the community which dances, of the world which dances (Chernoff 23).

Music is an integral part of African culture. It reveals the unity among the people. It carries a particular message of their customs and rituals. It can be linked with their history, politics, and also culture in vogue. There is a common style that one can notice in the music that is played for different occasions. Owing to the generalized study there is an issue of looseness and possible distortion. It is difficult to understand the significance of variety in it.

The limitation of this paper is that I have tried to generalize African music. With the help of this study alone we cannot understand the diversity of African culture. The problem is also to translate the structures which appear in another culture into our own textual situation. To make it a little bit easier I have tried to answer questions such as what is the purpose of rhythm. What is its social significance? What is the quality of it? etc.

The answers to these questions have provided me a framework for the study of the relationship between the African rhythm, culture and African sensibility. It also helps to describe the features of the African social situation. It reflects the social and psychological realities of its context. As a student of humanity I have tried to understand the people who make it and the role of it in their society and culture. Because the meaning of it can be better understood by studying the social situation in which it is produced.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* is divided into three parts. The first part provides an information about the hero of the novel named Okonkwo and his family. It also reveals the social and religious background of the African society. The second part tells about the exile of Okonkwo and how he is received by his mother’s kinsmen in Mbanta after the murder of a clansman. His family seeks refuge in his motherland. The third part reveals how things begin to fall apart after the departure of Okonkwo. In this part Okonkwo returns from exile and finds that colonial governors have established their power, values and rules which have led to the tragedy of the native people.

ISSN: 0974-892X

VOL. XIII

ISSUE I

January, 2019

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Poems

Short Stories

Book Reviews

Interviews

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The first part of the novel depicts the African tradition and customs. It also shows how rhythm or music is an integral part of their rituals. Every social occasion is accompanied by music and rhythm. It has an occasional difference, but, it is inseparable from the culture of the African people. Drumming plays an important part in African music. There are other instruments such as flutes, harps, horns, bells etc. used by people for music making. The novel begins with the drum beat and the flutes playing. It is a wrestling competition, where Okonkwo, the great wrestler who for seven years is unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino shows his skills and wins the hearts of the natives.

The wrestling contests are always accompanied by a drummer. They are arranged according to their size. Men beat them with sticks, work feverishly from one drum to another. They pass by the spirit of the drums. The drums rise to a frenzy as the competition mounts in intensity. Not only young men but also old men nod to the beat of the drums and remember the days when they wrestled to its intoxicating rhythm. Before the wrestling competition the two teams face each other across the centre to the other side and point at whosoever each wants to fight. They dance back to the centre together and then close in. The sound of the drummer is a part of every social event. So, it seems as if the crowd has surrounded and swallowed up the drums whose frantic rhythm is no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heart-beat of the people.

Okonkwo's father Unoka was also very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments hung above the fireplace. Sometimes people from another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. He is so fond of music that he always talks about music. He could hear in his mind's ear the intricate rhythms of the Ekwe and the Udu and the Ogene.

Okoye is also a musician. He plays on the Ogene. Ogene is used for communicating a message to the villagers. After beating the boomed hollow metal the crier gives his message and at the end of it, beats his instrument again.

The rhythm is so much a part of African life that it is linked to every change in nature. For different seasons there are different songs. It is also transmitted to the younger generation. For instance, after the rainfall children no longer stayed indoors. They ran about singing: "the rain is falling, the sun is shining, and Alone Nandi is cooking and eating" (Achebe 26)². Nature is a part of their life. They enjoy every change in nature with music and dance.

When Ikemefuna is taken for sacrifice outside Umuofia, he remembers a song which he tried to sing in his childhood to solve the confusion about the death of his mother. He sings it in his mind and walk to its beat. He believes that if the song ends on his right foot, his mother is alive, if it ends on his left foot, she is dead.

The songs and rhythms are inseparable from the stories of the land. For instance, Nwoye tells the stories that her mother had told her. She no doubt still tells it to her younger children. The often told story is the story of the quarrel between the earth and the sky and how the sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony earth. At last vulture was sent to plead with sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of men. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song, she felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where vulture, earth's emissary, sang for mercy.

The beating of the Ekwe with music and dancing and a great feast are a very popular combination in Africa. The feast of the New Yam is held every year before the harvests begin, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. It is an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Like other occasions this occasion is also not an exception for beating of drums.

Most of the communal ceremonies take place on the village ilo. The drum is sounded and the flute is blown in honour of the Egwugwu. An iron gong sounded and the flute blew and set up a wave of expectation in the crowd. To welcome the ancestral spirits of the clan the metal gong beat continuously and the flute, shrill and powerful, floated on the chaos. Every village had its own ilo which is as old as the village itself and where all the great ceremonies and dances took place. As the distant beating of drums began to reach people,

they start to gather on the ilo, the village playground. And the change in its rhythm such as quick, light and gay, reveals the intensity of the occasion. Achebe observes:

The sound of drums was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement (Achebe 32).

After the death of Ezeudu, the ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannons were fired and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over Walla and dancing on the road. It is a warrior's funeral. Ezeudu was a great man and so all the clans were at his funeral. People have respect for their ancestors and the dead clans. Achebe says:

The level of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors (Achebe 89).

It was a great funeral, such as befitted a noble warrior. As the evening drew near, the shouting and the firing of guns, the beating of drums and the brandishing and clanging of machetes increase. The drums beat violently and men leaped up and down in frenzy. In the centre of the crowd Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers danced the traditional farewell to their father.

Okonkwo's friend named Obierika celebrates his daughter's uri. As night fell, burning torches are set on wooden tripods and the young men raised a song. The elder sat in a circle and the singers went round singing each man's praise as they came before him. The musicians with their wood, clay and metal instruments went from song to song. They sang the latest song in the village:

If I hold her hand
She says, "Don't touch!"
If I hold her foot
She says, "Don't touch!"
But when I hold her waist beads
She pretends not to know (Achebe 87).

After the missionaries came to Umuofia, they built their church, headquarters, implemented their laws and converted people to Christianity. It took away the native people from their customs and culture. They got confused. They did not know what was good for them. Okonkwo's son attends the Sunday prayers in the church. He accepts Christianity. The African men joined the ranks of the stranger. They join their religion and help to uphold their government in Africa. But there is also a strange resistance to them. They realize that it is too late for protest. Their song shows the anger against colonialism. When the young people cut grass in the morning they sang in time with the strokes of their machetes:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,
He is fit to be slave
The white man has no sense,
He is fit to slave (Achebe 128).

The song shows how the suppressed native people grieve due to the indignity and mourn for their neglected farms. The two songs above are in iambs modulated by Pyrrhic feet and Trochee which suits the occasion of mourning, regret and grim irony.

People hear strange and fearful sounds. It seems as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that is coming- its own death. Okonkwo could not bear this change. So, he decides to fight against this evil. On this occasion he remembers the song sung by Okudo in the war against Isike. His voice turns every man into a lion. He feels that all gods are weeping. He could not control himself and in a furry of anger he kills the messenger and commits suicide.

Thus, the use of rhythm in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be analyzed on the basis of moral and ethical aspects. Though, it does not give rational assessment about the ethics or the morality, it represents certain fundamental social themes. Rhythm is an integral part of their social setting. It reveals the African culture. It is a way of communication and

interaction. With the help of it we can interpret various aspects of African social life. As John Miller Chernoff in his study of African rhythm observes,

Music is essential to life in Africa because Africans use music to mediate their involvement within a community, and a good musical performance reveals their orientation toward this crucial concern. As a style of human conduct, participation in an African musical event characterizes a sensibility with which African relate to the world and commit themselves to its affairs (Chernoff 154).

The African rhythm reveals the philosophical and ethical tradition of African culture. It refers to the style of living and the sensibility relating to life itself.

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Note: *The title of the article is modeled after a book by Chernoff, John Miller. African Rhythm and African Sensibility Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.*

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