Chapter - IV
POSTCOLONIAL TEXTS
This chapter takes up Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to examine with postcolonial perspective the multiple ways in which culture and national identity get articulated. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is considered as a rich, vivid, layered, paradoxical, and problematic novella; a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller’s yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and sceptical meditation. It has proved to be ‘ahead of its time’: an exceptionally proleptic text. First published in 1899 as a serial in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, it became extensively influential during subsequent decades, and reached a zenith of critical acclaim in the period 1950-75. It belongs to the late nineteenth century. It is a tale of travel of adventurous exploration of the heyday of imperialism. Symbolically it is a story of a journey into the darkest Africa.

It is a story is told by a British gentleman to other British gentlemen. From its very title onwards, the tale is full of paradoxes. Conrad was able to voice his paradoxes not only through explicit statement but also through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols. The title of the tale refers not only to the heart of the ‘darkest Africa’ but also to Kurtz’s corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and obscurity, physical, moral, and ontological.
The novella has a diversity of sources in Conrad’s personal experience. His scepticism about ‘the imperial mission’ can be related to the facts that he was born into Poland which had vanished from the map of Europe, and that his parents were redoubtable patriots who were exiled by the Russian authorities as punishment for their conspiratorial patriotism. Partly as a result of his parents’ political struggle against Russian oppression, both of them died when Conrad was still a boy. Hence his keen sense of the price in human terms exacted by political idealism, and, indeed, by idealism of various kinds. *Heart of Darkness* was prompted mainly by Conrad's own journey into the Congo in 1890. During this journey, he noted evidence of atrocities, exploitation, inefficiency, and hypocrisy, and it fully convinced him of the disparity between imperialism’s rhetoric and the harsh reality of “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience”.¹

That experience provided a basis for the knowledgeable indignation of *Heart of Darkness*. Other, more intimate, personal factors also provided materials for the tale. Marlow has various features in common with Conrad; the depiction of Kurtz was probably inflected by the author’s sense of similarity between Kurtz’s plight and that of the dedicated creative writer’s.

*Heart of Darkness* was abundantly suggestive and remarkably quotable. If offered a concise iconography of modern corruption and disorder. The tale became an anthology of epitomes. The First World War showed how men could be engulfed, diminished, and destroyed by man-made organizations and technology. Conrad seemed to have
anticipated this in his depiction of the ways in which men in Africa served, and died for a remorseless organization. He portrays men dwarfed by the system that dominates them and by an alien environment. Hitlerism and the Holocaust seemed to have been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz’s charismatic depravity: Kurtz, potentially ‘a splendid leader of an extreme party’, celebrated for his intoxicating eloquence, is the persuasive genius whose grandiose ambitions are reduced to the exclamation ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ By 1974, C.B. Cox could confidently declare:

This masterpiece has become one of those amazing modern fictions, such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* or Kafka’s *The Trial*, which throw light on the whole nature of twentieth-century art, its problems and achievements. The cultural influence of the novel, *Heart of Darkness* was clearly pervasive. This novella served as a reference-point, an anthology of scenes and passages that in various ways epitomized twentieth-century problems and particularly twentieth-century modes of exploitation, corruption, and decadence. For Terry Eagleton, a Marxist, Conrad’s art was an art of ideological contradiction resulting in stalemate: Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the colonialist nations, nor rejects colonialism outright. The ‘message’ of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilization is at base as barbarous as African society - a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them.
On the other hand, in a 1975 lecture, the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, declared that Conrad was a bloody racist. Achebe asserted that *Heart of Darkness* depicts Africa as a place of negations... in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. The Africans are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesques or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. We see Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor.\(^5\)

One of the subtlest features of the text is the dramatization of Marlow’s uncertainties, of his tentativeness, of his groping for affirmations that his own narrative subsequently questions. To take an obvious example, he offers conflicting interpretations of Kurtz’s cry, ‘The horror! The horror!’ (Conrad103) Perhaps they refer to Kurtz’s corruption, perhaps to the horror of a senseless universe. But there may be another meaning: no final resolution is offered. According to Ian Watt, the narrative [Marlow] probes, questions, and subverts familiar contrasts between the far and the near, between the ‘savage’ and the ‘civilized’, between the tropical and the urban. Repeatedly, the tale’s descriptions gain vividness by Conrad’s use of delayed decoding, a technique whereby effect precedes cause.\(^6\)

Conrad’s style in *Heart of Darkness* is characterized by indirectness. The emphasis falls upon the suggestive and intangible rather than the descriptive and factual. None the less, when asked where Marlow’s adventure occurs, readers generally answer: in the Congo Free
State. But this is to blur the boundary between the facts of Conrad’s life and the experiences of Marlow, a fictional creation. Marlow’s geographical wanderings can be read as metaphors for a narrative of self-discovery.

*Heart of Darkness* is a tale not only of Belgian colonialism but more significantly of the colonial enterprise tout court, while Marlow’s story of his voyage into the unknown can be seen to mimic the imperial impulse itself. Marlow’s style is guided by metaphors that offer invitations to interpretation while never yielding a single meaning. In this manner, style conveys his insecurity when confronted by cultural difference, and, in the process, the correspondence between words and the world they describe is refashioned. Increasingly, Marlow’s language is linked not to the world but to his mental state and perceptions of the world.

In Marlow’s tale, the vague ‘brooding’ presence of nature contributes to his visionary experience, helping to deepen his character as he projects personal unease onto his surroundings. The reader negotiates the tale through atmosphere and suggestion as Marlow struggles to find appropriate words to describe his increasingly mystical experience. Central to the story’s coercive rhythms, the repetition of words like ‘brooding’ and ‘darkness’ replicate Marlow’s haunting memories’ in the narrative style. Anticipating this, repetition characterises the novella’s opening paragraphs. No matter how the narrator chooses to introduce these paragraphs, whether describing ‘The sea-reach of the Thames’, ‘The Director of Companies’, ‘the bond of the sea’, or the sunset, they
invariably conclude with a negative vision of London: ‘a mournful
gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on
earth’, ‘not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the
brooding gloom’, ‘the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper
reaches’, and ‘the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men’
(HD,2). Suggesting the unnamed London as the source of the story’s
‘brooding gloom’, this pattern establishes an ideological, rather than
merely a contextual frame for Marlow’s narrative, prompting the
suspicion that the human ‘darkness’ he encounters in Africa is carried
there and released by Europeans.\textsuperscript{7}

The creation of Marlow, the sailor-turned-raconteur, is one of
Conrad’s great achievements. Marlow is English and so provides Conrad
an immigrant author writing for an English readership, with a
recognizable English perspective. Simultaneously character and
interpreter, Marlow has a dual narrating presence, recounting the tale
and transforming its action into moral and philosophical enquiry.
Marlow's presence as an English narrator thus weaves Conrad’s own life
into the life of his adopted nation, through the potent myth of English
literature. In Najder’s words:

Thanks to Marlow’s duality, Conrad could feel
solidarity with, and a sense of belonging to,
England by proxy, at the same time maintaining
a distance such as one has toward a creation of
one’s imagination. Thus, Conrad, although he
did not permanently resolve his search for a
consistent consciousness of self-identity, found
an integrating point of view.\textsuperscript{8}
Character and narrator, positioned between the tale and the reader, Marlow can be thought of as Janus-faced seeing and addressing both the colonial ‘world’ of Heart of Darkness and the British ‘island’ of the reader.

Marlow’s story of his journey to find Kurtz and its consequences is structurally ‘framed’ by the presence of an unnamed narrator, who introduces the story and occasionally interjects. Peter Brooks argues, *Heart of Darkness* is ... a framed tale, in which a first narrator introduces Marlow and has the last word after Marlow has fallen silent; and embedded within Marlow’s tale is apparently another, Kurtz’s, which never quite gets told - as perhaps Marlow’s does not quite either, for the frame structure here is characterised by notable uncertainties...It is evident that in the novel everything must eventually be recovered on the plane of narrating, in the act of telling which itself attempts to recover the problematic relations of Marlow’s narrative plot to his story, and of his plot and story to Kurtz’s story, which in turn entertains doubtful relations with Kurtz’s narrative plot and its narrating. Marlow’s narrative plot will more and more as it precedes take as its story what Marlow understands to be Kurtz’s story. Marlow as storyteller, retelling his story on the deck of the *Nellie* to a certain group of listeners. Marlow’s tale is proffered at a moment of suspension: the moment of the turning of the tide, as the mariners wait for the outbound tide in the Thames estuary in order to begin a new voyage. By the time Marlow falls silent, they will have missed the ‘first of the ebb’. Marlow’s tale inserts itself, then, in a moment of indefinable suspension between the flood and the ebb of the
tide, at a decisive turning point that passes undiscerned to those who depend on it. Marlow’s tales, where meaning is not within but ‘enveloping’. The tale, that image tells us, does not contain meaning, but rather brings it out as a surrounding medium, acting itself as a virtual source of illumination which must be perceived in that which, outside itself, it illuminates: ‘as a glow brings out a haze’, in the manner of a misty halo made visible ‘by the spectral illumination of moonshine’. Marlow’s tale makes the darkness visible.\(^9\)

A frame-narrator introduces Marlow, who then tells a story about Kurtz, creates the impression of being taken deeper and deeper into the narrative by a telescoping process, suggesting a quest for essence through the steadily refined focus. The frame narration establishes an ideological context for Marlow’s tale. The narrative begins by establishing the setting: Marlow recounts his story to four friends aboard the *Nellie* a small pleasure boat, moored in the Thames estuary. Besides the frame-narrator, Marlow’s audience consists of three men identified only by their social roles: the Director of Companies, the Accountant and the Lawyer. These three men, allied by ‘the bond of the sea’ (Conrad 1), all have their counterparts in the tale to follow.

In the novel there are few reminders of the presence of Marlow’s audience beyond occasional interruptions to dramatize the telling—such as when Marlow pauses to light his pipe or one of his listeners objects to his turn of phrase: “Try to be civil, Marlow” (Conrad 46) – and hints of their reaction: “It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another...The others might have been asleep, but I was
awake” (Conrad 36). The narrative contains two journeys: the literal upriver venture to find Kurtz, and Marlow’s odyssey of self-discovery. The two journeys, the telling and the tale, become symbolic representations of each other. Marlow’s narrative is presented in three stages: the first charts his journey from London to the Central Station; the second that from the Central Station to the Inner Station; and the third his meeting with Kurtz and its consequences. Confronted by the brutal truth of ‘the great cause’, Marlow encodes his experiences of human excess, past, present and future, in terms of an infernal taxonomy:

I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men- men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther (Conrad 19-20).

The designation of the living-dead Africans as ‘black shadows’ provides an irresistible challenge to the light-dark opposition that provides Europeans with a vindication for colonialism, viewed as bringing enlightenment to a ‘savage’ darkness for the benefit of those incapable of finding it for themselves.

The first part of Heart of Darkness concludes with Marlow’s wondering whether Kurtz, “who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set
about his work when there” (Conrad 41). Marlow’s literal river journey assumes metaphorical and metaphysical implications, a journey into the unresolvable, as the narrative seems to be searching for a language to match the audacity of the truths it attempts to communicate about the nature of man. It begins with his observation that “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (Conrad 45). Marlow feels himself to have entered an unknown world, and as the steamboat carries him deeper into Africa, so his sense of estrangement from the world he knows increases. Initially a symbol of alienation and energy, as Marlow’s Journey progresses the jungle is reconstituted as an expression of forces that cannot be contained or controlled.

Marlow’s literal navigation of the river carrying him “deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (Conrad 47) is simultaneously figured as a navigation into human values and potential, his uncertain perceptions reflecting those of the reader negotiating the twists and turns of the text. Marlow’s narrative is casually racist in its recourse to terms like ‘savage’ and ‘nigger’, reminding the reader that such was the currency of his colonial age and, unsurprisingly, in our time charges of racism have been levelled against the novella as well as Conrad himself. Kurtz’s actions Marlow none the less places them within an understandable but deeply unsettling context:

He had taken his seat amongst the devils of the land - I mean literally. You can’t understand. How could you? - with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the
policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and
gallows and lunatic asylums - how could you
imagine what particular region of the first ages a
man’s untrammelled feet may take him into by
way of solitude- utter solitude without a
policeman - by way of silence - utter silence,
where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can
be heard whispering of public opinion? These
little things make all the great difference.
(Conrad 67).

The implications of this for any civilized self-definition are profound.
Morality is relative not absolute. Far from being innate, our moral
behaviour is consequential upon the strictures of the situations we find
ourselves in. At its most extreme, this suggests that we all have the
capacity to behave like Kurtz, and the reason that we do not is because
we lack the opportunity. Instead, it is fear of the social consequences of
our actions that determines behaviour. When Marlow says, “All Europe
contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad 68), more than his
parentage - his mother half-English; his father half-French - is implied.

The report that Kurtz prepares for the International Society for the
Suppression of Savage Customs provides an illustration of the effect of
his sojourn in Africa, charting his slide into moral dereliction. Beginning
with such high-minded sentiments as, “[W]e whites”, from the point of
development we had arrived at, “must necessarily appear to them
[savages] in nature of supernatural beings- we approach them with the
might as of a deity’, and so on, and so on. By the simple exercise of our
will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded”, it concludes
with the ‘scrawled’ postscript: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 68).
Venturing to Africa with civilizing intent, Kurtz ended up presiding “at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which ... were offered up to him”. That these rites should be ‘unspeakable’ is part of the poetics of *Heart of Darkness*: the narrative suggests rather than enforces meaning in order to implicate the reader in the atmosphere surrounding the story. In this case, Marlow relies upon his audience to fill in the gap with their individual nightmare-visions. The discussion of Kurtz concludes with a return to the narrative present, through Marlow’s comment that, while Kurtz left an indelible mark on him, he is ‘not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him. Having tipped the helmsman’s body into the river, to be eaten by fishes rather than the cannibals, Marlow takes charge of the wheel and, soon afterwards, the steamboat finally arrives at her destination, the Inner Station.

Marlow is guided into shore by a white man whose patched clothes give him the appearance of a harlequin, a figure from the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, dressed in multi-coloured clothing, who approximates the trickster. Appropriately his facial expressions suggest that his clothes replicate his personality: “His face was like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next” (Conrad 73). “You English?” asks Marlow, seeking a mirroring nationality, and is disappointed to find that the man isn’t. Instead he turns out to be Russian, and a fellow sailor, who had been “wandering about that river for nearly two years alone”. Confirming the international presence in the country, the ‘harlequin’ also contributes to the sense of European
identity as destabilized there. He, too, confirms the spell cast by Kurtz’s words, claiming: “You don’t talk with that man - you listen to him” and “this man has enlarged my mind”. This section of the narrative concludes by confirming Marlow’s suspicions about the attack on the steamboat, and reaffirming Kurtz’s ambiguous status as tyrant-deity, as The Harlequin says of the natives: “They don’t want him to go”.

The third and final part of the novella begins with Marlow’s conversation with the young Russian sailor. Part of Marlow’s experience of Africa, The Harlequin is viewed as ‘fabulous’, ‘inexplicable’, ‘bewildering’, and ‘an insoluble problem’ (Conrad 75). Indeed, so extraordinary seems this youth that, after their parting, Marlow wonders “whether I had ever really seen him - whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon!” In The Harlequin’s own words, and reminding the reader that Kurtz’s absorption by his surroundings is shared by other Europeans, including Marlow, his presence in the wilderness has involved venturing “a little farther … then still a little farther - till I had gone so far that I don’t know how, I’ll ever get back”. Despite his appearance, ‘in motley’, the traditional garb of the Fool, The Harlequin’s place in the story is crucial not least because, as his patchwork clothes suggest, he too reflects the fragmentation of European identity that provides one of the tale’s central themes - and can be seen, in post-colonial terms, as resistance to the colonial invasion. As if to confirm this, The Harlequin is presented ambiguously: for instance, he is protected from the wilderness by his innocence, while his words about Kurtz are spoken ‘with mingled eagerness and reluctance’. The
Russian’s experiences in addition provide a further frame of expectation for Marlow’s imminent meeting with Kurtz. This apologist for Kurtz, who he feels has been ‘shamefully abandoned’ by his fellow Europeans, has served in the capacities of confidant, nurse, pander, and whipping-boy. Left with an unshakable ‘devotion’ to Kurtz, which Marlow considers “about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far”, his account provides in brief outline the details of Kurtz’s decline into barbarity, from his early ivory expeditions that included discovering a lake, to running out of trade goods and resorting to raiding the country, with the help of a tribe to whom he had come ‘with thunder and lightning’ and who accord him the status of a deity. On one occasion he threatened to shoot The Harlequin for a little ivory in his possession, simply “because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased”. To Marlow, Kurtz is simply ‘mad’. But to The Harlequin, ‘Kurtz’s last disciple’ and enthralled by his eloquence, “You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man”.

During conversation with the Russian, Marlow experiences the shocking revelation that the ‘ornamental’ balls around Kurtz's hut are, in fact, human heads. The Harlequin’s claim that these human heads belonged to ‘rebels’ further compounds the issue of perspective, albeit within the admittedly narrow sphere of a Eurocentric vision that subjects the Africans to repeated redefinition: “Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers - and these were rebels”. But Marlow silences him when he begins
explaining how native chiefs would crawl before Kurtz, believing that the ‘uncomplicated savagery’ evidenced in the tangible heads is preferable to the imagined ceremonies of abasement that transport him ‘into some lightless region of subtle horrors’.

The appearance of Kurtz’s African mistress, ‘a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman’, identifies the exotic setting as an erotic space, a fairly standard trope in colonial adventure writings and, contradictorily, in making the Other an object of desire, a connection that undermines the distinction upon which colonialism is founded. The paragraph-long description of the woman that follows is worth quoting:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant-tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad 84).

When Marlow overhears some of the conversation taking place in Kurtz’s cabin, the reader, placed in an analogous position infers that
Kurtz has seen through the ‘philanthropic pretence’ of The Manager’s rescue mission: “Save me! - save the ivory, you mean!” (Conrad 85). This is confirmed when The Manager emerges to tell Marlow that Kurtz has “done more harm than good to the Company’ and that ‘trade will suffer’. Ominously, he judges that Kurtz “did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action” (Conrad 86), suggesting that it is not the ‘vigorous action’ but rather the timing of it that he resents. Kurtz is judged incompetent rather that depraved. To the Manager’s claim that Kurtz’s methods are ‘unsound’, Marlow responds that he sees “No method at all” (Conrad 86), yet when The Manager, seizing the opportunity to dispose of his rival, announces that it is his “duty to point it out in the proper quarter”. Marlow recognizes its true motive and declares that “Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man”, and instantly becomes persona non grata. Instead, he takes comfort in the fact that it was some thing to have at least a choice of nightmares (Conrad 86).

The figure of Kurtz has been interpreted as an emanation of ‘evil’. In this formulation, Conrad’s audacity in the novella includes giving new emphasis to the concept of evil by placing it at the centre of Western colonialism, the great contemporary fact of European life at the time of writing. The word ‘evil’ occurs only three times in the text, most forcefully when linked to ‘the profound darkness’ at the heart of the wilderness. A more prominent repetition is that of the word ‘devil’ which, together with its variants ‘devilry’ and ‘devilish’, occurs twenty times. Its continuity with phrases such as ‘witch-craft’ and ‘witch-men’ reminds the reader that the most dramatic way in which the Devil was
thought to intervene in human affairs was to be conjured up by witchcraft, as, say, by Faust. Kurtz thus becomes an embodiment of the demonic, conjured up through the practice of witchcraft to take a high seat amongst the devils of the land.

The novella concludes where it started, aboard the *Nellie*, with Marlow sitting apart, “in the pose of a meditating Buddha” (Conrad 108). All that is offered by way of response to the tale, besides the Director’s observation that the tide has already begun to ebb, is the frame-narrator’s final atmospheric sentence: “The offering was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky - seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (Conrad 108). This description itself returns to the imagery that characterized his opening paragraphs. The narrative appears to be circular: beginning and ending on the Thames, just as Marlow’s African adventure starts and ends in ‘the sepulchral city’, and his mission to rescue Kurtz involves a journey up and then downriver. But something has changed, for Marlow it is a journey from which European civilization’s sense of itself does not return intact. The compositional pattern of ‘return’ thus needs to be seen not as a reversion to a prior state but in the transformative sense that T. S. Eliot describes in ‘Little Gidding’: ‘We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started I And know the place for the first time’.¹⁰

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* seeks to discover the cultural ethos of Igbo society. Achebe attempts to explore and identify the roots
to his society and its socio-religious contexts. Here an attempt is made to analyse and examine *Things Fall Apart* in respect of its interpretation of cultural identity and ambience. It provides a vivid account of the fabric of the Igbo society in Eastern Nigeria of 1890s. Achebe underlines the indestructible elements of Igbo culture while sensitively depicting its process of disintegration under the impact of the white man’s arrival. *Things Fall Apart* is analysed in terms of these enduring values that have the potential of becoming the vital, rejuvenating forces of a resilient and independent Nigerian identity. This novel seeks to fictionalise the events in Eastern Nigeria of the 1890s. This part of the country is often referred to as Igboland due to the concentration of this particular tribe in the region. The Igbo society is known for their hard-working and enterprising qualities. One can discern a sort of cultural uniformity among the Igbo people who are a single people speaking a number of related dialects with many social features in common.

It may not be out of place to provide here a brief account of the political, sociological, religious and cultural aspects of the life of the Igbo society for a proper understanding and appreciation of *Things Fall Apart*. Unlike in different parts of Nigeria, the institution of Chiefdom is somewhat unfamiliar among the Igbo people. The Igbo society is a pluralistic society. Decision making power or authority normally rests with the community itself. In other words, a group of elders are involved in matters of crucial decisions at the village community meetings. Besides, the village community is linked by common shrines and a common myth of descent. Although each Igbo village is an-autonomous political unit,
these villages are interlinked and integrated into one another by way of marriages, titled men, Oracles and shrines. Marriages of women within a village community are a taboo. Thus, exogamy serves as an integrative factor linking several villages creating a system of affiliations and communications larger than that of the autonomous village.

Men of titles occupy a place of importance in the hierarchy of power in each village. These titles are not conferred by a ruler nor are they awarded by the state. On the other hand, these titles have to be acquired by the individuals concerned either by way of registering success at the village or intra-village level tournaments or by the payment of initiation fee. These men of titles are treated with honour and respect not only by their villages but by the neighbouring villages as well. Yet another significant integrative factor is the presence of oracles and shrines common to many villages.

Igbo religious beliefs and practices also serve as a unifying factor. Three major modes of belief are worth mentioning: worship of the supreme god Chukwu and many other intermediary deities; the worship of ancestors; and finally, the cult of personal god or Chi. Chukwu is the supreme god without a shrine or priests. The sky is his abode and he is the god of creation and fertility. He is the final receiver of all the gifts and sacrifices offered to minor deities. Next in the hierarchy is Ala or Ani, the goddess of earth. She is the owner of all the people, both dead and alive. She is the guardian of the laws of the land and punishes offenders. A constant interaction between the living and the dead is ensured by the presence of Ala. Chi is a sort of personal god or spirit
double gifted to an individual at birth by Chukwu. Although the Igbos are a pluralistic society, the individual is provided with enough scope to manipulate his way for the realization of his objectives by means of his Chi. According to David Carroll:

[T]he individual is controlled by his Chi, out since his role in society has been bargained for he is encouraged to make a success of it.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, the Igbo mythology seems to emphasize the principle of dualism as against monism or absolutism. However, what is significant here is that a single autonomous village at its own level as well as a cluster of villages is held together by a network of relationships, with a common recognition, much stronger than in modern European civilization that the community is greater than the individual and is the source and means of his self-fulfillment.

*Things Fall Apart* deals vividly with all these aspects of the [Igbo] community life. Thus, Achebe’s delineation reminds the world - both African and the European - that Africa had a rich past and legacy. African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain. The message of this should be clear for both the natives and the Europeans as well. Thus, Achebe assumes for himself the roles of a cultural
nationalist, explaining the traditions of his people to a largely hostile world, and a teacher, instilling dignity into his own people.\textsuperscript{12}

_Things Fall Apart_, the title has carefully been chosen by Achebe. The title at once is appealing and striking for several reasons. As pointed out earlier, the novelist wanted to join issue with Joyce Cary’s _Mister Johnson_ in order to counter the racist account of an outsider dealing with the African situation and the African character. _Things Fall Apart_ has three parts, the first part attempts to celebrate the ceremony of innocence symbolized by the Umuofians. This part of the novel is devoted to the depiction of the life of the inhabitants of Umuofia (children of the bush) in terms of their political, cultural, sociological and anthropological aspects. The second part is a sort of formless darkness on account of the intrusion of the European missionaries in the land of the innocence. It deals with the depressed life of the protagonist, Okonkwo, as an exile at his mother’s place, Mbanta. The third part assumes the shape of an anarchy let loose on the Umuofian world to destroy the native institutions and traditions. This is a stage where the missionaries collaborate with the coloniser or the alien administration. This final section of the novel accounts for the tragic end of the protagonist following his return from exile after a period of seven years.

The hero of the novel, Okonkwo, who symbolizes the African culture, is at the center of the events. He is one among a few important men of his village, Umuofia. His faith in the social order of his society is unshakeable. He immensely loves his clan and is always ready to abide by the code his clan prescribes. He enthusiastically participates in all the
activities of the clan. He also serves his clan as a warrior in battles against the enemy clans. The intrusion of Christian missionaries into the affairs of his clan makes him restless. Throughout the novel we find him restless and agitated. He sternly opposes the entry of the colonialists into his land and wants his clansmen to fight tooth and nail against the colonial forces. However his urge for support from his clansmen to uproot the new religion and the new culture is not complied with. His failure is not an outcome of his flaw but is due to the failure of his clansmen in grasping the immediacy of his message and their inability to foresee the peril. The ruthless and dominating colonial power enters Okonkwo’s land in his very presence will hamper the natural flow of the fictional course. So, his devises a scheme through which he sends Okonkwo into exile. It is during his absence the colonialists make inroads into his land. As a punishment to the accidental killing of one of his clansmen, Okonkwo has to flee from his clan. He cannot return for seven years. In Okonkwo’s absence the colonialists set their soft paw on Okonkwo’s land. They find an easy entry and cozy shelter in Umuofia while he is in exile. His absence from Umuofia, therefore is highly symbolic; it symbolizes the absence of resistance, rejection and retaliation, that could have been put forth by an embodiment of indigenous elemental forces in the form of Okonkwo. His absence also symbolizes the proliferation of vulnerability of temptations and greed. The colonialists have always been schematic, cunning, opportunistic and exploitative. They arrive in the guise of Christian missionaries and employ all possible means to attract Africans towards them. Besides
arguments and explanations, the missionaries also entice the natives with gifts such as bicycles and guns and impress them with modern facilities and comforts such as schools and hospitals. A conversation between villagers of Mbanta and a white missionary through his interpreter goes on as follows:

Where is the white man’s horse?” he [a man in Mbanta ] asked. The Ibo evangelists consulted among themselves and decided that the man probably meant bicycle. They asked the white man and he smiled benevolently. “Tell them”, he said, “that I shall bring many iron horses when we have settled down among them. Some of them will even ride the iron horse themselves (Achebe 132).

The tragedy of Okonkwo is that he does not hesitate to do a thing all alone. He chooses to fight ‘alone’ and on behalf of the community against the colonial administration. He is also aware that his community is not prepared to support him in his fight. In a fit of near madness, he beheads the messenger of the white man with his matchet to the dismay and shock of the entire community. He realizes the possible consequences of his action in killing the messenger and decides on the course of suicide rather than allow himself to be hanged by the white administration, which often “judged cases in ignorance.” (Achebe 158)

Thus, Okonkwo awaits the similar fate of his father for who no funeral could be arranged. Okonkwo embodies the Igbo-traits of sturdiness, strength and self-dignity. The negative aspect, however, was his fear of ‘failure.’ The ‘manliness-complex’ appears to dry up the milk of human-kindness in him as evidenced in his merciless killing of Ikemefuna
against the advice of Ezeudu, a village elder. His irrational and almost pathological allergy to affection which he considers to be a form of weakness nearly dehumanizes him. He had a fiery disposition; was an iron man, but he failed to take the community with him. He lacked the leadership quality to rally and consolidates the native forces against the aggression of the white man. His rash and impulsive act of killing the Whiteman’s messenger, however heroic in itself, amounted to an admission of collective defeat - a signal of community’s surrender and colonial triumph.¹³

The setting of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is Umuofia and Mbanta, the two principal villages in a union called the ‘nine villages’. Okonkwo, the major character of the novel was a great wrestler in his youth, a renowned warrior and one of the most wealthy, powerful and influential members of Umuofia. The language of Okonkwo and the other villagers is expressed in the idiom of the Ibo villagers as Achebe transmutes it into modern English. The conflict in the novel, vested in Okonkwo, derives from the series of crushing blows which are levelled at traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture causing, in the end, the traditional society to fall apart. Thus the significance of the title of the book taken from Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming”:

> 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.

Achebe’s major concern in *Things Fall Apart*, like that of Yeats in his *The Second Coming*, is with the decline, disintegration and fall of
civilizations. The novelist, obviously, seems to have been influenced by the message in The Second Coming and all that the poem seeks to portend in terms of the inherent limitations in each civilization. Yeats is of the view that no civilization can ever beat the laws of time and change despite its frantic effort for perfection and permanence. Ultimately, every civilization collapses paving the way for a new one which will be antithetical to the one it seeks to replace so that a totally new order comes into being. For Umuofia—the fictional locale of Things Fall Apart, the Western civilization is no more than a fabulous formless darkness and a mere anarchy let loose on the Umuofian world. Thus, in both the civilizations of Europe and Africa, “the centre cannot hold” and “the falcon cannot hear the falconer.” The result: things fall apart.¹⁴

This novel is a vision of what life was like in Iboland between 1850 and 1900. Achebe makes a serious attempt to capture the strains and tensions of the experiences of Ibo people under the impact of colonialism. What ultimately gives this novel its strength is Achebe’s feelings for the plight and problems of these peoples. Achebe is a twentieth-century Ibo man, a de-colonised writer, and recognizes the wide gulf which exists between his present-day society and that of Ibo villagers sixty years ago, sixty years which have seen remarkable changes in the texture and structure of Ibo society.

Achebe is able to view objectively the forces which irresistibly and inevitably destroyed traditional Ibo social ties and with them the quality of Ibo life. In showing Ibo society before and after the coming of the white man he avoids the temptation to present the past idealized and
the present as ugly and unsatisfactory. The atmosphere of the novel is realistic, although there are romantic elements in it. Put another way, Achebe manages to express a romantic vision of Ibo life in realistic form, to encompass aspects of that life which evoke it in all its complexity and convincingness. Achebe’s success proceeds not from his interest in the history of his people and their folklore and legend in an academic sense, even though he puts these to good use in the novel, nor from the fact that he tells a compelling story, although this is true. His success proceeds from his ability to see his subject from a point of view which is neither idealistic nor dishonest. Of the temptation to present the past in an idealized form, especially to the African writer, Achebe has written: the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. “Because…the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity…This is where the writer’s integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts”.

In the second and third parts of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* the critical social conflict takes place. These sections present the social and psychological effects and the tragic consequences which result from the clash between traditional Ibo society and British Christian
Imperialism. In the second section, as well, the relationship between Okonkwo and his refractory son Nwoye is delineated in such a way as to transmute the broader cultural conflict to the personal level. Okonkwo prepares for the last day of his life filled with deep foreboding and brooding nostalgia:

Okonkwo slept very little that night. The bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of child-like excitement. Before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia skirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. They were all satisfactory, he had thought. As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man’s court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself. He thought about wars in the past. (Achebe 141.) At first it seems as if the gathered remnant of the clan share Okonkwo’s feelings and that some decisive action will be taken.

The final paragraph of the novel contains an irony of a different kind with which the novel ends is worth quoting:

In the many years in which he [the DC] had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to
the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. (Achebe 187)

The entire passage, from first to last, is ironical; the narrative takes the commissioner’s point of view, and therefore, makes his intentions clear. Okonkwo’s death is an “undignified detail” for him whereas for Obierika it is the death of “one of the greatest men in Umuofia” (Achebe 187). Actually Okonkwo’s death is a metaphor to the collapse of Ibo society. The commissioner can never understand this reality. Even some critics of Things Fall Apart, including Robert Serumaga, fail to see the nobility in Okonkwo’s death. Okonkwo never turns his back on the society. On the contrary he urges his clansmen not to turn their backs on the values their society has cherished. Okonkwo, in the view of Begam Richard is an embodiment of the Ibo values and true representative of his people. Whereas G.D. Killam argues, “He [Okonkwo] even accepts exile to upkeep those values. His action of suicide proceeds from “a profound sense of loss of values” among the clansmen”.16

It is again ironical to D.C. Hunks who says, when the DC Hunks that “one can write a whole chapter on him” [Okonkwo]. Okonkwo’s death symbolizes the crumbling of Ibo traditional culture as a result of
its encounter with the British colonialism. The DC thinks that only “a chapter” or a “whole paragraph” can be written on this incident. This event is epoch-making in African history whereas for the DC it is merely a small “detail” about which “one must be firm in cutting out.” The ironic tone of the DC continues to the last line of the novel. The title he chooses for his book to be written is: The Pacification of Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. Denial of freedom to live with self-dignity, according to the DC, is “pacification.” Lloyd W. Brown makes following remark on DC’s thoughts:

The District Commissioner is an archetype of those numerous Europeans, particularly missionaries and administrators, whose instant expertise on Africa has contributed to the Westerner’s profound ignorance of the continent. And the ethnocentric bias of the Commissioner’s imperial handbook underlines the historical inability of the Western scholar to emancipate himself from the usual perspective on African “Primitives.”

Critics like Solomon O. Iyasere and Ernest N. Emenyonu accuse Okonkwo of his inflexibility. For them the reason for his death is “his inability to bend.” Such criticism is to deny Okonkwo the right place he deserves in history. He died a heroic death when his clansmen refuse to rally around him and join him in resisting the British. They act as quiet onlookers when their culture is ruthlessly distorted by an alien culture. But Okonkwo does not fail his duty. Foreseeing the collective suicide which his clansmen are going to commit by submitting themselves to the alien force he simply precedes his people and through
death also he leads the way. His failure to establish a balance between his inner self and his society, between his own people and the intruding forces leave only suicide as a course of action open for him.

In its analysis, death of the agitated hero dramatizes the beginning of a war between the colonial forces and Achebe Hero who is more matured now. Direct confrontation with the enemy, without really estimating his power that operates on various places simultaneously, would not yield desired result. If the enemy has to be met on equal ground, his merit or otherwise has to be accurately judged, Achebe hero has to inevitably adopt another strategy. He, therefore, reconnoiters.

*Things Fall Apart* is the expression in terms of imaginative art of the tensions, stresses and conflicts, presented in personal, social and spiritual terms, of late nineteenth century Ibo society. The men and women in the novel are real; they live in the world and seek to control their destinies, sometimes successfully, sometimes painfully and with difficulty and error. The inevitable processes of history are suggested by the struggle made concrete in the novel and conceived and presented in actual and particular terms, without idealism and without sentimental.¹⁹

The novel is primarily concerned with the conflict between the two cultures-African and the European. It also addresses the socio-economic problems and psychological tensions generated by the intrusion of the colonial forces into the African society. The novel is packed with innumerable episodes that shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of Ibo culture. Adewale Maja-Pearce rightly points out that:
One of Achebe’s purposes in *Things Fall Apart* is to assert that the … values of pre-colonial Africa were in no way inferior to those of Europe, merely different.  

The colonisers use all the means and methods with apparent intentions of the natives’ amelioration, progress and comforts. Bicycle (iron horse) is the enticing means here. Achebe very subtly criticizes the inherent social weakness, certain rites and rituals and cultural practices that perturb the sensitive beings of the land. The converts, however, also include worthy men in the clan like Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles. Okonkwo’s son Nwoye also embraces Christianity, not because he understands the philosophy of Christianity but because he cannot agree with certain customs of his own community. Achebe thus reveals Nwoye:

> It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was. . . A vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul- the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. (Achebe 134)

Nwoye’s conversion perturbs Okonkwo. His opposition to the existence of Christians in his mother's clan - where he spends his period of exile assumes a more serious dimension. He thinks it is a fatal blow for him because in most African societies, “The first son is supposed to be his father and it is shameful and disgraceful for a father to lose his first son.”

Okonkwo wishes his son “to be a great farmer and a great man.” (Achebe 30) Once he says, “I will not have a son who cannot hold
up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my hands.” (Achebe 30) When he comes to know about Nwoye’s conversion, he catches Nwoye by neck and threatens him to kill. Okonkwo’s uncle, Uchendu, rescues the boy from his father’s grip. Obierika also explains at length to Okonkwo about the situation, which has grown worse in Umuofia. Their own men are with the whites now. They help him in his governance. According to Obierika, the situation is out of control and “it is already too late” (Achebe 159) to do anything. Obierika expresses his fear:

I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas. While leaving Okonkwo he again says who knows what may happen tomorrow? Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us. (Achebe 127-8).

Here Okonkwo fails to foresee what Obierika talks about. He still believes that his clan would give a tough fight to the white men. But this illusion about his clan is shattered as soon as he comes back to Umuofia from exile. He understands that he has lost his place in the clan. Now he is no more one of those ‘nine masked spirits who administer justice’ in the clan. “The clan (is) like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another” (Achebe 155). A man’s place is not there waiting for him. As soon as one leaves, someone else rises and fills it up. During Okonkwo’s exile, Umuofia has changed a lot. Its “centralizing traditional controls have broken down.”
The new religion, the new government and the trading store have become a matter of wide note. People do not talk much about Okonkwo’s return. A church has been established and it has attracted many Umuofians. Okonkwo comes to know that one of his clansmen, Aneto, was hanged by the white men. Aneto kills Oduche in the fight over a land. According to the custom Aneto, the killer, should flee from the clan. But he is arrested by the white administration and he is hanged. The enforcement of these new laws further perturbs Okonkwo. He is obsessed with the only idea of liberating his clan from the clutches of the foreign forces. Though he understands that the things have begun to fall apart in his clan and his clansmen too have become soft like women, he does not withdraw himself from the arena. He wants to motivate his clansmen to rise up against the foreign rule.

The District Commissioner (DC) invites the leaders of Umuofia to his headquarters. Since it is not for the first time that the DC has invited them, six leaders including Okonkwo go to the headquarters. As soon as they reach the headquarters the six men are arrested and severely beaten up. Their heads are shaved. They are neither given anything to eat nor allowed to go out to urinate. The DC tells them:

> We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we will come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others . . . That must not happen in the dominion of our queen. . . (Achebe 175)

The ironical words of the commissioner confuse the leaders of Umuofia. How can his administration be a ‘peaceful’ one? How did he rescue them
when Enoch illtreated them by unmasking the egwugwu? How can their land become the ‘dominion of his queen?’ Okonkwo tells his companions that they should have killed the white men as he suggested earlier. One of his companions mockingly says if they had done so they would have been waiting, now to be hanged. Finally Umuofians pay the “Extortionate ransom” the white man demands and release their leaders. Okonkwo decides his final action. If the clan goes on war it will be well; otherwise he will leave them and plan his own revenge. The next morning the clansmen assemble to debate a line of liberating action against the colonial government. Okika, an orator in the clan, addresses the gathering:

We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done. . . We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil we must root them out too. (Achebe 183)

Thus he tries to motivate the clan to rise up against the white men. Then five court messengers come there with the white man’s order that the meeting be stopped immediately. Okonkwo, ‘trembling with hate, unable to utter a word’, drew his matchet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo’s matchet descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body. The waiting backcloth
jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: “Why did he do it? He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away”. (Achebe 44-5.) Uchendu in seeking to win Okonkwo from despair in his exile says that he himself has suffered much and adds, ‘I did not hang myself, and I am still alive’. (Achebe 95.) This prepares the way for Okonkwo’s death by hanging, his final act of despair. The symbolic pattern is complete. Obierika says to the District Commissioner to whom he appeals to cut down Okonkwo’s body and bury it:

It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. (Achebe 147.)

Okonkwo, ‘one of the greatest men in Umuofia’ is at the end totally alienated from his people and ‘now he will be buried like a dog’. (Achebe147.) Having embodied the tragic drama of a society in the tragic destiny of a representative member of that society, having suggested that the inexorable forces which determine Okonkwo’s personal tragedy are analogous to the inevitable, irrepresible forces which determine historical change, Achebe seeks to distance himself from the particular events of the story and to fit both story and theme into a wider historical context. The dangling body of Okonkwo is merely
an ‘undignified detail’ to the District Commissioner who has it cut down and the indifference displayed by him is symptomatic, not only of the utter failure of the two systems to understand each other but, through the irony of the final paragraph, symptomatic of the hypocritical basis of the imperial-colonial notion of the ‘civilizing mission’, the idea contained in the phrase ‘the white man’s burden’.
REFERENCES:


