Individualism and Social Change in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This paper examines the communal culture in African society and how it affects the individual. It presents the powers of the individual in bringing about the planned and desired social change. This paper is anchored on the theory of phenomenalism as propounded by George Berkeley to demonstrate the power of the individual in changing the status quo and to bring social change. It focuses on the culture of the community which is practised in Africa and how trapped Africans from making head ways in development. The research recommends individuality as a way out of African socio-political barriers and posits that individuality can bring the social change and total liberation in African society.

Keywords: Individuality, social change, Chinua Achebe, Things fall Apart, Communal Culture

Introduction

From time immemorial, changes have always been achieved through the efforts of the individuals either solely or collectively. The individual is at the core of social change. From the Biblical account of the first revolution in heaven, the individual was involved. Lucifer spearheaded the revolution that changed the status quo in heavenly places. With his revolutionary endeavours, the hegemony of God was questioned for the first time. This interrogation brought about different kingdoms. Though, Satan might have been described in bad light for his quest to bring about a different social order in heaven, but his impact in bringing forth a new structure is imperative.

All human activities have passed through the same method of individual evolution for any impactful change to be recorded. The economic change of Singapore was triggered by the individual efforts of organized group spearheaded by Lee Kuan Yew. Without the singular and combined efforts of such people, Singapore would have remained a third world country characterized by all beggar lines and wretchedness. In social circles, like in music, the formidable impacts of the individuals cannot be over emphasized. Reggae musicians are known for their characteristic sense of individuality which they use to influence the
group for new-social order. The new songs which shape our worldviews are usually a product of the individual efforts.

The evolution and revolution in the Christendom was a product of the individual. These individuals ranging from Martin Luther with his ninety-seven publications that interrogated and laid bare the belief systems of the church, thereby leading to the formation of different churches such as the protestants and other denominations that sprouted from his singular efforts.

However, the individual is not without conflict. It is the conflict between the Individuals and the communities that leads to social change. The conflict is the essence of the dialectics that define growth and bring about new social order. The attempt of the group or the community to force the individuals as a part of the collective has been welcome as conformity and collectivism. In view of this perennial conflict, Haralambos and Holborn has this to say:

Conflict provides the dynamic principle, the source of change from viewpoints. Any process of change involves tension between incompatible forces. The struggle between incompatible forces grows in intensity until there is a final collision. The result is a sudden leap forward, which creates a new set of forces on a higher level of development. (867).

From this point, it is indeed a confirmation that the conflict between the individuals and the collective or the community is an unending one. It only ends with a certain result of growth and a new social order. The community would continue to be an albatross in the characterizations and representation of the individuals. The towering and intimidating nature of the community, would continue to stymie the efforts of the individuals but as history has shown, the individual is the ultimate place setters. In Nigeria political terrain, the singular action of General Murtala Muhammad, who took over power in July 1975 was remarkable. Though, he was scuttled and his efforts nipped in the bud, but his contributions in his brief stay in capture thus: “that the character of one man could establish the quantum change in a people’s social behavior was nothing less than miraculous. But it shows that social miracles can happen” (1). The elusive change that the staggering and confused world is looking for, lies in the individuals. Until the individual is allowed and they allow themselves to be regulated by their inner fire, social change would remain a dream in the pipeline.

In African, particularly in Nigeria, the individual efforts are usually relegated and not given a voice. This is because, community is the basis in which African people define their
relationships. Until the group or the community is involved or consulted, the efforts of the individuals would be null and void. The paper sees the culture of the community and the collective as a problem to the envisaged social change. Communalism is the bane of individualism and social change in African society.

**Individualism and social change in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

Chinua Achebe is known for his delightful exploration of the power of the individuals as against the collective. However, he was not blind to the dialectics that pitch the individual to a sad end in its struggle of assertion and deepest yearning for a new social order. In his famous novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is imbued with all traits of individualism. Okonkwo rises to eminence by dint of "his solid personal achievement". He fights against the characteristic poverty of his father, and by imitating the traits of other noble individuals like Nwakaebi, whom he borrowed seed yams from. He tries his best to carve out a niche for himself even after being met by failure. His father, Unoka's poor background could not hold him down. Rather it became his impetus for remarkable individuality.

Okonkwo proves himself as worthy of eminence by leading his Umuofia people in a battle of vengeance against his murdered kindred and, as a recognition of his proof of worthlessness, Ikemefuna is kept in his custody. He is the only one boiling with peculiar bitterness when the white man's messenger arrives to disrupt the meeting of Umuofia. Not being able to face such abominable humiliation, he defies the white man and cut off his head. His move against the white man's messenger is an act of individualism and his eventual suicide culminates such. He commits suicide- when he perceives that the people of Umuofia would not go to war but would rather swallow their insults and capitulate collectively.

His death is a representation of the power of individualism in bringing about social change. With his death, a new social order is formed. Obierika, his best friend is geared and inflamed to respond to the white man as follows: "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 (78).

Though ironic that Umuofia's greatest son would be buried like a dog, but the message and its impact stays with the District Commissioner and the entire white men. The death of Okonkwo makes him to reflect on the people and their value system. Without Okonkwo's individuality, the people of Umuofia would not earn a place in the new book the commissioner wants to write and with such writings, the tragedy of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* would be felt in distant quarters.
Okonkwo’s individuality may not have ended well like most individual assertions, but its ripple effects, go beyond the surface and bring about a new social order. The muteness and "utter silence" that characterized Umuofia give way to boldness and expression as evident in the words of Obierika. Through his individuality, liberation, voice, presence and passion are gained by those left behind.

Okonkwo’s victory for his people is remarkable, though, it’s a costly one. It is for this lack of belief in the efforts of the individuals that prompted Romanus Okey Muoneke to posit that: "African art...is therefore not an individual affair but a creative communal enterprise in which the community functions both as the beneficiary and the active partakers of the experience" (38). To him, Okonkwo should have waited for the collective actions of the people instead of acting alone. But how long should one allow spittle on his face and wait until the entire community go for a fight?

In a different dimension. Joy Ogbonna condemns Okonkwo’s individual actions and describes it as “stubbornness” (56). She further compares Okonkwo as “the little bird, ‘nza’... he has become the challenged, not the one that challenges, the hunted” (56). In her view, Okonkwo failed totally for rejecting collectivism. Okonkwo must "maintain security within the group.

Such niceties and maintenance of security and decorum is the reason for doldrums that have engulfed Africa.

In recognition of individualism, Columbus Ogbujah describes the essence of its tenets as follows:

Man is distinct from all others; through self-consciousness he recognizes himself as free, unique and repeatable;.... and through self-transcendence he is called to surpass all his confines with which space and time seek to block his ascension into the realm of the absolute (23).

The realm of the absolute world remain delusional and unattainable if men continue to secure the decorum of their society. Therefore, freedom, uniqueness, ascension to a higher level are among the gains of individualism. To be lost in the whirlpool of the community is to lose all the changes and new social order that individuality brings about.

Okonkwo’s actions of selfhood has been described as embodiment of qualities “most valued by His people...energy, a strong sense of purpose, and a sense of communal cooperativeness” (26). With individuality, energy is transferred. Focus and a sense of the preservation of community are attained. This is because individual actions are what
preserve the community. Okonkwo’s actions have preserved the culture of Umuofia people. The District Commissioner is filled with awe inspiring story around African pride.

**Theoretical framework**
Phenomenalism is a radical form of empiricism and hence, it roots as a logical view of the nature of existence can be traced back to George Berkeley and his subjective idealism. As an epistemological idealism, it examines the possibility of knowledge of objects are things in themselves and their significance is in their perceptions.

This theory is the anchor of the research on individual to show how different individual beings derive their powers and act according.

**Conclusion**
The communal existence and culture is the bane of African new social order. The culture of group think, communal togetherness and conformity is a great problem to the developmental stride the individual would have been enjoying. Individuality is sadly at loggerheads with such practice. In other climates where growth and development is taking place astronomically, it’s the culture of individualism that makes it thrive. Therefore, the conflict of the individuals with the group or community is essential. With such conflicts, the status quo is challenged and a new social order emerges.

The research showed how individual’s conflict with the group is necessary for a new order. Through the use of phenomenalism, the individual is identified as an agent of change even though his existence is within the group yet he shapes the culture of the group.

**Works Cited**
