Things Fall Apart

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“Things Fall Apart” is a novel written about Africa by an African writer. Although he wrote wonderfully in English, Achebe was born in Nigeria. Many scholars consider it the African novel. It is superbly written and tells a type of story about Africa that didn't really exist beforehand, namely a story about Africa written from an African point of view. Everything, the author’s African and it is set in Africa. It’s inspired by African events that happened perhaps between the 1890s to the 1920s. Nonetheless, the most important thing about the novel is that it explores issues related to African culture, particularly the effect the coming of Europeans had on African culture. Achebe grew up in an interesting time for Africa. He got to experience traditional African culture at its finest, and he also got to experience the events surrounding the arrival of Europeans on the continent. The practical knowledge he acquired at this time motivated him to write the novel. He employs various African proverbs (Igbo to be specific) and narrative techniques that make it such a rich story (Chinua, 1958). This is an African novel that deliberates on the existential crisis telling the story of Okonkwo and taking an objective approach towards respect and power in a society.

The title of the novel comes from a Yeats poem, here are a couple of lines, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. The poem is about cyclical anarchy emerging from reality. Yeats had an elaborate yet strong spiritual belief in balance through duality (as explained in his work A Vision), that the world and individual people cycled between bipolar states. Then that goal shifted, growing strong then falling apart, in proportion as society passed between two extremes. So that civilization, which relies upon its ability to define itself through encouraging and conversely suppressing certain behaviors, is fated to eventually have the suppressed rise up and assert itself. Specifically in Achebe's book, Igbo society while in many ways flexible in its balance between male and female sensibilities, places greater honor on traditionally male characteristics, aggressiveness, individuality, etc. It is revealed that Okonkwo's sole motivation in life, is to build a legacy in strict avoidance of his father's failures, which he is deeply ashamed of and came about due to what is perceived as feminine sensibilities. This results in Okonkwo's inability to create a balance between both genders and eventually alienates himself from his loved ones. Consequently, he breaks laws, and suffer from the outcomes despite being

Furthermore, it is actually Okonkwo's status and reputation as the embodiment of the male that works against him. Where the traditions and values of Igbo society may have easily survived their fated contact with Christian missionaries using a balanced approach, Okonkwo comes looking for a fight. Returning from exile (for his crimes), he discovers the changes missionaries have made and despises them. He kills a messenger expecting his people to follow suit and kill the others. When they don't it is a clear sign of how disconnected from his peers he has become. The slightly repressed feminine aspects of Igbo society found an outlet when exposed to the missionary's sensibilities, and as a result, began to successfully assert themselves. Okonkwo, kills himself in shame, further reducing the status and reputation for such traditional masculine viewpoints. This type of falling apart is what sets the stage for missionaries to step in and assert themselves and their culture much more strongly.

Achebe uses his novels, particularly Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God to paint a picture of the European scramble for Africa from an Igbo point of view. Achebe describes in great detail the sights and sounds of daily Igbo life (Chinua, 1958). He also paints an interesting picture of the dealings between the two cultures both on important and mundane issues. Such interactions are often surrounded by confusion and misunderstanding. For example, in one scene villagers encounter a European on a bicycle. Having never encountered a bicycle before the villagers are unsure how to react, most are curious. Eventually, the bicyclist is killed and his bicycle tied to a tree. In reprisal, the villagers are shot and the village destroyed. It is important to note that the main characters in Achebe's narrative decry the killing as foolish even though they are from a neighboring village. Things Fall Apart portrays Igbos as humans - good, bad, wise and foolish. It shows their way of life, their philosophy, and institutions. It shows how the invasion by white men disrupted the culture. It does not judge whether colonialism was good or bad and the reader is left with tools to make his/her own judgment.

In my opinion, Achebe chose to tell the story of 'Things Fall Apart' that way because of an existential crisis which I believe all 'Western-educated' Igbo experience at a certain stage. The Pull of modernity vs the traditional calls of the tribe, though perhaps not solely an Igbo experience, one other Africans feel. Achebe across numerous interviews and in his book "There was a Country" told two poignant tales; The first was about his Uncle an "Ichie"(an Igbo title-holder) who his Father (a Christian Convert/Missionary) tried to convert, after numerous attempts by his father, his Uncle Achebe tells us pointed to his traditional paraphernalia and asked "and what are my to do with these?" Implying, what was he if he rejected the world-view that gave him those titles and in which he had achieved so much.

The author, Chinua Achebe, tells the story in the novel objectively. It deliberates Achebe's love for literature, he tells readers of the books he loved growing up, where he subconsciously took the side of brave upright European adventurers and hated the savages stopping the European from his righteous task of civilization and gospel (Chinua, 1958). Eventually, he discovered that he and his people were the savages. The above led Achebe and many of his generation to conclude that a different story of Africa one different from the often negative stereotypes had to be told. For some, it involved rejecting the Western names and returning to native attire, for others it was the nationalist fight, Achebe and other writers including Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka chose literature. Achebe, of course, wrote the tale of Okonkwo and how the coming of the colonizer led to things falling apart. On the subject of colonialism, the British not only tilted the education system towards glorifying the 'Empire'(many Nigerians of that generation speak of singing "God Save...... better than the national anthem(s), glorified British explorers for 'discovering the country'), it also led many especially the first generation elite to view everything 'native' as ugly and backward literally everything from names to dressing(they were especially later lampooned for sticking to the three-piece in the tropics) and respect for the traditional ways.

Some of the opinions about the book are that he wrote it to hammer away myths of African savageness, and to bring forward the idea of civility before colonization. This seems to me to be more of a sub-point in relation to the bigger picture. The theme pulsing through the novel, for me, is that of respect and position in society. The Igbo culture supports a meritocracy, promoting people on worth rather than class or status. Yet Umuofia classes success away from relationships, morality, and kindness. The book begs many questions, is this position favorable? Is Okonkwo's thirst for reputation healthy? Why does he persevere for his children when he didn't for his father? Etc.

# References

Chinua, A. (1958). Things fall apart. *Ch. Achebe*, 1–117.