

Research Paper

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A Post Colonial Study of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart



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Chinua Achebe's college work sharpened his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures. He had grown up in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. His father taught at the missionary school, and Achebe witnessed firsthand the complex mix of benefit and catastrophe that the Christian religion had brought to the Igbo people. In the 1950s, an exciting new literary movement grew in strength. Drawing on indigenous Nigerian oral traditions, this movement enriched European literary forms in hopes of creating a new literature, in English but unmistakably African. Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* is one of the masterpieces of 20th century African fiction. *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s, during the coming of the white man to Nigeria. In part, the novel is a response and antidote to a large tradition of European literature in which Africans are depicted as primitive and mindless savages.

Achebe depicts the Igbo as a people with great social institutions. Their culture is rich and impressively civilized, with traditions and laws that place great emphasis on justice and fairness. The people are ruled not by a king or chief but by a kind of simple democracy, in which all males gather and make decisions by consensus. Ironically, it is the Europeans, who often boast of bringing democratic institutions to the rest of the world, who try to suppress these clan meetings in Umuofia. The Igbo also boast a high degree of social mobility. Men are not judged by the wealth

of their fathers, and Achebe emphasizes that high rank is attainable for all freeborn Igbo.

He does not shy from depicting the injustices of Igbo society. No more or less than Victorian England of the same era, the Igbo are deeply patriarchal. They also have a great fear of twins, who are abandoned immediately after birth to a death by exposure. Violence is not unknown to them, although warfare on a European scale is something of which they have no comprehension.

The immediate subject of Chinua Achebe's novels is the tragic consequence of the European encounter with African civilization. His novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the invasion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society, and the disarray of the African consciousness that has followed. In *Things Fall Apart*, the theme is the colonization of Africa by the British and the negative and violent changes this brought about in the lives of the African tribes. Along with colonization was the arrival of the missionaries whose main aim was to spread the message of Christianity and to convert people to their religion. These missionaries eventually establish a strong foothold in the tribe which then allows a government as well as law court for administering justice to become part of the indoctrination of native peoples to Western ways. Achebe does not gloss over the cruelty and superstition that prevails in the tribe, and even

shows that it was this element that opened the way for the disintegration of the tribe and their 'falling apart.' It is the coming of the missionaries which brings the disruption. After thousands of years of unviolated and untouched tribal existence, Okonkwo returns after just seven years of exile to find his village almost unrecognisable. Similarly, his fellow clan members seem unwilling to recognise him. Instead, "the new religion and government and trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds ... they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return" (149). He does not try to force Nigerian culture upon a European audience. This is exactly what he objects to in the colonial project - the forcing of European culture on an unwilling Nigerian clan. The missionaries simply walk into the midst of the tribe with their interpreters, and "told them that they worship false gods, gods of wood and stone" (*Things Fall Apart*, 120). After thousands of years of worshipping unchanged deities, the white man virtually commands them to "leave your wicked ways and false gods" (120). Chinua Achebe's college work sharpened his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures. He had grown up in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. His father taught at the missionary school, and Achebe witnessed firsthand the complex mix of benefit and catastrophe that the Christian religion had brought to the Igbo people. In the 1950s, an exciting new literary movement grew in strength.

Things Fall Apart is set in the 1890s, during the coming of the white man to Nigeria. In part, the novel is a response and antidote to a large tradition of European literature in which Africans are depicted as primitive and mindless savages. The attitudes present in colonial literature are so ingrained into our perception of Africa that the District Commissioner, who appears at the end of the novel, strikes a chord of familiarity with most readers. He is arrogant, dismissive of African "savages," and totally ignorant of the complexity and richness of Igbo life. Yet his attitude echoes so much of the depiction of Africa; this attitude, following Achebe's depiction of the Igbo, seems

hollow and savage. Digression is one of Achebe's most important tools. Although the novel's central story is the tragedy of Okonkwo, Achebe takes any opportunity he can to digress and relate anecdotes and tertiary incidents. The novel is part documentary, but the liveliness of Achebe's narrative protects the book from reading like an anthropology text. We are allowed to see the Igbo through their own eyes, as they celebrate the various rituals and holidays that mark important moments in the year and in the people's life.

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The novel attempts to repair some of the damage done by earlier European depictions of Africans. But this recuperation must necessarily come in the form of memory; by the time Achebe was born, the coming of the white man had already destroyed many aspects of indigenous culture. Throughout his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has attempted to describe the intricacies of the lifestyle of the Igbo, a thriving culture living in Nigeria. The novel produces impressive and beautiful artifacts in music, dance and above all, in conversation. "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which the words are eaten." Many interesting and meaningful proverbs have been injected into the narrative of the novel. For example. "The sun will shine on those who stand, before it shines on those who kneel under them", and "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing", "Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to fly without perching", and "The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did" and many more.

The reader is also informed about the agricultural pattern - The Week of Peace, the planting of the Yams, the New Yam feast, followed by the dry season - The Harmattan - and the

exquisite taste of locusts. Medical help, both herbal and psychological treatment, is meted out for illnesses. Ezinma was believed to be out of danger when the medicine man found her iyi-uwa. However when she later falls sick Okonkwo prescribes a herbal brew which relieves Ezinma of her fever.

Many folk-tales are related in the novel, like the story of the tortoise, the tortoise and the cat which reveal the strange nuances of their society and culture as well as the importance of stories and their pedagogical value. Morals and values are described through these seemingly simple tales of animals. Social customs such as marriage ceremonies, funeral arrangements, and the gaining of titles are described in great detail to give the reader a glimpse of the way of life of Igbo, especially that of the clans members of Umuofia.

Post colonialism is a diverse network of ideas and practices that seeks to make sense of, evaluate, critique, and rewrite a people's colonial experience. One of the best known postcolonial theorists is Edward Said who helped unveil the centuries-long essentializing project of the West in its dealings with the East, particularly the Muslim world in the Middle East.

Things Fall Apart is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization. One of the things pointed out is that Umuofia had no kings or chiefs but had a highly democratic and efficient government. This is something the invaders did not see; Western sensibilities insist that each nation needs a leader, at least one person to take charge and prevent anarchy. The courts used the white man's justice: either a flogging or hanging: both senselessly brutal in Umofian eyes. The main reason for the culture clash is lack of social interaction and understanding between the cultures. And the misunderstanding did not end at the end of the novel; the colonizers are the ones who recorded the history, so, as the saying goes,

“...Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter” (Achebe, *Home and Exile* 73). African history is unique; “History has not treated the whole world the same way, and we would be foolish not to realize how we are in a peculiar situation as Africans. Our history has not been the history of England.” (Jussawalla, 76). The cultural misunderstanding led to a false history, with characters written from the hopes and fears of a people whose uniformed accounts are prevalent even today. “Achebe has made it clear that his principle purpose in the book was to give African readers a realistic depiction of their precolonial past, free of the distortions and stereotypes imposed in European accounts.” (Booker, 65)

In *Things Fall Apart*, the theme is the colonization of Africa by the British and the negative and violent changes this brought about in the lives of the African tribes. Along with colonization was the arrival of the missionaries whose main aim was to spread the message of Christianity and to convert people to their religion. These missionaries eventually establish a strong foothold in the tribe which then allows a government as well as law court for administering justice to become part of the indoctrination of native peoples to Western ways. Achebe does not gloss over the cruelty and superstition that prevails in the tribe, and even shows that it was this element that opened the way for the disintegration of the tribe and their ‘falling apart.’ This theme is best shown in the rise and fall of Okonkwo, who represents the best and worst of his culture. Thus, Okonkwo himself becomes a symbol of the disintegration.

In a tribal society, the most important factor is the unity of the members of the tribe and their absolute obedience to the ruling of the elders as well as the gods and goddesses. This is lost when some of them accept contrasting values brought to them by the missionaries. This leads to an increasing openness to Western thought and religion and allows for the eventual exploitation and assimilation. Okonkwo is one of few who

resist and he ends up dead at the end of the novel. His refusal is a form of resistance to conforming to the ways of the white man as well as a rejection of his own culture as he has made a terrible transgression in committing suicide and will not be buried in the warrior style that he deserved. In a way Okonkwo rejects his own tribe members for their cowardice and lack of support. Gerald Moore has stated in *Seven African Writers* that Achebe's goal in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to recapture "the life of his tribe before the first touch of the white man sent it reeling from its delicate equilibrium" (58). This is central to an understanding of the novel. Right from the tribes' first encounter with the whites, the reader observes it being unchangeably altered.

It is the coming of the missionaries which brings the disruption. After thousands of years of unviolated and untouched tribal existence, Okonkwo returns after just seven years of exile to find his village almost unrecognisable. Similarly, his fellow clan members seem unwilling to recognise him. Instead, "the new religion and government and trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds ... they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return" (149). Yet despite these hardships, the reader cannot escape the feeling the Achebe is not as narrow-minded and bitter as he first appears. He clearly does not object to the discovery of and learning about new religions and cultures. He presents a strong argument in favour of discussion as a path towards understanding. In *Things Fall Apart*, the missionary Mr Brown and Akunna, one of the tribal elders, often spend long hours in discussion, and although "Neither of them succeeded in converting the other ... they learnt more about their different beliefs" (147).

It is not Achebe's intention to demonstrate any superiority an idealistic pre-colonial Nigerian existence might hold over life in Europe. What he seeks to achieve is an "illumination of the complicated truth of African existence (and) a concrete insight into the reality of their existence". As clearly demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*,

he is making neither excuses nor apologies for African existence. In his rejection to this approach to missionary work, and the colonial project in general, Achebe not only makes them seem "mad" (*Things fall Apart*, 121) and a reason for much laughing and joking, but he also hints at darker and more sinister aspects to them. The missionaries were injected into Africa with the expressed desire to completely change all aspects of African life, and convert it into something much more Europhile. They "pride themselves on their indifference to all the ceremonies which bind and express the life of the tribe" (Moore, *Seven African Writers*, 63). By extension, they can be assumed to have entertained a great of indifference within the tribe also. Basically, these individuals were statistics of converted and unconverted natives.

The missionaries were ruthless in pursuit of new converts. Domestic support for the missions depended in large measure upon the tangible success of their preaching, "success" being reflected in the numbers of conversions. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe even hints at their use of bribery and blackmail in their endeavours. He tells us, "the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write" (126). The inference is clearly that the unconverted heathens were not given this opportunity. Yet bearing in mind the orality of Nigerian culture, the apparent pointlessness of learning to read and write is exposed. This is indicative of the move away from Nigerian pre-colonial orature, towards a more Eurocentric culture.

In their desire for quick converts, the missionaries allowed into their ranks outcasts and "afulefu, worthless, empty men" (*Things Fall Apart*, 119). In the ideology of the missions, this was portrayed as display of the truly egalitarian nature of European Christianity, so different to the harshness experienced in tribal living. Yet as Gerald Moore notes, there are more duplicitous aspects to this. He states that outcasts and seemingly worthless man were specifically targeted by the missionaries because they are a

group which “despises and gradually undermines the older ones. Thus a fatal weakness is introduced at the very heart of the clan, which is the unit of its customary life” (*Seven African Writers*, 64). In his portrayal of Nwofia, Achebe also acknowledges the subversive side of the converts, men who have no real place in the tribe, and no loyalty to it.

To further enhance the negative aspects of the missions, Achebe suggests that even the converts never really accept the religion they are being offered. The reader is led to believe that each convert has their own self-centred ulterior motives for going into the “evil forest” with the missionaries. Two examples of such behaviour are given. Nwofia is more attracted by the “rollicking tunes of evangelism” (*Things Fall Apart*, 121) than by the doctrines of Christianity, and he doesn’t really fit in within the tribe anyway. Nneka also has her own reasons for conversion. Having had two sets of twins killed by the tribe already, and once more being pregnant, she goes to the missionaries, it seems, to save her unborn child. Not only that, but her family are relieved to separate themselves from such an obviously

cursed woman. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe never accepts that Christianity has been fully recognised, even by the converts.

The people of Umuofia find it difficult to arrive at a firm conclusion as to their opinion of the whites. To the end they remain ambiguous, for example, they like the wealth and new found value that white trade brings, a strong reminder of the missionaries’ role to find a substitute for slaves. Yet they cannot reconcile themselves with white intrusion and indirect rule through a District Officer. Perhaps the reason for this ambiguity and uncertainty lies in the difficulty in finding a language or a voice for expressing and describing white intervention. Such was the clash of cultures involved in the colonisation of Nigeria that even the language had to alter to accommodate it. In many cases, this alteration brought about a silencing of native dialects, and a loss of indigenous voice. This is potently reflected towards the close of the novel with Achebe’s assertion that “even now they have not found the mouth with which to tell of their suffering” (*Things Fall Apart*, 145), an issue keenly raised in Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.

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