



Chinua Achebe's "Things fall apart"; colonialism versus tradition

KEYWORDS

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Achebe, "the father of modern African writing" through his work and inspiration paved the way for many writers of succeeding generations. Novelist Margaret Atwood called him "a magical writer – one of the greatest of the twentieth century". Poet Maya Angelou praised *Things Fall Apart* saying "all readers meet their brothers, sisters, parents and friends and themselves along Nigerian roads" Achebe has been a great author to reshape and design the African colonial and post colonial era. Achebe like Other postcolonial writers such as Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison has multiethnic perspective of history and truth. He not only presents but also challenges, defines, and describes the new world of African culture under the influence of colonizers where the old tradition is in struggle with modernity and where post colonialism is not only a break and reaction against old culture but also an evolution of new values. Achebe's novel is groundbreaking work as it is significantly differentiated from colonial way of writing where all the onus for subjugation and exploitation lies on colonizers. His position as a postcolonial writer is indispensable in the history of modern Africa because he made the natives realize that along with colonization their own lack of character has some where led to the destruction and downfall. In 1972, in an interview, Achebe said, "I never will take the stand that the Old must win or that the New must win. The point is that no single truth satisfied me—and this is well founded in the Ibo world view. No single man can be correct all the time, no single idea can be totally correct."

Key words- tradition, colonization, post colonialism, multiethnic.

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Chinua Achebe's hallmark fiction depicts life in Nigeria at the end of the twentieth century and takes its title from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming".

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,

The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

It is a Christian vision according to which the world and civilization would disintegrate into anarchy because of an internal flaw in humanity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe correlates the same idea to the Igbo society of Nigeria that due to its colonization by the British and because of internal weaknesses within the native structure, the community of Umuofia is unable to withstand the change and transformation leading to an anarchic world of destruction and causing the traditional world of African culture and values in colonial as well as in post colonial era to fall apart. He expounds that Africa is a composite and vibrant society against the view that it is stereotypical, primitive, simple and backward. European writers have always presented the continent as a dark place inhabited by people of primitive minds. Achebe changed this notion and assumption by presenting a completely different perspective of the African society. Achebe considers that the description of Africa as given by Conrad, who wrote

against imperialism and condensed Africans as mysterious, animalistic, and exotic "others" is only Eurocentric approach. In an interview published in 1994, Achebe urges to read such novels only to understand the racism of the colonial era not as a cause of destruction. Achebe brings to life a different vision of African culture having its own religion, culture, and tradition. The Igbo culture is revealed as technologically backward but remarkably complex. Achebe pictures stereotype white colonialists as rigid people exhibiting imperialistic intentions, whereas the Igbo are highly conscious individuals open to new ideas.

It is a saga of clash of cultures and a tale of conflict of change versus tradition. The tension between whether change should be accepted and tradition should be preserved is the central point of discussion. Achebe does not present Igbo culture without flaws. Many writers who wrote about colonialism like Joseph Conrad, George Orwell, Herman Melville, and Graham Greene were opposed to imperialism although were romantic in their portrayal of noble savages — primitive and animalistic. They voiced that an advanced Western society corrupted and destroyed the African world. Achebe regards this argument as a created myth as his approach is multiethnic. The Igbo are not noble savages, and the Igbo world is destroyed because of the aboriginal culture before the arrival of the white colonizers. The seeds of the decay are inbuilt. The colonizers just fastened the action, took the advantage of the situation and ruled. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe considers that negative elements of Igbo culture were equally responsible along with colonization for its exploitation and destruction. He condemns his own people and criticizes the colonizers too. In a 1996 interview, Achebe said: "Belief in either radicalism or orthodoxy is too simplified a way of viewing things ... Evil is never all evil; goodness on the other hand is often tainted with selfishness."

Africa has always been pictured as a dark continent and needs some light to free it from superstition as it is misunderstood under the effect of colonial power. This novel is thought provoking and exclusively African written from the perspective of inclusive approach and not with Eurocentric notion. This is perhaps the first novel in African history about the interior of an African character rather viewed with exterior eye. The Igbo people are caught between resisting and embracing of change and they face the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change. Many of the Africans are excited about the new opportunities and techniques that the missionaries brought. This European influence, however, threatens the need of traditional methods of survival.

The novel is about the life of Okonkwo, a leader and local wrestling champion in Umuofia, inhabited by the Igbo people. It focuses on his family, tradition, customs, and the effects of colonization on the Igbo community. Okonkwo's suicide represents his culture's rejection of him versus his rejection of the change in culture. He realizes that the Igbo society that he so values and cherishes has been altered and tainted by the invasion of Christian missionaries. Due

to this clash of cultures he is unable to bear the tension and ultimately out of frustration ends his life. Achebe's writing tends to insist that the African culture was vulnerable to invasion by western civilization. Hero is distressed by social changes brought by white men in the traditional society. His position is at risk due to the arrival of a new value system. The irony is that Okonkwo completely loses himself in both value systems.

Europeans always portray Africans as savages who are thought to be enlightened by Europeans. Achebe broke apart this view by portraying Igbo society in a sympathetic light, which allows the reader to examine the effects of European colonialism from a different perspective. He commented, "The popularity of *Things Fall Apart* in my own society can be explained simply... this was the first time we were seeing ourselves, as autonomous individuals, rather than half-people, or as Conrad would say, 'rudimentary souls'.. The Christians and Ibo's people with a limited view of each other do not understand and accept each other's customs and beliefs, resulting in destruction of values .Both the cultures do not go beyond their own interest. The natives pay the high price of losing their tradition and custom as the society is replaced with new values and this conflict between two cultures brings the chaos and leads the things to fall apart. The novel does not idealize the Igbo people rather presents weakness-

es which aid to its destruction. The novel attempts to repair some of the damage done by earlier European depictions of Africans. Achebe "chooses to ignore the evidence of what Izebbye calls 'rich material civilization' in Africa in order to portray the Igbo as isolated and unique, evolving their own 'humanistic civilization'." This suggests that Achebe intends to show readers the changes that the Igbo culture could have made in order to survive in future years. Achebe shows that Europeans are mistaken towards Africans.

Things Fall Apart is a milestone archetypal modern African novel in English .Achebe's magnum opus, is a novel of decolonization. Achebe's main focus has been cultural ambiguity and complex cultural systems. Ernest N. Emenyonu commented that "*Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization."The novel ends with the destruction of an individual and the downfall of the community with equal the emphasis on colonialism and traditionalism .His multiethnic approach is reflected in the words of Ikem, a character in *Anthills of the Savannah*: "whatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism."

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