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Chinua Achebe's portrayal of underprivileged and sufferings of labour class. A study of class system in '*Things Fall Apart*'

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Abstract:

Every society is divided into classes, rich and poor, upper class, middle class, and lower class but it is different from caste system as it has numerous divisions and subdivisions. But the line drawn between rich and poor and wealthy and deprived has nothing with caste. Money has now become indispensable criteria to judge whether one belongs to rich or poor class and it also gives the status of an individual in society. But this social evil has subjugated and segregated thousands of people into everlasting misery, but this class system has proved more troublesome than caste system as it affects people at social, economic and political level. People are oppressed, exploited easily and Achebe shows concern about it in his novels.

Keywords: Subjugation oppressed, underprivileged, sufferings.

The present paper attempts to study class system in the novels of Chinua Achebe and their exploitations and sufferings. Achebe has taken side with the underprivileged, poor and he even suggests ways for liberation. He encourages people to organize themselves and fight against oppressor, rather than simply accepting their fate and for this they should even be ready for any sacrifice. His heart is distressed while witnessing agony and of the downtrodden and poor people. With firm conviction he writes about suppressed people and takes cudgels against society which demarcates between rich and poor, privileged rich and the underprivileged. He yearns that common men and women rise from their miseries and have a happy life but it is not possible without their active participation as no one from the upper class will wish change. The Nigerian society discriminates their own people on the basis of birth, colour, and creed, it is class based society which results in injustice and inequality.

Chinua Achebe in his novels describes wide gap between rich and poor, exploiters and exploited, ruler and

ruled as class system is a universal phenomenon, every society is affected with this in one way or the other but Achebe explores sufferings and stresses in African society. Their economic set up was unfair as it allows only few people to accumulate and hoard wealth and power and allows them to give inhuman treatment and frame harsh and rigid rules for the poor. Outcasts, poor people, women were at the mercy of ruling class. His first novel *Things Fall Apart*(1958) occupies a pivotal place in African literature and remains the most widely studied, translated read African novel. The novel explores the conflict between the ruling class and the ruled class in Igbo society and the complications which arise after the arrival of Europeans to the Igbo land. The social evil which engulfs the society is expressed in this novel. The novel actually deals with the story of Okonkwo and his tribe and it realistically portrays underprivileged and downtrodden people of Igbo society. Igbo society is full of social evils, it is class based society and people believe in class system and it discriminates people socially and sometimes injustice. Men are considered most lucky as it is easy for them to earn titles, have several wives, become rulers and women are at the bottom of society. There are other outcasts such as Osu, who do not participate in social activities of Igbo society. They were considered classless as they failed to get any class due to poverty in Igbo society. But with the arrival of white people with new religion helped them to bring into open the conflict between rich and poor, ruling class and the oppressed class in Igbo society. Okonkwo who is the main character believes in class system and he ruins his whole family because he is afraid of losing his social status in society.

In Igbo society as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* ones status is not determined by economic background such as that of the priests. Yet, economic factors do play a major role in defining society. For ordinary people, obtaining more titles in society is having more barns of

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yams. The Nigerian society which Achebe depicted is a class biased society which is more complicated and devious than the governed caste system. Someone who has huge barns of yams, number of titles and wives comes in the ruling class and get great respect by the society while poor people and women are at the bottom of the society. The world of sufferers are subject to more rigidity and depression, like osu, known as social out-casts who have social status as slaves and do not have any status in the Igbo society. They are aliens in their own society and live as separate class in their own community. The osu drifts from place to place, job to job and virtually rootless incapable of finding a place in society. The main characters portrayed in his novels suffer bitterly and become strangers in their own land as they get entangled in shifting definitions of class.

It is worth to point out that Igbo people have certain imperfections and weaknesses as most one is that it is divided into classes. As there is no King or Queen at the topmost social hierarchy as we see in European social systems but Igbo people has different social, cultural and political positions. The Igbo society is deeply religious, it believes in different gods as Chukwu is most courteous god and his other multiple minor gods like Ani goddess of earth. In Igbo society there are oracles who used to represent God and communicating gods message to people. Oracles provide helpful advises to people regarding important matters, and no one dared their question and authority. Whatever they will say it is final and no one questions, even people blindly sacrifice their loved ones whether their children or parents.

There are various things by which a person can be respected as if he is brave , masculine or has achieved materialistic things. There were almost three things which define class of a person as number of wives, number of titles and barns of yam. But number of titles earns most respect and joy in a society. Those who fail to earn more titles or do not have such strength were considered weak and females were ill-treated. What is important is that Okonkwo earns more and more titles and is a respected member of Igbo community, but his father is a coward and did not earn any title and he even fails to give his family bread and butter. Achebe has described Unoka as, “ Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed.” (*Things Fall Apart- 6*)

Unoka was a good musician but it cannot give him any title, as only criteria was titles, material wealth and number of wives. The Igbo community totally had no respect for art, but his friend Okoye was also musician but he had large barn of yams and has three wives also:

Okoye was also a musician. He played on the *ogene*. But he was not a failure like unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest title in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony and he was gathering all his resources together. (*Things Fall Apart 6-7*)

Unoko, a talented musician did not get any title as he did not gain material wealth and status. But Nwakibie gains title and respect as he has three large barns and nine wives. “There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo’s village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan.” (*Things Fall Apart 18-19*) People in Igbo society were treated as per title and wealth but society was so cruel that it treated people differently at the time of death. Ezeudu who was a warrior was given decent funeral but Unoka who died because of swelling was thrown out into dense forests.

Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he has no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was a story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and

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tioned to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rooted away above the earth, and was not given the first or second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. (*Things Fall Apart* 18)

Unoka was considered evil person and as per customs it was necessary to throw him into forests otherwise more people will die with him as he failed to gain titles and number of wives. But society treated Ezeudu's death differently. He was the oldest man in the clan and had gained three titles and before him only one had earned fourth title. So when he died he was given warrior funeral as there was drum beating, canons and guns were fired. Achebe comments:

Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral. The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups. They all wore smoked raffia skirts and their bodies were painted with chalk and charcoal. (*Things Fall Apart* 121)

In short, people with titles and wealth live luxurious and happy life and enjoy great respect in the Igbo society. They belong to the aristocratic or elite class of precolonial Igbo society as depicted it in Achebe's novels. The elders or *ndichi* is another class as Achebe says, "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered." (*Things Fall Apart* 8) The Umuofian clan believes that elders are experienced and have thorough knowledge, they can solve day to day problems as for the same they organize meetings and events. The elders or *Ndichi* not only solve problems but assist oracles in implementing rules and laws of Igbo

community. These elders are powerful and even play active role in politics. For example, on the report of Okonkwo's mission to Mbaino when a woman of Igbo clan was accidentally killed by a man from Mbaino clan:

The elders or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission. At the end they decided, as everybody knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. Okonkwo was, therefore, asked on behalf of the clan to look after him in the interim. And so for three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household. (*Things Fall Apart* 12)

Ancestral spirits or *Egwugwu* form another class in the Igbo clan. They are also respected and they administer justice and they preside important religious ceremonies and affairs. But they were only nine in number and their leader was called Evil Forest. Women were not even allowed to see them, they even fled immediately as they came into their sight. Achebe describes *Egwugwu* thus:

The *Egwugwu* house into which they emerged faced the forest, away from the crowd, who saw only its back with the many-colored patterns and drawing done by specially chosen women at regular intervals. These women never saw inside of the hut. No women ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. No women ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan.... A woman fled as soon as an *Egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was terrifying spectacle. Even Mgbafo took to her heels and had to be restrained by her brothers. Each of the nine *Egwugwu* represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head... Evil Forest then thrust the pointed end of his rattling staff into the earth. And it began to shake and rattle, like something agitating with a metallic life. He took the first of the empty stools and the other

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eight *Egwugwu* began to sit in order of seniority after him. Okonkwo's wives and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *Egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *Egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. (*Things Fall Apart* 63-64)

Egwugwu, together with men of titles and elders are under the control of the Oracles. *Egwugwu* assist the Oracles to execute the laws and administer justice in the Igbo society. So the Igbo clan is democratic. It proclaims, "A man is judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father." (*Things Fall Apart* 8).

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