THE STORY OF A MAN AND HIS PEOPLE:

CHINUA ACHHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

"One ear bent to the sleeping centuries along the dark road of time"1

Things Fall Apart occupies a stretch on "the dark road of time" which Achebe has chosen to traverse. It is a nostalgic journey perhaps, but one with a clear purpose: "to heal the pain of the wound in our soul" and to "regain for Africa, its belief after years of denigration and self-denigration." Umuofia belongs to the world of the novelist, created to meet the challenge of modern Africa in its encounter with two cultures, with two ways of life, the traditional and the contemporary.

Leonard Dobb, the American psychologist, observes that

Everywhere the traditional society meaningfully survives. The most urbanized African knows that usually not far away is a village of his tribe where many if not most of the old ways are cultivated and practiced. His native language, like that of his children, is an African language. At the same time even the remotest area in the interior has experienced some contact with the west. Planes are visible overhead and roads are being built and improved. Under these conditions Africans, even if they wished to, could not accept one society and then pay little attention or no attention to the alternative; they simply must experience both societies.2

What Leonard Dobb has discerned as a psychologist is in essence Achebe's main concern in this novel, but, unlike the psychologist, Achebe uses literary tools to examine the worth and dignity of a culture before and immediately after its collision course with an alien culture. It is this deep concern for and commitment to the culture of a people that has resulted in a literary venture that has proved a challenge and an inspiration to literary artists of Achebe's own time and place and also to those outside them.

Things Fall Apart, viewed from the perspective of a world in which various cultures are in constant action and interaction, transcends the narrow confines of a group of villages and reflects the trauma of nations that seek to expand their horizons without sacrificing cultural values that are traditional and indigenous.

The title of Things Fall Apart is taken from Yeats' "Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The title is significant because it sets the mood for the novel, the mood of a society self-contained, unruffled and totally unaware of the dramatic changes that are only a falconer's step away. The novelist recaptures this mood in all its simplicity and drama in the village wrestling contest.

The drummers took up their sticks and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow. Dusk was already approaching as their contest began. The drums went mad and the crowds also. They surged forward as the two young men danced into the circle. The palm fronds were helpless in keeping them back. Ikezue held out his right hand. Okagoe seized it, and they closed in. It was a fierce contest. Ikezue strove to dig in his right heel behind Okagoe so as to pitch him backwards in the clever ege style. But the one knew what the other was thinking. The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose frantic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heart beat of the people.3

The drums, wrestlers, and people respond to one beat of a people. The artist captures perfectly the cohesion and strength of a tribal community, caught in the intense excitement of an event which fuses them together for one single moment. It is this cohesion, order and strength seen in the texture of Ibo society which Achebe examines in the first part of the novel. He proceeds to examine this structure not in an academic anthropological sense, but in the context of real life, their hopes, fears, superstitions, customs and beliefs. The second part of the novel deals with the arrival of the first missionaries and the gradual encroachment of an alien church, government and commerce upon the established and traditional patterns of life. Finally, in the third part, "the centre cannot hold"; the tribe that had but one heartbeat is now divided, the things that held the people together no longer do, so the "widening gyre" turns and turns until it is destroyed.

There are two levels on which the novel moves: the level of Okonkwo, the intense individual with a passionate belief in all the values and traditions of his people, and that of Umuofia,
a clan of nine villages that lie deep in Iboland. *Things Fall Apart* is thus seen as a story of a man and his people. A man who is inflexible, driven by an obsession to uphold a way of life in which he has an abiding faith. This inflexibility runs counter to the flexibility of a system more prone to change and less authoritarian, a society in which the seeds of change are inherent as they perhaps are in any society, given time. The flexibility of this society is visible in the absence of a central authority and absolute laws.

The inflexibility of Okonkwo is first seen in his absolute refusal to identify himself or his family with all that his father stood for. In Okonkwo's eyes his father Unoka was a failure. He was an effeminate, improvident man who wasted his time playing his flute when he should have been tilling the lands, going to war, or winning titles. Unoka's cardinal sin was gentleness. He was a musician and poet, and time and money were of no consequence to him. But Okonkwo his son was well-known throughout the nine villages. Okonkwo's fame had grown "like a bush fire in the harrassman."

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a severe look. He breathed heavily and it was said that when he slept his quarters could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father. (P. 7)

He was a wrestler, a great warrior, a man with personal wealth, three wives and barns full of yams. He had acquired two titles and a third would most certainly be his, given time. His stature is thus of a heroic figure whose flaws, if any, were beyond his ability to resist, the result of a preordained sequence, the workings of a Chi or personal god.

Achebe early in the novel exposes the flaws of Okonkwo's character. The author emphasizes his driving ambition, his intolerance and anger, and his rejection of those values which his father Unoka cherished. Unoka in spite of all his shortcomings had a great passion for music and folklore.

Unoka would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking if it had brought any lengths of cloth. (P. 9)

The conflict between father and son is the traditional conflict between the masculine and feminine virtues. Okonkwo oversimplifies this traditional conflict; he insists with rigid firmness that his own sons set their faces against any feminine virtues, which bring him haunting memories of his father, and instills into them the virtues of masculinity and aggression. This conflict between strength and gentleness is to prove a dominant factor in the ultimate tragedy of Okonkwo, and in the life of his son Nwoye. Nwoye represents that generation of Africans that stands on the threshold of change, a generation that will not accept implicitly the values of the society of their fathers. Okonkwo's aggressiveness and self-assertion are not only disturbing to his son, in whom he sees a streak of his father's nature, but also bring him into dramatic conflict with his clansmen. The shadow of this flaw in an otherwise heroic figure lengthens as the novel unfolds.

Okonkwo's violation of the week of Peace is the first instance of the conflict between an inflexible individual and a clan that will not forgive a breach of its rigid code, not even for its most eminent warrior and wrestler. Whatever value the clan may attach to manliness and courage is submerged in its allegiance to a greater conviction, the conviction that the earth goddess can be offended and refuse to yield her bounty. Okonkwo in a moment of anger beats his youngest wife severely for neglecting her duties. In his anger he forgets it is the week of Peace. Ezee, the priest of the earth goddess, speaks for the clan when he says, "Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into the Obi and found her lover on top of her, you still would have committed a great evil to beat her." His staff came down again. "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish." (P. 32)

Okonkwo's self-assertion runs contrary to the bonds that link the individual and the clan. Okonkwo's aggressive nature runs counter to the very values he as a clansman has so devoutly cherished. His insistence is such that his actions become a menace to his society and to the ethics of the tribal code. Achebe very deftly lengthens this shadow that appears to cloud the actions of this otherwise heroic and impressive figure. The shadow deepens with the killing of Ikemefuna and remains with him until, in a fit of uncontrollable anger, he kills the messenger of the white man in the closing chapters. In between comes the accidental killing of Ezuedu's son. In the fever heat of the funeral rites due to Ezuedu, the elder of the clan, Okonkwo's gun explodes. Ezuedu's sixteen-year-old son lies bleeding to death. Okonkwo has killed a clansman. Though the killing is purely accidental, the tribe exacts the last pound of flesh from its most exalted warrior. As soon as the day broke a large crowd of men from Ezuedu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed
in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleaning the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (P. 117)

Achebe uses Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, as the conscience of the clan in order to probe the mysteries that surround the ethics of a tribe that exacts such harsh punishment for a crime most inadvertently committed. Obierika's limited understanding leads him no farther and he seeks consolation in the wisdom of a system ordained by tradition and upheld by the clan.

But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The earth had decreed that they were an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. (P. 118)

Okonkwo accepts his punishment and leaves his village, exiled for seven years. All that he has earned lies in ruins at his feet. His loyalty and inflexible adherence to the dictates of his clan are matched only by the inflexibility of his character and his uncontrollable anger. Achebe, by his complete honesty and detachment in exposing what might appear as a fundamental weakness in the clan, evokes a measure of pity for this man who is prepared to subdue himself to uphold a tradition and a way of life which to him is extremely precious. To Okonkwo, Umuofia represents a world that needs no change. He will not question the laws and customs which have over the years given her strength and pride. It is only when viewed in this light that any justification can be made for Okonkwo's unrelenting opposition to the intervention of any alien influences. Okonkwo even after seven years exile holds no rancor towards his clansmen. On the contrary he expects the clan to remain as he has left it: a world closed and self-contained, proud of its heritage, its dignity and self-respect. Achebe creates a character in tune with his commitment. However, Achebe also makes use of this episode to expose the fundamental flaw in Okonkwo, and reveals to the reader the position of women in Africa in general and Iboland in particular.

Even though it is the man that rules and masculinity is held in great esteem, the Ibos have a place for their women in the scheme of things. They are not only a part of the economic unit and add to the prosperity of the family with their labor and fecundity in producing children, they also hold a supreme position in their own way. This is brought home to Okonkwo as he sits in exile counting the days and years until he can return to Umuofia. Uchendu, the eldest in the clan of his mother where Okonkwo had fled, reveals to him that part of human nature which he long abhorred.

"Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give to our children is Nneka, or mother is supreme? We all know that a man is head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to his father and his family and not to his mother and her family." (P. 123)

Having said this, the old man reveals why it is mother who is called supreme.

"It is 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 'mother is supreme.'" (P. 124)

The killing of Ikemefuna is in many ways central to this novel. This ill-fated boy, who first appears in Umuofia, along with a virgin, as a hostage of war, is the figure Achebe uses as a foil to examine individual and communal values of the society he has created. Loyalties to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who has decreed the boy must be killed, are set in opposition to private loyalties of home, heart and kinship. The words of Ezuedu, the oldest man in the village, present to Okonkwo a dilemma which he is incapable of rationalizing. "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death." (P. 55)

Achebe dramatizes the event by the rather clever use of symbolism presented to the reader at two levels of meaning. The killing of Ikemefuna is preceded by the coming of locusts. Achebe, aware of his Westernized literature public, presents them an ironic paradox. Locusts, the symbol of destruction and ruin, are received by these pre-literate Umuofians with shouts of glee. To these simple people locusts mean only one thing, food. To the literate reader the symbol is one of a dark shadow: "And then quite suddenly, a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud" (p.54).

Locusts were not the only creatures that were to descend on Umuofia. The dark cloud is suggestive of colonialism, which would hide the sun for years to come.

It is also suggestive of the innocence of a people, unaware of the impending alien intervention which they were to regret for a hundred years. The symbolism is cleverly worked in, and the paradox is ironic.

The shadow of the dark cloud is also used
symbolically, portraying the fortunes of Okonkwo. Okonkwo's misfortunes increase from that time onwards and the threat of war shines on him again. For immediately following the coming of the locusts, Ezueudu comes bearing the message from the Oracle of the Hills and Caves.

"That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death. Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father." (P. 55)

Ezueudu offers a humane solution, neither to defy the gods by resisting, nor to go against one's conscience by actively participating in the act. But to Okonkwo there can be only one solution; his manliness and loyalty to the entire tribal ethics are at stake:

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. 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. (P. 59)

Obierika reminds Okonkwo that in his single-minded devotion to his tribe he may have offended the very virtues he believes he is striving to uphold.

"The earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palms."

"That is true," Obierika agrees. "But if the Oracle said my son should be killed I would neither dispute it, nor be the one to do it." (P. 64)

The killing of Ikemefuna marks a growing rift between father and son. Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, finds it difficult to accept implicitly the customs and traditions of a tribe that can lead to the killing of an innocent boy. Ikemefuna had become to him a brother, a member of his household; a part of him seemed to die with the boy, a part his father could never understand. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna sets in motion a sequence from which Umuofia would never recover. It is the sequence set in motion from within. Nwoye represents this change which was to lead him beyond the boundaries of his father's household.

As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp. (P. 59)

Later in the novel Nwoye rejects his father and all that he stands for, when he tells Obierika with a certain finality, "He is not my father" (p. 134).

The killing of Ikemefuna is as old as the story of Abraham and Isaac, but a divine providence was not there to save the boy. Achebe very subtly poses to his readers the whole problem of unquestioned obedience to a deity by which men have sought to live. Whether it was necessary to kill the boy to prove allegiance to a deity is perhaps debatable. But what is not debatable is Achebe's portrayal of a man whose allegiance to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves is as old as Abraham's allegiance to the God of Israel.

Achebe, in presenting a man and his society and in focusing the attention of the reader on the conflicts inherent at a personal and social level, also presents this society as one that has positive qualities of its own. The coherence, order and warm personal relationships reveal the author's nostalgic attachment to an age that might remain only in the creative imagination of writers of Achebe's quality. This need to recreate a literary fantasy not only fulfills a need for creative literary pursuits on the part of African writers but also leaves the reader with the unresolved problem of whether African societies, in spite of their inherent flaws, would have emerged and taken their place as truly indigenous cultures regardless of Western intervention.

Through its rituals, ceremonies, and communal drama, the author reveals those qualities which merged the individual and his community into a vibrant and cohesive living texture. The village meetings with the arrival of the masked spirits of Egwugwu and the fear and awe with which the traditional rituals are observed to their last detail give the reader an insight into the tribal law and custom which bind the people together. The spirits parading in the masks of the dead command absolute respect and obedience, the gravest crime that an Umuofian could commit was to unmask an Egwugwu.

It is into this world that the first white missionaries come. It is a world which in spite of all its shortcomings, its conflicts, and its tensions, lies protected by the spirits of the dead, in harmony with itself, and in tune with the seasonal cycles of rain and drought, death and disease, a social order that is accepted with fatalism, whether it is decreed from above or wrought from below. Uchendu, in comforting Okonkwo during his period of exile, expresses this fatalistic attitude perfectly when he reminds Okonkwo of the song that is sung when a woman dies: "For whom is it well, for whom is it ill? There is no one for whom it is well."

(P. 125)

The missionaries are received with good humor. The people laugh at the doctrine of the Trinity and Okonkwo makes mockery of the whole idea when he says, "You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife then." (P. 164)

He is convinced that the missionaries are mad and that their gods can never equal Chukwu the Ibo god in power and strength. But there are others who do not view the conflict in the same
light. There is Okonkwo's son Nwoye with unanswered questions. The boy is in rebellion again against his father and the system he represents. This is how Achebe deftly introduces the missionaries and their religion. The new religion appeals to that rather sensitive segment of society whose youth rebel against an established order that appears to them too harsh or too rigid. In this respect Okonkwo and Nwoye shed color and identity, and assume roles that transcend time and place. To Nwoye, it was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion; something felt in the hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear 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 palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (P. 137)

There are others, unlike Nwoye, to whom the missionaries have things other than religion to offer. They brought with them a government and trade to enhance their affluence, and schools to open the villagers' minds to a world outside. Above all, they preached a gospel of equality, where every man was a son of God and equal in his own right. Religion, which for centuries was a part of the tribe linked even after death by ancestral spirits, was now presented as an individual matter. Emphasis had shifted from the tribe to the salvation of the person.

The fears and apprehensions of the tribe are centered in Okonkwo as he ponders the enormity of his son's crime. The spiritual values of a people, which are the greatest force in binding them together, are at the point of being destroyed. Okonkwo's bitterness is the bitterness of one generation as it helplessly watches another destroying the values by which that past generation has lived. Okonkwo's lament is timeless. Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shiver run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. (P. 142)

The novel reaches its climax when one of the converts, Enoch, the son of the Snake priest, commits the most heinous of crimes when he dares to unmask an Egwugwu. The mask of the Egwugwu represents the world of the dead and the living. This belief for centuries has been held sacred and inviolable. Enoch has killed an ancestral spirit and Umuofia is thrown into confusion. Achebe, in one of the finest passages in the novel, deplores the passing away of the spiritual values of a tribe which had a function in the elaborate scheme of checks and balances.

That night the mother of the spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming--its own death. (P. 171)

The tribe whose heart beat as one is now divided. Okonkwo, in his refusal to see the complexity of the changes that are being brought to Umuofia, believes that if Umuofia will return to its former self, the white men will be driven away. For this to happen, Umuofia must go to war. Okonkwo's old self is asserting itself again. He does not understand that in fighting the white man he would have to first fight against his own clan. He fails to see that vital links in the network of the tribal life have been broken never to be repaired. Obierika clearly analyzes the inevitability of what must follow when he points out to Okonkwo, "The whiteman 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 things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (P. 162)

He is now one man against history, a lonely figure from the past whose language the tribe no longer understands, least of all speaks. Umuofia has changed. "In that brief moment the world seemed to stand still waiting" (p. 186). The court messenger, the emissary of the white man who had destroyed the world he loved, stood in his path. "There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia merged into a mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers" (p. 188). They are an impersonal, detached group whose links with this man, one of their greatest, are forgotten in the cycle of change. He is now an anachronism, a man tossed by time into a world that has moved without him.

In a flash Okonkwo draws his machete. The messenger crouches to avoid the blow. It is useless. Okonkwo's machete descends twice and the man's head lies beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew Umuofia would not go to war. He heard voices asking why did he do it. (P. 188)

He wiped his machete on the sand and went
away to kill himself, thereby committing an offence against the earth; a man who committed this offence will not be buried by his clansmen. "His body was evil and only strangers may touch it" (p. 190). It is truly an ironic end, signifying the conflict of a man who stood inflexible, believing he was defending a heritage, while even his last act in defence of a system proves an abomination. The man who is the very embodiment of tradition has become the outcast of the tribe. This ironic paradox is too much for Obierika to comprehend. "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog," he cried." (P. 131)

This final lament of Obierika conveys the inevitability of an historical process and the tragic consequences that follow at a personal and social level. Achebe closes his tale of a man and his people with a final paragraph which is not only deeply ironic, but is also in keeping with his commitment. The body of Okonkwo hanging from the branches is ordered cut down by the District Commissioner, as a part of an "undignified detail" in the task of bringing civilization to the people of Africa. This utter indifference, as displayed by the District Commissioner, is what has led to the "pain of the wound in the soul" in writers like Achebe, and given cause to a commitment to tell the story, as it has perhaps never been told.

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had tried to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend such an undignified detail as cutting down 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 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 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. (P. 191)

The indifference of the District Commissioner and the relegation of Okonkwo to a mere paragraph in the District Commissioner's contemplated book is also symbolic of the loss of identity of Africans for a hundred and fifty years. To the District Commissioner, Okonkwo ceases to exist as a person; he is only part of the mute backcloth without form, figure or voice. Identity, self-respect and dignity will be restored when, in the words of Awoonor Williams, Africans can say:

Reaching for the Stars
We stop at the House of Moon
And Pause to learn the Wisdom of our fathers.4

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NOTES


3Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1969), p. 49; additional references are included in the text.

4Roscoe, p. 10.

AND WHEN THE MORNING COMES

brothers & sisters jivin/rappin/cuttin/it up Party Yall.
remember the day, is coming Pretty People.
Remember The Day is a cold dark dawn
--------is coming of morningtime;
oh we were beautiful culture trippers
daytrippers/black blacker yet than dark &
remember the day we held each other's hearts
wore our sour souls like tightfittinglkackredgreen gloves
& what is the meaning of our newfound love?
philosophize/hypnotize/
revolutionize??
remember dim street lights innocently standing by
on the corners of our world
as bloodred red ripple gushed through leaky
faucets in the outhouse
that is our consciousness.
we know the reasons why--
remember yall.
day is coming---again
is coming party yall, prettypeople/gaypop-smokeout/strungout
remember . . . .

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