

Challenging Literary Universality: A Pluralistic Reading of Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"

Rahi Disuza

Faculty of arts, university of Lucknow Arts, India

Abstract:

*Charles R. Larson, in his essay "Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature," critically examines the widespread assumption of universality in literary discourse. This paper explores Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* through the lens of Larson's critique, arguing that Achebe challenges Eurocentric notions of literary standards. By presenting an African protagonist and cultural setting distinct from Western traditions, Achebe subverts prevailing expectations and asserts the validity of African experience and expression. The novel foregrounds the unique social structures, beliefs, and moral codes of Igbo society, rejecting the imposition of Western literary ideals. This analysis highlights how *Things Fall Apart* resists ethnocentric biases by emphasizing culturally specific perspectives.*

Keywords: *Ethnocentrism, Universality, Culture, Literature, Postcolonialism Description*

The notion of universality assumes that there are "irreducible features of human life and experience that exist beyond the constitutive effects of local cultural conditions" (Ashcroft 29). The concept of a universal human being can be traced to the movement of western humanism. Although itself a contentious term, various movements have been working alongside it and have been named under the umbrella of humanism. According to Charles Larson universality of literature is "The belief that the universal attitudes should be the same, irrespective of society". Later in the essay, he rejects the idea of universality in literature; According to him, "Literature produced in one culture represents a set of values which are peculiar to that culture only, therefore, to call a piece of literature universal is to impose these values on other arbitrarily". (Larson 463)

He further writes, "when we try to force the concept of universality on someone who is not Western, I think we are implying that our own culture should be the standard of measurement" (Larson 464). He claims, for the most part, the term 'universal' has been grossly misused when it has been applied to non-western literature because it has so often been used in a way that ignores the multiplicity of cultural experiences. Charles Larson rejects the idea of universality in literature; he is of the view that literature produced in one culture represents a set of values that are peculiar to that culture only, therefore to call a piece of literature universal is to impose these values on others arbitrarily, he writes, "when we try to force the concept of universality on someone who is not Western, I think we are implying that our own culture should be the Standard of measurement"(Larson 464).

Each culture has its own set of norms and values which are peculiar to them. Larson writes, "For the most part, the term 'universal' has been grossly misused when it has been applied to non-Western literature because it has so often been used in a way that ignores the multiplicity of cultural experiences" (Larson 465) Larson holds that the concept which is very in vogue in the west and

are parts of western culture, such as kissing, sex, love, lengthy descriptions of country-life and the concept of hero.

He analyses the African culture and literature in comparison to that of the western and concludes that whatever is deemed fashionable in the west, is even not recognized by many people in Africa. But does it imply that these people are inferior and uncivilized if they don't know the western values, he writes,

...are these attitudes so different for the Africans? Is the African way of life less sophisticated than our own? Or is the belief that these supposedly 'universal' attitudes should be the same as ours the naïve one? Is this what we mean when we talk about 'universality' in literature—if someone does not react to something in our literature the same way that we do, then he is to be considered inferior? Perhaps the term itself is meaningless. (Larson 467)

He says that the African people instead of hero, an individual with extraordinary power, believes in the group experience, village life, clan, and tribe, etc. he, therefore, concludes, "The time has come when we should avoid the use of the pejorative term 'universal'" (Larson 467)

In parallel to the idea of Larson, we witness the criticism made by Chinua Achebe in his essay "Colonialist Criticism" on the lingering colonialism in the criticism of African literature by non-Africans. The African writer writes the text or 'they produce literature, their literature goes to Europeans for analysis. Every African literature has to get through the grids of European writers or their big brother consciousness. Achebe sees the faults of colonialist criticism in the assumption that the African writer is "Somewhat unfinished European and that somehow outsiders can know Africa better than the native writers" (Achebe 81). Achebe opposes the European colonial prejudice, habit of ruling and discriminating against others, and comparing African people in their literature, art, and culture with Europeans. He argues that African literature should not be judged with canonical literature since it has its particularity and peculiarity.

Attacking the concept of universality Achebe further says that the European critics judge African text from the angle of universality. They argued that the African text is not universal because it does not speak about universal issues. It speaks only of the African voice; therefore, their text is invalid. They are not able to write about the whole universe. The two main problems with Universalism, according to Achebe are, first that the presumed universality that critics find, is merely a synonym for the "narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe" (Achebe 83) and second, that every literature must "speak of a particular place; evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current and the aspirations and destiny of its people" 83.

Before Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, all the novels that had been written about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans. Mostly, European writings described Africans as uncivilized and uneducated persons. The Europeans, seeing that they thought of themselves as more advanced than Africans, were determined to help Africans shift from the old era into the modern era of civilization and education. *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, by Joseph Conrad was one of the most read novels around the time of its publication in 1899. Conrad described Africa as

a “wild, ‘dark’, and uncivilized continent” (Sickels 1). Following Conrad’s novel in 1952 was *Mister Johnson*, a novel by Joyce Cary. Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Mister Johnson* was also quite a popular read. According to Sickels, *Mister Johnson* describes the novel’s protagonist Mr. Johnson generally as a “childish, semieducated African who reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africa” (1).

It is through the insights of *Things Fall Apart* that the world became more appreciative of Africa and its people and at the same time the truth surrounding the stereotypical ideas that once existed about Africa began to appear in a much clearer light. *Things Fall Apart* provides readers with an insight into Igbo society right before the white missionaries invaded their land. The invasion of the colonizing force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society; from religion, traditional gender roles and relations, family structure to trade. The novel reflects the traditional African society with its own culture untainted by western influences. There is no mention of sex, love, and romantic relationship between the opposite sexes. The African people have been shown as firmly believing in superstitions and myths, the occasion of death is accorded more importance which can rarely be found in other cultures. The society depicted is patriarchal and the status and role of women are confined to domestic chores. The novel depicts the traditions and customs of the African people. There is a great focus on the laws of the tribes.

They believe more in superstitions than in concrete things, as the passage goes, “A snake was never called by its name at night because it would hear” (Achebe 4). The belief that the ghosts of the dead persons appear and mediate in their disputes has been depicted as follows, “Each of the nine Ekwugwu represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. I am the Evil Forest I kill a man on the day that his life is sweetest to him”. (Achebe 6) A strange practice of penalty and compensation as Achebe writes, is “to choose between the war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation” (Achebe 8). To cure their disease, they would resort to other practices than medicine intake, as the passage goes, “the medicine itself was called agadi-nwayi, or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umufoia, in a cleared spot.” (Achebe 9)

In the Nigerian culture as depicted by Achebe, “Okonkwo has three wives and eight children” (10). In another passage, he writes, “There was a wealthy man in the Okonkwo’s village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children” (Achebe 11). The people largely believed in personal achievements and those who were strong in achieving things, Okonkwo’s father was weak in achievement as he says, “Ask my dead father is he ever had a fowl when he was alive” (Achebe 14). They also believed in chi or personal good. The patriarchal societal order exists in the African culture, domestic violence against women is a common practice and was condoned. As Achebe writes, “and when he returned, he beat her very heavily” (15). They also believed in a week of peace in which violence was forbidden, “in his anger he had forgotten that it was the week of peace” (18). The origin of the practice is described as, “our forefathers ordained that before we plait any corps in the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour.” (18)

The people would firmly believe in tribes and clan laws and any breach of the same would be termed a crime. As it is put, “but the law of the land must be obeyed” (18). Okonkwo’s act of beating his wife is termed by the tribal law as a severe violation, as he writes, “you would still have committed a great evil to beat her” (18). The punishment for the breach of laws is severe as he writes, “In the past, a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while the custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve” (19). When the boy gets killed by Okonkwo’s gun the punishment for it is exile, “he could return to the clan after seven years”.

The architectural designs of the African people have been depicted in the novel which is different from that of the West. Instead of an apartment or villa, there exists obi, and the use of goatskin is a vogue for a chair. There is a division of work some are assigned to males and others to females as it is said, “can I bring a chair for you, no that is a boy’s job”. (19) Western values such as the concept of romantic love, sex, kissing have no room in the African culture. The Africa people even disliked their education system and resisted the inroads of their religion. If the values are in vogue in Western culture and transmitted through their literature, and the literature is called universal, then in the western view.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Achebe’s **Things Fall Apart** represents a powerful counter-narrative to the Eurocentric paradigm of literary universality. Drawing on his deep understanding of Igbo culture and community, Achebe challenges the notion that literature must conform to Western ideals to be considered valid or universal. As Larson suggests, labeling non-Western texts as “universal” often means forcing them through the filter of Western norms, an act both reductive and exclusionary. By rejecting this, both Larson and Achebe advocate for a richer, more inclusive understanding of global literature—one that honors cultural specificity and dismantles hierarchies of literary value.

References:

1. Achebe, Chinua. **Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays**. Penguin Publishing Group, 2012.
2. Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**. Pearson Education Limited, 2008. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. **The Post-Colonial Studies Reader: The Key Concepts**. Routledge, 2005.
3. Larson, Charles R. “Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature.” **The American Scholar**, vol. 42, no. 3, 1973, pp. 463–75. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41207133>.
4. Sickels, Amy. **Critical Insights: Things Fall Apart**. Salem Press, 2012.