

## **Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Showcase an unflinching Exploration of Women, Colonization and Cultural Change**

**P. Jayakar Rao**

**M.A, UGC-NET, AP-SET, (PhD)**

**Asst. Professor of English,**

**Govt. Degree & PG College,**

**Siddipet, Telangana**

**India**

### **Abstract**

Things Fall Apart (1958) is a post-colonial novel written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. It is one of the first African novels in English to receive global critical acclaim. The novel was written in reaction to European assessments of African culture. The novel is divided into three parts, the first describes the Igbo (“Ibo” in the novel) leader and local wrestling champion Okonkwo’s family and personal history, the customs and society of the Igbo, and the second and third parts introduce the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community.

In this novel the reader encounters the Igbo people at a landmark moment in their history and culture. The intrusion of the colonizing force is changing or impending to change almost every facet of their society: religion, family structure, gender roles and relations, and trade, etc. In this novel, one recognizes just how much the representation by Achebe of Igbo society is changing because women, who were traditionally restricted to the home and who possessed little decision-making power preceding to colonialism, unexpectedly find themselves agents of significant social exchanges through the roles they play in the trade that befalls in the market, as well as in the production of the crops that are sold at market.

### **Introduction:**

Aside from being one of the seminal and foremost African writers, Achebe is one who has worked hard to dispelling the idealized images of his people and portraying them as they actually live in the real world. Depicting African people with accuracy was part of the mission of Achebe's work as a writer, and something that he aspired to do with accuracy and aplomb. One could argue that Achebe feels that art and society are indivisible, something which becomes apparent in the bulk of his writing, particularly in the work, *Things Fall Apart*. That particular novel showcases an unflinching exploration of women, colonization and cultural change. This novel explores the originality and memorability by which Achebe creates fictional characters and a fictional reality in order to showcase the realities and obstacles of the African experience. The sub-themes of this novel look at how issues like identity and dignity have to be fought for rigorously in this struggle and how dominance is another manifestation of colonialism. Another aspect of the Achebe's work that is often overlooked is how Achebe refuses to idealize society before or after colonialism. This all connects to Achebe's unflinching dedication to realism and a refusal to portray the African experience in any way which does not connect directly to reality.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe introduces the Igbo people at a truly seminal moment in their history and culture: as colonial forces apply pressure, their entire way of life is at stake. These impending colonial forces essentially represent the end of everything they know, representing massive changes to the way they practice religion, their family unit, the roles of gender and gender relations and trade. Colonial forces don't just mean foreign dominance; rather there's an impending death which is immediate and catastrophic and which is something that Achebe examines head on.

### **The role of women, the impact of colonization & cultural change**

In spite of the darkness of colonialism and the death of a way of life that it represents, it also opens a door for the role of women in society. Prior to the presence of colonial forces, women were restricted to the home and hearth, seen as little more than an accessory to the man. Colonialism represents a massive change in their roles, as they slip into the power of becoming powerful agents for social change, playing pivotal roles in trade and in harvesting crops and selling. The start of the novel shows us the narrowness of gender roles within society. The early interactions between Okonkwo and his wives along with other men and women demonstrate that the responsibilities given to women were very particular and very

restricted to the domestic sphere (Innes 13). The gender roles prior to colonialism were not mercurial aspects of culture, but hard and fast elements of this African society's way of life.

To distill the novel to a single theme, one could say that it's about a dramatically changing culture that has to change in the most rapid and immediate manner. One of the most drastic changes that has to occur is connected to the harvesting of crops. Crops are constantly instilled with masculine attributes and constantly seen as a symbol of manliness (Achebe 33). As colonial forces apply more pressure and become more dominant, this novel explores the symbolism inherent in how the men clung to the yam as a crucial symbol of the Igbo culture. Thus, the crops became entangled in the battle between old and new and in the struggle to embrace change and to hold on to tradition. This novel shines a strong light on the resistance that Okonkwo demonstrates repeatedly: he resists the new political and religious regimes as a result of the fact that he feels they are not manly, and that he would lack manliness if he deigned to join them or even endure them (Cooper 1520). This resistance is a manifestation of the rigidity by which Igbo culture views gender relations. This novel explores how much of the rigidity is rooted in fear: this is a dynamic which manifests time and again with the main character, Okonkwo: much of his resistance to cultural change is connected to his fear of losing societal status. This arises yet another issue that this novel will examine closely: how identity is connected to the traditional standards that man of the people in this small society have been socialized among. One can see that these traditional standards are not going to disintegrate readily: in fact, one can interpret the entire treatment of the novel, and much of Achebe's work as a story of the push and pull that arises in the battle between new values and old values, or modernity and tradition (Stratton 121).

Among all these battles, came the transformation of gender roles among society. Given their positions in the exchange of trading, women started to have more immediate contact with foreigners, as this contact increased, so too did the impact that women had on society. As that impact grew, Achebe demonstrates how women became bolder in asserting their ideas and feelings to male elders, when previously they wouldn't have dared to. The expression of one's honest opinion on behalf of the women in the novel, might not seem like such a tremendous threat to the average reader, but for this society it was a drastic, unfathomable change. This transformation towards the empowerment of women was a direct threat to the men in this society. The main character of the novel, Okonkwo, discusses how colonialism shatters so much of what they held sacred. The rigidity of gender relations was unquestionably one of the things that these people held sacred: the subjugation of women and

their disempowerment was one of the ancient aspects of this society, and that was held to be true without question. This was one of the pillars which supported the society. Without this strict division of gender relations, society was lost. One of the most revealing quotes that supports this particular notion, is the fact that Achebe remarks that, “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (Achebe 45). Trade and colonialism didn’t just change the role of women in society, it changes the entirety of gender dynamics and with it the way that families communicated and threatened to shake the very bed rocks of the Igbo culture.

Language is another motif that adds to the tension throughout the novel and is another aspect which needs to be explored throughout the dissertation as it manifests as both a factor of newness and tradition. “Does the white man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably 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 124-125). This exchange is an assertion that Obierika makes about how the colonialists cannot possibly understand anything about their society’s way of life, as language separates them completely. There’s also a strong suggestion of betrayal in the members of the clan who have converted to Christianity. However, more than anything, this quote demonstrates the astuteness of the writer as a whole, as he completely prevents the reader from viewing the situation in dichotomous terms of good versus bad, and white versus black. Rather, the fragility of this society is exposed as the elements which appear to hold it together are mere threads, the threads being religion and tradition. As this dissertation will explore, much of what Achebe is showcasing is the fragility of the human condition as a whole, and the fragility of society in its totality—all societies. The pillars of society which once seemed so fundamental and so strong appear flimsy, unstable and at times even inappropriate.

**Conclusion:**

Thus, Achebe’s novel beautifully showcases some of the more powerful and more bewildering themes that have plagued society and human history for ages. This novel attempts to explore how the dynamics of colonialism, gender, identity and tradition interaction, support and undermine one another. This novel also takes time to scrutinize the

role of human expectation and the human condition and how that melees with the colonial experience as a whole. Ultimately Achebe is one who aptly documents just how destructive it can be when rapid, unexpected change, regardless of the good and bad it brings, descends upon a culture.

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994.

Cooper, F. (1994). Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History. *The American Historical Review*, 1516-1545.

Innes, L. (1994). Virgin Territories and Motherlands: Colonial and Nationalist Representations of Africa and Ireland. *Feminist Review*, 1–14.

Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, J. (1997). *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Stratton, F. (1994). *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

[http://dbpedia.org/page/Things\\_Fall\\_Apart](http://dbpedia.org/page/Things_Fall_Apart)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things\\_Fall\\_Apart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart)