In 1952, as a university student Achebe read Joyce Cary’s acclaimed work *Mister Johnson* which was published in 1939. Achebe’s acrimony at Cary’s racially biased representation of Africa prompted him to write his first novel *Things Fall Apart*. As Achebe states, the story of Africa was something that ‘could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned’ (123). *Things Fall Apart* is acknowledged today as one of the most significant counter-narratives of the twentieth century. Indeed the transformative nature of *Things Fall Apart* is undisputed. African writing in English evolved primarily as a result of the Euro-African colonial encounter and its aftermath, and each of Achebe’s novels marks a significant moment in the growth of this body of literature. Simon Gikandi says in the forward to *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*:

It is crucial to understand how Achebe occupies a crucial diachronic role in the history of an African literature almost driven by desire to imaginatively capture the key moments of
African history from the beginning of colonialism to what has come to be known as postcoloniality. (12)

Alistair Niven suggests that one can read Achebe’s work in the chronological order of African and Nigerian history, from the 1890s to the present day. Achebe’s fiction registers different phases in the development of modern Africa: ‘Each work is wholly different in character from the other, but together they can legitimately be seen as aspects of one gathering sequence of human imperfection’ (49).

Achebe’s fiction can be divided into two categories. *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* represent a pre-colonial Igbo culture which is fighting against all odds to secure its integrity against external threats. *No Longer At Ease, A Man of the People* and *Anthills of Savannah* are primarily preoccupied with the crisis of decolonization. ‘Achebe’s fiction and literary criticism,’ explains Naheem Yousaf, ‘comprises an important literary archive for Nigeria in the making’ (15).

European colonial expansion on the African continent in the nineteenth century, as in other parts of the world, was initiated primarily for the purpose of economic exploitation. It was impossible for European imperial powers to physically control such a vast continent as Africa and the great imperial project had to be maintained through ideological mechanisms. The imposition of ideological hegemony was
much more deeply entrenched in the African context. This was so because of the dominance of traditions of oral communication in most indigenous African cultures. The absence of a strong written tradition allowed for the imposition of the coloniser’s language through the mechanism of education in English. Taking advantage of the absence of a documented past, people south of Sahara were denied an existence in the writing of the Western master narrative of colonial history. With the established control of the Church over education, the power to block out indigenous narratives passed into the hands of the various colonial authorities. One of the most effective strategies of colonial hegemonic control became the negation of identity through the denial of a collective history. The Kenyan novelist and radical critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o summarizes the complicity of religion, language and education over dissemination of knowledge: ‘the missionary carried the Bible, the soldier carried the gun, the administrator and the settler carried the coin. Christ, commerce, civilization, the Bible, the coin, the gun’ (88).

The history of the African novel, as Dan Ivezbye points out has been ‘essentially a history of an evolving racial consciousness’ (28). What is unique about the growth of the modern African novel is that it was coincidental with the collective intellectual annexation of Africans by the Western colonial enterprise. However, the awakening of creative
responses to counter the undervaluing of indigenous systems of thought and communication was not at all a sudden phenomenon. The arrival of Edmund Blyden in Liberia in 1851 marked a crucial stage in the development of African thought. Blyden’s most important contribution was his championing of the theory of the ‘African personality’ formulated as one possible means of regaining the African’s ‘disinherited self’. Consequently, Afro-American literary movements of the early twentieth century played an influential role in the gradual assertion of pride in being black for the Africans. The movement towards establishing a common Negro identity gained further momentum in the 1920s when under the influence of the ideology of the Black Nationalism of Marcus Garvey and Pan-Africanism of Du Bois, the Negritude movement was born. The preoccupation with a ‘black affirmation’ dominated the literary expression of the Francophone poets and intellectuals of the 1940s like Aime Cesaire, David Diop and Leopold Senghor. While there have been several debates on the aesthetic principles of Negritude, it is generally accepted that the movement served as a launch pad for the articulation and growth of a black consciousness among Anglophone African writers as well.

By the 1950s, the struggle for independence in the former British colonies of Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya had begun to grow in
strength. On the other hand, the literature of the period was marked by a convergence of anti-colonial indignation and nationalist thinking. The first stage of the writing of cultural nationalism and racial assertion was governed by the intention of performing a therapeutic role of healing the wounds and humiliation inflicted by the colonizing process. As Fanon points out in The Wretched of the Earth, ‘the birth of national consciousness in Africa has a strictly contemporaneous connection with the African consciousness’ (199). Cultural nationalist fiction tended to be dominated by a forward-looking optimism. Promises of an egalitarian and classless society had been an integral part of the socialist manifestos of nationalist leaders, and a general sanguinity about the potential of indigenous cultures is reflected in the literature of the first generation African novelists.

Most first-generation African novelists in English found themselves in a doubly-dilemmatic situation. As the products of colonial English education they felt compelled to reassert their African sensibility in a second language. But in a clever move, they appropriated the English language as a counter-weapon to perform a psychologically affirmative function and to inscribe new meanings. There are innumerable and exciting examples of the creative breaking and re-making of the English language, largely through retention of the stamp
of orality. In 1953, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-wine Drinkard* was the first Nigerian novel to be published by a reputed British publishing company. Tutuola became a controversial figure in the critical reception of the novel in English for the ‘strangeness’ of his style and the use of what is referred to as ‘young English’. In this magic-realist narrative, Tutuola incorporates Yoruba myth and folklore, where human beings mix freely with creatures from the spiritual world.

However, the novel that received widespread international acclaim as the seminal postcolonial novel was *Things Fall Apart*. This novel inspired an entire generation of African novelists to appropriate the English language by incorporating the techniques of oral story telling for a political purpose. Achebe demonstrated his masterly ability to ‘Africanize’ the English language through the introduction of Igbo words and proverbs into the flow of the text in *Things Fall Apart*. The roots of this writing were grounded in the writer’s urgency for self-assertion and the recovery of an ‘African’ identity in view of the severe colonial negation of the psyche of the black African.

*Things Fall Apart* portrays the history of Igboland between 1875 and 1904. Igboland is located in the territory of south-eastern Nigeria, located on either side of the River Niger. While the main narrative is that of the protagonist Okonkwo and his tragic inability to deal with the
colonial dispensation, there is also the larger story of the encounter between the colonial intruders and the Igbo village of Umuofia. Clement Okafor remarks that Igbo society is ‘historically egalitarian and democratic in the sense that the people never had rulers with anything approaching autocratic powers’ (87).

Biodun Jeyifo suggests that Things Fall Apart can be read at two levels. First, as a grand narrative of the colonial encounter, and secondly, as a counter narrative providing a fragmentary story of the decentered identities of subaltern groups (1990; 65). Those who are first converted in the village of Umuofia to Christianity, and absorbed into the colonial administration as messengers and petty officials, are from the group of social outcastes and marginalized ‘others’ who view the new economic and social order as liberating and privileging. Jeyifo says, ‘Achebe’s ironic vision extends as well to their liberation by colonialism’ (65). Once absorbed into the new system they actively propagate corruption, and become the instruments of colonial brutality. To Achebe’s credit it must be stated that he does not compel the reader to choose between the two value- systems. Rather he presents the colonial encounter as a paradoxical process of incorporation of the old into a new, complex social order.
In the brilliant and ironic ending of *Things Fall Apart* is the essence of the politics of representation, central to postcolonial debates on identity. The reader is witness to an act wherein the indigenous oral account of Okonkwo will be taken over by the written ‘official account’ of the white District Officer for his intended book on the *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The District Officer thus emerges, as Jeyifo points out, as ‘a figure not merely of political, administrative power but also of narrative, discursive, epistemic authority’ (55).

In 1964, Achebe published *Arrow of God*. In the preface to a later revised edition of the novel he admits that of all of his work, it is this structurally complex novel that he is most likely to be caught sitting down to read again. Achebe returns to the period of the intrusion of the coloniser, and the theme of the collapse of the traditional Igbo social order. The narrative focuses on the social and political engagement between the priest of Ulu (Ezeulu), the villages of Umuaro, and the new colonial administration, and particularly explores the relationship between religion and social order. Margaret Turner argues that the central issue here is more about conflict over the acquisition of power. She points out that there is ‘no return to the order of morality at the end of the novel, only to an order of power’ (35).
Turner offers an important observation in her reading of the element of personal and cultural tragedy in Achebe’s work. She points out that “rather than catharsis, cleansing of the emotions through the re-establishment of a moral order, a vague uneasiness and dissatisfaction remain after each novel” (33). This element of uneasiness becomes increasingly predominant in Achebe’s No Longer at Ease (1960), the third novel in the order of composition, though published two years prior to Arrow of God. Set in the 1950s, No Longer at Ease marks the end of the colonial rule in Nigeria, and describes a society on the eve of self-rule. Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the protagonist of Things Fall Apart, returns home from England, and finds himself caught between the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ value systems. Obi’s predicament mirrors the ambivalence experienced by young university graduates, once removed from their traditional locales, and yet indebted to their communities for the opportunity for higher education. Obi is, as told to the reader, the first son of Umuofia to be sent abroad. Despite his initial resistance, Obi is unable to cope with the practical expectations of the Umuofians now residing in Lagos, or to assert his moral stance viz. his relationship with his girlfriend Clara who is an osu or an outcaste and therefore the society forbids him to marry her. No Longer at Ease indicates how western capitalism and consumerism has already set a
framework for cultural paralysis in post-independence African society and Obi soon succumbs to the rapidly prevailing culture of corruption. There are also starting signs of the alienation of the intellectual from the political class: ‘In Nigeria, the government was ‘they’. It had nothing to do with you or me.’ (30)

Emmanuel Obienchina points out that “between 1960 and 1968 there were 25 unconstitutional changes of government of which 18 were military coups and others were military inspired” (110). Although almost all the former Anglophone colonies had attained political independence from the British by the 1970s, the post-independence experience of the new nation-states came to be structured by what Neil Lazarus describes as “the deadly sinuosity of ‘neo-colonialism’(17). It took less than a decade for sub-Saharan Africa to slide into a condition of profound economic and political crisis. A legacy of colonialism, the term ‘neo colonialism’ is usually used to describe the high degree of economic control over a former colony’s affairs by western business interests. Although the direct relationship between the imperial power and the African colonies had theoretically altered through independence, western hegemonic control continued to exercise considerable influence with both political and psychological consequences. The complex extension of western dominance was achieved with the complicity of the
neo-colonial elite. Archie Mafege points out in *Neo-colonialism, State Capitalism or Revolution* that while colonialism was ‘an unmitigated imposition’, ‘neo-colonialism’ is a ‘contractual relationship’ (31). Infamous megalomaniac rulers like Idi Amin of Uganda and ‘Emperor’ Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic were supported by Western vested interests. Progressive socialist experiments, which had once promised so much change, also collapsed. The founding fathers of African nationalism Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya not only failed to deliver their pre-independence promises, but also turned into one party, semi dictatorial leaders. Nigeria too suffered a spate of not less than six military coups between 1950 and 1980.

The African intellectual-artist had attached enormous importance to the promises of nationhood in the early years of independence, and therefore bitter disappointment, anger and blame replaced what could have been the third world’s era of nationalist idealism with a nationalism of disastrous connotations. The political elite were now regarded as having sold out, and could no longer be considered as the legitimate representatives of the people. ‘The new tribalism of African society’, laments Ngugi, ‘was that of haves and have nots’ (17). As a consequence of the increasing disassociation between the dissident post-
colonial intellectual and the governing elite, creative writing now enters a new phase antithetical to the pre-independence mood of affirmation. There is a shift, for instance, from hope filled descriptions of the future in Ngugi’s first novel *The River Between* to a caustic critique of the Kenyan government’s humiliating reliance on international financial institutions in his fourth novel, *Petals of Blood*. A similar mood of weary cynicism recurs in Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease*.

The bitter political and social realities of the new nation states necessitated moving away from simplistic Manichaean oppositions of black/white, colonised/coloniser. The writer was compelled to address pressing issues on the nature and purpose of their art, and the responsibilities of the artist towards the population at large. New re-interpretations and interrogations of identity also compelled a rethinking of the hierarchies of gender, class, and religious and linguistic differences. One of Africa’s most polemical writers Ayi Kwei Armah defines the process of decolonization as ‘the search or research for positive African ideas, perspectives, and values’. ‘The enterprise,’ he adds, ‘is tautologically centered on Africa’ (1984:64). Decolonization, according to Armah, involves a parallel process of ‘re-Africanization’ or a discursive formulation wherein the artist reconstructs an identity s/he has hitherto been denied or deprived of. The very act of writing thereby
becomes a means of self-realization. An analysis of *Things Fall Apart* would again lead to a site which Abdul Jan Mohammed terms ‘a Manichaean code of binary oppositions’ such as white/black, civilization/savagery, rationality/sensuality, modern/traditional, individual/community (62). What is remarkable is the way Achebe accommodates these binary oppositions and holds them in artistic balance. Achebe does it thematically and technically.

As Wole Soyinka observes, the situation in most African countries needs a double redemption, ‘first from the colonial deniers of their past but also from the black neo-colonial deniers of their immediate past and present’ (114). In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe is primarily engaged with retrieving the history of his race from the imperial deniers of his past. In this respect, Achebe seems to have conceived his role as one of addressing in his fiction the social, political and religious concerns of Africans.

Depending for their subsistence on land, the African people have lived closely and in harmony with nature. As Achebe shows, they respect the seasonal changes with an almost religious fervor, preparing themselves for the best and the worst. These seasonal changes and the myths and beliefs associated with them compel them to perform certain rites and rituals which shape their consciousness and their daily lives.
Again, they have their own social system and cultural practices which are closely bound by their beliefs and superstitions. If the community falls apart with the advent of the European missionaries and bureaucrats, it is also ruined because of the tragic stubbornness of people like Okonkwo. The central character of the novel, Okonkwo, who epitomizes the characteristics, the African man, is a towering hero of the Igbo tradition. In his tragic fall we witness the disintegration and fall of an ancient society. Okonkwo is a hero, an exceptionally brave man in every sense. So great is his prowess that even as a young man he has won battles and has had five heads severed. ‘He was well-known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. ‘As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat’ (3). He is a man of titles, has large acres of land and can afford to have many wives. In short, he has become an epitome of success in mythic proportions. It is through his life from birth to his tragic suicide that Achebe portrays the intricacies of the Igbo culture. However, Achebe refuses to romanticise Okonkwo's achievements, for what he shows is that the strength and bravery of the kind embodied by the Okonkwo can, if without a degree of open mindedness and flexibility, lead to disaster. It is not merely the tragic flaw in his character but also his obsessive
hatred of the white men, who he fears will tear his own culture apart that brings his tragic end.

The texts produced in the colonies during the early years of imperialism were in the language of the colonisers. These texts were written by people whose identification with the colonisers was near total. Hence such texts could hardly reflect an indigenous culture in a credible manner. Even when they were to be written by the English-educated upper classes like that happened in India, they were written under imperial licence, in the language of the dominant culture. It was only when the restraining influence of the imperial discourse was set aside and new usages evolved and were appropriated that the texts acquired the flavour of the regional culture. Needless to say those postcolonial literatures developed through several stages corresponding with the stages in the development of both the national and regional consciousness of the people of these postcolonial nations along with the abrogation of the imperial canonical centre.

One of the important factors that made imperial domination over the colonies possible was the control over language. It was through the language of the rulers that concepts like ‘truth’, 'reality', and ‘universality’ were established as the only valid ones. And such concepts dominated the minds of the people even after the political
domination of the rulers ended. Where literary activity was concerned, the cultural hegemony of the rulers continued even after the colonies gained independence. It was only after an effective and confident postcolonial voice began to be heard that such domination began to be weakened. It is out of ‘the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages that some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of modern times have emerged’ (Ashcroft 8). And it is in the way Achebe handles such tensions that the greatness of Things Fall Apart lies.

A major feature of the novel is Achebe's concern with the crisis of identity a particular community experiences because its culture is being gradually and systematically denigrated and a supposedly ‘superior’ cultural model is sought to be imposed. Again, although the community that Achebe portrays has not undergone an actual ‘geographical displacement’ or was not entirely subjugated, it is likely to experience a sense of linguistic alienation, because through its educational system, the Empire has sought to impose on the colonised an alien language which is incapable of bearing the burden of their experience. Hence the need for writers like Achebe to transform the language of the masters and mould it in such a way that it becomes an apt vehicle for expressing
the geographical or physical conditions of their land as also their socio-cultural practices.

Language has a dual purpose; it is both a means of communication and a bearer and transmitter of culture. For it was speech which came first, with the written form following in due course. For example in Nigeria, the oral culture was predominant and the written was introduced only with the advent of colonialism. Thus, while writing, the African novelist uses language as a technique for cultural reimagining. Language is used in writing to create a flavour which in itself defines certain concerns and meanings. Though much of colonial writing is in English, what marks the work of Afro-Asian writers is their sincere use of the English language in the portrayal of the society to which they belong. Their fiction is governed by the habits, customs, norms and manners of their own group or community and so their speech is steeped in perceptible contrivance. Commenting on the use of language as a technique, Mark Schorer remarks:

For technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subjects, to conveying its meaning and, finally, of evaluating it. And surely it follows that certain techniques are sharper tools
than others, and will discover more, that the writer capable of the
most exacting scrutiny of his subject matter will produce works
with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and
resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum
meaning. (387)

In the novel Achebe says: ‘Among the Ibo, the art of conversa-
tion is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which
words are eaten’ (6). Each proverb is richly connotative, compressing a
wealth of associations into a pithy phrase. By the use of proverbs, a
speaker is looked upon as the owner of traditional values and wisdom
locked in them. Thus proverbs constitute one of the most potent factors
for individual conformity and cultural continuity and in Things Fall
Apart they succeed in translating Ibo thoughts and words into English,
adding an extra dimension to the novel. Reviewing the novel in 1959,
Ben Obumselu said:

The African writer is not merely to use but to expand the re-
sources of English and also that the verbal peculiarities of Things
Fall Apart suggest that Chinua Achebe has reflected much on this
problem. His solution is to attempt literal fidelity to translate
whereever possible the actual words which might have been used
in his own language and thereby preserve the native flavour of his situations. (43)

An Ibo proverb as Achebe uses it, besides giving a local color lightens up a situation and gives it a significance which otherwise could be missed. As one can see in the novel, the proverb ‘If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings’(7), indicates the character of Okonkwo, whose fame rises to be a man of title and one of the lords of the clan. The phrase gives an insight to the reader, of the native tradition that age was respected among his people but achievement was considered as more important. Not by birth but by merit of one's personal qualities and gains, respect could be earned in society. Thus proverbs are used both to give information and to express the motives and thoughts of characters. When an old man says about Okonkwo ‘Looking at a King's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast’ (65), the whole ethnic framework is brought to life. A number of critics have noticed and commented on the use of proverbs in Acheb’s fiction. In Folklore in Nigerian Literature, Bernth Lindfors remarks, ‘the function of proverbs in Achebe's novels is to reiterate themes, sharpen characterisation, clarify conflict and define values’ (6). Palmer Eustace refers to them as vivid ‘illustrate analogies’ (62). They
are used in the novel to reinforce and hold together the various strands of the theme.

Proverbs are woven into the novels’ discourse, which far from detracting the flow of the narrative or making for climaxes in structure, help to make the text integral. Each proverb has a story behind it and this is the triumph of Achebe's art. Achebe knows how to achieve big effects economically by fastening on what is most significant and setting it in a context which gives it a wider application. The proverbs, "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing"(19) and "whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight then know that something is after its life" (178), basically express the idea that whenever there is something unusual in the movement of people, one can be sure that there is some strong reason behind it. In things fall apart, the proverb in the first formulation is directed at a person called Obiako, a palm wine tapper by profession, who abandons the trade so suddenly that it arouses public speculation and the reason is not far to seek. The man gives up the trade following the prediction of the Oracle that he will fall off a palm tree and die. The second proverb appears at the end of the novel, and then it refers to the fall of the traditional culture of Umuofia in the face of the advent of the white man's religion and cruel laws. Achebe poignantly expresses the prevailing fear and uncertainty of Umuofia with the help
of animal imagery. "Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent ominous air and not knowing which way to run" (173). The toad in the proverb is a symbol of the terror-stricken natives of Nigeria and the pursuer is the white colonial aggressor.

The proverb in each case helps to carry forward the theme of the novel and strengthen the novel’s structure. The proverbs thus become a hallmark of *Things Fall Apart*. Commenting on the technique and usage of proverbs, Donatus Nwoga says:

The Ibo proverbs can be relevant in two ways, depending on the context—the illuminative and the corrective. In Achebe's novels both types of uses are found. Corrective use refers to that which is not direct, is oblique in its usage, designed to produce an understanding or reaction in the person concerned, without directly involving the speaker. The illuminative use on the other hand, directly reinforces ideas by recalling traditional wisdom to support a given statement and is mainly to be found in formal address, oratory and discussion. (198)

Okonkwo, the protagonist in the novel, is a self-willed, self-made man with a firm determination, as indicated by the proverb: ‘The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did’ (22). The same proverb is used towards the
end of the novel but to get a different effect. When the question of salvaging the Umuofian culture becomes the sole concern of the people, they are to be on the alert to make the final assault on the white man, his religion and his government. The rural idiom used in Things Fall Apart not only conveys a great deal but also evokes authentic tribal culture and sensibility, rural expressions and analogies. Expressions like ‘I shall give you twice four hundred yarns’ (20), ‘the drought continued for eight market weeks’ (22), ‘from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost’ (81), are some of the expressions which take the non-African reader by surprise and give an understanding of the ways in which time and space are measured in rural society. In the novel, one comes across a number of native proverbs which add to the inexhaustible source of cultural references. It is the the traditional and mythical framework of the tribal people of Umuofia that has successfully moulded the narrative structure of the novel. Making use of the local dialect Achebe has presented not only the tragic irony of the hero, Okonkwo, but also of the rural world of religiosity, customs, superstitions, faiths, taboos and agrarian life. George Awoonor Williams says:

I think Achebe's Things Fall Apart achieves this overall effect of freshness by the translation of Ibo thoughts and words into English. Proverbs are woven into speech and dialogue. Far from
being a desecration of the English language, which seems to have come to stay, this transliteration of thoughts, concepts and images give the language freshness and a new scope for which I am sure the native speakers of English will thank us. (44)

Achebe is accurate and precise in recording the details of the colonial penetration into the Ibo land and despite having absolute fidelity to historical truth; the colonial experience is presented from the perspective of the native residents. One may ask whether the use of proverbs is in some way a protest against oppression and domination or are they setting in motion a reaction against the European powers and voicing native resistance. This thought can further be substantiated when reflecting on what Chinua Achebe himself had to say on the role of the writer. In November 1969 during his visit to the University of Texas at Austin, Achebe was asked in an interview, ‘Do you believe literature should carry a social or political message?’ His reply was:

Yes, I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. Even these early novels that look like very gentle recreations of the past - what they were saying, in effect, was that we had a past. That was protest, because there were people who
thought we didn't have a past. What we were doing was to say politely, that we did - here it is. (7)

*Things Fall Apart* takes into account all the rooted nuances of class, custom and culture that differ inherently from the homogenised cosmopolitan culture.

To quote from Fanon,

But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes ineffaceable wounds that the colonist onslaught has inflicted on our people. (201)

Fanon's words may seem a bit too harsh to a First World critic but the fact remains that the ‘wounds’ have been inflicted and the postcolonial writer cannot help but write about these wounds. The postcolonial writing is the healing process that takes the form of resistance writing: resistance against oppression, onslaught and dehumanisation of man. The use of the word ‘Man’ for the civilised west has justified its actions on the grounds of transforming brutes, subhuman creatures, Niggers and Blacks into man. As Fanon points out, ‘The native is declared insensible to the ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values and he is in this sense absolute evil’ (32).
*Things Fall Apart* deconstructs this very myth by proving that society and culture did exist in Africa but was converted into brutes by the aggression of the European. The process of humanising the so called ‘animals’ of Africa and bringing enlightenment to the world of Africans through the spread of Christianity, culture and science by the West, was one of violence. Peace was brought about by mass slaughter, splitting up of the native community, uprooting of traditions, religion, language and elimination of tribes in the name of education. Hence Achebe portrays a perfectly cohesive society with its own values, traditions, customs and religious leanings; a humane society which exhibits feelings of love, hatred, violence, worship, marriage, recreation and earning from the land. It is a society with a past that Nigerians need not be ashamed of and Europeans did not take cognisance of. In an address to the conference on Commonwealth Literature held at Leeds University in 1964, Achebe declared:

> I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one of a long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them. (Phelps 331)
The choice of the title taken from Yeats's famous poem *The Second Coming* is not therefore without significance. When Yeats writes: ‘Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’, and he foresees the end of Christian civilisation. Achebe predicts the end of the traditional African society. The Second Coming of Christ as a horror vision of the ‘rough beast’ is ironically akin to the advent of the white missionaries and white administrators. They bring about the catastrophic end and disjunction of Umuofia and consequently of Okonkwo, the hero who stands for Africa. As Gilbert Phelps points out, *‘Things Fall Apart* was in effect the archetypal African novel, in that the situation it describes—the falling of a traditional African rural society as a result of the coming of the white man, was a traumatic experience common to all the colonial or former colonial territories’ (331).

The opening sentence of the novel plunges the reader straight into the heart of Umuofia with the introduction of Okonkwo and his wrestling skill, thereby marking the importance of the native culture’s value system. Okonkwo’s social achievements are summed up in the following words:

He was a wealthy farmer, and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two
titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars.

And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. (12)

Regarded as a man of action and highly esteemed for his physical strength and courage, Okonkwo is an antithesis to his father Unoka. Unoka is lazy, is perpetually in debt, loves music and hates the sight of blood. He is a man of gentle emotions and loves the ‘intricate rhythms of Ekwe and the Udu and Ogene’ (24). But the Ibo people have no place for such weaklings and social failures. Hence Okonkwo is afraid to reveal the finer emotions of sensitivity and love for fear of being considered a coward. His love for his daughter Ezinma and the hostage Ikemefuna is masked by a rough and rugged exterior. He is obsessed with the idea of preserving his manliness in reaction against his father's feminine traits.

Farming is the main occupation of the Ibo people. Hence land occupies a central place in their life. Land is solid and it gives them dignity. Okonkwo's social status is determined by the land he owns. Before the harvest, Umuofia has its festive season; a thanksgiving to Ani—the earth goddess. It is the feast of the new yam—a kind of New Year celebration. Huts and walls are scrubbed with red earth; women paint themselves with camwood, draw beautiful patterns with uli on
their body, shave their head in designs and wear beads on their waist.
Yam foo foo and vegetable soup are in plenty and a wrestling match
accompanied with the beating of drums marks the end of the festival.
Palm wine and kolanut are offered to the guests as a sign of hospitality
and honour. They drink the wine in drinking horns usually kept in
goatskin bags. The partaking of wine entails an elaborate ceremony.
Achebe, the skilled craftsman, leaves out nothing from the narration. He
writes:

The younger of his sons, who was also the youngest man in the
group moved to the center, raised the pot on his left knee and be-
gan to pour out the wine. The first cup went to Okonkwo, who
must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group drank, be-
ginning with the eldest man. When everyone had drunk two or
three horns, Nwakibie sent for his wives... Anasi was the first
wife... She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from
him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed
back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to
her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper
order, and went away. (23)

Such ceremonial details and its fondness for proverbs, stories and
folk tales add up to the picture of a society with a rich cultural heritage.
Idioms, allusions and folklore point to a live oral tradition. Their socio-moral value system is self-sustaining. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves is the final authority of justice on all social and political matters of the village. It represents their ancestral gods. Worshippers go to the Oracle with awe and reverence to know about their future. Personal disputes are settled in public by the nine egwugwu, the judges. ‘It is communal self-criticism, and relaxed and in the last resort we all want the same things: at that level we can say the community triumphs and that it spreads its own light and reason’ (Fanon 37). Punishment follows transgression of laws. Okonkwo is punished, though not severely, for beating his wife during the week of peace. But he is exiled from his home for committing the ‘female crime’ of killing a clansman when his gun accidentally exploded during the burial rites of Ezeundu.

Umuofia has its strange and irrational ways. When possessed with the spirit of Agbala, Chielo acquires superhuman strength and carries Ekwefi’s daughter Ezinma on her back round the nine villages to the Oracle of Hills. With Ezinma on her back she disappears through a hole hardly big enough for a hen to pass, chanting-‘Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-! Chi negbu madu ub-ori ndu ya nato ya uto daluo-o-o...’ Similarly Ikemefuna, the hostage, is killed, though he is loved by Okonkwo and calls him father. Surprisingly Okonkwo participates in his
killing as he is afraid of being considered a weakling though he is filled with guilt and remorse for days after the incident. Okonkwo is incapable of compromise; of blending the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’ within himself.

Again, if a woman gives birth to twins they are abandoned and left in the forest to die and so is a man afflicted with stomach ailment, for he is considered to be an abomination on mother earth. Unoka faces such a death. Such events are shocking to the rational mind. But Achebe weaves them skillfully into the social fabric developed in the novel. Achebe is successful in juxtaposing conflicting values and actions within the accepted belief System. Okonkwo's exile is a turning point in the novel. With his downfall begins the disintegration of Umuofia. During his stay in Mbanta his friend Obireka brings the news that Abame has been wiped out. He says, ‘After a few days a few white men came to the marketplace which was full and began to shoot. Everybody was killed except the old and the sick who were at home.... their clan is now completely empty’ (129).

The white missionaries arrive in Mbanta and begin to educate the natives about the falsity of their own gods and religion. Ironically, it is Okonkwo's son Nwoye who is lured by their talk and becomes a convert. Nwoye like his grand-father is the “softer” sort. Hence the
missionaries attract him with their songs and prayers. ‘The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled’. (137)

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia the church has made its impact and there is a white man's government to judge cases against the natives. Some of the natives are imprisoned and subjected to the indignity of clearing the ground or fetching wood for the White Commissioner. The natives are men of title. They are pained and angered at such treatment. Others are hanged. In despair they sing:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,
He is fit to be a slave
The white man has no sense
He is fit to be a slave. (161)

It is ironical that the white man in the eyes of the native is ignorant and foolish; hence fit to be a slave. Okonkwo's blood boils to hear incidents of assault on his kinsmen. But as Obierika explains, the white man has acquired power by dividing their clan, by driving them apart with his religion and turning their own kinsmen against one another. The white man has taken away their power to fight back. Obierika tells Okonkwo, ‘He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart’ (162).
The Christians desecrating the personal gods of the natives infuriates the natives. Okonkwo and the leaders of Umuofia decide to demolish the church that has parted them. It results in their imprisonment and a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. Their stay in the prison is one of hunger, humiliation and insult. They are not allowed to go out to urinate, their heads are shaved and then knocked together by the court messengers. Okonkwo is filled with hatred and vows to avenge his honour. He has survived personal failures: his exile, his son's treachery or the failure of crops. But when the very existence and dignity of his clan is threatened, he is ready for war. Seething with anger, he kills the court messenger who tries to disrupt their meeting. He seeks the support of his people, but they are divided and Umuofia backs out of war, unable to take action like Okonkwo. Okonkwo is filled with despair. Umuofia has failed him. Rather than accept the white man's slavery, he decides to take away his life. His act is a crime against mother earth. Okonkwo's despair finds release only in death. His friend Obierika says ferociously to the District Commissioner who has come to arrest Okonkwo, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (191).
Okonkwo's death is recorded in the White Commissioner's book in a paragraph. The name of the book is *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This ironic note by Achebe and the objective tone that he uses throughout, heightens the tragedy of Okonkwo. Okonkwo's death is the result of a dilemma that all natives face. ‘If he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he is a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all; shame and fear will split up his character and make his innermost self fall to pieces’ (Sartre 13).

The end of *Things Fall Apart* is a displacement of Ibo culture, language and traditions by the English language, religion and culture. The process of colonisation has begun with the death of Okonkwo. The novel is a work of epic dimension in its magnitude of subject matter. It unveils the complete life history and tragedy of Okonkwo and consequently of the African tribe. *Things Fall Apart* resembles Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* in its vastness of human life history. Achebe adds life and vitality to the novel by introducing native usage in the English language. He thus pushes the frontiers of the English language a little further, thereby adding another feature of post colonialism to his writing. One aspect of decolonization takes into account the acceptance of guilt and self introspection on the white man's part. Sartre's scathing
denunciation of colonialism should be an eye opener to the West: ‘First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it’s not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affection of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions’ (21).