

An Analysis of Colonial Impact in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

Book Review




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Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. 1. Baskı, New York: Anchor Books Press, 1994.
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Chinua Achebe. *Parçalanma* [Parçalanma]. 2. Edition, New York: Anchor Books Press,
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Abstract: This paper analyzes Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, focusing on the societal disintegration of the Igbo clan and the breakdown of its culture and unity during the early phase of British colonialism in Nigeria. Achebe highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of Igbo society, providing a fair portrayal of their culture. Umuofia's destruction was a dual strategy, caused by the conflict between the protagonist Okonkwo's strict adherence to traditional warrior values and the multidimensional, systematic assault of British colonialism. The Christian missionaries, through the use of both soft power (education, religion, and trade) led by Mr. Brown, and hard power (courts, armed forces) led by Mr. Smith, caused the political and spiritual disintegration within the clan. This fragmentation ultimately weakened the Umuofia's ability to resist collectively, rendering its traditional judicial and leadership structures powerless in the face of foreign powers. Lastly, Okonkwo's desolation was evident in his desperate act of violence and subsequent suicide. His life is brutally reduced to a mere footnote in the history written by the District Commissioner.

Key Words: Administration, Civilization, Culture, Architecture

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe was the author of *Things Fall Apart*, who was born in 1930 in Nigeria. He was a prominent novelist and made great contributions to modern African literature through his poetry and novels. Due to his remarkable intellectual achievements, he got the Nigerian National Merit Award. His first novel, “*Things Fall Apart*,” published in 1958, represented the influence of white Christian missionaries and the colonial authority in Nigeria, and their conflict with traditional African culture. Through his writings, Achebe challenged the Western interpretation that used to view African societies as uncivilized and chaotic, but he presented African culture as having their own set of rules, customs, traditions, and system of authorities.

Things Fall Apart illustrates the Igbo people in the nine villages of Umuofia, dominated by ancient traditions, strong social connections, religious beliefs, and *egwugwu* (judicial authority of ancestral spirit). The main character of the story is Okonkwo, who is known for his personal values, aggressiveness, and achievements in war. His popularity in Umuofia started at the age of 18 after defeating the unbeaten wrestler Amalinze the Cat. Okonkwo had an opposite personality from his father, Unoka, who was lazy, a debtor, a failure, and called *abgala* (a term used for a woman or a man with no title). Therefore, being ashamed of his father’s life, Okonkwo worked hard to become not like his father. Through the personal values of Okonkwo, the writer depicts the ideal culture of Umuofia that started crumbling with the arrival of Christian missionaries and British colonial authorities.

The novel’s themes of masculinity, fear, and identity will be examined in this review, explaining how Okonkwo’s rigid views ultimately lead to his downfall and how the new foreign powers erode the unity and moral authority of the clan. It will show that the devastation of the community’s political center occurred before the final fight, making Okonkwo’s rash act of resistance a desperate, solitary gesture rather than the start of a war.

Evaluation & Discussion

Things Fall Apart is a captivating novel that depicts the collapse of an entire cultural system by representing the story of one man’s tragedy. The writer successfully represents how traditional Igbo culture is destroyed by both internal and external faults. Though Achebe defines both the positive and negative aspects of Igbo culture, he also challenges the narrative of earlier Europeans that depicted African societies as primitive and chaotic. He depicts Umuofia as a structurally ordered people followed by strong religious beliefs, the clan’s judicial system, marriage customs, and agricultural traditions, also highlighting rigid aspects of the society like severe criminal

punishments, gender inequality, and the killing of Ikemefuna, which adversely impacts the feelings of Okonkwo.

The climactic tragedy of *Things Fall Apart* is driven by the conflict between Okonkwo's rigid, immutable character and the adaptable, multifaceted nature of the colonial attack. The last five chapters show how the British forces dismantled the economy, moral authority, and political unity of Umuofia Society, which were the core pillars of Igbo Society. The foreign powers established a dual system of control through soft power as well as hard power. They gave economic incentives (like establishing a trading store), and to persuade the young people and sow the seeds of conflict among them, they gave educational and healthcare incentives through soft power. Second, they disrupted their legal system through the use of hard power by establishing a court system run by the District Commissioner and enforced by Kotma (a corrupt foreign messenger).

The turning point in the novel occurs with the entrance of Christian missionaries. The missionaries offer a new identity and a power structure to the people who were ostracized by their traditional customs. Achebe shows how colonialism first felt appealing to the women, outcasts, but it ultimately led to the split within the clan. The reason for Umuofia's downfall was not just brute force; instead, it was the mistrust, misunderstanding, and spiritual disruption.

When Okonkwo returned from his seven-year exile in Mbanta, he noticed a tremendous change in Umuofia. The men have become soft like women; they no longer focus on gaining titles and warrior status. Their attention is totally diverted towards economic and educational gain. Apart from lunatic religion, the white man also built a trading store, making palm oil and kernel valuable commodities for the first time, which led to a significant flow of money into Umuofia.

In chapter 21, Mr. Brown engaged in a long theological discussion with a local great man named Akunna, after which he realized that a frontal attack on the Ibo religion would fail, so he established schools and hospitals. Mr. Brown then successfully persuaded people to send their children to school by prophesying that only literate individuals would become future leaders. Soon, the Ibo people realized they could have authoritative positions just after a few months of schooling. Eventually generation of Ibo collaborators was created, powered by missionaries.

Mr. Brown was succeeded by the Reverend James Smith. Unlike Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith directly confronted the Ibo religion. Smith's fanaticism provoked an aggressive convert, Enoch, to publicly unmask the *egwugwu*, considered equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The clan then retaliated by destroying Enoch's compound and church. As a result, the District Commissioner launched a counterattack and invited six

Umuofia leaders, including Okonkwo, to palaver with the purpose of imprisoning them. The leaders were subjected to psychological and physical humiliation, their heads were shaved, instilling a wave of fear in the Igbo people. This punishment was a demonstration of the fact that even titled Umuofia people were powerless in front of Christian missionaries.

After the release, the leaders were full of anger. Okonkwo considered Egonwanne as an obstacle to Umuofia's unified action. The last action taken by Okonkwo was the brutal killing of the head messenger. But opposite to his expectations, he was left alone and not supported by the clan. Thus, he ultimately committed suicide. This was the tragic twist: as suicide is considered an abomination against the earth, and made his body unclean. The man who lived his whole life by preserving and following the clan's tradition passed away by doing the most humiliating act and did not even get a burial from his own people. As Achebe's ethical voice, Obierika then accused the District Commissioner in these words: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; -and now he will be buried like a -dog. He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words." (Achebe, 1994, p. 208).

Achebe then ends the novel by exposing the colonial mindset. DC thought of adding a paragraph of Okonkwo's entire tragic life story in his upcoming book, "*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*." The man who spent his entire life striving to be a great man was brought down by the collapse of his society. This final, patronizing thought perfectly sums up how a great civilization was minimized and erased by the colonial narrative.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Things Fall Apart* thoroughly represented Okonkwo's personal tragedy, Umuofia's disintegration, and the devastating effects of colonial invasion. It criticised both the rigidity of Igbo society and the oppression by white missionaries. However, the collapse of Umuofia was not just caused by external attack by colonial powers but also due to the failure of moral authority and communal unity. While explaining the societal collapse, Obierika said, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion... 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, 1994, p. 176).

Achieve also emphasized that colonial dominance was initially indirect. The missionaries gave economic and educational incentives to the underprivileged people before using physical force. The clan's unity had already vanished at the time of actual conflict. Lastly, the two actions taken by Okonkwo: killing of messenger and committing suicide, an act which is considered shameful and forbidden in Igbo culture,

show the destruction of values and traditions for which he fought his whole life. In conclusion, *Things Fall Apart* points out that societies or cultures fall apart not only from foreign domination but from internal conflicts, fear, and severe, rigid adherence to traditions that make them incapable of adapting collectively.