

Things Fall Apart: A Review

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Abstract

Things Fall Apart is Chinua Achebe's first novel. It is set in an African village Umoufia. The village is full of peace and prosperity and has its own beliefs and culture. The 'egwugwu' or the ancestral spirits exercise administration and judgement over Umoufia. It is only with the arrival of the Missionaries that things start falling apart as they gain converts from the clan. We find the gist of the novel in the words of Obierika who says, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

Keywords: Chi, Iba, Ilo, Ogbanje, Iyi-Uwa, Umuofia, Egwugwu.

Introduction

Things Fall Apart is Achebe's first novel. The title of the novel has been taken from Yeats' poem "The Second Coming". Achebe quotes a few lines from that poem in the beginning of the novel providing us with the essence of the novel itself.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.²

The implication of the poem is that the Creator (the falconer) is at the centre of the Universe and man, the falcon, is moving constantly in a widening gyre, thus distancing himself from God. As a result, the centre can no longer exercise control over man and anarchy has replaced the moral order, which should have persisted. If, however, one were to seek the meaning of this verse in which Achebe uses it one needs to replace God by colonizers who remain at the centre of the colonization process and the colonized at the periphery. "The turning in the widening gyre" then would refer to the revolt against the colonizers and their customs, a kind of subversive attitude that destroys the master-slave relationship that exists between the colonizer and the colonized. As the gap between the colonizer and the colonized increases, the latter is no more interested in paying attention to whatever the centre pronounces; consequently, the centre fails to exercise any control over the colonized, which gradually seem to be falling away from the British Empire. The result is anarchy as the 'natives' are no more at peace in their own countries which have been deprived of their cultural heritage and has been infused with the white man's customs, which seem difficult to be uprooted. Possibly, this is one of the major reasons that we have writers writing in English from countries that are non-English.

Things Fall Apart is a narrative in the third person narrated by a native. We can, in fact, find parallels between the novel and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* – both have a native narrator. Moreover, the novelist himself maintains a distance from the narrator. What the narrator says is what he observes and feels and not what the writers observe and judge. Moreover, the writers do not have to say anything about the way things go on. They are only agents in providing us a glimpse into their societies.

Achebe relates to us the various cultural beliefs and practices of the Igbo people. Through this novel, Achebe also tries to assert the identity of the African people. He wishes to imply that Africa has a unique culture of its own and is not simply a 'Heart of Darkness' where men are seen as inanimate objects. Achebe shows how the Igbo clan is full of activity, which, though it appears as superstition by the Western concept, is only part of Igbo life.



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Achebe's novel is set in a village Umoufia that in turn comprises nine villages. All these nine villages were supposed to be sons of the first father of the clan. The leader among these was the Evil Forest. Often there appeared 'egwugwu' that represented the nine villages of Umoufia. Though they are masked men and not real spirits, they still instil awe among people and their word had to be fulfilled. Though some people could notice that the second egwugwu 'had the springy walk of Okonkwo'³ and 'that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu'⁴ they were not supposed to voice their suspicion.

The novel is steeped in the local lore. It is full of myths and stories handed down from generation to generation. Even when Okonkwo has a mosquito buzzing at his ears he is reminded of the story his mother told him. She told him that story in which the ear refused to marry the mosquito. Such stories might appear illogical and absurd to the western readers in the same way as they appeared uninteresting to Okonkwo, but one has to remember such stories are meant for children who would be too eager to believe in anything, whether it is an African story or Alice in Wonderland.

Achebe has made profound use of contextualization. Words like 'chi', 'obi', 'iba', 'egwugwu', 'ogbanje', 'iyi-uwa' and others. A non-native reader might understand them only by assigning them meaning with the help of context in which they occur. These words are culture-specific and it is possible that Achebe found it difficult to translate them into English along with the cultural nuances they carry. A non-native reader might not understand what obi is but as soon as Achebe provides its equivalent term in English as hut, one would conjure up various kinds of dwelling depending on the cultural one belongs to. It is also quite likely that even after these alternatives being made available to us, there are certain cultural-specific aspects about these words which might be lost completely if the original words are not provided. It is perhaps, specifically in the case of discovering Ezinma's 'iyi-uwa'⁵ that the readers might fail to comprehend its meaning completely as Achebe does not provide any equivalent term for it till the end where we find the medicine-man digging up a pit and discovering a stone which according to him is Ezinma's iyi-uwa. Even the very concept of Ezinma's being an 'Ogbanje'⁶ and of having concealed her 'iyi-uwa'⁷ becomes quite cultural-specific and might become unintelligible for a non-native reader. However, Achebe's effort in this novel is not to justify the beliefs or superstitions of the Igbo society, he is simply portraying the Igbo society with all his cultural nuances and beliefs. We can very well notice that Obierika, though he belongs to the same clan and thus is required to have absolute faith in the clan's beliefs and the judgements of the Oracle, does not encourage the idea of Okonkwo's participating in the sacrifice of Ikemefuma who had lived with Okonkwo for three years and had shared with him the relation of a father and son. Obierika tells Okonkwo, "If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families."⁸ He further expresses his disagreement about the incident by saying, "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it."⁹ Just like Obierika, the reader would also not approve of Okonkwo's participation in the crime.

As in other tribes and clans, Umoufia has its own judicial and administrative system. Similarly, Umoufia had its own system to judge and punish accordingly unlike the commissionerate of the colonizers. During the burial rituals of Ezeudu, Okonkwo unknowingly commits a crime by killing a sixteen-year-old son of Ezeudu during the last gun salute. According to their belief, it was a crime against earth goddess to kill a clansman and for such a female crime one was required to leave his clan (Umoufia) for seven years. Okonkwo, along with his family leaves for Mbanta, his motherland.

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On his return to Umoufia, after seven years, Okonkwo finds that Umoufia had completely changed. A Church had been built and there were many converts. The converts included not only the outcasts but also the worthy men with name, fame and titles of the clan. The colonizers had taken over the administration of the clan along with the judicial system of the clan. The white man, Mr. Brown, had built schools and hospitals and wanted the Umoufia people to send their children to school and learn to read and write as the white men do. In a way, the colonizers, through people like Mr. Brown, tried to take over the educational and cultural system of Umoufia. All these things had made the wise men of the clan worry. They were extremely stressed because things seem to be moving away and out of control of the clan. A new system was established by the colonizers. The colonizers were not only making the converts rich, strong and powerful but also influencing the young people of the clan to oppose their culture and follow Christianity.

In an incident in which a convert Enoch kills the holy egwugwu, the rest of the egwugwu demolish the holy Church built by Mr. Brown. The District Commissioner, for the sake of trial, invited the leaders of Umoufia. The six leaders, including Okonkwo, visit him as they thought that the Commissioner would have a friendly conversation with them. One among the six leaders narrates the whole incident not realizing the fact that this would be considered his confession of the crime and would result in the imprisonment of the six leaders. The leaders were humiliated and insulted by the Commissioner's court messengers.

The leaders were released only after the payment of fine by the clansmen. On their return from the imprisonment, the clan decides for a meeting next morning at the market place. The people gathered at the market place. The Commissioner's court messengers intervene to stop the meeting. Okonkwo, who was furious and not ready to accept the colonizers as their ruler takes out his matchet and kills the head messenger. The Commissioner, in order to punish Okonkwo, raids his house but does not find him. Many people come out of Okonkwo's house and tell the commissioner that they knew where Okonkwo was. He was then taken to the place where Okonkwo had hung himself from the tree.

Objective of the Study The Objective of this paper is to study Things Fall Apart as an African Novel that later gets converted into a Post-colonial novel.

Conclusion In the end, we are reminded of Obierika's speech where he says, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

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 8. *Ibid*, p. 62-63.
 9. *Ibid*, p. 63