

Things Fall Apart: An Alternative Interpretation

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For Achebe, it is in the nature of cultures, to the extent that they are alive, to continually confront and negotiate changes, crises and contradictions (Olaniyan 23)

The title of Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), often gets interpretively apprehended from the limited perspective of Obierika's remarks in the novel, that the clan had "fallen apart" because "the white man" had "put a knife on the things that held [the people] together" (125-26). This widespread misreading of the novel appears, for instance, on the very opening page of Hugo's "Introduction" to an edition of the novel:

Things Fall Apart, then, is about a clan which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared a common awareness and acted like one. The white man came and *his coming* broke this unity (my emphasis, v).

Being the closest inference to the title of the novel, that assessment by Obierika, of the white man's roles in the historical experience of the Igbo (and by extension African) people(s), is too quickly assumed by most readers as Achebe's thesis in that novel. Other details from the novel suggest, however, that the popular assumption begs another consideration.

Firstly, it was not "the white man" per se who put a knife on the things that had held the society "together." He was merely the powerful

outsider who more vividly personated the forces which had long begun to besiege the society. For instance, although the white man was at the head of the powerful new way, which initially threatened and eventually overwhelmed the old society, the black man was as much an element in it, even though he stood in an unequal relationship with the white man in the new scheme of things. The point may be further stressed by the fact, for example, that an ardent black “head messenger” (even if as a mere front for the white man) was the immediate *agent provocateur* to Okonkwo’s swift decapitation of that head messenger, which act became the final catalyst to the events that culminated in that tragic hero’s climactic suicide by hanging.

The same Obberika, in the novel, more properly analyses the situation when he states:

Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government...

[The white man] says that our customs are bad; and our 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? (124)

Secondly, the partnership of the black man with the white man in the affairs that constituted a “knife” on the old culture, questions the misreading that the society had been ‘held together’ in the sense of being a homogeneous cultural monolith with which every member totally agreed, until the entrance of the ruinous white man. The practice of throwing away twins, for example, had generated potent but repressed doubts, which only later found expression through the avenue of the new religion – Christianity. The new culture was, therefore, merely the welcome external impetus to the internal cracks that had long begun to show on the old fence. The callow

Nwoye's as well as the eminent Ogbuefi Ugonna's eventual alignment with the new culture (104,123) had an origin in those internal cracks.

On his arrival to Umuofia, after his seven years of ritually mandatory land-purifactory exile, for his accidental occasioning of the death of a fellow clansman, Okonkwo observed that "The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it" (123).

The authorial insight into Nwoye's psychic succinctly reveals, for instance, that the new religion

Seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul - the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth (104)

This second argument brings to mind Achebe's frequent reminder that "we cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides" ("The Role of the Writer..." 9).

No reader of Achebe would disagree with Adebayo Williams's description of him as a "cultural nationalist" (11) whose "history of anticolonial exertions in the sphere of culture is well known and justly celebrated" (10). But a certain extreme pedestal on that broad spectrum of 'anticolonial exertions' is certainly a misreading founded on a jolly desire to transfer culpability for all of Africa's ruinations.

Thirdly and most importantly, things did not *fall apart*" in the totally anarchic sense suggested by marching Obierika's dismal perspective with W.B. Yeats's apocalyptic lines from "The Second Coming," quoted on the novel's title page: ".../ The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart ... / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." For Nwoye, for the missionaries, and for all on the side of change, thing did not fall *apart*. They merely fell into a *different* pattern; a *new* pattern with which,

unfortunately, those too rigid for change (represented in Okonkwo the tragic hero), who wished to hold down or even turn back the hands of Time, could not reconcile, and therefore became casualties.

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly about the *new dispensation*. 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, and much money flowed into Umuofia (my emphasis, 126)

It was a season of “profound change” (129). However, there were those who saw things differently. Okonkwo represented them.

Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for a clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women (129)

That leads, finally, to the issue of the essential conflict in the novel, not merely between cultures but between the obstinate forces of tradition (epitomized in the tragic hero) and the stronger antagonistic forces of change (represented prominently in the white man and all that came with him).

As if it had not been sufficiently dealt with in *Things Fall Apart*, the same theme of change continues into Achebe’s two subsequent novels: *Arrow of God* (1964) and *No Longer at Ease* (1968), which had been conceived somewhat as a trilogy with the first novel. In *Arrow of God*, for instance, whereas Ezeulu the protagonist chief priest preaches that “a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time” (189), he rigidly and legalistically refuses to adjust to the dynamics of his own time. He refuses the insistent plea of his people, informed by the climatic exigencies of the time, to eat in one month the last two of the ritual (‘calendar’) yams, so as to

proceed to name the New Yam ('New Year') feast days, after which the villagers could rescue their dying crops from the scorching womb of the unfriendly earth. Some of the anxious farmers, threatened by starvation in the face of Ezeulu's obstinacy, had to shrewdly circumvent the old way represented by the chief priest, opting to go, indirectly, through the Christian version of the same ritual (the "Harvest") that should legitimize harvest subsequently. In the end, Ezeulu is tragically overtaken by change as things began to fall (not *apart* but merely) into a *different* pattern; a *new*.

Recalling Hugo's assertion that was cited at the beginning of this essay, we could conclude that the white man's coming was not what broke the eternal pristine cultural serenity of Africa as shown in the fictive world of *Things Fall Apart*. The white man was merely a catalyst in an ongoing process of inevitable change.

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