JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Between Tradition and Change: Okonkwo's Tragic Stand in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is an African writer, and a study of his works offers valuable insight for those seeking to understand the contemporary identity of black individuals. Achebe's novels depict three distinct eras: Pre-Independence Nigeria, Post-Independence Nigeria, and the contemporary nation under dictatorship. His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is divided into seven distinct portions.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a landmark novel that addresses the profound social, cultural, and psychological impact of colonialism on indigenous African societies. Set in pre-colonial Nigeria and later transitioning into the early years of British colonization, the novel presents a richly layered exploration of the Igbo culture and its gradual destabilization under colonial rule. Through the tragic story of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo leader, Achebe exposes the tension between traditional African values and the disruptive influence of Western customs and religion introduced by European missionaries and administrators. Achebe's work critically examines the colonial experience from the perspective of those who endured it, highlighting the erosion of indigenous identity, culture, and social structures as Western ideologies and systems are forcibly transplanted onto African soil.

Achebe's narrative strategy is not only to depict the cultural conflicts and psychological upheavals precipitated by colonial rule but also to authentically represent African traditions and perspectives to counter Western literary portrayals that often dehumanized or misrepresented African societies. By focusing on the intersection of colonization and cultural transplantation, *Things Fall Apart* serves as a commentary on the complex and often devastating impacts of colonialism on non-Western societies, making it one of the most powerful literary articulations of anti-colonial sentiment and cultural resistance.

This study explores the theme of colonial experience and the transplantation of Western culture and traditions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's narrative captures the unsettling encounter between the indigenous Igbo society and the forces of Western colonization. The novel portrays the cultural collision and the resulting fragmentation of traditional African values and beliefs as European missionaries and colonial administrators introduce Western customs, religion, and governance. Through the protagonist Okonkwo and the Igbo

community, Achebe illustrates the gradual dismantling of indigenous culture, the conflict between traditional and foreign systems, and the psychological strain on individuals caught between these worlds. This study will examine how Achebe utilizes storytelling, language, and character development to present the complexities of cultural transplantation, and how he critiques the often-destructive impacts of Western hegemony on African societies. By contextualizing Achebe's work within postcolonial discourse, this analysis aims to illuminate *Things Fall Apart* as a profound commentary on the enduring consequences of colonization and cultural imperialism in African literature and identity.

Keywords: colonization, postcolonial discourse, cultural imperialism, African literature, traditional and foreign cultures etc.

Introduction

The initial chapter addresses Igbo society and serves as an anthropological document.This illustrates the evolution of tribal society into a modern and largely westernized form. The second chapter addresses the cultural transformations occurring and the emancipatory influence of Christianity. The third chapter addresses stereotypical characters and the process of self-discovery. The protagonist, Okonkwo, experiences a journey of self-discovery. The fourth chapter addresses Black individuals as victims and the multi-dimensional pain experienced by the African race. Achebe's protagonist exemplifies this to a greater degree, illustrating the various dimensions of the downtrodden black individuals. The fifth chapter addresses a distinct conflict, specifically the clash of civilizations. The value structure of the tribal civilization conflicted with the contemporary Christian and Western mentality. The state of dilemma has arrived, the facet of which is indirectly suggested in his writings. The sixth chapter addresses artistic achievements, including folklore, oral tradition, and historical context, which enhance the narrative and maintain structural unity while preserving Black values. Achebe adeptly employs a foreign language to depict a multifaceted society. The seventh chapter addresses the restoration and salvation of the Black race and cultural separation. Achebe demonstrates that only a coherent individual, fully cognizant of their identity, can effectuate a positive transformation in African society.

Commonwealth Literature is exceptional. It possesses a unique and discrete unit. These writings exhibit distinct cultural and natural diversities. However, they possess certain commonalities, specifically the colonial experience and the transfer of Western culture and heritage. Chinua Achebe serves as a prominent representative of the African race. His readers perceives the essence of Africa and its populace, with a specific focus on Nigeria and the Igbo tribe. His creative artistry is further enhanced by his perspective on black consciousness, black identity, and negritude. His works encompass the burgeoning nationalism, swift progression towards urbanization and industrialization, and the proliferation of education that facilitated the creation of new literature in the African continent. His novel *Things Fall Apart* serves as a profound testament to the resilience of black Africans, their culture, and their traditional heritage. His publications encompass myths, tales, linguistics, and customs.

Things Fall Apart demonstrates a unique synergy of theme, narrative, and technique, each enhancing the others. The entrance of the white man into the Igbo disrupts the tribal society of Umuofia, leading to the disintegration of traditional rituals and practices.

Characters such as the protagonist Okonkwo encounter a horrible demise amid the ensuing turmoil. The religion of the white man precipitates the dissolution of families. For example, when Okonkwo's son Nwoye converts to Christianity, familial unity is disrupted. Achebe effectively situates his narrative within the meticulously depicted context of traditional Igbo life. The narrative is conveyed by an omniscient narrator who adopts the voice of an oral storyteller, allowing for the use of proverbs, songs, and masks, therefore infusing the tale with local colour and enhancing its naturalistic realism. The tragedy of Okonkwo is self-inflicted. His hubris, impulsiveness, and ambition culminate in his unavoidable demise. (Khayyoom 1999) Consequently, *Things Fall Apart* illustrates the disintegration of the traditional family system as Okonkwo and his son diverge from the tribal structure.

The location of *Things Fall Apart* is the Igbo region, a vast forested territory in southern Nigeria, situated between the Niger and Cross Rivers.

This African clan experiences unusual occurrences: the discourse on titles, the manifestation of the ancestral spirit of egwuegwu, the rituals about marriages, illnesses, and fatalities, the sacrifice of Ikemefuna by his foster father, the banishment of Okonkwo for the inadvertent death of a relative, the protagonist's suicide, and the ensuing disgrace.

The Igbo community shown in *Things Fall Apart* regarded the will of the clan as paramount. The clan exhibited its authority through several means. The initial event was the significant meeting of Umuofia, during which communal issues were presented, deliberated, and debated until the collective consensus of the clan was established. The political and religious life of the Nigerian populace has endured significant strain.

In the novel, the supreme deity Chukwu, along with minor deities and the personal god Chi, constitutes the essence of the Igbo religion. The personal god Chi was curiously Nigerian, distinctly different from the Hindu personal god. The progression of political administration in Nigeria, as shown in Achebe's five books, constitutes a compelling subject of analysis. It was previously contended that *Things Fall Apart* exposed an inseparable amalgamation of social standards, religious customs, and political governance. When confronted with forces of change, individuals within the community react variably to the changing circumstances.

The protagonists in Achebe's novel encountered crises when confronted with conditions foreign to themselves and their society. It is vital to assess the people's reactions at this moment. Okonkwo was situated in intricate circumstances where the constraints and regulations governing traditional life were disintegrating. Achebe aims to delineate the progression and advancement of a race from its original agrarian foundation to a contemporary state of sophistication. He embarked on this endeavour with his inaugural novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe documents the history of his ethnicity, highlighting the progressive transformation experienced by his tribe over five or six decades. The old political system that once flourished in Igbo countries transitioned to the governance of traditional chiefs and was subsequently supplanted by a Western-style democracy. Nigeria oscillates once more between dictatorship and popular governance. Achebe's fictional works scrutinize the deterioration, obsolescence, or continuation of social norms and behaviours. His response and reaction to the changing environment identifies Christianity as a liberating force.

The protagonist of this narrative, Okonkwo, resided in his Obi, behind which were the dwellings of his three wives. The barn and the shrine dedicated to his deity and ancestral spirits were located within the compound. He provided support to his mother, father, and sisters before his father's demise. Okonkwo governed his household with strict authority. He physically assaulted his youngest wife, Ojiugo, for failing to prepare the afternoon meal during the Week of Peace, so incurring disrespect towards his deities.

Domestic violence was prevalent within the tribe; yet, sufficient constraints existed to prevent this behavior from escalating into torture. The connection between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye becomes strained. The excessively critical father consistently found fault with him for every matter. On one occasion, when he instructed Nwoye and Ikemefuna to prepare yams for planting, Okonkwo forcefully conveyed his discontent with their efforts. Okonkwo's treatment of his child, together with the son's subsequent rejection, represented an exceptional instance within the clan. Elders required respect from the youth, while the youth esteemed the elders highly. The familial hierarchy was preserved meticulously. The family was on the brink of disintegration due to the father's hubris and oppressive rule. (Carroll 1998)

Achebe asserts that the black race is not inferior to any other race, possessing its history, a structured social order, a specified code of conduct, and a commendable oral literary legacy. Africans are neither barbarous nor primitive; they are simply human. Achebe intertwines the historical narrative of his race with fiction while dismantling preconceptions, both of which aim to restore the dignity of Africans. This tale also highlights the traditional cohesive elements that unite the clan.

Achebe effectively debunks the prevalent misconception that Africa lacks history, literature, and a structured social or political system. One of the biased assessments of Europeans is the physical characteristics of black individuals, who were often described as unattractive and resembling monkeys. The characteristics of physical beauty vary across different races and communities. Europeans perceive those of African descent as unattractive, while Africans refer to those of European descent as fair-skinned.

In the Igbo tribe, "white-skinned" served as a euphemism for leprosy. Another prejudice of Africans was that black men were unambitious and indolent. Achebe reveals the emptiness of such categorization in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo was a formidable and prosperous individual, distinguished by his money and renown. His attainment of this esteemed position was not a result of chance, but rather the consequence of diligent effort and industriousness that conferred upon him prosperity and distinction. His clan respected strong-willed, industrious individuals with titles while disregarding those like him who were weak and unsuccessful.

In the pre-colonial period, the black community was a relatively tranquil and, to a degree, stable entity as illustrated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It faces its domestic issues, with an internal mechanism of adaptation and adjustment that sustains the clan's stability. An examination of the characters in the novel reveals that the men of Umuofia exhibited varied reactions. The protagonist, Okonkwo, endeavours to uphold the traditions of the Igbo tribe and resist change, and when he transgresses the clan's laws, he accepts the punishment without protest. Achebe illustrates the existential threat faced by the community in *Things Fall Apart*. Ultimately, the

group abandoned the hero, who fell victim to the tribe's archaic practices that continued to haunt him even in death.

Okonkwo's character in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo customs, and his dedication to upholding these customs is driven by a desire for power, recognition, and respect within his society. Unlike other characters who are drawn to the new opportunities brought by colonial influence, Okonkwo is entrenched in a worldview that sees adherence to Igbo traditions as the only path to success and honor. This rigid attachment to tradition blinds him to the changes encroaching upon his society, leading to a tragic confrontation with Western religion and the colonial government, which brings irreversible transformation to Umuofia.

Okonkwo's motivations are rooted in his desire to distance himself from the shame of his father, Unoka, who was considered weak and improvident. From an early age, Okonkwo strives to be the opposite of his father, respected, powerful, and wealthy. His achievements, such as winning wrestling matches, accumulating titles, and becoming a prosperous farmer, signify his determination to secure his place in the tribe as a man of honor and power. However, these ambitions also foster a narrow perspective, making him resistant to any change that could challenge his hard-won status.

One of the most significant incidents that reveal Okonkwo's commitment to tribal customs over personal relationships is his involvement in the death of Ikemefuna, a boy who lived in his household and whom he had come to care for as a son. Despite being warned by the elders not to participate in the boy's death, Okonkwo fears being seen as weak, and he personally strikes the fatal blow (Achebe, Chapter 7). This act showcases Okonkwo's inner conflict between his adherence to tradition and his personal feelings, and it highlights his fear of being perceived as weak—a reflection of his drive for respect and power.

Okonkwo's exile after accidentally killing Ezeudu's son at the elder's funeral is another turning point. Although the killing was accidental, the clan's customs require that he and his family leave Umuofia for seven years as punishment (Achebe, Chapter 13). Okonkwo accepts this punishment, but his frustration grows as he is forced to witness the gradual erosion of Igbo traditions in his absence. During his exile, he observes the arrival of Christian missionaries in his motherland of Mbanta and the subsequent conversion of some clan members, including his own son, Nwoye. Okonkwo's reaction to these changes is anger and disgust, but he fails to recognize the depth of the cultural shift underway.

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, he finds that the village has changed significantly. Christianity has taken root, and many villagers have converted, creating divisions within the community. Okonkwo's attempts to rally his peers to resist this cultural invasion fall on deaf ears, as the clan members are either indifferent or hesitant to challenge the growing influence of the colonial government (Achebe, Chapter 22). His rigid attachment to Igbo customs leaves him unable to adapt to the shifting social dynamics, resulting in his increasing isolation from his people.

Okonkwo's story culminates in his suicide after he realizes that the clan will not join him in fighting against the colonial forces. In the final confrontation with the white man's court messengers, Okonkwo kills one

of them, believing that this act will inspire his people to resist. Instead, the clan's response is one of shock and silence, signaling their acceptance of colonial rule. Recognizing that he has lost everything he valued—the respect of his clan and the possibility of preserving their traditions, Okonkwo takes his own life (Achebe, Chapter 25). His suicide marks the tragic end of a man who clung to traditional values so tightly that he became unable to survive in a world that was rapidly changing around him.

Okonkwo's story in *Things Fall Apart* reflects Achebe's exploration of the tragic consequences of inflexible adherence to tradition. Okonkwo's character is not driven by a search for personal identity but rather by a desire for social standing within a framework that values strength, titles, and masculinity. His inability to perceive and adapt to the changing forces within Umuofia ultimately leads to his downfall. Achebe uses Okonkwo's fate as a commentary on the larger impact of colonialism on African societies—while some embraced the change, others, like Okonkwo, found themselves broken by it. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe captures thus the complexities of this clash between traditional and colonial values, illustrating both the resilience and the vulnerability of indigenous cultures in the face of foreign influence.

Achebe is a creationist in his selection of novel titles, characterization, dialogue composition, representation, narration, and his distinctive fusion of Western and African cultures. He demonstrates exceptional cognitive acuity in examining the myths, stories, and history of his culture. He has exceptional common sense in his approach to human existence, whether regarding the frailty or dignity of his people or the foreign white man. He converts historical and anthropological information into fiction utilizing indigenous creativity. Achebe thinks that Christianity can function as a liberating force, conveying a message specifically to Nigerians and broadly to the African diaspora. As an African writer, he recognizes that Western influences are an imposition and impediment to Black individuals in realizing their potential and flourishing authentically and independently.

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