

## Book Review

# Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, UK: Penguin Random, 1958, xiii+152. ISBN: 9780141186887

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Written by a Nigerian author, *Things Fall Apart* is full of rich proverbial quotes and is a great literary work. The book tells the story of a small fictional village, Umuofia in Nigeria and gives an overview of Igbo society. The story is primarily about a character named Okonkwo, who is a strong man, but he fears failures and has no courage to fight back. The story illustrates the coming of 'whites' in Umuofia with their Bible unexpectedly and the sudden changes in their institutions and political structure.

Chinua Achebe tells the story in three parts. The first half of the story portrays his life, customs, and cultures of his Igbo society having a complex patriarchal society. The story begins with the sentence saying, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (p.3). The author goes on to give a more complete picture of Okonkwo, as he describes his physique as "tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him severe look" (ibid.). Chinua labels him as a man of short temper who "had no patience with unsuccessful men – he had no patience with his father" (p.4).

Okonkwo is at the height of his fame as a respected warrior and a wrestler from the Umuofia clan. However, his father Unoka died without taking any title and he was heavily in debt. Fortunately, in Umuofia, a man is judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo is young but he was not like his father. He marries three wives and has two barns full of yams, 'king of crops' grown by men, and he has taken two titles. At a young age, he earned respect from others and became one of the greatest men of his time. "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had washed his hands and so he ate with the kings and elders" (p.8). That was how he was given the responsibility to take care of the ill-fated lad, Ikemefuna who was sacrificed by the neighbouring village to Umuofia to avoid war for killing the daughter of Umuofia.

Marriage is a women's ceremony and the central figures are the bride and her mother. The bride receives a dowry from her family. Good words and prayers are exchanged such as "we are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear nine sons like the mother of our town" (p.111). Once again, Achebe takes readers through the Igbo funeral, in an incident where Okonkwo accidentally kills a young boy and has to go exile for seven years. He flees to his motherland, Mbanto.

The second and the third part of the story is about his stay in Mbanto where his family was gladly received by his mother's family. It is also about his tragic experiences when British missionaries arrive. During his second year of exile, Okonkwo's friend Obierika brings bad news about Abame, another

village being evaded and destructed by the white man. The whites enter into both Mbanto and Umuofia with their Bible as their weapon of choice. They gain some converts who are the outcasts of the society and Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son also converts himself to Christianity which displeases his father. Moreover, the white man's government came to Umuofia and the clan no longer has the freedom to judge its own. It was the District commissioner judging the case of ignorance, backed by the armed power. As Obierika tells, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one" (p.166).

Coming of whites leads to the collision of African and European culture in people's lives. Okonkwo is not happy with the intense changes brought about by the colonial rule, the mixing of two cultures. Here Achebe brings in the theme of 'struggle between change and tradition'. Okonkwo is against the entry of the white man but "there were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation" (p. 168). The entry of white man has built the trading store and "for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia" (p.168). During a gathering, to decide whether to fight against the war or to live peacefully with the whites, Okonkwo kills a messenger infuriated for ruining Umuofia's independence. Okonkwo wanted war against the whites but he realized that his clan members have chosen not to fight the war as they let other messengers escape. Okonkwo hangs himself and his friend Obierika seeks help from the whites to bring his body down and bury his body, thus Okonkwo's world fall apart.

With the story of Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe describes both the flaws and strengths of Igbo society's unique culture and traditions and also, how cultures vary among themselves and how they change over time. He provides examples such as belief in the evil spirits and the power of the ancestral god, oppression of women, complex patriarchal system, farming traditions, and killing of twins. Achebe gives insight to Igbo society before the British missionaries invaded their land and he wants to educate his readers about the Igbo society's values and culture. The readers are aware of the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia and reactions of both the parties' differences in culture and values.

Although there were some positive impacts with the arrival of whites missionaries, towards the end of the story, readers witness Igbo society falling apart. The Igbo were impacted by the advent of the British government, religion, education, and trade. Instead of fighting back and protecting their motherland, the citizens of Umuofia show their weakness compromising with the whites. Everything falls apart as the people start to accept the British values, cultures, and laws imposed on them. Achebe describes Okonkwo as someone who is haunted by the fear of weakness and failure and becomes a successful person. However, at the end of the story, due to his rashness, Okwonkos' bravery and confidence also falls apart. Okonkwo is not able to challenge his fear and commits suicide which is a disgrace for a man to take his own life. Just like the death of Okwonko, as Umuofia sees changes in their culture with the arrival of whites, without culture, Igbo society can be considered dead. 'Things Fall Apart' is a story of Okonkwo's tragedy, yet it presents Igbo life before the coming of the white man threatening their religion and their tribal life. The story documents what the white man destroyed. Igbo's customs and traditions are the central part of the book.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be allied to *The River Between*, a novel by another African author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. In his book, Ngugi also tells the story of the coming of Christian missionaries in Kikuyu (in Kenya) and losing their tradition. The protagonist Waiyaki tries to educate his people without forgetting his traditions. Yet, his dream of educating Kikuyu dies when he falls in love with Joshua, who is the daughter of a Christian convert. Both *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between* tells the story of African colonization by Europeans and demonstrate the culture of Nigeria and Kenya before colonization.