



A NEW VOICE EMERGES: CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND THE RESURGENCE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE IN A EUROCENTRIC WORLD

Reshaping Narratives: Reclaiming African Identity Through Literature

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*² is widely recognised as a groundbreaking work of African literature that challenged the European model of literary production and created an alternate tradition. This paper explores how Achebe's novel attempts to break away from Eurocentric literary conventions and establish a distinct African voice. Through a nuanced portrayal of Igbo society³, a celebration of African culture and traditions, and an exploration of the complex relationship between African spirituality and Christianity, Achebe challenges Western stereotypes and promotes a more nuanced understanding of African history and culture. The novel offers a powerful critique of colonialism and its impact on African societies and establishes a new literary tradition that celebrates the richness and diversity of African cultures.

¹Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic, best known for his seminal work *Things Fall Apart*, which revolutionized African literature and provided a powerful critique of colonialism. His writing is celebrated for its exploration of African identity, culture, and the impact of European colonialism on indigenous societies.

²*Things Fall Apart* (1958) is Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking novel that portrays the life and struggles of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo leader, as colonialism disrupts his traditional society. The novel offers a powerful critique of European imperialism while celebrating the complexity and richness of African cultures.

³Igbo society is a deeply communal culture, where social status and personal achievements are intertwined with family ties, customs, and traditions. It values collective decision-making, spiritual beliefs, and a strong sense of unity, which are challenged by the arrival of European colonialism.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, African Literature, European Literary Production, Alternate Tradition, Igbo Society, African Culture, African Spirituality, Christianity, Colonialism, African History

Introduction

Chinua Achebe is an acclaimed Nigerian writer known for his novels, poetry, and critiques. He is highly regarded in African literature, and his writing style is characterised by his straightforward language and its ability to create vivid portrayals of people and places. Despite writing in English, a language introduced by British colonisers, Achebe incorporated African idioms, proverbs, and imagery into his works to create a unique blend of European and African literary traditions. He drew inspiration from traditional African storytelling techniques, using repetition, symbolism, and oral history in his writing. His works often explore colonialism, identity, and cultural conflicts, and his writing reflects a strong social and political consciousness.

During the 1950s, Achebe began his literary journey by writing poems and short stories. In 1958, he published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which is considered a landmark in African literature. The novel depicts the Nigerian Igbo community before European colonisation and explores the effects of colonialism on traditional African culture.

Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is considered a masterpiece in African literature, challenging the dominant narrative of colonialism and African culture. He was a vocal advocate for African literature and culture, contributing to developing a unique African literary tradition. His impact on African literature and culture is significant, and his writing continues to inspire and resonate with readers globally.

The novel was published in 1958 and is widely recognised as a groundbreaking work in African literature. The book provides a vivid and compelling portrayal of the complex social hierarchy, customs, and beliefs of the Igbo people through the character of Okonkwo³. Achebe challenges the traditional European literary model by incorporating African idioms, proverbs, and imagery, creating an authentic and unique African voice. The novel explores the tension between tradition and change, with the arrival of European colonisers leading to the decline of Igbo culture and values. Achebe⁴ also delves into the role of religion in African society and examines the intersection and conflict between Christianity and African spirituality. *Things Fall Apart* is a 20th-century literary classic that has inspired a generation of African writers.

Breaking the Centre: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the African Voice

Using the character of Okonkwo, Achebe provides a detailed portrayal of the intricate social structure, customs, and beliefs of traditional Igbo society. The novel also explores the broader historical context of colonialism and examines the conflict between the Igbo way of life and European colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into many languages and has had a significant influence on African literature and postcolonial discourse. It is widely studied in educational institutions worldwide and is regarded as a 20th-century literary masterpiece.

The novel, which is set in the 1890s, examines how British colonialism affected the traditional Igbo society in Nigeria. It was published in 1958, a mere two years before the end

of a century-long period of British dominance in Nigeria. Achebe's work is not simply a condemnation of colonialism, but a nuanced examination of the complex interactions between African and European cultures. The novel depicts how the Igbo people responded to the arrival of Europeans, adopting some aspects of European culture while resisting others. It also delves into the tensions and conflicts that arose within Igbo society due to colonialism, and how traditional values and beliefs were challenged and transformed. The novel remains a timeless critique of colonialism and its effects on African societies and is considered a classic work of postcolonial literature that resonates with readers worldwide.

The novel progresses and unfolds the story of African culture and society from an African perspective, challenging the Eurocentric⁴ view that had dominated literature at the time. Chinua Achebe gives voice to the people of the Igbo culture (through his characters in the novel) and offers a nuanced portrayal of their complex and rich traditions. The novel is written from the perspective of an African protagonist, Okonkwo, and illustrates the lives and experiences of the Igbo people from an insider's point of view. This is evident in the opening lines of the novel: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements." (Achebe 1) The focus on Okonkwo's achievements within his society highlights the value of African culture and traditions.

Chinua Achebe's novel broke away from the European model of literary production in several ways. Chinua Achebe "Africanised" the novel in several ways. Achebe wrote the novel in English, a language imposed on the Igbo people by British colonisers, but infused it with African idioms, proverbs, and imagery, creating a distinct African voice. This challenged the idea that European languages were the only valid languages for literary production. The novel depicted African culture and history from an insider's perspective, rather than through the lens of European colonialism. This challenged the idea that only Europeans could accurately depict African cultures and histories.

The novel has some integrated elements of African oral tradition, such as proverbs and storytelling, which persist throughout the lines of the novel. This inclusion of oral tradition adds authenticity and depth to the narrative and reflects the importance of oral tradition in African cultures. Achebe seamlessly weaves proverbs and folktales into the narrative, making them an integral part of the narrative of the novel. When Okonkwo's friend Obierika questions the wisdom of sacrificing a young boy, he is told: "*If one finger brought oil it soiled the others.*" (Achebe 41). This proverb illustrates the interconnectedness of members of a community and the consequences of individual actions.

Echoes of Tradition: Community, Spirituality, and Resistance

The oral tradition⁵ is a significant aspect of African societies, and griots are the custodians of this tradition. They are responsible for preserving and passing down the history, culture, and traditions of their communities through storytelling, songs, and poetry. In the novel, storytelling is a crucial aspect of the Igbo culture. The novel begins with a description of the storytelling tradition and the role of women in this practise. The protagonist, Okonkwo, also tells stories to his children and grandchildren, passing down the history and traditions of

⁴ Eurocentric refers to a worldview that centers European culture, history, and values, often marginalizing or misrepresenting other cultures and perspectives.

⁵ Oral tradition refers to the practice of passing down cultural knowledge, stories, and histories through spoken word rather than written texts. It plays a crucial role in preserving the identity, values, and customs of many indigenous cultures, including those of Africa.

his people. The novel showcases the importance of language in preserving oral traditions. Achebe infuses the English language with Igbo idioms, proverbs, and imagery, creating a distinct African voice. This infusion of language adds to the novel's authenticity and emphasises the importance of preserving indigenous languages and oral traditions.

The novel explores the complex relationship between African spirituality and Christianity and challenges the Western view of religion as a monolithic entity. When Okonkwo kills a messenger sent by the District Commissioner, he says: *"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."* (Achebe 57). Achebe shows how the arrival of Christianity disrupted traditional African beliefs and practises.

The complexity of the interactions between Europeans and Africans is showcased in the lines of the novel and highlights how colonialism disrupted African societies. This is evident in the scene where the District Commissioner arrives in the village to arrest Okonkwo and other leaders: *"The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price."* (Achebe 58) The arrival of Europeans brought both positive and negative changes to African societies, well mostly negative changes.

The novel emphasises the importance of community in African societies and challenges the Western notion of individualism. When Okonkwo is exiled from the village, he feels a profound loss and isolation. The novel shows how African cultures place a high value on communal relationships and social cohesion. And in Umuofia, a man's wealth was measured by his number of yams, but his status was measured by the strength of his kinship ties, further making it a solid point, that African cultures place a high value on communal relationships and social cohesion.

"Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi." (Achebe 43)

"Chi," is an individual's personal God or destiny. The idea of chi challenges the Western notion of individualism, as it emphasises the role of fate and the interconnectedness of the individual with the community. Through the character of Okonkwo, Achebe shows how a person's chi can affect their success or failure in life, and how one's destiny is intertwined with the destiny of the community. By incorporating this traditional African belief into his novel, Achebe contributes to the development of an alternative literary tradition that emphasises the importance of community and fate, rather than individualism and free will.

"Gome, gome, gome, gome went the gong, and a powerful flute blew a high-pitched blast. Then came the voices of the egwugwu, guttural and awesome." (Achebe 29)

The egwugwu are masked ancestral spirits who represent the collective authority of the village. The use of the egwugwu is significant because it challenges the Western tradition of individualism by emphasising the importance of community and collective decision-making. The egwugwu symbolises the continuity of the community's values and traditions, and their presence in the novel demonstrates the vitality and significance of the Igbo culture. By incorporating the egwugwu into the narrative, Achebe creates an alternative tradition that highlights the importance of communal relationships and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Redefining Gender: Women's Roles in Igbo Society

The portrayal of gender challenges the Western tradition by depicting the roles and status of women in traditional Igbo society. Unlike in Western societies where women were often relegated to subordinate roles, Igbo women had important economic and social roles in their communities. The novel portrays women as powerful figures who are involved in various aspects of village life, including farming, trade, and even religious rituals. Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, is shown to be intelligent and resourceful, and she takes an active role in the community. Also, the priestess, Chielo is respected and feared by the villagers, and she wields significant influence over the spiritual life of the community. These portrayals challenge the Western notion that women are inherently inferior to men and highlight the complexities of gender roles within African societies.

Achebe's vivid descriptions of African customs and traditions demonstrate the complexity and vibrancy of African cultures. The novel celebrates the richness and diversity of African culture and challenges the Western view of Africa as a primitive and backwards continent.

With the infusion of African idioms and imagery into the English language, re-centring African perspectives, the novel broke away from the European model of literary production and created an alternate tradition, challenging Western ideas and stereotypical notions about African cultures and societies and African people in general, and presented a unique African voice in English literature.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* stands as a monumental achievement in African literature, redefining the narrative of African societies in the face of Eurocentric literary dominance. By weaving traditional Igbo customs, idioms, and oral traditions into the framework of the English novel, Achebe crafted a voice that is authentically African yet accessible to a global audience. The novel challenges Western stereotypes of Africa as a monolithic and primitive continent, presenting a complex, nuanced portrayal of pre-colonial Igbo society and the devastating impact of colonialism.

Achebe's ability to critique colonial ideologies while celebrating the richness of African cultures established a new literary tradition that reclaims African stories from the margins of history. His work invites readers to rethink the binaries of tradition and modernity, community and individualism, and spirituality and materialism, emphasizing the resilience and diversity of African societies.

Things Fall Apart is more than a novel; it is a statement of cultural pride, resistance, and renewal. Achebe's legacy endures as an inspiration for generations of writers, scholars, and readers, marking a turning point in the global appreciation of African literature. In doing so, he not only broadened the literary canon but also asserted the vital importance of telling one's own stories in one's own voice.

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