

**EUROPEAN ADVENT AND FALLING APART:
CULTURAL CLASH IN *THINGS FALL APART***

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Abstract

There is no doubt in denying the fact that Chinua Achebe is one of the leading and significant postcolonial writers. His novel, *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most important novels based on the theme of colonial impact on the native culture of Ibo community. Like other African texts, this work is also linked with the delineation of different kinds of cultural anxiety as well as conflicts. In the book, a perpetual conflict between tradition and modernity can be perceived due to which a state of disagreement arises, but the real argument is between the individual and the society. It is the society which scores over the individual in the African novel.

Keywords: Colonialism, control, hegemony, culture, domination, advent.

Paper

There is no doubt in denying the fact that imperialism, capitalism and many other 'isms' have kept people under their control since time immemorial. Africa has been suppressed by the western imperialism. The white man in control, through the dynamics of colonialism, persuaded the colonised people and himself that he was superior to them in civilization, in history and in every facet of life. African writers have reacted to this situation of psychological and moral dislocations and re-adjustments. The focus of their works was on African dilemma. Senghor achieved success as a poet of negritude. Soyinka probed the impact of African tradition on the psyche of the people. He also threw light on the inroads made by the western ideas.

In the same way, Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* explores the African problem at the dawn of the black Africa's independence. He wanted to give proper shape to the slanted picture of Africa during the years of colonisation. African society and customs were well depicted and also its collision with western ideas and Christianity.

It is an established fact that Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* is the most important and popular novel written on the theme of colonization. Regarded as a modern classic, it has captivated the imagination of the readers all over the world. The novel is a powerful exploration of the encounter between traditional culture of Africa and the British culture, ushered in by the historical force of colonialism. In essence, *Things Fall Apart* is a tragedy told in the epic manner, but like any great literature, this work is open to many interpretations.

Things Fall Apart is a powerful castigation of the postcolonial conflict between Africa and Europe. It narrates how things fall apart in Africa with the advent of the white man. White men or the Britishers initially went to the countries they had colonized as missionaries

preaching their religion, but slowly and gradually became masters by their clever manipulations.

The Britishers dominated either by force or by consent. Domination by force is what they did in Africa as Obierika tells Okonkwo in the novel when he is in motherland “during the lasting season a white man had appeared in their clan.” (Abame). “An Albino” suggested Okonkwo.

The other way, i.e. domination by consent is seen when the missionaries went to the village of Mbanta. They preached their new religion and the villagers laughed at them. They spoke about “The son of God whose name was Jesu Kristi” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 23), and Holy Trinity. The Ibo men did not understand the “mad logic of Trinity” but still young men like Nwoye were captivated by the preaching of missionaries.

The Britishers first established their religion in their colonies. They began by preaching their religion, then they set up a church and started converting the indigenous population, along with also came the government to protect the Christians, they also built markets, as they did in Umuofia. By remaining in constant touch with the masses and the leaders of the clan, they felt the pulse of people and decided their policies.

The missionaries also asked men of high title and the elders of Mbanta to give them a plot of land to build their church. The missionaries were offered the “evil forest.” It was amazing for the elders of Mbanta that the missionaries “thanked them and burst into a song.” The inhabitants of Mbanta had thought that all the Christians who had gone to the evil forest will be dead within four days, but nothing happened. They thought that their gods were letting the Christians deliberately defy them, “but even in such cases they set their limit at seven market weeks or twenty-eight days. Beyond that limit no man was suffered to go. But when nobody died even after twenty-eight days,” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 44) the Christians won a handful of more converts. Their number started increasing slowly and steadily.

It cannot be said that the African people did not understand all this. In *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika, elders of the clan and Okonkwo know that the new religion will do much harm to the coming generations. When Nwoye deserted his family, Okonkwo thought, “to abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow shudder run through him at the terrible prospect. Like the prospect of annihilation.” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 56) And, at the feast given by Okonkwo in Mbanta before leaving for Umuofia, one of the oldest members of the clan said: “I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong the bond of kinship is. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and brothers, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan.” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 78)

By the time Okonkwo returned to Umuofia, the Britishers established their religion and government. Okonkwo had planned to become the highest title holder in Umuofia, he had also planned to build his compound and barns at a magnificent scale and to marry his daughters to influential people in the clan, but things have changed a lot in the past seven

years. Besides the so called low barns, men with titles had also converted to Christianity. The white men had built a court and had appointed a District Commissioner to judge the cases. There were court messengers under the District Commissioner and they were greatly hated in Umuofia for their high-headedness.

Okonkwo wants to drive these foreigners out of his land, but Obierika tells him that there are only two white-men in Umuofia, the rest are their own people who have been given power by these white men. Obierika further tells Okonkwo that religion has divided them amongst themselves. "The white man is very clear. He came quickly 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. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 77) were troubled. On one occasion three converts were beaten because they openly called all the gods dead and impotent and said they were ready to defy them by burning all their shrines.

On another occasion a convert killed the royal python, "the most revered animal in Mbanta and all surrounding clans." (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 49) The clan outlawed the Christians and a fight could have ensued between them, had not the person who had killed the royal python died. His death pacified the clansmen, "his death show that the gods was still able to fight their own battles. The clans saw no reason then for molesting the Christians." (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 48)

The only time when people of Umuofia were really and direct was when Enoch a convert had "killed and ancestral spirit" by unmasking him. It was then that they turned the church to "a pile of earth and ashes." (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 77)

Achebe has even shown that the British preachers who came to Nigeria had different attitudes and way of handling the people. In chapter twenty one, Mr. Brown, the white missionary is introduced. He has good relation with the clansmen and he is respected by everyone. Mr. Brown by his calm, calculating temperament and shrewdness is able to conclude that a direct attack on the religion of Igbo people would not succeed.

He built school and a little a hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. But at first they only send their slaves or sometimes there lazy children... And it was not long before the people begin to say that the white man's medicine was quick in working. Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even court clerk... New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a new school with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand.

Then came his successor, Reverend James Smith. He did not like Mr. Brown's policy of appeasement. 'He saw the things as black and white.' And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in moral conflict with the son of darkness." Achebe further described his behaviour in terms of saying in Umuofia, "that as a man danced so the drums or beaten for him. Mr. Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad. The over-zealous converts who had smarted under Mr. Brown's restraining now flourished in full favour," (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 89) and the result is the conflict between clansmen and Christians and the burning down of the church in Umuofia.

We are also told that the British administration was full of corruption and injustice. The District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance.” The case of disputed land in Umuofia was judged in favour of a person because he “had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter.”

When Okonkwo and other leaders were arrested for burning down the church, the District Commissioner asked two bags of cowries for their release but the court messengers asked the people of Umuofia to give them two hundred and fifty bags of cowries or their leader will be hanged. Two hundred bags of cowries went to the white man and fifty went to the court messengers. This not only shows that there was corruption in administration but also that there was no communication between the masses and the British administration, and this further led to their exploitation.

Okonkwo wanted to go to war with the white man and drive him out of his land but this cannot be done by him alone. He tried to awaken the spirit of his fellow Umuofians by killing a court messenger in the market place. After the court messenger was dead, Okonkwo “knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action.

Okonkwo commits the abominable act, he commits suicide, and what Unoka had said comes to light. He had said to Okonkwo “you have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart cancer survives a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a woman feel alone account is unable to bear his failure to arouse the people of his country clan and hence commit suicide.

Okonkwo who was considered as a great warrior, a rich and influential person in Umuofia, is only worth “a reasonable paragraph” in the book the District Commissioner was planning to write, which he wanted to title as “*The Specification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Nigger*. As Margaret E Turner says, “There is no return to an order of morality at the end of the novel only to an order of power. No solution speaks to reason for justice; the question of justice remains unresolved here.” (Turner, *Chinua Achebe: The Novelist*, 23).

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