

**REVISITING HISTORY, CULTURE AND POSTMODERNISM IN  
CHINUA ACHEBE'S FICTION: A CRITICAL STUDY****DR.BOLLA MALLIKHARJUNA RAO**Asst. Professor of English  
Government Degree College  
Avanigadda - 521122  
Krishna District  
Andhra Pradesh - INDIA**ABSTRACT**

*Chinua Achebe examined a tribal society fracturing under the abuses of colonialism. The novel has been assigned to generations of American high school and college students. In many respects "Things Fall Apart" is the "To Kill a Mockingbird" of African literature: accessible but stinging, its layers peeling over the course of multiple readings. The novel tells the story of Okonkwo, a stoic clan leader and former wrestling hero who returns to his village after seven years in exile. (He'd been sent away after his role in an accidental death.) The changes that Christian missionaries and other white men have brought are intolerable to him. "Things Fall Apart" rolls toward a bleak denouement. What sticks with you about the novel is its sensitive investigation, often through folk tales, of how culture functions and what it means. Mr. Achebe (his name is pronounced Chin-you-ah Ah-Chay-bay) had plenty to say about notions of traditional masculinity, as well, not to mention his braided observations about nature, religion, myth, gender and history. This paper attempts a reading of Things Fall Apart from an ecocritical and colonial perspective to show that he was writing the novel in part to make his West African readers aware of the extent of the embeddedness of their forefathers in the environment. It also intends to indicate the extent of the damage in the relationship between Africans and their natural world caused by the advent of colonization. Finally, this article also emphasizes Achebe's profound consciousness about the vital relationship the African must have to the natural world to make them whole again.*

**Key Words:** *Okonkwo, Ibo Culture, British Raj, Colonialism, Things Fall Apart, Africa*

To put Achebe's position positively, among the reasons he wrote *Things Fall Apart* was to depict for his African readers a continent where, especially before colonial invasion, people lived in a complex, diverse and fruitful relationship with the African environment. The overall effect of Achebe's perspective on the African's links with the land is to make his African readers realize what it was to dwell in a harmonious relationship with the world, thereby raising what we would now term their ecological consciousness, that is to say their sensitivities about the importance of preserving the intimate link between the land and themselves.



Achebe also intends to demonstrate through his fiction how the coming of colonization induced a sense of strain in the African's connection to nature; among the things that fell apart in the continent with the coming of the white man, he implies through his inaugural novel, was the oneness of African nature and culture.

Colonial rule was the crime that came close to enslaving the African all over again. When Chinua Achebe showed the horrors of colonial rule in 'Things Fall Apart,' the narrative easily became the African story that impinged itself on our consciousness. Chinua Achebe has passed onto the land of our silent ones. However, the African story he told in 'Things Fall Apart,' will always remain piercingly one of Chinua Achebe's goals in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to correct a whole history of misrepresentations of his people and country in occidental discourse.

Chinua Achebe examined a tribal society fracturing under the abuses of colonialism. The novel has been assigned to generations of American high school and college students. In many respects "Things Fall Apart" is the "To Kill A Mockingbird" of African literature: accessible but stinging, its layers peeling over the course of multiple readings.

The novel tells the story of Okonkwo, a stoic clan leader and former wrestling hero who returns to his village after seven years in exile. (He'd been sent away after his role in an accidental death.) The changes that Christian missionaries and other white men have brought are intolerable to him. "Things Fall Apart" rolls toward a bleak denouement.

What sticks with you about the novel is its sensitive investigation, often through folk tales, of how culture functions and what it means. Mr. Achebe (his name is pronounced Chin-you-ah Ah-Chay-bay) had plenty to say about notions of traditional masculinity, as well, not to mention his braided observations about nature, religion, myth, gender and history.

*"Things Fall Apart - Colonialism and Independence  
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."  
- W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"*

"Things Fall Apart," its title taken from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," has sold more than ten million copies and been translated into some forty five languages. Time magazine placed it on its list of the hundred best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005. This excerpt is almost a summary of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Things Fall Apart* is a novel about nineteenth century Nigeria, before colonialism and the granting of independence.

It is a story of a great wrestler and elder of a Nigerian clan comprised of several villages. It tells about his life from start to finish in great detail. Towards the end of the novel, the reader is introduced to colonialism. This colonialism is what the anarchy is the above quote is referring to. The falcon represents the young generation of the clan; the falconer represents the elders. This is a story of how things really do fall apart. The story is centered on



Okonkwo, a great wrestler and elder of the clan. He is the son of an indolent man, who was constantly in debt.

*Things Fall Apart* is about the tragic fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and the Igbo culture. Okonkwo is a respected and influential leader within the Igbo community of Umuofia in eastern Nigeria. He first earns personal fame and distinction, and brings honor to his village, when he defeats Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling contest. Okonkwo determines to gain titles for himself and become a powerful and wealthy man in spite of his father's weaknesses.

Okonkwo's father, Unoka, was a lazy and wasteful man. He often borrowed money and then squandered it on palm-wine and merrymaking with friends. Consequently, his wife and children often went hungry. Within the community, Unoka was considered a failure and a laughingstock. He was referred to as *agbala*, one who resembles the weakness of a woman and has no property. Unoka died a shameful death and left numerous debts.

Okonkwo despises and resents his father's gentle and idle ways. He resolves to overcome the shame that he feels as a result of his father's weaknesses by being what he considers to be "manly"; therefore, he dominates his wives and children by being insensitive and controlling.

Because Okonkwo is a leader of his community, he is asked to care for a young boy named Ikemefuna, who is given to the village as a peace offering by neighboring Mbaino to avoid war with Umuofia. Ikemefuna befriends Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, and Okonkwo becomes inwardly fond of the boy.

Over the years, Okonkwo becomes an extremely volatile man; he is apt to explode at the slightest provocation. He violates the Week of Peace when he beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo, because she went to braid her hair at a friend's house and forgot to prepare the afternoon meal and feed her children. Later, he severely beats and shoots a gun at his second wife, Ekwefi, because she took leaves from his banana plant to wrap food for the Feast of the New Yam.

After the coming of the locusts, Ogbuefi Ezeuder, the oldest man in the village, relays to Okonkwo a message from the Oracle. The Oracle says that Ikemefuna must be killed as part of the retribution for the Umuofian woman killed three years earlier in Mbaino. He tells Okonkwo not to partake in the murder, but Okonkwo doesn't listen. He feels that not participating would be a sign of weakness. Consequently, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna with his machete. Nwoye realizes that his father has murdered Ikemefuna and begins to distance himself from his father and the clansmen.

Okonkwo becomes depressed after killing Ikemefuna, so he visits his best friend, Obierika, who disapproves of his role in Ikemefuna's killing. Obierika says that Okonkwo's act will upset the Earth and the earth goddess will seek revenge. After discussing Ikemefuna's death with Obierika, Okonkwo is finally able to sleep restfully, but he is awakened by his wife Ekwefi. Their daughter Ezinma, whom Okonkwo is fond of, is dying. Okonkwo gathers grasses, barks, and leaves to prepare medicine for Ezinma.



A public trial is held on the village commons. Nine clan leaders, including Okonkwo, represent the spirits of their ancestors. The nine clan leaders, or *egwugwu*, also represent the nine villages of Umuofia. Okonkwo does not sit among the other eight leaders, or elders, while they listen to a dispute between an estranged husband and wife. The wife, Mgbafo, had been severely beaten by her husband. Her brother took her back to their family's village, but her husband wanted her back home. The *egwugwu* tell the husband to take wine to his in-laws and beg his wife to come home. One elder wonders why such a trivial dispute would come before the *egwugwu*.

In her role as priestess, Chielo tells Ekwefi (Okonkwo's second wife) that Agbala (the Oracle of the Hills and Caves) needs to see Ezinma. Although Okonkwo and Ekwefi protest, Chielo takes a terrified Ezinma on her back and forbids anyone to follow. Chielo carries Ezinma to all nine villages and then enters the Oracle's cave. Ekwefi follows secretly, in spite of Chielo's admonitions, and waits at the entrance of the Oracle. Okonkwo surprises Ekwefi by arriving at the cave, and he also waits with her. The next morning, Chielo takes Ezinma to Ekwefi's hut and puts her to bed.

When Ogbuefi Ezeudu dies, Okonkwo worries because the last time that Ezeudu visited him was when he warned Okonkwo against participating in the killing of Ikemefuna. Ezeudu was an important leader in the village and achieved three titles of the clan's four, a rare accomplishment. During the large funeral, Okonkwo's gun goes off, and Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son is killed accidentally.

Because the accidental killing of a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo and his family must be exiled from Umuofia for seven years. The family moves to Okonkwo's mother's native village, Mbanta. After they depart Umuofia, a group of village men destroy Okonkwo's compound and kill his animals to cleanse the village of Okonkwo's sin. Obierika stores Okonkwo's yams in his barn and wonders about the old traditions of the Igbo culture.

Okonkwo is welcomed to Mbanta by his maternal uncle, Uchendu, a village elder. He gives Okonkwo a plot of land on which to farm and build a compound for his family. But Okonkwo is depressed, and he blames his *chi* (or personal spirit) for his failure to achieve lasting greatness.

During Okonkwo's second year in exile, he receives a visit from his best friend, Obierika, who recounts sad news about the village of Abame: After a white man rode into the village on a bicycle, the elders of Abame consulted their Oracle, which told them that the white man would destroy their clan and other clans. Consequently, the villagers killed the white man. But weeks later, a large group of men slaughtered the villagers in retribution. The village of Abame is now deserted.

Okonkwo and Uchendu agree that the villagers were foolish to kill a man whom they knew nothing about. Later, Obierika gives Okonkwo money that he received from selling Okonkwo's yams and seed-yams, and he promises to do so until Okonkwo returns to Umuofia.



Six missionaries, including one white man, arrive in Mbanta. The white man speaks to the people about Christianity. Okonkwo believes that the man speaks nonsense, but his son, Nwoye, is captivated and becomes a convert of Christianity.

The Christian missionaries build a church on land given to them by the village leaders. However, the land is a part of the Evil Forest, and according to tradition, the villagers believe that the missionaries will die because they built their church on cursed land. But when nothing happens to the missionaries, the people of Mbanta conclude that the missionaries possess extraordinary power and magic. The first recruits of the missionaries are *efulefu*, the weak and worthless men of the village. Other villagers, including a woman, soon convert to Christianity. The missionaries then go to Umuofia and start a school. Nwoye leaves his father's hut and moves to Umuofia so he can attend the school.

Okonkwo's exile is over, so his family arranges to return to Umuofia. Before leaving Mbanta, they prepare a huge feast for Okonkwo's mother's kinsmen in appreciation of their gratitude during Okonkwo's seven years of exile.

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, he discovers that the village has changed during his absence. Many men have renounced their titles and have converted to Christianity. The white men have built a prison; they have established a government court of law, where people are tried for breaking the white man's laws; and they also employ natives of Umuofia. Okonkwo wonders why the Umuofians have not incited violence to rid the village of the white man's church and oppressive government.

Some members of the Igbo clan like the changes in Umuofia. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, respects the Igbo traditions. He makes an effort to learn about the Igbo culture and becomes friendly with some of the clan leaders. He also encourages Igbo people of all ages to get an education. Mr. Brown tells Okonkwo that Nwoye, who has taken the name Isaac, is attending a teaching college. Nevertheless, Okonkwo is unhappy about the changes in Umuofia.

After Mr. Brown becomes ill and is forced to return to his homeland, Reverend James Smith becomes the new head of the Christian church. But Reverend Smith is nothing like Mr. Brown; he is intolerant of clan customs and is very strict.

Violence arises after Enoch, an overzealous convert to Christianity, unmasks an *egwugwu*. In retaliation, the *egwugwu* burn Enoch's compound and then destroy the Christian church because the missionaries have caused the Igbo people many problems.

When the District Commissioner returns to Umuofia, he learns about the destruction of the church and asks six leaders of the village, including Okonkwo, to meet with him. The men are jailed until they pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. The people of Umuofia collect the money and pay the fine, and the men are set free.

The next day at a meeting for clansmen, five court messengers who intend to stop the gathering approach the group. Suddenly, Okonkwo jumps forward and beheads the man in charge of the messengers with his machete. When none of the other clansmen attempt to stop



the messengers who escape, Okonkwo realizes that they will never go to war and that Umuofia will surrender. Everything has fallen apart for Okonkwo; he commits suicide by hanging himself.

Okonkwo's father was often referred to as a woman, which was a great insult. Growing up, Okonkwo develops a phobia of becoming his father, and does everything in his power not to. With this phobia came an abominable stubbornness. His first step in becoming a "real man" (opposed to his father) was to prove his strength, in doing so he became the great wrestler of his clan. Doing so earned him a lot of accolades and honours. He earned a lot of land, and married three different wives. However, with all of his fame and fortune, he was unable to escape his internal conflicts due to his stubbornness and his becoming frustrated easily.

One example of this was when a young male warrior and a young virgin girl were sent to Okonkwo's village in exchange (as a sacrifice) for a heinous crime committed against his clan. This was a crime that otherwise would have resulted in an all-out war; a war which Okonkwo's clan and village would have earned an easy victory. The young boy is sent to live with Okonkwo and his family for quite some time. During this time Okonkwo becomes very attached to him, so attached that it seems as if the boy is one of his own. However, when the time comes for the sacrifice of the boy to be made, the other elders excuse Okonkwo from the "hunting trip." Yet, because of Okonkwo's hubris and fear of looking like a woman, he is determined to go on the mission. Okonkwo's determination wouldn't have been so bad, but he worsened the situation by making the first strike on his "son" and then proceeded to watch the other elders brutally massacre the little boy. Achebe does this to let the reader know of the significance of the gender roles among the Ibo people, and to alert the reader to the types of sacrifices and the types of cultures that are experienced among the Ibo people.

Later on in the story Okonkwo really pays for his stubbornness. During a large gathering in the center of Umuofia (Okonkwo's village), he shoots his gun off into the air. The action had a very tragic reaction. In reaction, the stray bullet fell down from the sky and struck an innocent bystander. This was an accident of fatal consequences. The bullet ended up killing the unsuspecting civilian. This incident resulted in the exile of Okonkwo and his family to his motherland for seven years. Things took a drastic turn for the worse while Okonkwo was absent from his village, resulting in a return to a place he barely knew

During part one of the story, Achebe takes the reader through the daily lives of the Ibo people. It is not until part two that the reader is introduced to the European missionaries. The purpose of Achebe's waiting until part two to introduce that missionaries was to wait and immerse the reader into the everyday life of the Ibo people, so he or she could feel as though he or she was a part of the clan, then the author shifts the momentum of the story. Part two displays the affect the societal changes have on the members of the Ibo clan.

The author concentrates the attention on the conflict between the people of Umuofia (Okonkwo's village) and the Christian missionaries. The missionaries succeed in taking over Umuofia and transforming the once Ibo tribe in a Christian one. As a result, Okonkwo is so distraught with the result of his village he ends up committing suicide.

Things Fall Apart is a novel displaying the effects colonialism plays on a region. It was



published and released at the time when Nigeria was acquiring their independence. It serves as a reminder to the people of Nigeria of their heritage and of what once was. It is an accurate display of how society deals with change; the affect change has on individuals and the harm a resistance to inevitable change plays on a village. If only the falcon could have heard the falconer, maybe things would not have fallen apart.

One of Chinua Achebe's goals in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to correct a whole history of misrepresentations of his people and country in occidental discourse. To put Achebe's position positively, among the reasons he wrote *Things Fall Apart* was to show a continent where, especially before colonial invasion, people lived in a complex, diverse and fruitful relationship with the African environment. One effect of colonization was the disturbance of this balance; the task of the writers of the continent, therefore, was to highlight the organic nature of the relationship and to portray its subsequent disruption.

Achebe attempts a reading of *Things Fall Apart* from an ecocritical and colonial perspective to show that he was writing the novel in part to make his West African readers aware of the extent of the embeddedness of their forefathers in the environment. Here we can observe the illustrations the way he conveys through his writing and use of language the rich connections between the African and the land. It also intends to indicate the extent of the damage in the relationship between Africans and their natural world caused by the advent of colonization. Here Achebe's profound consciousness about the vital relationship of the African must have to the natural world to make them whole again.

Apart from its utility as an African response to European imperialism, 'Things Fall Apart' has other uses in academia. The book has proven itself as a work of scholarship usable in multiple, academic disciplines. Prescribed in some Africa and Asian countries as a literature book. 'Things Fall Apart' has also been used in American universities as a sociology book. Additionally, "Things Fall Apart" can lend itself to the veracity of a historian because book deals with the political, cultural and social developments of a people, whose history was perverted by foreigners. Sociologically speaking, 'Things Fall Apart' deals with the behavioral patterns of a society that suffered a civilization eclipse when attacked from outside. 'Things Fall Apart' has been internationally used as a literature textbook because its European and African characters have stirred a lot of pensiveness among dramatists.

The colonial encounter featured in the novel, *Things Fall Apart* cover the period from late nineteenth century to the eve of Nigeria's independence. Achebe's representation of this period in Nigeria's history depicts conflicts in the Igbo society, generated partly by the impact of colonialism and also by tensions within the society itself. Achebe narrates a world where violence, war and sufferings of the people are balanced by the strong presence of tradition, rituals and social coherence. The disruption of the balance is depicted through the characterization of Okonkwo. Finally, this article emphasizes Achebe's profound consciousness about the vital relationship the African must have to the natural world to make them whole again.

Achebe uses knowledge and power, the two indivisible foundations of authority to tell the story of his people. In representing the past, Achebe traverses the boundaries of conventional



disciplines like history, literature and anthropology to seek out an integrated form of knowledge where “to know” is “to change” or to possess power.

Achebe has for long been read as a postcolonial writer whose writings seek a reclamation of space through a replacement of the imperialists accounts by discourses which resist colonial appropriation.

As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Everyday brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. They also have to be read along with what Achebe has to say about his commitment to his people:

Re-reading Achebe shows that this sense of commitment does not consist of merely writing against the imperialists’ versions, or rewriting to set the facts right, but it has far reaching and a deeper sense of association with the written word and the world. The past with its omnipresent ancestors, the solidarity of communities and the legitimacy of social contract cannot be categorised only as a counter discourse. As G.D Killam says, Achebe’s novels “... form a sequence and reflect broadly speaking, the changes which have taken place in Ibo, and by implication Nigerian life as a result of what Achebe calls the “chance encounter between Europe and Africa during the imperial-colonial period.”

Going back to the past and writing about it to rediscover the African identity not only fell within the parameters of postcolonial discourse but also became a way of instilling a feeling of pride in the people of a continent whose lives had been distorted both by the colonial rule and in imperial representations.

Achebe’s documentation of the sophistication of traditional Igbo society provides vivid dramatisation of the protagonists psychology and how contradictory forces of internal conflicts and British rule determine their destinies. This looking back at the past yields a balanced view of how things stood, as Achebe says, “What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us.” Narrated within a specific locale, Achebe provides alternative sets of traditions, ideals, values and behaviour while reclaiming his heritage and at the same time provides directions for constructive changes. This is evident in the absence of sentimentalist and nostalgia for the past of the nation. The author recognises not only the weaknesses but also the strong points of the old dispensation. According to Anuradha Ghosh, Achebe’s narration of the precolonial world presents:

The unsullied, untarnished image of an Africa with her several gods and goddesses, rituals and taboos, languages, cultures and traditions, songs and dances, bounty and grace, health and well-being may be a romantic reconstruction of the primal world of peace and happiness – a kind of golden age that is posited in order to counter-point the humiliation, the squalor and the ugliness of colonial exploitation. The notion of freedom and beauty and the poignant rendering of a world that has not yet lost its fine sense of balance is a harmonious extension



of trying to find roots in the collective unconsciousness of the people who had their own folk forms of expression, ways of living and belief systems suited to the needs of their contexts.

Achebe narrates the loss of the pristine glory of a civilization that had flourished on the strength of its own merits and demerits. The strong presence of the community, the rich culture of the people, the democratic impulse behind the village meetings and the mediation of disputes by village elders highlight the sophistication and democratic tradition of the Igbos. Achebe's evocation of the past is not just to portray a cultural resistance but to see things as they were which he lived.

In order to understand Achebe's world as described in his novels, a brief ethnographic account of the Igbo society would be helpful in understanding the cultural and historical background to Achebe's works. The Igbo territory in south-eastern Nigeria stretches from the low-lying swamp land of the Niger Delta through the tableland of the region's centre to the hills of Onitsha in the north.

The Igbo as a whole never had any centralised institution to govern them nor did they have any powerful chief. Traditionally, power has been divided among numerous small groups with the aim of dispersal of authority rather than its concentration in the hands of a few people and the same is reflected in the social structure. The basic social unit is the patrilineage which is made of a single hamlet of several homesteads or compounds. Each compound has the house of a man, his wives and his sons. A number of lineages made up of a group of hamlets make a village which is autonomous. A cluster of villages share a meeting place and are linked by common shrines and myth of descent. David Carroll says that, "This scattered social grouping is symptomatic of a persistent feature of Igbo life which runs directly counter to the European stereotype of the African tribe with its rigid hierarchy and all-powerful chief."

The traditional Igbo concept of political power and authority is structural and determined by their concept of Umunna (one's membership of a patrilineage and one's rights and duties) and the membership of associations based on an elaborate title system. This political structure had two layers – the village and the village group and authority in the family. Victor C Uchendu elaborates this further, "Government at the village level is an exercise in direct democracy. It involves all the lineages and requires the political participation of all the male adults. Though it forms part of the village-group, the widest political community, the village is autonomous in its affairs and accept no interference or dictation from any other group." The dispersal of power allowed villagers to participate in public meetings and express their views.

When the British colonial administration took control over Igbo land in the first decade of the twentieth century, they imposed their direct administration. Victor C Uchendu views it as the failure of the British to understand the traditional political institutions of the Igbos,

*"Failing to find powerful chiefs who wielded influence over a large territory, as were found in the northern and western parts of Nigeria, they naively concluded that the Igbo were living in "ordered anarchy." Without considering the implications, they imposed a system of direct administration on the Igbo."*



Igbo society allowed an individual considerable freedom of action to move up the social scale and also to express his views. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* stands tall as one who in spite of his father's failure could acquire titles, improve his finance and be counted as an important and respected member of his village.

The Igbo world maintains a cosmological balance where change is expected and where Man's existence is interrelated with the material and the spiritual. David Carroll comments, "There is constant interaction between the world of the living and the dead, between the visible and invisible, the material and the spiritual. Any calamity or untoward event indicates a loss of equilibrium which must be diagnosed through divination and then put right by sacrifice or by an appeal to the ancestors."

One aspect of Igbo social life is the kola hospitality, which Victor C Uchendu says, "The kola nut is the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality." Every guest is welcomed with a kola nut as a way of showing respect. It is also used in every auspicious occasions and ceremonies.

Achebe in his novels describes how this gesture continues to be a part of Igbo life.

Igbo society was not without its flaws. When a woman delivered twins she was made to part with them. Achebe narrates the pain and helplessness of those who had to discard twins born to them. The system of *osu* was another social evil. An *osu* was an outcaste, having been dedicated to a god. They were not allowed to mix with the freeborn and their future generations were destined to share the same fate. Victor C Uchendu says, "The *osu* system of slavery constitutes the greatest contradiction to Igbo equalitarian ideology." Achebe in his narration shows how this practice continues even with the spread of Christianity.

A study of Igbo society would not be complete without the study of the position of women. Igbo held mother as supreme – *Nneka*, laying stress on her lineage. Igbo women took active part in the village markets where they sold their crops. Within the homestead each wife had a hut along the other co-wives. A man could have as many wives as he desired.

Achebe's novels show the improvement in the position of women as they progress and begin to take part in nation building. They are no longer silent spectators in wars between clans and are shown as capable of changing the course of their nation's history. Igbo society held homicide as an offence. Achebe problematizes the Ikemefuna episode in *Things Fall Apart* to counter the western view of the African as savage and upholds the universal feelings of helplessness, pain and ancient ways of rendering justice.

The Igbo have been good orators whose language was replete with proverbs of universal wisdom; they were also excellent craftsmen who attributed religious importance to carving masks; finally they were great warriors. It was this society with which Europeans first made their contacts – the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the slave traders in the eighteenth century, Christian missions in the middle of the nineteenth century and the British political intervention at the end of the nineteenth century.

A brief history of Britain's political intervention in Nigeria and the changes that came in its wake is attempted here. Achebe's protagonists who struggle through the conflicts within



themselves and in their clan do not remain unaffected by the political turmoil. Their lives are changed as the colonial encounter brings in new systems of administration, religion and education. These had the effect of making men more corrupt and perpetuate divisions among people. It also heightened ethnic consciousness, as each of the different tribes in Nigeria wanted to participate in the new order of the day.

Achebe`s narration goes back to a time long before the scramble for Africa, revealing that the colonial encounter is only a part of Africa`s long history. This brief colonial occupation of Nigeria not only transformed the pristine world but left behind lasting impressions which lasted even beyond political independence. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe presents a world long before the coloniser came. Achebe presents a world complete in its order, where there were conflicts between tribes, land disputes, marital disputes which were settled by the village communities. The old ways of rendering justice preserved the balance in the society and upheld the necessary laws of the clan. It was also a self-sufficient society well served by its institutions, laws and men who dispensed justice. The colonial rule was resisted because it altered and sometimes corrupted that which had stood the test of time.

Achebe looks at the Igbo through their own eyes as they celebrate the various rituals and holidays that mark important events in the year and in the lives of the people. The Igbo are depicted as a people with well-developed and time tested social institutions and having a rich culture impressively civilised civic life with traditions and laws based on justice and fairness. They are not ruled by a chief or a king but in accordance to democratic principles in which all males gather and take decisions through consensus. Ironically, it is the Europeans, who boast of bringing democratic institutions to the rest of the world, who tried to subvert these clan meetings in Umuofia.

The Igbo also take pride in their high degree of social mobility as men are not judged by the wealth of their fathers and Achebe emphasises that a title and high rank is attainable for all freeborn Igbo. Achebe does not shy away from depicting the injustices of Igbo society. The Igbo are deeply patriarchal. They have a great fear of twins who are abandoned immediately after birth. Violence is not unknown to them but they cannot comprehend warfare on a European scale.

*Things Fall Apart* irrevocably changed the perception of African Literature in English. Jeffrey Meyers says that:

Achebe celebrates the bonds of kinship in family life, the respectful and ceremonial visits, the worship of the ancestral spirits, the veneration of the Oracle and of the elders, the arrangement of the bride price, the feasts of marriage, of harvest, and of farewell; the singing, the drumming, the dancing and the wrestling; the village councils and the oratory, the courts of justice and the last rites of the dead.

The theme of colonialism is not introduced until about the last fifty pages of the novel. By then, Okonkwo the protagonist has lost everything and has been driven into exile. Within the traditions of Igbo culture there is still hope for his redemption and he is not completely abandoned by his clan, who still visit him and make arrangements to help him.



The arrival of missionaries in Umuofia, followed by representatives of the colonial government completely disrupts Igbo life. As Igbo society undergoes a phase of transition, a series of tragic events test Okonkwo whose fear of being considered as weak leads to his suicide. Okonkwo decides to remove himself rather than live under an alien rule and in a clan which has shifted its loyalties to the new rulers. The conflict between Okonkwo and his community arises because he remains faithful to the ideals of the clan while others have learnt to accept change.

The general perception is that the change triggered off by the arrival of the coloniser was too sudden for the Igbo to cope with, which led to the rapid disintegration of institutions and values. The traditional society with all its glory and strength disintegrated under the formidable external force of imperialism and the self-destructive impulse of the individual from within. *Things Fall Apart* analyses not only the shift from communal life to the individual consciousness but also the weaknesses of the society the coloniser had taken advantage of and exploited. Achebe's refusal to blame the colonial rule for the destruction of

Igbo society makes one reconsider the postcolonial contention. Achebe's works mark an important shift in this context. As the Igbo society undergoes transition, Achebe locates it in the liminal space of history where it grapples with the colonial power and devises ways to counteract it. *Things Fall Apart* shows the last phase of precolonial history as it is taken over by colonial rule. In the textual politics of subversion, Achebe has been able to bring alive the story of his people with all their frailties and shortcomings. He presents the socio-historical crises among the Igbo that existed long before the arrival of the British and later created opportunities for the spread of Christianity. Achebe's recreation of the precolonial past shows that it was neither wholly a savage condition nor an ideal era. The Igbo ancestors were brave but vulnerable people and their world had fallen apart because they could not comprehend and counter the violence of colonisation. The picture of the past is made without any attempt to romanticise it and it is accepted with dignity while understanding its imperfections without apology.

Achebe presents his protagonist with human weaknesses who at a time of great historical upheavals tried to save his people but failed. Achebe brings alive the story of a hero's failure which would never have been recorded in mainstream history and rarely found in the fictional recreation of those who rose against imperialism.

As Achebe narrates the past, the episode of the killing of Ikemefuna, the young boy sent from the village of Mbaino as compensation for the wrongful death of a young woman from Umuofia, stands out. Much has been written about Okonkwo's weakness in his killing of Ikemefuna. A re-reading of the event in the context of the present study shows that Achebe used the incident to present not only the dark side of a society but also to show the wisdom and helplessness of the clan. The village elders who had warned Okonkwo against interference had obviously foreseen the tragic outcome. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected member of Umuofia had said to Okonkwo: "The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father".



*Things Fall Apart* narrates the position of women in Igbo society in the pre-colonial era. In the apparently patriarchal society there were some women at least who did enjoy some empowering privileges. Each married woman had her own homestead and a share of the land to grow crops which could be traded. Though women had no say in community meetings, the priestess Agbala mediated between the world of man and the other world. Though there was hierarchy among the wives of a man with the eldest wife wearing the anklet of her husband's titles, there were also men who treated their wives as equals. There were men like Nlue who "could not do anything without telling her". The Igbo philosophy of "Nneka – Mother is Supreme".

The deep respect for women can go unrecognised in any essentialist reading. A woman's fate is not different from that of many men across communities. The suppression of the traditional African way of life is shown as leading to conflicts between the individual and the community with the corollary of British intervention in the administrative, educational and religious fields. The early signs of this conflict between the community and individual which was featured in *Things Fall Apart* is dealt with at length in *Arrow of God*. Here it spreads deeper. Ezeulu with all his powers as the chief priest of Ulu stands tall in his responsibilities towards his people.

The imagery-laden style of *Things fall Apart*, full of metaphors and proverbs carries intimations of the spiritual world of the Igbo. The creative practices of mask-making and the various rituals and festivals bring alive the rich oral tradition. While re-reading Achebe's recreation of the past, one comes across Ezeulu, the high priest of the village deity, an intellectual who can see the weaknesses of his clan members and sense the need for change. His isolation from his community cannot be blamed only on the historical changes or on the clan's failure to understand him. His greatest failing is his own pride. Ezeulu's conflict with his self and his clan lead to further debates on the binaries such as religion and power, spiritualism and materialism and continuity and change.

Achebe does not merely conform to the norms of postcolonial discourse while showing how colonisation made inroads and disrupted the old order. He goes further than that: in Ezeulu he shows a character who can foresee the changes that were about to take place. In a spirit of accommodation he sends his son to receive the new ways.

Titles are no longer great; neither are barns or large number of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune. We are the first in all the nine villages to send our son to the white man's land. Greatness has belonged to Iguedo from ancient times. It is not made by man. You cannot plant greatness as you plant yams or maize. Whoever planted an iroko tree – the greatest tree in the forest? You may collect all the iroko seeds in the world, open the soil and put them there. It will be in vain. The great tree chooses where to grow and we find it there, so it is with the greatness in men. Their greatness is also mentioned many years later at the time when Ikemefuna's killing is remembered: "Even in those days some elders said it was a great wrong that a man should raise his hands against a child that called him father."

1. Europeans have spent centuries, trying to justify their uninvited presence in Africa. With its sociological teachings, 'Things Fall Apart' can be used to ask a specific



question: Why did Europeans force their so-called “civilizing mission” on a people who were readily spiritual and culturally sure of themselves? Even today, in the twenty-first century, the colonial rampages seen in ‘Things Fall Apart,’ continue in several guises, mostly through Western agencies like the IMF and international trade, which has been booby-trapped enough to be called ‘unfair trade.’

2. There is a reason why things have fallen apart in Africa: a rape victim-psychologists say-could live with the trauma of defilement for an endlessly long time! When the infliction of horror is both physical and psychological, the ensuing trauma can be eternally destabilizing. Little wonder the subversive presence of Europeans in Umuofia, disoriented Okonkwo so much that he committed suicide. Today’s African countries are a bigger representation of Okonkwo’s Umuofia, where normalcy was replaced with the chaos unleashed by European colonialists.
3. Colonial rule lasted well over a century in some African countries. Britain pompously took over Sierra Leone and kept the country as a personal property for at least 150 years! Colonial rule was very thorough in its destruction of Africa, both from a psychological and socio-economic perspective. Land-seizures and the total usurpation of African authority are few of the horrors committed in Africa by colonial Europe. By the time Europeans pulled out of Africa in the 1960s, the damage was already done.
4. After a century of colonial degradation, the skills needed to run a modern, nation-state, became dangerously scarce in the newly-independent African States. Portuguese colonial rule, for example, proved so damaging that Africans were not allowed to acquire any skills other than those needed to make them serve as cooks and servants. When Portugal grudgingly pulled out of Angola in 1975, the newly-independent Angolan state staggered with incompetence, nervously searching for teachers, doctors and the managerial competence needed to run a country.

Thus, we can say that the novelist grabbed the subject of colonialism “so firmly and fairly,” John Updike wrote in *The New York Times* in the 1970s, “that the book’s tragedy, like Greek tragedy, felt tonic; a space had been cleared, an understanding had been achieved, a new beginning was implied.”

#### REFERENCES

1. Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy - Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God* (London: Picador, 1988)
2. Chinua Achebe, “The Novelist as Teacher” *Hopes and Impediments – Selected Essays* 1988 (New York: Anchor Books, 1990)
3. G.D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969)
4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963)
5. Chinua Achebe, “The Role of a Writer in a New Nation” *African Writers on African*



- Writing ed., G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973)
6. Victor C Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965)
  7. A Onwuejeogwu, "The Igbo Culture Area" *Igbo Language and Culture* F.C. Ogbalu and E.N. Emenanjo (Ibadan: OUP, 1975)
  8. Onwuejeogwu, "The Igbo Culture Area" *Igbo Language and Culture*
  9. David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe – Novelist, Poet, Critic* 2nd ed (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980)
  10. Chinua Achebe, quoted in Arlene A. Elder "The Paradoxical Characterization of
  11. Okonkwo" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* eds., Jeffery Hunter and Tom Burns Vol. 152 (Detroit: Gale, 2002)