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## **THE TRUE FACE OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA IN**

### ***THINGS FALL APART***

*The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe is known to be one of the most influential African writers and holds an important place in postcolonial studies. His main aim was to reconstruct the wrongly established beliefs, ideas, and thoughts of the Western world regarding Africa. To realize his aim, he made careful selections in his choice of language, which contributed greatly to sharing his observations, ideas, and beliefs with the rest of the world. He wrote his novels in English, believing that doing so would be more powerful in conveying the true face of pre-colonial Africa, rather than in Nigerian, which could not be as effective as the language of the colonizers. Achebe's complaint was that the history of Africa had mainly been written by white men who did not belong to his continent and who would not judge life there fairly. With his novels, he changed the prejudices of those who had never been to Africa, and he managed to convert the negative ideas and feelings caused by the portrayal of his continent to positive ones. Things Fall Apart is a novel whose mission is to portray Africa in a very realistic and authentic environment, contrary to the one-sided point of view of the colonizers. The novel presents us, in very authentic language, with many details about the customs, rituals, daily life practices, ceremonies, beliefs, and even jokes of the African Igbos. Chinua Achebe thus realizes his aim in revealing that African tribes, although regarded as having a primitive life and being very far from civilization, in fact had their own life with traditions and a culture specific to themselves.*

*KEY WORDS: Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, pre-colonial Africa.*

Chinua Achebe (16 November 1930, Nigeria — 21 March 2013, USA) is considered to be one of the most famous writers in Africa with his works on modern African literature. He is even referred to as “the Father of African Literature.” In “Named for Victoria, Queen of England,” he says that he was baptized Albert Chinualumugu and that he was raised in a Christian family. It was during his university years when the idea of writing his own history as an African occurred to him. “At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa

(including Joyce Cary’s much praised *Mr. Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned” (Achebe 1973: 193). In this essay, as in other works written by him, he focuses on different cultural practices and values between the Western world as the Colonizer and Africa as the colonized. In an interview by Jerome Brooks, Achebe says, “There is that great proverb — that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”

(Brooks 2013). He wrote many novels on the traditions and culture of African people, among which *Things Fall Apart* is the best known, as it carried him to the summit of his career as a writer and brought him worldwide fame. This novel has sold millions of copies throughout the world and has been translated into many different languages.

He was also a person admired by literary circles and many people including politicians. Nelson Mandela, who had an anti-colonial stance and struggled for blacks to have equal rights with whites, and thus received Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, called Achebe, "The writer in whose company the prison walls fell down." Achebe was a writer like Mandela, who devoted his life to his people. What they did was to be a voice for their people who were under oppression or who were evaluated with prejudice. Besides being a successful novelist, he was a talented poet as well.

"A volume of Achebe's poems was joint winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972. He also has written short stories and essays, including an attack on corruption in Nigerian politics, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). A more famous attack of another kind, his essay 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' is a vigorous polemic that accuses Conrad of racism, while perhaps deflecting attention from Achebe's debt to his Polish-born precursor" (Greenblatt 2005: 2622).

What Achebe criticized Conrad for was his creation of the "other." He thought that Conrad could not be objective in his observations of Africa because he portrayed the clans and the natives as savages in his *Heart of Darkness*.

"Achebe sees Conrad mocking both the African landscape and the African people. The story begins on the 'good' River Thames

which, in the past, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' The story soon takes us to the 'bad' River Congo, presently one of those 'dark places.' It is a body of water upon which the steamer toils 'along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy'" (Phillips and Achebe 2007: 60).

Good/bad, black/white, civilized/savage—these are all binary oppositions that Achebe tried to draw attention to in Conrad's work. He accused Conrad of being a racist. In his works, Achebe tried to destroy the prejudices of Western countries toward Africa.

Achebe penned his novel in English. He said that not using his mother tongue was a dreadful betrayal and produced a guilty feeling, but that the English language was able to carry the weight of his African experience. He added that, however, it would be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Bamiro 2006). It is for this reason that throughout the novel we often come across words from the Igbo language. Achebe thought that his works written in English would be more powerful in telling about the real face of pre-colonial Africa.

"Achebe composes his work in the language of the colonizer, but integrates folklore, proverbs, tribal customs, and the performance of oral storytelling in order to evoke Igbo tradition and to force the reader to acknowledge the story he tells on his own terms" (Watts 2010: 65).

In *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel published in 1958, Achebe uses vivid descriptions related to the daily life and practices of the Igbo people—as he himself was born in an Igbo-speaking town in Nigeria. He tries to show that the Igbo people in Africa have a life of their own; their own

communal justice, practices, and their own beliefs and societal values. In different parts of the novel we see Okonkwo telling stories to Nwoye and Ikemefuna, and Ekwefi and Ezinma telling stories to each other. The story of the tortoise is just one of them. As he emphasizes the destructive effects of the colonizers and their invasion, Achebe also portrays an African society, with some people adapting to the cultural changes—and thus surviving—while other people, who cannot adopt the changes, lose their power. Okonkwo, the protagonist, is the best example of this. With this novel, Achebe achieves his aim in changing the prejudices of many people who had been influenced by the literary works of white writers.

The novel takes its title from Nobel Prize winner William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming."

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The lines of this poem create a gloomy air for the start of the novel. They imply the destruction of settled beliefs and systems, which is true for the Igbo culture with the arrival of the Europeans.

"Achebe shows how 'the blood-dimed tide is loosed' in a Nigerian village by European colonizers, drowning the ceremonies of the indigenous society. The novel is set in the fictional village of Umuofia during the late nineteenth century, before the arrival of Europeans, and in the ensuing period of British imperial 'pacification' of southeast Nigeria from 1900 to 1920, including the Ahiara massacre of 1905 (fictionalized in chapter 15 as the Abame incident) and the

destruction of Igbo opposition groups by the Bendeonitsha Hinterland Expedition" (Greenblatt 2005: 2623).

The story is told in the third person, with a mostly objective attitude. We can access the internal world of characters such as Nwoye and Ekwefi. It is a tragedy in that Okonkwo, who cannot adapt to the new system(s) brought by the colonizers, commits suicide at the end of the novel as a result of his actions.

Reading *Things Fall Apart*, one gets detailed information about the Igbo people, their traditions, and practices. The cowries, shells of sea snails, are used for exchanging things among Igbo people and other clans in their daily life. Those who have more cowries and yams are seen to be wealthy. Some of the clan members have titles specific to themselves. Those who have more titles are considered to be more honorable. We learn about the musical instruments they use, such as the *ekwe*, a kind of drum. The environment they live in shapes their faith. They have gods, among which the earth goddess is an important one. Even darkness has a significant meaning for them.

"Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear" (Achebe 2010: 9).

The novel starts by giving information about Okonkwo's fame as the wrestler who beat Amalinze the cat, who had not been beaten for seven years. He is described as a tall and huge man with strong muscles. His way of living is completely different from his father's, since his father was a man who was lazy, who bought palm-wine

whenever he had money, and played his flute during rituals. He was not a man to be trusted, especially when lending money. "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (Achebe 2010: 6). Okonkwo, however, is the opposite of his father. He considers courage to be a masculine attitude, and never hesitates to fight or go to war. Okonkwo feels proud of his manly characteristics.

"He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head" (Achebe 2010: 10).

The tone of the narrator in the above paragraph reflects that even bringing back a human head was regarded as a sign of victory for a native such as Okonkwo. A situation like this is seen as a heroic action among the natives and clans. However, it would be seen as cannibalism from the Western point of view.

Okonkwo is portrayed as a strict man bound to traditions. But he is an impulsive, hot-tempered character as well. Although he appreciates Ikemefuna, whom he got from the neighbour clan in return for the killing of an Umuofian woman, his actions conflict with his internal world.

"Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness—the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else—with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big

village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father" (Achebe 2010: 27).

He beats his youngest wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace because she goes to plait her hair at her friend's house and does not cook the afternoon meal on time. Since, during that week, using violence is forbidden, he is considered to have insulted the earth goddess Ani. Ani may prevent the village crops from growing because of his using violence, so he sacrifices one female goat, one hen, some cloth, and a hundred cowries to the earth goddess.

He is a tyrant over his wives. According to him, "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 2010: 50). He thinks that showing affection is a feminine quality and makes a man weak. After three years of having Ikemefuna, Ezeudu, the oldest man in Umuofia, comes to him and tells him that the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced Ikemefuna's death. Although he is not expected to take part in Ikemefuna's killing because he calls him "father," Okonkwo joins the other men of the clan and take him outside of Umuofia to kill him. Tradition and spiritual leaders play a significant role in *Things Fall Apart*. The wish or the order of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves can never be questioned. Okonkwo, as a strong believer in his cultural practices, does not hesitate to perform this action. He tells Ikemefuna that he will be taken home. When the day for leaving comes, Ikemefuna and other men including Okonkwo set out for his home. As they walk through the forest, the men that will kill him approach him. Okonkwo stays behind.

Ikemefuna, however, is not aware of this premeditated murder.

“He heard Ikemefuna cry, ‘My father, they have killed me!’ as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe 2010: 57). Purely not to seem weak, he brutally kills a boy who calls him “father.” But he cannot easily overcome the feeling of being a murderer. For two days after the murder he does not eat any food. It is clear that it is not easy for him to forget Ikemefuna. For this reason he tries to console himself.

“‘When did you become a shivering old woman,’ Okonkwo asked himself, ‘you are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war. How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed’” (Achebe 2010: 60).

The woman is considered to be a weak creature in his society. Shivering or feeling repentant after killing a man, even a boy, is regarded as a feminine characteristic. In a patriarchal society, a man with masculine qualities is indeed a man. With his action, Okonkwo tries to present his masculine qualities: that the man should be brave and not repentant after killing another. Killing is regarded as a characteristic that should be inside of a man if he wishes to be a warrior and hunter and never afraid of taking the life of another.

His best friend Obierika’s and his maternal uncle Uchendu’s characters, however, contrast with his own. These two men are calm, sensible, and behave logically—unlike Okonkwo. Obierika questions his people’s traditions by not approving of some of the actions they conduct. For example, he fails to understand the purpose of throwing

away the twins or joining the killing of Ikemefuna. When Okonkwo kills Ezeudu’s sixteen-year old son by mistake during a ceremony, he and his family are forced into exile to his motherland for seven years. His maternal uncle Uchendu welcomes him and gives him some land to cultivate. As an elderly and experienced person, Uchendu advises Okonkwo not to think about his exile with these remarks:

“‘It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you they will all die in exile’” (Achebe 2010, p.126).

When Okonkwo’s exile is over, he returns to Umuofia with great hopes. He even does not want his daughters Ezinma and Obiageli to marry in Mbanta, but in Umuofia. However, what he sees there is that more missionaries have settled there. The missionaries have gained more converts, who have refused their gods in favour of Christianity. One of them is Enoch, who takes the mask of an egwugwu off and thus kills the ancestral spirit. Okonkwo returns to his fatherland after seven years expecting to become powerful and regain his former prestigious status in his tribe, but instead what he sees there is change. He sees it in the way some of his people, who had been strictly

bound to tradition and cultural practices, have begun behaving differently after their conversion. Enoch, one of the converts, attacks his own cultural practice by taking the mask off of an *egwugwu*, a murder attempt on their own spiritual ancestor.

The act of taking the mask off creates a shocking effect among the Igbos, who later decide to burn down both the church and Enoch's house. The disrespect shown by Enoch, who is following the ideology of the white people, toward his people's beliefs only creates violence and hatred among his people. Upon this, six clan leaders, including Okonkwo, are summoned by the District Commissioner, who represents the Colonial British Government and executive power of the Queen. The laws that are in effect are no longer those of the Igbo people. They are the laws of the white people, who have come to bring justice to the so-called uncivilized people. Six of them are immediately arrested and humiliated by messengers over two days. When they are released, after paying a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries, Okonkwo decides to take revenge, thinking that the Umuofians will go to war against the white men with him. He and others who were arrested but now released think that their honor has been injured. During the meeting with the Umuofians, five messengers appear, who tell them that the white man has ordered the meeting to stop. Hearing this, Okonkwo draws his machete and kills the head messenger.

"After Okonkwo attacks a small group of messengers from the colonial court before the men of the nine villages of Umuofia, and no one supports him, he kills himself. Significantly, it is not at this point that we sense grief for Umuofia's downfall, but earlier, in chapter twenty-two, when the

spirit is unmasked and the Mother of the Spirits walks the earth, 'weeping for her murdered son'" (Samatar 2011: 63).

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Igbos have a belief unique to themselves. Their earth goddess Ani, for example, is characterized with the environment they live in. "Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth" (Achebe 2010: 35).

It is not until the second part of the book that we are presented with detailed information about the white men beyond the one or two references in the first part of the novel. The coming of the locusts is likened to the arrival of the white men by the Oracle in the second part of the novel. The village Oracle tells the natives who consult it that the white men will spread destruction among them. Sensing the white men as a great threat to their life, the natives kill them.

The conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo reveals the strategy of the colonizers in dominating the lands they conquer or occupy:

"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 2010: 166).

Here, the meaning of the title *Things Fall Apart* is clearly revealed.

One of the important aspects in *Things Fall Apart* which is worth mentioning is the role of women. Polygamy is widespread in Igbo culture. Okonkwo, who already had

three wives and eight children, decides to build huts for his two new wives when he returns to Umuofia. Women are generally seen as the property of their husbands, who legalize the use of violence on them. Black women who are already subordinated to their men in their clans are subordinated to the colonizers as well with the arrival of the British colonizers.

Having multiple wives is clearly a marker of masculinity and prestige in the precolonial African society of the text. Okonkwo, the central character, resents his father, Unoka, who only had one wife and was not successful according to his sons' standards, but he honors the memory of his father's friend, Okoye, who "had a barn full of yams and... three wives" (Achebe 2010: 6). In this way, wives are equated with property in Igbo culture and, especially, in Okonkwo's mind (Powell 2008: 173).

Throughout the novel there are many examples of how the Igbos lead their life, although they have a complex system. For example, nine egwugwus from the nine villages gather to solve a problem between a husband and wife.

It is true that Igbo philosophy, of which metaphysics is a part, though unwritten and unsystematized, lacking the "complex and abstract logical and mathematical exposition of facts and issues" (Nwala 1985: 106), nonetheless was "pragmatic, meant to solve practical problems of food, security, peace and the general welfare of the community" (Nwala 1985: 7).

The colonizers in the past thought that they were bringing civilization to the savages or uncivilized. They disregarded the natives' traditions and beliefs, claiming that they were archaic. They didn't accept that they had their own world.

"In African philosophical thought, reli-

gion and life form an integral whole. The core ingredients of religion and its defining characteristics include: belief, worship, faith, sacrifice, transcendence, doctrine, offering, mediation, pilgrimage, prayer, community, creeds, icons and images, symbols and other relational elements, and devotions to sacred objects and practices" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010: 51).

It is true that the colonizers contributed to the life of the colonized to a certain degree, e.g., by bringing trade and making the natives profit from exporting goods. However, stereotypical colonizers such as the Reverend James Smith and the District Commissioner could never understand the natives and show no respect for their traditions and life. Mr. Smith harshly criticizes the natives for their beliefs, and the District Commissioner despises them. The last paragraph in the novel, below, is written according to the point of view of the Commissioner after Okonkwo hangs himself.

"In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much

thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*” (Achebe 2010: 197).

Chinua Achebe, with *Things Fall Apart* and his other novels, essays, and stories, assigned himself a high mission to show us an Africa not through the eyes of white people, but through those of a Nigerian native like himself. He criticized the works of white writers such as Conrad, claiming that the things they had written about Africa were not completely true, because they were outsiders, not insiders. In this novel, especially in the first part, he gives us many details about the life of the Igbos, an African tribe. It would be impossible to understand the ceremonies, rituals, beliefs,

and customs of Africans from the point of view of a non-African. Another Nigerian writer, Charles E. Nnolim (2011), says that it was Chinua Achebe who established and defined the Nigerian tradition in the novel, a tradition that takes its roots from their folk culture and creatively makes use of their proverbs, legends, folktales, and local myths, thus giving expression to their national culture. And by making capital of what is indigenous to both Nigerian and African literature, Achebe established the total rehabilitation of the image and dignity of the African personality bruised and damaged by the colonial master.

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TIKRASIS IKIKOLONIJINĖS AFRIKOS VEIDAS SU ROMANU *GRIŪTIS*

**Santrauka**

Nigerijos rašytojas Chinua Achebe yra žinomas kaip vienas įtakingiausių ir svarbiausių pokolonializmo rašytojų Afrikoje. Pagrindinis jo tikslas yra pakeisti neteisingai Vakarų pasaulyje susiformavusius įsitikinimus, idėjas ir mintis apie Afriką. Siekdamas įgyvendinti savo tikslą, jis rūpestingai rinkosi kalbą, romanus rašė anglų kalba manydamas, kad taip galės įtaigiau perteikti tikrąjį prieškolonijinės Afrikos veidą, nei rašydamas Nigerijos kalba, kuri yra mažiau paveiki nei kolonizatorių kalba. Rašytojas skundžiasi, kad Afrikos istoriją daugiausia rašė baltieji, nepriklausę juodajam žemynui, tad apie gyvenimą ten negalintys spręsti. Jo romanas pakeitė žmonių, niekada nevykusių į Afriką, požiūrį. Knyga sugebėjo pakeisti neigiamus jausmus ir idėjas, susijusias su juodojo žemyno aprašymu, teigiamomis. *Griūtis* yra romanas, kurio misija – vaizduoti realistišką ir autentišką Afriką, priešingai vienašališkam kolonizatorių požiūriui. Autentiška romano kalba suteikia daug informacijos apie maitines, ritualus, ceremonijas, kasdienes praktikas, įsitikinimus ir net anekdotus apie Igbo Afrikoje. Chinua Achebe siekia savo tikslo parodyti autentiškas, specifiskas Afrikos tradicijas, kultūrą, genčių gyvenimo būdą, atskleidamas jų primityvumą ir nutolinimą nuo civilizacijos.

**REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** Chinua Achebe, *Griūtis*, prieškolonijinė Afrika.

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PRAWDZIWE OBLICZE AFRYKI PRZEDKOLONIALNEJ W POWIEŚCI *WSZYSTKO ROZPADA SIĘ*

**Streszczenie**

Nigeryjski pisarz Chinua Achebe jest uważany za jednego z najbardziej wpływowych pisarzy afrykańskich i zajmuje ważne miejsce w studiach postkolonialnych. Jego głównym zamierzeniem było zweryfikowanie błędnych wyobrażeń, sądów i przekonań o Afryce, zakorzenionych w świecie zachodnim. W tym celu dokonał on starannego wyboru języka, który miałby mu pomóc w dzieleniu się spostrzeżeniami, myślami i poglądami z resztą świata i ukazaniu prawdziwego oblicza przedkolonialnej Afryki. Achebe pisał swoje powieści w języku angielskim, wierząc, że wzmocni to siłę przekazu, gdyż język nigeryjski nie byłby tak efektywny jak język kolonizatorów. Achebe skarżył się, że historia Afryki była zasadniczo pisana przez białego człowieka, który nie należał do tego kontynentu, przez co nie mógł należycie ocenić tamtejszego życia. Swoimi powieściami zmienił on nastawienie do Afryki tych, którzy nigdy tam nie byli, a negatywne wyobrażenia i odczucia związane z obrazem tego kontynentu potrafił zamienić na pozytywne. *Things Fall Apart* (1958; wyd. pol. *Świat się rozpada*, tłum. Małgorzata Zbikowska, 1989; *Wszystko rozpada się*, tłum. Jolanta Kozak, 2009) jest powieścią, której autor poczuwa się do misji przedstawienia Afryki w bardzo realistycznym i prawdziwym świetle w przeciwieństwie do jednostronnego punktu widzenia kolonizatorów. Powieść ukazuje nam wiele szczegółów o codziennych zwyczajach, obyczajach, rytuałach, obrzędach, wierzeniach, a nawet żartach ludu Igbo. Tak więc Chinua Achebe osiąga swój cel, gdy ukazuje, że afrykańskie plemiona, prowadzące jakoby prymitywny tryb życia z dala od cywilizacji, faktycznie żyją swoim własnym specyficznym życiem z własnymi tradycjami i własną kulturą.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Chinua Achebe, *Wszystko rozpada się*, Afryka przedkolonialna.