Chapter - II

Things Fall Apart

_Things Fall Apart_, published in 1958, is the seminal African novel in English. The novel has been so influential, not only on African literature, but on literature around the world. Its most striking feature is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a traditional village culture in Africa. Achebe is trying not only to inform the outside world about Igbo cultural traditions, but to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it had contained much of value. Most of the Africans in his time were ready to accept the
European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering.

In the 1950s, Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous peoples. The novel *Things Fall Apart* came as a response to novels, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, that treat Africa as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Tired of reading whitemen’s accounts of how primitive, socially backward, and most of all, language-less native Africans were, Achebe sought to convey a fuller understanding of one African culture and, in so doing, give voice to an underrepresented and exploited colonial subject. The language of the novel is simple but dignified. When the characters speak, they use an elevated diction which is meant to convey a fuller understanding as well as the sense of Igbo speech. This choice of language was a brilliant and innovative stroke, given the most of the earlier writers had relegated.

The setting of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s and portrays the clash between Nigeria’s while colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. The novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. He
is careful to portray the complex, advanced social institutions and artistic traditions of Igbo culture prior to its contact with Europeans. Yet he is just as careful not to stereotype the Europeans; he offers varying depictions of the white man, such as the mostly benevolent Mr. Brown, the Zealous Revenued Smith, and the ruthlessly calculating District Commissiner.

Achebe’s education in English and his exposure to European customs have allowed him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture. His decision to write Things Fall Apart in English is an important one. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; his choice of language was thus political.

Achebe wanted to achieve cultural revitalization within and through English. Nevertheless, he manages to capture the rhythm of the Igbo language and he integrates Igbo vocabulary into the narrative. Looking at Okonkwo’s life in terms of the story of the little bird nza, enables us to raise questions about his greatness. We can discuss whether challenging one’s personal god, or Chic, is an act of bravery, mischief or impudence. This little bird resembles trickster characters in the mythologies of many cultures who also challenged
to gods. They include the Sumerian hero Golgamesh and Greek Characters such as Prometheus, Sisyphus and Tantalus.

The readers commonly see *Things Fall Apart* as a story about the disintegration of an African culture as a result of European intervention. This view fails to recognize the contradictions and dynamics in Okonkwo’s society. Although the people olonkwo’s society had a common culture, they did not always agree on its various aspects. We see, for example an elder advising Okonkwo not to take part in the Killing of Ikemefuna. This is quite strange, considering that the elders are the keepers of the culture and wisdom of the society and bearing in mind that the killing of Ikemefuna had been ordered by the oracle of the Hills and the caves.¹

Another old man, obierika, was a critic of Umuofia’s culture:

> Obierika was a man who thought about things, when the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend’s calamity. Why should a man suffer so guevously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. Hew was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had
they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender.

As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others.² Several times in *Things Fall Apart* we are informed about how social customs and values had been falling apart as a result of developments within the society itself. We find Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in Okonkwo’s village, complaining “that the punishment for breaking the Peace of Ani had become very mild in their clan.”³ Similarly, when Okonkwo is in exile, we see another old man, Uchendu, complaining about how Okonkwo’s generation had abandoned some of the old ways.⁴

There are many people who think that pre-colonial African societies were static with everybody following the tradition without any opposition. That is a false view. As we see in *Things Fall Apart*, those societies had internal tensions and dynamism such, which made them, change and develop.

The title for Achebe’s novel comes from the poem, *The Second Coming* by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. Both Yeat’s poem and
Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart* speak of the breakdown of the ‘old’ order and its displacement by a ‘new’ order. Achebe’s objective analyses of the various reasons for the breakdown of the ‘old’ order in *Things Fall Apart* achieve by enterining his story on a representative man, Okonkwo, and relationships, both with his community and his family. In the process, Achebe coolly analyses the inflexibilities with the Igbo social formation that ultimately led to the wholesale disaster. Achebe dispassionately presents how things are beginning “to fall apart” in the Igbo society even before the white man arrives. But Achebe points out that cannot absolve white culture of the crime of destroying indigenous culture of the Igbo. He wants to declare that the Igbo culture is quite flexible and presumably would have resolved its own contradictions in its own way without the intervention of the Europeans. Thus Achebe’s novel, *Things Full Apart* envelops twin tragedies – one occurs in the life of the protagonist Okonkwo and the other takes place on a broader plane at the level of the society of Okonkwo.

The plot structure of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is balanced in an even way. It is divided into three main parts. The plot is tightly knit into this strongly built main frame. The events of the story are
described in the voice of the author himself. Achebe adopts the ‘omniscient point of view’ coming handy for him to have free access into the mind of his central and other characters as the need arises. This facilitates him to explain to the reader the intricate implications arising out of particular situations and circumstances. Thus Achebe plays the role of an ‘intrusive narrator’.

Achebe indicates the tragedy awaiting Ikemefuna from the beginning of the novel. In chapter one he refers to Ikemefuna as ‘the doomed lad’ who was sacrificed to the village of Umnoha by their neighbours to avoid war and bloodshed’. He threw closer the chapter by reiterating the above by saying ‘The ill-fated lad’ was called Ikemefuna. In this chapter he forewarns the readers as if in a Greek chorus the impending tragedy of the innocent lad, Ikemefuna:

**As for Idemefuna, he was at a loss. His own home had gradually become very faint and distant. He still missed his mother and his sister and would be very glad to see them. But somehow he knew that he was not going to see them, remembered once when men had talked in low tones with his father; and it seemed now it was happening all over again.**
Later, Nwoye went to his mother’s hut and told her that Ikemefuna was going home. She immediately dropped her pestle with which she was grinding pepper, folded her arms across her breasts and sighed, “Poor Child”.

The meeting between Okonkwo and Ogbuefi Ezeudu includes Ezenbdu’s refusal of hospitality, suggesting something very serious is a foot. After three years, the village has decided to kill Ikemefuna, in response to an oracle, and they are telling Okonkwo to stay out of it. This is a central act in the ‘tragedy’ of Okonkwo.

Digression is one of Achebe’s most important tools. He takes any opportunity he can to tell us about a past incident which is only indirectly connected to his central story. These digressions allow him to flesh out his portrait of tribal life. He through his diversions gives us detailed descriptions of Igbo traditions, customs, and beliefs. Memory is an important theme; here, as a broad term covering all documentary style descriptions of Igbo life. By the end of the novel, the reader realizes that the account he has just read is the story of a culture that has been irrevocably transformed. Another part of Achebe’s project is to give a balanced and sensitive portrait of Igbo
culture, as African tribal cultures were long dismissed by white scholars as barbaric and evil.

Achebe’s digression into the ritual, and celebrations of the Igbo in some way echo what is going on in the central story of the novel. In addition to fleshing out Achebe’s portrait of Igbo life, the parallels here between ceremony and central action are strong. The ceremony welcoming the new bride is dominated by the women: it is the husband’s sister who subjects the new bride to scrutiny, with the eldest sister taking on a protective role for her brother. Not coincidentally, Uchendu’s lecture centers on the important role of a mother and maternal blood lines. Okonkwo, so proud of manhood and obsessed with masculinity, is being asked to accept a mother’s comfort. He is also asked by Uchendu to be a source of tenderness and comfort to his wives; Okonkwo has always associated such behavior with weakness. Uchendu is reminding his nephew that strength is not synonymous with force and violence. He further warns him that strength is on a uniquely male domain. Unlike the narration of Chielo’s kidnapping of Ezinma, the narration of the egwergwn ceremony is rather ironic. The narrator makes several comments to reveal to us that the villagers know that the egwngwu are not real.
The plot structure of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is balanced and divided into three main parts. The first part of the novel covers chapters one to thirteen. During the narration of this part, Achebe relates the life and times of the protagonist Okonkwo of Umuofia. In the same breath, he acquaints us with the society of Umuofia, its pattern of life, social framework, political make-up and religious ethic. As we are conducted through the life of Okonkwo and that of his society, we learn of their kinship bonds, their religion, their feast and festivities, their court system and their customs and traditions. The rise of Okonkwo, his ambition to become a doughty warrior of his clan, his mortal fear of being considered weak and likened to his weak-willed father, his character and impetuous temperament nurtured carefully and the ruling of his household with an iron hand are narrated smoothly in the spontaneous vein of an adept storyteller. During the course of the first part events like his involvement in the killing of Ikemefuna who looks upon as his surrogate father, his beating of his wife during the sacred Week of Peace, and his accident killing of one of the sons of Ezendu when his gun goes besserk cast a shadow on the hero’s life. Part one of the
novel ends with the banishment of Okonkwo from Umuofia and his exile to his mother’s village Mbanto.

The second part of the novel covers chapter fourteen to nineteen and traces the crucial events both in the life of the hero and that of the clan. A new religion takes root among the Igbo of Umuofia. The newly intruding white man establishes his religion, school and court besides his own government Okonkwo’s life comes under the shadow of unrelenting tragedy. His son Nwoye proves to be a thorn on his side by deserting him and joining the new band of Christians. His monomania to become one of the lords of the clan of Umuofia and his hopes that his son would perpetuate his name by taking the highest titles of the clan are dashed on the rocks. Things have started falling ‘apart’ with the advent of white man, his church and his government. Thus the second part of the novel though short is a vital part of the novel where there is a change for the worse in the life of the Igbo community. Achebe holds the view that the harsh and inhuman practices of the native religion are the causes of imposition of their own religion and culture on the society of Umuofia. Thus the novelist fused these facts of history with the story of Okonkwo.
Third part consists of chapters twenty to twenty five. The last six chapters of the novel trace complete bulldozing of the native culture by Western Codes of belief and the blowing up of the roots of the Igbo society. Achebe objectively depicts how anarchy entered the society of Igboland. He dispassionately shows that both the European colonists and the natives are equally responsible for bringing about fall of a once rich native culture. The mission of the Christians is to spread their religion by some means or other. The profussed purpose of Mr. Brown and Reverend Mr. Smith to bring in the civilization of the Western world to the so-called ‘dark continent’ for their own good has an ulterior motive of bringing it under the British rule. They lacked understanding and sympathy for the native traditions. Their practices are often rude and underhand. They divide the family bonds by baiting them with money and material comfort. As a result old values collapse. The weakened clan cannot act as one anymore and began to revolt against the white colonists who are trying to subjugate them. People like Okonkwo unwilling to compromise with the new order of the foreigners, device their own ways of revenge. Some die fighting the whites and some like Okonkwo commit suicide to escape from a fate worse than death. The last chapters of the novel
not only trace the individual tragedy of Okonkwo but also the larger tragedy suffered by the society of Umuofia.

On one level, the conflict is between the traditional society of Umuofia and the new customs brought by the whites, which are in turn adopted by many of the villagers. Okonkwo also struggles to be as different from his deceased father as possible. He believes his father to have been weak, effeminate, lazy, ignominious, and poor. Consequently, Okonkwo strives to be strong, masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy. The Rising action lies in Enoch’s unmarking of an egwugwu; the egwugwn’s burning of the church, and the District Commissioner’s sneaky arrest of Umuofian leaders force the tension between Umuofia and the colonizers to a breaking point. The climax of the novel lies in Okonkwo’s murder, or Uchu, of a court messenger.

Achebe excelled in depicting the African situation of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era among the writers. His novels have pervading sense of Africanness in the blighted history of his people. He employs a curiously moulded tone which is atonce formal and fiercely passionate. So his novel becomes a rare phenomenon of literary excellence.
Achebe’s own literary language is standard English blended with pidgin, Igbo vocabulary, proverbs, images and speech patterns. The language of the novel *Things Falls Apart* is simple but dignified. Achebe tells the story of Nwoye’s conversion with humour and irony. Sometimes he uses poetic language.

The novel’s ending is dark and ironic. The District Commissioner is a pompous little man who thinks that and understand indigenous African cultures. Achebe uses the commissioner, who seems a character straight out of *Heart of Darkness*, to demonstrate the inaccuracy of accounts of Africa such as Joseph Courad’s. The commissionier’s mis representations and the degree to which they are based upon his own short comings are evident.

Language is an important theme in *Things Fall Apart* on several levels. Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. It is also significant that he clearly intended it to be read by the west. His goal was to critique and amend the portrait of Africa that was painted by so many writers of the colonial period and in doing so
required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folk tales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe managed to capture and convey the rhythm, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language.

Achebe uses the animal imagery. In descriptions, categorizations and explanations of human behavior and wisdom, the Igbo often use animal anecdotes to naturalize their rituals and beliefs. The presence of animals in their folklore reflects the environment in which they live—not yet “modernized” by European influence.

Okonkwo is a tragic hero in the classical sense: although he is a superior character, his tragic flaw—the equation of manliness with rashness, anger, and violence—brings about his own destruction.

Okonkwo is gruff, at times, and usually unable to express his feelings (the narrator frequently uses the word “inwardly” in reference to Okonkwo’s emotions). But his emotions are indeed quite complex, as his ‘manly’ values conflict with his ‘unmanly’ ones, such as foundness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma.

The world in *The Fall Apart* is one in which patriarchy intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence. It is an androcentric
world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. In domestic terms, womans are quantified as part of men’s acquisitions.

Kate Turkington observes that “Achebe’s novel exposes the need for tolerance, practical wisdom and flexibility in a period of social transition as well as demonstrating the tragic ambignity – public and personal – of such a situation.” 7 Bruce F. Macdonald is also of the same opinion when he writes :

For the people of Umuofia, caught between the disintegration of their own system of social and religious orientation and the imperfectly understood powers of the new order, the World is indeed anarchy, and it is this anarchy which Okonkwo attempts to overcome with his last heroic act. 8

Though Okonkwo proves an exemplary son of his culture in rehabilitating himself during his exile, his rashness in misjudging the unprecedented situation faced by his people when the missionaries came to spread the gospel, and his failure to take a rational view of the new religion, negate his quality of refinement. His impatience and disgust with Nwoye further prove his anarchy. It he were a person of composure and considerate nature he would have been closer to his
son, and would have made an effort to understand his predicament and that of his clan. William Wabh observes:

*Okonkwo’s error, the Aristotelian flaw, for this is the kind of hero he is, is to suppose that the present is wholly susceptible to his governing, moulding will.*

Certainly Okonkwo fails to realize that a man of equaznimity alone can control the events, moulding them to his good nature. The novel focuses its message as “Integuty without common-sense is not only useless, it can be dangerous.” Thus historical events, on the however grand a scale, finally work themselves out in local areas and individual lives.

The intent and purpose of Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* was one of awakening his people and instilling in them a sense of identity with their past and feel a sense of pride in it. It was also intended to make the rest of the world know about Africa’s rich culture and heritage. The novel succeeds in convincing and puts across authentic fictional terms, that the African societies had a great culture of their own. Achebe portrayed successfully the humanism and grandeur in a dying order. The novel unfolds the systematic process of destruction wrought upon the African societies by the anarchic forces in the
native and alien cultures alike. By printing this clash, Achebe brings to focus the larger theme of the good versus evil in his *Things Full Apart*. Certainly the novel deserves to be called a classic.

**References**


10. Kate Turkington, p. 34.