

## THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL CLASS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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### Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisa gambaran nyata dari kelas sosial di dalam novel karya Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Dengan menggunakan perspektif marxisme yang dikemukakan oleh Georg Lukacs, artikel ini hendak menunjukkan adanya bias dalam kelas sosial yang ada di dalam karya tersebut. Artikel ini menganalisa penggambaran tentang stratifikasi sosial dalam masyarakat Igbo. Seluruh masyarakat Igbo dibedakan dengan grup yang berbeda dengan perbedaan posisi sosial dan posisi dalam keagamaan. Konflik yang terjadi antar kelas berasal dari perselisihan antara golongan yang tertindas dengan golongan yang berkuasa. Artikel ini mencoba menunjukkan bahwa novel ini juga menggambarkan masyarakat Igbo secara nyata. Beberapa tema yang terjadi dalam kehidupan sehari-hari terlihat mirip dengan kejadian yang terdapat di dalam novel ini. Karya sastra mampu merefleksikan secara riil kondisi historis dari karya sastra.

**Kata Kunci:** *Marxisme, Realistis, Lukacs, Kelas Sosial, Sejarah.*

### Abstract

This article tries to analyze the realistic depiction of social class in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Using a Marxist perspective proposed by Georg Lukacs, this research shows the biased class society depicted in Achebe's work. This article the social stratification in Igbo tribe society. The whole Igbo society is divided into different groups with different social and religious positions. The class conflicts of Igbo tribe is derived by the clash of the oppressed class and religious positions. This article tries to show that this novel also portrays Igbo tribe society realistically. There are some themes in the real life look similar with the incidents of the novel. Literature reflects real historical conditions.

**Keywords:** *Marxism, Realistic, Lukacs, Social Class, History.*

### Introduction

This article tries to explain the operation of social class in Igbo tribe society depicted in Achebe's novel. This topic appears as the response of biased class society presented by the novel. Social injustice depicted as follows; someone who has many huge barns of yams, title, and warrior become the ruling class and get great respect by the society. While, women are at the bottom of the society. And there is *osu*, known as social outcasts, who have social status as slave. They do not have any social status.

Overall, this novel tells the story of an Igbo village in the late 1800's. Here, the conflict of the novel happened in Okonkwo, the main character. Okonkwo, is a champion

wrestler, a wealthy farmer, and a husband of three wives. Okonkwo's life is dominated by fear of failure. He does not want his life similar with his father. He also scares of losing his social status. He knows that the coming of the white men give bad effect and big differences for Igbo society. He is unable to adapt the changes that accompany colonialism. In frustration, he kills a white man and then commits suicide.

This article uses a Marxist perspective proposed by Georg Lukacs. Marxist is a philosophy of history and economic. It is a theory about the basic explanation of how the society goes to change. Marxism appeared as a response to the European industrial revolution in early century. *Things Fall Apart* is set in a particular situation where colonial occupation becomes the main concern of the society. It

begins with the arrival of the white man and Christianity in the 1870's and ends with military dictatorships in Nigerian. Chinua Achebe has described the societies in terms of colonization, independence, civil war and a number of military dictatorships. The novel describes traditional Igbo society and its confrontation with European colonialism.

Here, Igbo tribe's social condition is chosen as the main society analyzed using Marxist theory proposed by Georg Lukacs' theory about concept of realism. This article analyzes using Georg Lukacs' theory because the novel shows the same image and shows many aspects of Igbo culture realistically. The daily activities of the people, the drama of the wrestling match, their customs, their faith and legal practices are all clearly depicted.

### Research Methodology

This article can be categorized as a qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on analyzing information in description (text). The technique of data collection is library research. Blaxter. et. al (2006:187) state that library research aims at producing a critical synopsis of an existing area of research writing. The primary data of this research are collected from the statements and narrations particularly refer to the chosen topic in *Things Fall Apart* novel. Furthermore, the secondary data (essays, articles, magazine or any other text) are used to strengthen the arguments about contextual situation of Igbo's society within its reality.

The data collection is done by reading the novel. After reading the novel, we have to find the realistic of social condition of Igbo people within the novel such as sentence, clause, phrase, or even words. Then, make classification, verification, and discussion of written materials related to research problems. After doing the classification and verification, the data are going to be discussed.

### Result

The social class is defined by the combination of material possessions and religion. In other words, the social class of a person is determined by the number of yams and wife. Title is very important in the society because someone who has a title respect more by the society. Then, for someone who cannot take a title, and poor, the society will not respect with them. As it is said by Lukacs in *The Theory of the Novel*, "the elements of the novels are, ... ; abstract, the existence of social structures based only upon their factual presence ..." (Lukacs, 1971:70).

### Discussion

This novel shows many aspects of the Igbo's culture. There is no king or queen at the top of their social system, the whole Igbo society is divided into two different groups

with different social and religious positions. In religion, the chief of priests and oracles become the ruling class. In material structure is determined by the number of barns of yams and wife. The elders or *ndichie* also respect by the Igbo society because they have more experience and knowledge than younger people. Title is another important thing in Igbo tribe. Titles earned based on the successes of a man and the privilege is respect by the society. The Igbo society is judged by his own ability and worth, not by his family or father.

In other condition, the women are placed at the bottom of the society. Women role are doing domestic jobs (taking care of children, cleaning the house and preparing the meals for their husband) and being a good housewife.

However, in social reality, woman's existence is abused and humiliated. And in the lower position of social stratification, there is *osu* or social outcasts. Here the explanation about

*osu*

"He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo for ever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste-long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could no shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was burried by his kind in the Evil Forest" (Achebe, 1992:137).

They have social status as a slave. They do not have any social status. They are aliens and live in their separate community.

Social injustice creates conflict between the oppressed class and the ruling class. The coming of Europeans also helps to bring the open conflict between the ruling class and the oppressed class in Igbo society. The oppressed class takes the advantage of Christianity to fight with the ruling class. They come to challenge the authority and the power of the clan because the Igbo society denied their status.

The class conflicts in Igbo society is derived by the clash of the oppressed class and the ruling class. The internal contradictions within the class stratification described in the act of Nwoye, Okonkwo's son. He is a lazy and sentimental boy. He is expected to be prosperous man, capable of ruling his household. He prefers the woman story than man story. Okonkwo feels that he looks similar with his father, lazy and weak. Moreover, Nwoye learns to change himself unwillingly in order to fit into the appropriate social group. It is not until Ikemefuna is killed. Nwoye realizes that it is impossible for him to take apart in his society.

Ikemefuna is a victim of inter-ethnic war between Umuofia and Mbaino. He is given to Umuofia as a sacrifice because the death of Ogbuefi's wife. Based on the decision of the clan, he lives in Okonkwo's household for three years.

Ikemefuna and Nwoye become bestfriend. Thus, the death of Ikemefuna has influence on Nwoye's psychological. He can not accept the action taken to Ikemefuna. Then, he throws himself to become Christian. He does not care about gain a title, become a warrior or another action doing by Igbo society. This is Nwoye's effort to escape from the society. Another internal contradictions within the class structure described in the story of Enoch. The clan takes revenge by destroying Enoch's compound because his actions unmask an *egwugwu*. The clan also destroys the church established by Mr. Brown because Enoch is protected by the missionaries.

In other condition, Okonkwo is portrayed in a complex manner. He always obsessed with gaining and maintaining a social status. For him, gaining titles and becoming the upper class of the clan is his main goal in life. Once he reaches the goal, his desires become how to secure his social status as a respected titled man in the Igbo society. Okonkwo does not have a good start in his life. He does not inherit a barn or a title, or even a young wife. This condition overwhelms Okonkwo's feeling on Unoka and he fears to follow his father's failure.

In fact, Unoka's failure enables Okonkwo to become aware of how people of different social classes can be treated differently. Thus, Okonkwo's goal in life is to delete his father's image and become a respected man of his society. The result of all his actions, Okonkwo rises from poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan (Achebe, 1992:22). At his very young age, he is elected to the council of elders and made an *egwugwu* (masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village). He is sent by the clan as an imperious emissary of war to Mbaino to settle tribal disputes.

Okonkwo is alienated from his people because of his desire in masculine values of his society. His participation in the killing of Ikemefuna makes him fear of losing his social status. Okonkwo's life is declining. After he kills Ikemefuna, he is involved in another accidental killing of a boy. It happens when Ezeudu's funeral.

“Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart”(Achebe, 1992:109) .

According Igbo custom, he is exiled for seven-years from Umuofia.

Okonkwo cannot accept the fact that people in Umuofia have not taken any special notice of his return. Thus, Okonkwo fails to reach any fair judgment but possesses mixed feelings of bitterness and jealousy. These problems were no more than the conflicts between the ruling class and the oppressed class in Igbo society. This was also the actual role of missionaries and the white men. The white men not only brought Christianity, but also an alien government to Igbo society.

However, Okonkwo is not able to interpret the actual roles of the white men and missionaries. He views that their interventions more as a threat in the society. That is why he

wants to do something while the Igbo society feel it unnecessary to take any action. Ironically, when he dies,

“his body is evil, and only strangers may touch it... You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog” (Achebe, 1992:178).

As the custom in Igbo clan, Okonkwo is buried in the Evil Forest because suicide is one of the worst acts taking by someone. Evil Forest is a place where his father, social outcasts, and twins are buried. Okonkwo commits suicide because he feels shame with the Igbo condition. The white people bring new beliefs for the Igbo society, change the custom and culture. In short, Okonkwo is the product and the victim of his society. For instance, the society honors personal achievement, yet at the same time, allows those who have no titles to survive. Okonkwo is not able to understand the complexities of his society.

There is also realistic depiction of Igbo's culture in *Things Fall Apart*. This explanation shows the social and historical condition of African societies. In other words, there are some themes in the real life look similar with the incidents of the novel. Here, the researcher describes the theme of African experiences (culture, custom and religion) and the clash of cultures. This explanation sees how this novel is a representation of the social reality of traditional Africa.

Igbo society organize themselves in patrilineage. Patrilineage is lineage groups organized along lines of descent from father to son. In real Africa, marriage was a fundamental aspect of the survival of the societies and followed a certain number of principle. In traditional societies of Africa, young people were not free to marry the girl of their own choice. The way marriage that is depicted in the novel is marked by three stages: The first is fixing the dowry (bride price), the second is *uri* (part of the betrothal ceremony when the dowry is paid), and the third is *isa-ifi* (a ceremony. The oath of the bride). The theme of polygamy appears in the novel. Realizing that monogamy was a sure avenue to poverty, most husbands practiced polygamy. Number of wives and children represent someone's status in the society (Ohadike, 1996).

The democratic process which really existed among the Igbos is very close which is in the fiction. In the novel, there is no king as drawn:

"They asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them there was no king. "We have men of high title and the chief priest and the elders," they said" (Achebe, 1992:129).

when the missionaries first arrive in Mbanta, the missionaries expect to find a king, but there is no king. This matches the actual fact that Igbo society in Nigera had no king.

The majority of Igbo are farmers. Their staple crop is yam and its harvesting is a time for great celebration. Another important plant is palm tree. The society process the palm fruits become palm oil.



In the real life, the traditional society of Africa has a system that is based on the values of the community. These are expressed in moral and material. The base of this social organization is based on family groups and ages. The ultimate power was the legislative assembly which give power to various departments.

The other authentic African culture can be established between religion in actual traditional Africa and in the fiction. They worshiped many different gods and goddesses who represented elements of the natural world. The Igbo's believe is Chukwu. Chukwu is the supreme God,

'creator of the earth and the sky. Chukwu lived far away in the sky, he was the origin of all things and directed the activities of all things' ( Ohadike,1996).

The other gods are *Ikenga*, *Ani* and *Agbala*. *Ikenga* symbolizes manhood. *Ani* is the earth goddess and the source of fertility. *Agbala's* authority is respected all over the clan. There are also the *egwugwu* ( ancestral spirit) and the medicine men. Medicine men are needed in difficult situations. In the novel, the prestige of Umuofia result from the courage of warriors but also the medicine men. Then, for the role of the *Egwugwu* is the link between the departed and the living. It appears in the village during the feast or important event.

It was colonization that happened in Nigeria. It is possible to find the connection between actual colonization and the one in fiction. The ways of the penetration of the white man was done in the Igbo land were multiform. In west Africa, the British did not make negotiations but they made force. In South of Nigeria, the strategies used by the British were diplomacy and military action. In some parts of the Yoruba land, they had signed peace agreements.

In the story, the first encounters make serious effects because there are dead people in both sides. Another impact of colonization is Christianity. Actually, in West Africa, before the establishment, the missionaries were the conveyors of western cultures. There were some responses of Africans who challenged the missionaries. But, there were also some Africans that accepted Christianity. All these fact are similar to those in the novel. In the story, the first actor of colonization are the missionaries. They are found in Mbanta and Umuofia. They want to replace the Igbo's belief

Another aspect of Okonkwo is his static character. This lack of change may be linked to the negative aspects of the African past (in real life) which need correct. Through the story, it is seen that Okonkwo is almost the same at the end as at the beginning. He describes as a character that can not accept and adapt a change. By the end of his exile, he gives the impression to be able to get back on his feet. But the historical make him can not allow to reconquer his lost position and he chooses death.

Change is required and Africa needs men who are able to select the good sides of western cultures and not those who constantly refuse change as Okonkwo does. The character of

Okonkwo could be linked to the issue of unity. Okonkwo is the representative of the tragic elements of Africa. In many respects, the main protagonist seems to be Africa unable to contain certain types of personality. The real cause of the destruction of Africa is the coming of the white man.

There is the sense of community with traditional Africa. But here Africa falls apart because the sense of unity is lost. The destruction of the continent is fast as symbolized by the death of Okonkwo. It represents the cultural roots of the actual Igbo society in order to provide self confidence in *Things Fall Apart*.

## Conclusion

After analyzing Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it can be concluded that the Igbo society structured with different social stratification. In material structure, the ruling class in someone who has large numbers of barn of yam. In religiosity, the chief of priests and oracles become the ruling class. Title is very important for the society. The Igbo society is judged by his own ability and worth, not by his family or father. Women are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. There is also *osu* or social outcasts, who has social status as a slave and do not have any social status.

The discussion shows that the class conflicts is derived by the clash of the oppressed class and the ruling class. The oppressed class come to challenge the authority and the power of the clan because the Igbo society denied their status. The coming of the white men also bring the conflict between the ruling class and the oppressed class in Igbo society. The oppressed class takes the advantage of the white men to fight with the ruling class. The white men use soft method to convert the society to become Christian and join with them.

The discussion proves that this novel also shows the same image and shows many aspects of Igbo culture realistically. Nigeria has no king. The daily activities of the people depicted in the novel. There is also the depiction of colonization happened in Nigeria. The ways of the penetration of the white man was done in the The ways of the penetration of the white man was done in the Igbo land were multiform, make force, diplomacy and military action and signed peace agreements. It is different in one place and other place. The colonization also brings Christianity.

## Acknowledgments

The deepest gratitude to Allah S.W.T., the Almighty God for His blessing so that the writer is able to finish the reserach. The writer would also like to thank to : Dr. Hairus Salikin, M. Ed. as Dean of Faculty of Letters, Jember University Dra. Supiastutik, M. Pd and Hat Pujiati S.S., M.A as my first and second advisors, who patiently took the time to guide and direct me. Thanks for all your guidance to finish this research

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