

THINGS FALL APART - A POST-COLONIAL NOVEL

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* depicts the African culture, religious rites and superstitions through the Ibo society. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in response to European novels that depicted Africans as savages who needed to be enlightened by the Europeans. Achebe presents to the reader his people's history with both strengths and imperfections by describing for example, Igbo festivals, the worship of their gods and the practices in their ritual ceremonies, their rich culture and other social practices, the colonial era that was both stopping Igbo culture and also brought in some benefits to their culture. *Things Fall Apart* therefore directs the misleading of European novels that depict Africans as savages into a whole new light with its portrayal of Igbo society, and examines the effects of European colonialism on Igbo society from an African perspective. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin opine that though post-colonial historically implies 'after colonization', in literature it stands for 'all the experiences affected by the colonial process from the beginning of colonization to the present day'. As *Things Fall Apart* is a record of the harrowing consequences of the western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and beliefs of the Ibo Society, this paper makes an attempt to analyse the novel as a post-colonial text.

Things Fall Apart is a postcolonial text. It is postcolonial in the sense that it draws a clear line between the colonizer and the colonized. Towards the end of the nineteenth century most European states migrated to Africa and other parts of the world where they established colonies. Nigeria was amongst other African nations that received visitors who were on a colonising mission; introducing their religion and culture that is later imposed on Igbo. The culture of the people of Umuofia (Igbo culture) is immensely threatened by this change.

Achebe's primary purpose of writing the novel was to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* provides readers with an insight of Igbo society right before the white missionaries' invasion on their land. The invasion of the colonising

force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society; from religion, traditional gender roles and relations, family structure to trade. Consequently, Achebe blames the white missionaries' colonial rule and invasion for the post-colonial oppressed Igbo culture; this oppression can be seen in terms of the oppressed social coherence between the individual and their society. Furthermore, Achebe educates readers extensively about Igbo society's myths and proverbs. Before Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, all the novels that had been written about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* are examples of this.

In this novel, Achebe describes the history of Igbo; he does so by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made them different from Western culture. For example, their belief in the power of ancestral gods, the sacrifice of young boys, the killing of twins and the oppression of women to name a few. In the novel, the reader is also made aware of the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia as well as the reactions of Igbo to their arrival. Although the arrival of the missionaries had some benefits to Igbo, there were also a number of challenges that faced the future of Igbo.

The people of Umuofia are separated into two groups immediately following the arrival of the white missionaries in their land. The first group of people are Igbo followers and the second group of people are followers of the white missionaries. Converts to Christianity choose to abandon their own religion, traditional ways of life and fellow people to follow the white man and his ways. The novel is all about the collapse, chaos, and confusion of traditional Igbo culture that suffers at the hand of the white man's arrival in Umuofia along with his religion. The views about life that the white men have are totally different from the views that the Igbo have. What seems utterly appropriate and acceptable in traditional Igbo culture does not appear so to the white missionaries. They are quick to want to change certain elements of traditional Igbo culture that according to them are inappropriate and unacceptable. However, in so doing, the white missionaries fail to see that these inappropriate and unacceptable elements of traditional Igbo culture are what keep the Igbo together and at peace with each other. For instance, in traditional Igbo culture it is required for a "real" man to wed two or more wives. The women of the clan are aware of this and have accepted this ritual; in some cases, the first wife can even suggest to her husband to

look for a younger wife. The younger wives are also expected to respect the first wife. These women along with their husbands live together in peace and help each other with taking care of the children and other household chores. However, the white missionaries are against polygamous marriages.

Most of the text chiefly focuses on the complicated Igbo myths and proverbs that the Europeans fail to acknowledge. Throughout the novel Achebe cleverly uses his characters to speak in proverbs when they address one another. The use of proverbs is very important in conversations as the Igbo believe them to be a fountain of wisdom and of respect. For Example, when Okoye pays Unoka a visit to ask him to settle his debt, and although Unoka is late with the payment, Okoye does not lash out at Unoka about his overdue debt. Rather, the neighbours share a kola nut, give thanks to the ancestors and then go on to discuss the debt by speaking in proverbs. This maintains good relations between the two neighbours even though they are discussing such an issue that usually causes conflicts between people.

The difference between Achebe's novel and other colonial novels is that his novel thoroughly examines Igbo society as he portrays them in a way that shows all aspects of Igbo culture and not only the desirable aspect of their culture. He also predicts of the future of Igbo if the white missionaries are to be successful in taking control of Umuofia. With the use of the English language, Achebe is successful in fully detailing the life of Okonkwo who at the beginning of the novel is a very famous young man in all the nine villages of Umuofia. However, as the novel develops and white missionaries begin arriving in Umuofia along with their government and institutions, Okonkwo who tries to protest the change is in the end buried without respect or dignity and his fame is soon forgotten because of the greatest sin in Igbo religion that he commits by taking away his own life.

One of the main reasons that *Things Fall Apart* was successful was its detailed description of Igbo culture as seen from the perspective of its author, who had an insider-outsider position as a result of being raised in a Christian household, which meant that he was not allowed to participate in traditional Igbo rituals although he was Igbo (Owomoyela 18).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge both the benefits as well as the challenges that resulted from European colonialism on Igbo society. The Igbo greatly benefited from the introduction of school and education in their society that helped curb the rate of illiteracy in the village. Because of it, today most Igbo are literate individuals who have dilated their knowledge to be more “enlightened”. The Europeans also taught Igbo about their own culture, and although the Igbo found it difficult to transition from their own culture to that of a stranger, they learnt something new from it. Nonetheless, there are challenges that face Igbo as a consequence of the arrival of the white missionaries. Igbo lost most of the values that tied them together as one; social coherence between the individual and society was lost, coupled with their traditional values and way of life. Because of the confused state of mind of Igbo, not knowing whether to reject or embrace these changes, it ultimately led to their fall mainly because of their loyalty to the language. The arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia was to take over the ruling of it and because Igbo are a compassionate society that was also unsuspecting of the white men’s intentions, they welcomed them into their land and also gave them a piece of their land not knowing that these men will be the cause of the collapse of their culture. Without culture Igbo society is as good as dead, hence the significance of Okonkwo’s death in the end. Like Okonkwo the Igbo committed suicide by not being suspicious of the white missionary’s intentions in their land or questioning his presence.

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