

# Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

David Whittaker and  
Mpalive-Hangson Msiska



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Since its publication in 1958 Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has won global critical acclaim and is regarded as one of the most influential texts of postcolonial literature. Offering an insight into African culture that had not been portrayed before, this is both a tragic and moving story of an individual set in the wider context of the coming of colonialism, as well as a powerful and complex political statement of cross-cultural encounters.

This guide to Chinua Achebe's compelling novel offers:

- an accessible introduction to the text and contexts of *Things Fall Apart*
- a critical history, surveying the many interpretations of the text from publication to the present
- a selection of critical writing on *Things Fall Apart*, by Abiola Irele, Abdul JanMohamed, Biodun Jeyifo, Florence Stratton and Ato Quayson, providing a variety of perspectives on the novel and extending the coverage of key critical approaches identified in the survey section
- cross-references between sections of the guide, in order to suggest links between texts, contexts and criticism
- suggestions for further reading.

Part of the *Routledge Guides to Literature* series, this volume is essential reading for all those beginning detailed study of *Things Fall Apart* and seeking not only a guide to the novel, but a way through the wealth of contextual and critical material that surrounds Achebe's text.

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# **Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

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# Notes and references

## Primary text

Unless otherwise stated, all references to the primary text are taken from Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Heinemann Writers Series), 1986.

The initial reference in each part will contain full bibliographic details and all subsequent references will be in parentheses in the body of the text, stating the chapter, page number and part number, e.g. (ch. 1, p. 5). The chapter number is provided to help anyone reading an edition of the novel that differs from this one.

## Secondary text

References to any secondary material can be found in the footnotes. The first reference will contain full bibliographic details, and each subsequent reference to the same text will contain the author's surname, title and page number.

## Footnotes

All footnotes that are not by the authors of this volume will identify the source in square brackets, e.g. [Irele's note].

All footnotes in the Critical Readings part are the original author's footnotes.

## Cross-referencing

Cross-referencing between sections is a feature of each volume in the Routledge Guides to Literature series. Cross-references appear in brackets and include section titles as well as the relevant page numbers in bold type, e.g. (see Texts and contexts, pp. 00–00).

# Introduction

With the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 2008, the literary world will celebrate one of the most remarkable stories in the history of African literature. Few could have predicted the impact and influence that this first novel by an unknown young writer from Nigeria would have when it was first published in 1958. *Things Fall Apart* is not only the most celebrated Nigerian novel ever published, it is also the most widely read and studied work of African fiction, both abroad and throughout the continent itself. Since it was first published, the novel has sold around ten million copies worldwide and been translated into over forty-five languages, a feat unequalled by any other work of African fiction. *Things Fall Apart* has also proved to be an immensely influential work for African writers, becoming the progenitor of a whole movement in fiction, drama and poetry that focuses on the reevaluation of traditional African cultures and the representation of culture conflicts that had their genesis in the colonial era. The extraordinary popular and critical acclaim for the novel, as well as its enduring influence, has led to its pre-eminent position as one of the iconic works of postcolonial fiction.

Although the novel was written in the pre-Independence Nigeria of the 1950s, it is set in the period around the beginning of the twentieth century when Europeans first came into contact with the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. It is significant that in the final years of colonial rule in Nigeria, Achebe chose to recall an era when a traditional African community was being irrevocably transformed by the arrival of the British colonialists and missionaries. It is a novel which looks back elegiacally at this pre-colonial culture and to the epochal changes wrought by British colonialism, yet it is also a text which looks forward to the future, inscribed with both the idealism and the anxieties of the decade in which it was written. At the heart of the novel is the story of Okonkwo, one of the most compelling creations in all of modern African literature. He stands both resolutely for the beliefs and traditions of his culture, and implacably against the encroaching influence of the colonial usurpers. Okonkwo is undoubtedly a heroic figure, yet he is also a tragically flawed individual who comes to symbolize both the supreme embodiment, as well as the internal contradictions, of his culture's ideals. What often makes *Things Fall Apart* such a memorable novel, however, is the cast of other characters who inhabit the community in which Okonkwo lives. *Things Fall Apart* was notable for being the first novel by a West African to

portray graphically how colonized subjects perceived the arrival of the colonizing Europeans, and one of Achebe's significant achievements in the novel is the way he succeeds in depicting Umuofia as a vibrant and sophisticated society, with its own complex culture and elaborate moral and ethical codes, while never succumbing to a desire to portray it as an idyllic pre-colonial utopia.

Our guide to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* aims to provide a scholarly exegesis of the text and introduce readers to important contextualizing historical and cultural perspectives, as well as to provide a detailed historical overview of the changing critical responses to the novel. In Part 1 of our guide we introduce the novel, its author, and its literary and cultural contexts. We begin with a brief biography of Chinua Achebe and his upbringing, as well as his careers in writing, broadcasting, politics and academia. In the second section we focus, in some detail, on the text of *Things Fall Apart*, and describe its distinctive features, including its narrative structure, use of language, characterization and main themes. Achebe wrote the novel at a time when West African literature was first beginning to flourish and in the third section of Part 1 we explore the literary contexts of the novel. We begin with a brief examination of the burgeoning literary scene in post-war West Africa and the experimentation with the novelistic form that early African writers were undertaking during this period. In a number of important ways, *Things Fall Apart* is a direct response to a whole canon of books written about Africa's history and cultures by Europeans, which began appearing from the sixteenth century onwards, and we briefly examine the history of this writing and its ideological imperatives. The underlying racist discourses of many of these works were to be echoed in much of the later European fiction that was set in Africa. We situate *Things Fall Apart* in relation to this European literary heritage and examine the unlikely influence that one particular work, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), had on Achebe's novel. We go on to analyse W. B. Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' (1921), which provides the epigraph to *Things Fall Apart*, and Achebe's appropriation and subversion of Yeats' Eurocentric vision of the cyclical motions of history. In the final section of Part 1 we examine the cultural and historical contexts of the novel. We briefly outline the contemporary historical and cultural milieu of the post-war era in Nigeria, and the political and cultural nationalism that was a defining feature of the period in which Achebe was writing, before going on to examine in some detail the nature of the pre-colonial Igbo society and culture that provides the crucial contextual background to the drama in the novel.

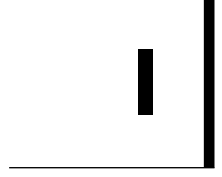
*Things Fall Apart* has inspired an enormous amount of critical attention in the five decades since its publication and this critical fascination with the text shows no sign of diminishing. Indeed, the history of critical approaches to the novel has often reflected broader changes in literary criticism and theory in general. In Part 2 we provide an overview of the changing critical approaches to *Things Fall Apart* by tracing the critical history of the novel from the earliest responses, which focused on questions of cultural conflict, the authenticity of the novel's language, of its form and its world-view, to a subsequent concern with the novel's universality which is often elaborated in terms of the novel's comparability with Western literary forms and styles such as Aristotelian Tragedy and nineteenth-century Realism. We then examine the later criticism and its preoccupations with questions of orality and those of gender ideology in the novel, before concluding with

an analysis of contemporary postcolonial approaches in which issues of ideology and nation-formation, as well as the general question of the novel's semiotics of representation are examined.

In Part 3 we bring together five essays by leading international scholars who have written most illuminatingly and innovatively on *Things Fall Apart*. The range and depth of the essays is evident in the diversity of their approaches, which encompass neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives on the text. We have included essays that represent some of the most important criticism on the novel, and which provide both 'classic' and innovative readings, the majority of which have been published in relatively obscure monographs and journals. We include essays by Abiola Irele, Abdul JanMohamed, Biodun Jeyifo, Florence Stratton and Ato Quayson. Each essay is prefaced with a brief introduction to the essay itself and to its author.

In Part 4 we provide a guide to further reading and internet resources which will be useful for those who wish to pursue their study of the novel and its contexts further. The material is arranged into sections under the titles: The author, The history of colonialism in Africa, Postcolonial literary theory, African and Nigerian literature, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Journals and periodicals, and Web resources. We recommend a short list of books, journals and websites that are relevant to the text and which are widely accessible, and provide a description of the focus of each resource.





## **Text and contexts**





## The author

Albert Chinualumogo Achebe, as he was originally christened, was born into an Igbo family on 16 November 1930 in Ogidi, in what is now eastern Nigeria. His father, Isaiah Okafor Achebe, had been converted to Christianity as a young man, and both his parents were devout Christians. Although Isaiah Achebe had become an evangelizing church catechist and a teacher for the Church Missionary Society, the young Chinua grew up in a community in which many people still lived a traditional way of life. Chinua was to have a strict Christian upbringing, but he also grew up surrounded by neighbours and an extended family who continued to practise the Igbo traditional religion and observe the various rituals and festivals of the culture. In his autobiographical essay 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1973), Achebe has described some of his earliest memories of growing up in Ogidi in the 1930s:

We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today; but when I was a boy one could see and sense the peculiar quality and atmosphere of it more clearly . . . On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols . . . What I do remember is a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads.<sup>1</sup>

The perceived distinction between 'heathen' and Christian cultures was by no means absolute for the young Achebe, as he has recently described:

Both my parents were strong and even sometimes uncompromising in their Christian beliefs, but they were not fanatical . . . My father's half-brother was not the only heathen in our extended family; if anything, he was among a majority. Our home was open to them all, and my father

1 Chinua Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1973) reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987*, London: Heinemann, 1988, pp. 22–23.

received his peers and relatives – Christian or not – with kola nut and palm-wine.<sup>2</sup>

The important question of Achebe's relationship with traditional Igbo culture, and the influence of his Christian upbringing, is one that we shall return to in more detail later in this chapter when we look at the cultural contexts of his life and work (see Texts and contexts, pp. 26–33).

Achebe undertook his early education in church schools at Ogidi and Nekede, and he went on to win a scholarship to study at the prestigious Government College in Umuahia, where he was a secondary school student between 1944 and 1948. Among those who attended the college during this period were Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, Gabriel Okara, Elechi Amadi and Christopher Okigbo, all of whom were later to become major Nigerian writers. Achebe was a gifted student and he was awarded a scholarship to study medicine at the first university to be established in Nigeria, the newly founded University College in Ibadan, which at that time was a constituent college of the University of London. After his first year of studies Achebe decided to switch courses to study English Literature, Religious Studies and History. As part of his English Literature course, which had a curriculum similar to that of a contemporary British university, he studied the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, Swift, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Tennyson, Eliot, Frost, Joyce and Hemingway as well as literature which was considered relevant to Nigerian students, such as the 'African novels' of Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Joyce Cary. Achebe's reaction to the derogatory and demeaning portrayals of Africans in these novels was to have a profound influence on his later writing (see Texts and contexts, pp. 18–21). It was also during this period at university in Ibadan that Achebe first began writing essays, humorous sketches and short stories for various student magazines.

Achebe obtained an honours degree in English in 1953, and after a short period of working as a teacher he became an editor for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), where he was to hold various senior positions until the Biafran crisis in 1966. It was during his early years working at the NBC that Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*. He travelled to London in 1956 to attend a training course at the BBC where his manuscript came to the attention of one of his course tutors, the novelist and literary critic George Phelps, who recognized the quality of Achebe's writing and recommended it for publication. *Things Fall Apart* was first published in London by Heinemann on 17 June 1958. Although the novel was met with some initial critical scepticism, it has gone on to receive considerable critical and popular acclaim around the world. Chinua Achebe's pre-eminent position in the field of Nigerian and African literature was established with the publication of his first novel, and his reputation has only grown in the decades since his most famous work first appeared. Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), was set in the contemporary world of 1950s Lagos and has as its protagonist Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of *Things Fall Apart*'s main character, Okonkwo. Achebe was to publish two other novels in this period,

2 Chinua Achebe, 'My Home Under Imperial Fire' in *Home and Exile* (2001), Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003, pp. 10–11.

*Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966), as well as a collection of his short stories *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Short Stories* (1962), and a work for children *Chike and the River* (1966).

At the time of writing *Things Fall Apart* in the 1950s the young Achebe was deeply influenced by the growing pan-Nigerian nationalist movement in the colony, a political sentiment that was shared by many of Nigeria's educated elite. As in many of the British colonies across West Africa, Nigerian nationalists optimistically looked forward to the day when the country would become a self-determining nation and gain its independence from British colonial rule. The anti-colonial nationalist movement, and a concomitant form of cultural nationalism, had been gaining considerable strength and support in Nigeria in the years after the Second World War, and were to prove a crucial influence on Achebe's writing. This is an important area of influence on Achebe's work that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (see Texts and contexts, pp. 22–26). Achebe was eventually able to join in the national euphoria that attended the celebrations for Nigerian independence on 1 October 1960. The event was an undoubtedly momentous occasion in modern African history, not only for the fact that one out of every seven Africans had been liberated from colonial rule, for it also witnessed the creation of Africa's largest and most populous new nation-state.

By 1966, however, the situation in the country had reached a crisis point, with political and ethnic tensions in the republic having led to a military coup and the massacre of thousands of easterners, predominantly but not exclusively Igbos, in northern and western Nigeria. The growing instability in Nigeria, together with the decision of the newly created state of Biafra in eastern Nigeria to secede, sparked the devastating Nigerian Civil War. Like many educated Igbos, Achebe came to support the secessionist state of Biafra, and played a prominent role in the new government, often travelling the world as an ambassador for the Biafran cause. The whole country was traumatized by the years of fighting, which ended only in 1970 with the defeat of the Biafran government and army. Achebe was deeply affected by the war, and particularly by the loss of many friends and acquaintances, including his close friend the poet Christopher Okigbo who was killed in the fighting. He spent most of the next few decades writing and teaching in universities in America and Nigeria. It was to take Achebe twenty-one years before he published another major work, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), which is his last novel to be published. The intervening years were not idle ones, however, for he also published a number of collections of his essays, short stories, poetry and children's stories and edited the magazine *Okike* and a number of anthologies of African fiction. One of his most important achievements during this period, in terms of the promotion and dissemination of African literature, was his work as Series Editor for Heinemann's African Writers Series between 1962 and 1990. In 1990 Achebe was involved in a car accident in Nigeria that left him with serious back injuries that have since confined him to a wheelchair. Since this time he has mostly lived in America, although he has remained active in Nigeria's political and cultural life, and he continues to write and give lectures around the world.

## The text

*Things Fall Apart* is not a lengthy novel, being approximately one hundred and fifty pages in length, and one of the principal reasons for this brevity is that Achebe originally conceived it as being only the first part of a much longer narrative. This more ambitious work was to follow three successive generations of the same family, and span the period from before the arrival of the British colonialists through to the contemporary world of colonial Nigeria in the 1950s. Realizing that the first section of this longer work was actually a self-contained narrative, one which functioned in its own terms, Achebe decided to divide his manuscript into two separate works, which were eventually to become his first two published novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960).

Delineating a brief outline of the plot of *Things Fall Apart* reveals a relatively simple storyline: the narrative begins in the late nineteenth century, at a time before Europeans had begun to colonize systematically the interior of West Africa. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, is a renowned, if deeply flawed, member of a traditional Igbo village, in what is now south-eastern Nigeria. A combination of hubris and misfortune leads to Okonkwo and his family being banished from the village for seven years. The intervening years prove to be epochal ones for the village, for the British colonialists have arrived in his absence and introduced their own system of law and government, and missionaries have begun to convert people to the Christian religion. When Okonkwo returns from exile he is dismayed by the changes he finds. He advocates armed resistance to the newcomers and in a fit of pique he murders a court messenger in order to spark off an insurrection. When he realizes that his fellow villagers will not join him and rise up against the invaders, he commits suicide in despair. This cursory synopsis of the novel's central plot does not do justice to the complexity of the work, however, for *Things Fall Apart* has a narrative structure which has numerous digressions and explications, all of which are germane to an understanding of the text.

The novel has a tripartite structure: Part One is by far the longest, with thirteen chapters, and introduces Okonkwo and his family, describes the culture and customs of Umuofia, and concludes with his exile from the clan; Part Two has six chapters, and covers Okonkwo's years of exile and the initial arrival of the white man; while Part Three again has six chapters, and details Okonkwo's return from exile, the changes that have occurred in his village with the coming of the European colonizers, and ends with his demise. Part One of the novel is not only the longest section of the narrative, it also provides much of the background material which is crucial to our understanding of Okonkwo, the culture which produced him, and the ultimate tragedy of his suicide. The narrative structure and temporal arrangement of this first section of the novel is not linear, however, as it tends to be circuitous, moving backwards and forwards in time as the narrative unfolds.

A closer examination of the novel's first chapter will illuminate this point: Okonkwo is introduced at the height of his fame, when he is approximately forty years of age, although the story is initially set in the past, and is in turn related to a more distant historical and mythical era. The first two paragraphs describe the eighteen-year-old Okonkwo and his wrestling prowess while the third gives a

physical description of him as a forty-year-old adult. The fourth paragraph moves back in time again to the death of his father Unoka ten years previously, and then the fifth provides a description of Unoka's love of drinking and music before moving back further to his childhood. The sixth paragraph returns to Unoka's adult years and a description of him as an irresponsible debtor. The next four paragraphs relate a story of his refusal to repay a debt to his friend Okoye that is set in a time parallel to Okonkwo's early adulthood. The final paragraph of this four-page chapter returns again to Unoka's death, to Okonkwo's achievements, and looks forward to the fate of Ikemefuna, the young boy from a nearby village who has joined Okonkwo's family. The following twelve chapters, which comprise the rest of Part One, return to a number of these events in considerably more detail, but not in the same order as they are first presented. Much of this first section of the novel is also taken up with a description of some of the central preoccupations in the lives of Okonkwo's clan. A considerable amount of the narrative is devoted to descriptions of the crops of Umuofia, their cultivation and harvesting, as well the various festivals that accompany these important agricultural activities. Part One of the novel also provides descriptions of a number of important social events, rituals and ceremonies in the village such as marriages, funerals, and the convening of the court of the *egwugwu*s.

The organization of the first section of the text lacks the narrative and temporal linearity that one is accustomed to in 'classic' European realist fiction, with only a small amount of the narrative being devoted to the development of the central plot. In an essay which we have included in the Critical readings section of this volume, the critic Abdul JanMohamed observes that 'Out of the one-hundred-and-eighteen pages that comprise part one of the novel only about eight are devoted, strictly speaking, to the development of the plot.'<sup>3</sup> This concentration on 'background' cultural information and various sub-plots dominates much of the narrative in the novel, as Robert M. Wren points out:

In page count, the marriage group (wedding and family chapters together) take up more than a quarter of the novel, and in them there is virtually no plot progression whatever. The chapters on the agricultural year, including the account of Okonkwo's disastrous beginnings as a farmer, amount to one fifth of the novel. The white man and his religion are dominant in about one third of the novel – almost all of Parts Two and Three. Through most of the novel Okonkwo is passive or subordinate, though he is the link that holds it all together.<sup>4</sup>

The circumlocutory narrative and temporal trajectories evident in the first section of the novel have a counterpart in the Igbos' highly prized rhetorical techniques, as Achebe indicates early on in the novel: 'Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the

3 Abdul JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', *Ariel*, 15: 4 (October 1984), p. 31.

4 Robert M. Wren, *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980, p. 12.

subject and then hitting it finally' (Ch. 1, p. 5).<sup>5</sup> Like Okoye, the narrator in Part One of *Things Fall Apart* employs periphrasis (a roundabout way of speaking) to circle around the subject, gradually building up a picture of Okonkwo and the culture in which he is situated. With the arrival of the British colonizers and missionaries in Part Two, while Okonkwo is in exile in Mbanta, the plot becomes decidedly more linear and the pace of the narrative quickens for the last third of the novel. It is as if the plot mirrors the rapid decline and destruction of the culture that Achebe so lucidly represents in the first section.

At the heart of the novel is the story of Okonkwo, one of the most compelling fictional creations in all of modern African literature. At the beginning of the narrative Okonkwo is described as a potentially powerful individual in a society that highly values physical vigour, wealth and courage:

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered.

(Ch. 1, p. 6)

Okonkwo's high status in the community is measured exclusively in relation to his success in the male realms of wrestling and warfare, and against the culture's patriarchal system of sanctioning titles, polygyny (men having more than one wife) and wealth accumulation. Even his ability as a farmer is demonstrated by his success in growing a staple vegetable which has been culturally reified with a gender bias: 'Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed' (Ch. 1, p. 24).

Okonkwo appears to be a man destined for greatness as a result of his conformity to his society's ideals of masculinity and patriarchal hegemony, although no sooner are we made aware of his potentially iconic status than we are informed that he is a deeply flawed individual:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a severe look . . . 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.

(Ch. 1, p. 1)

In the oral culture of Umuofia, in which 'the art of conversation is regarded very

5 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Oxford: Heinemann Writers Series, 1986, p. 5. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations from the novel are drawn from the same edition. Subsequent references will appear in the body of the text, taking the form of a chapter number and page number in parentheses.

highly' (Ch. 1, p. 5),<sup>6</sup> Okonkwo's incompetence at verbal communication, volatility and propensity for violence are personal flaws, which Achebe is careful to portray as alienating him from the very values in his culture which he espouses. Early on in the novel he is shown to be overzealous in his patriarchal position within the family: 'Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children' (Ch. 2, p. 9). His obsessive quest, and regard, for status within society even leads him to alienate himself from other men within his peer group, as the voice of this anonymous old man observes:

he was struck, as most people were, by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing with less successful men. Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: 'This meeting is for men.' The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit.

Everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo when Okonkwo called him a woman. The oldest man present said sternly that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.

(Ch. 4, p. 19)

The symbolic background to Okonkwo's insult had been revealed a few pages earlier, when we learn that as a child he had discovered 'that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title' (Ch. 2, p. 10). What this scene succinctly reveals is the differences between Okonkwo's own alienating view, which regards all untitled men as effeminate, and that held by the more inclusive and pragmatic group of his clan peers.

Simon Gikandi argues that there is a 'duality involved in Okonkwo's construction as a subject: at the beginning of the novel he is represented as a cultural hero . . . a symbolic receptacle of the village's central doctrines. But Okonkwo is notably characterized by his displacement from the Umuofia mainstream.'<sup>7</sup> Several critics have similarly described Okonkwo in terms of being a representative 'type', a symbolic manifestation of certain masculine characteristics or ideals of his culture. G. D. Killam describes Okonkwo as 'the embodiment of Ibo values, a man who better than most symbolized his race';<sup>8</sup> and C. L. Innes is even more strident: 'the reader never doubts that he is the product of his society's system . . . He is . . . a *type* of his society';<sup>9</sup> while Abiola Irele postulates that his 'power to fascinate' can be attributed to 'his physicality, all projected outward . . . in such a way as to constitute him as the incarnation of his society's ideal of manhood'.<sup>10</sup> There seems

6 The importance of Umuofia's oral culture, together with Achebe's representations of orality and its influence on his prose style, are discussed in detail later (see Texts and contexts, pp. 29–33).

7 Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, London: James Currey, 1991, p. 39.

8 G. D. Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* (1969), London: Heinemann, revised edition 1977, p. 16. Note that older books use 'Ibo' instead of the contemporary spelling 'Igbo'.

9 C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 26.

10 Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 129.



little doubt that this perception of Okonkwo, as a symbolic ‘embodiment’ or ‘incarnation’ of certain Igbo values and ideals, is one that is deliberately cultivated by Achebe in the portrayal of his protagonist. He generally depicts Okonkwo as a ‘flat’ character, with little in the way of psychological depth or intellectual complexity, and the narrative continually focuses our gaze on the one dominant aspect of his makeup: ‘Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action’ (Ch. 8, p. 49). In the first part of the novel he thoughtlessly beats his wife Ojiugo during the sacred Week of Peace, observed in honour of the earth goddess *Ani*, leading the narrator to comment: ‘Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess’ (Ch. 4, p. 21). His unthinking actions at a time when ‘a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour’ (Ch. 4, p. 22) lead to him committing the abhorrent offence of *nso-ani* against the powerful goddess of the earth and fertility. The deity’s priest Ezeani angrily admonishes Okonkwo for his personal transgression against an important religious and social custom ‘ordained’ by the forefathers, and reminds him of his communal responsibilities: ‘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’ (Ch. 4, p. 22). Achebe creates a tension between the duality of Okonkwo’s flawed individual subjectivity and his metonymic status as a ‘heroic embodiment’ of communal values and ideals, which becomes increasingly problematic as the novel progresses.

Almost every critic of *Things Fall Apart* focuses on the nature of Okonkwo’s tragic character, relating it to the way he chooses to interpret narrowly his society’s ideals of the ‘masculine’ and demonstrating how his character comes to disavow the culture’s ‘feminine’ values and principles. Although Achebe portrays Umuofia as a society dominated by the hegemony of male-dominated institutions and patriarchal discourses, he is also insistent in documenting the importance of a powerful ‘female principle’ in the metaphysical, ontological and cosmological systems that govern the culture. This is nowhere more evident than in his description of *Ani*, the goddess of the earth and all fertility, who is said to have ‘played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity’ (Ch. 5, p. 26) and it is in tribute to her that the people observe a Week of Peace before the New Yam festival, as a time of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Indeed, *Ani*’s importance in Umuofian life is acknowledged in her status as the arbiter of what is or is not acceptable in all individual and collective behaviour, being described as ‘the ultimate judge of morality and conduct’ (Ch. 5, p. 26). Okonkwo’s tragic flaw, therefore, is to disavow the place of the feminine in himself and his culture, leading Abiola Irele to describe his downfall in terms of a classical tragedy: ‘The irony that attends Okonkwo’s embodiment of manhood is that, pursued by the feminine principle as if by the Furies, he is finally vanquished.’<sup>11</sup>

If Okonkwo represents a hyper-masculinized manifestation of his culture’s patriarchal ideals, one which denies the importance and position of its ‘feminine’ values and principles, then the question becomes: Where in the world of the novel can we locate this elusive ‘female principle’? As we have already seen, Umuofia has a highly developed religious culture in which one of the principal deities is the

11 Irele, *The African Imagination*, p. 132.

goddess *Ani*, who plays a central role in the ethical life of the clan, and who is honoured with a period in which the ‘feminine’ attributes of deference, tolerance and peace are strictly enforced prior to the New Yam festival, one of the most important times in the year for an agricultural people. Accompanying this prominence of the ‘feminine’ in the religious sphere, Achebe also portrays Igbo cosmology and metaphysics as attempting to balance the ‘male’ and ‘female’ forces and principles at work in the cosmos. In terms of the characters in the novel, Achebe continually establishes Okonkwo in oppositional relationships to individuals within his family, his clan and the wider world. Chief among these relationships, particularly in terms of Okonkwo’s psychological makeup, are those with his father Unoka, and with his son Nwoye, both of whom openly rebel against traditional ideals of masculine behaviour in the culture. The dialectic which links Okonkwo with Unoka, on the one hand, and with his son Nwoye, on the other, determines the temporal frame of the novel and defines the patrilineal succession of the generations in the narrative. In terms of the other male characters in the novel, it is Okonkwo’s great friend, and alter ego, Obierika, who engages with, and counters Okonkwo’s views at important junctures in the novel. The representation of female characters such as Okonkwo’s wife Ekwefi and their daughter Ezinma is also important, but deeply problematic, in terms of the representation of ‘the feminine’ in the novel. These are all important issues that will be discussed in far more detail in Parts 2 and 3 of this guide.

One of the unique achievements of *Things Fall Apart* is that it was the first Anglophone (English language) African novel to elucidate graphically how colonized subjects perceived the arrival of the colonizing Other. What Achebe achieves so successfully in the novel is to portray vividly how the mechanics of the colonial encounter led to the undermining, and ultimately the overthrow, of a highly developed autonomous African culture. As Okonkwo’s alter ego, it becomes significant that it is Obierika who ‘narrates’ the first stories of the existence of white men to Okonkwo, and to the reader. At first the existence of the white men is consigned to the realm of the fantastic: ‘“It is like the story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk,” said Obierika . . . “And these white men, they say, have no toes”’ (Ch. 8, pp. 52–53). The scant information contained in these rumours leads the men of the tribe to amuse themselves by speculating that these mythic creatures are perhaps lepers. When, later on, Obierika visits Okonkwo in exile and tells him that one of these white men had visited Abame, he immediately asks if the man was possibly an albino and Obierika responds: ‘He was not an albino. He was quite different’ (Ch. 15, p. 99). The initial response is to conceptualize the white men as being akin to the physically aberrant, a category of people marginalized within Umuofian society. Despite relating the story of how the white men had virtually annihilated the whole clan in Abame, as a retribution for killing the first white man to visit them, it is only Obierika who appears to grasp the danger that these strangers represent: ‘I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true’ (Ch. 15, p. 101). Two years later, when Obierika again visits Okonkwo, the situation has changed dramatically: the white men who had previously been thought harmless because they inhabited the realm of the fictive have arrived, in the shape of Christian missionaries.

When they first appear in Mbanta the missionaries are confined to the Evil Forest, a space that is considered to be 'alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness' (Ch. 17, p. 107), and one which the elders believe will certainly bring about their deaths within a few days. When they fail to succumb to the 'sinister forces' of the Evil Forest, 'it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits. Not long after, he won his first three converts' (Ch. 17, p. 108). It is highly significant that the first converts to the new Christian religion are principally from among the *efulefu* ('worthless' men); the *agbala* (women and untitled men); the *osu* (a taboo caste who have been dedicated to deities); and the women who have had their twins cast into the Evil Forest. As the missionaries and the colonial administration begin to establish themselves in the area, it is from the ranks of these despised and marginalized groups within Igbo society that the new church and government functionaries and pupil-teachers are drawn. This situation represents a paradox for the Umuofians because the tenets of their social contract specifically restrain those, like Okonkwo, who would seek to take revenge on any fellow clansmen who desert their traditions and collaborate with the white men. Abiola Irele postulates that under colonial rule, this reversal of the established hierarchies in pre-colonial Umuofian society 'draws upon an eminently Christian trope, encapsulated in the biblical sayings about the last coming to be first and the meek inheriting the earth',<sup>12</sup> while Biodun Jeyifo observes, rather caustically, that 'for this group, things certainly did not fall apart!'<sup>13</sup> As always in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe is acutely alert to the potentially ironic significations present in any situation, and therefore it comes as no surprise that he portrays the colonial encounter as both a site of oppression and one of liberation for different groups within the colonized population. Beneath the text's overarching narrative of Okonkwo's emblematic tragedy, and the historic 'pacification' of the indigenous tribes by British imperialism, Achebe also reveals the subaltern discourses of those marginalized by Umuofian society who are liberated by the colonial encounter.<sup>14</sup>

Given the deeply *gendered* discourses of identity and personality in the novel, it is apparent that the early missionaries led by Mr Brown are depicted in the narrative as embodying and propagating qualities considered 'womanly' – namely tolerance, love, mercy and compassion. In a characteristic evaluation, Okonkwo describes the missionaries as 'a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens' (Ch. 17, p. 110). In this schema of the colonial encounter, Umuofia is initially symbolized as masculine and dominant, while the white missionaries are perceived as feminine and subordinate, which results in the latter being viewed as unthreatening to the patriarchal hegemony and, therefore, tolerable. This

12 Irele, *The African Imagination*, p. 136.

13 Biodun Jeyifo, 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika' in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds), *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 65. An excerpt from this essay is reprinted in the Critical readings section.

14 Although 'subaltern' is an adjective meaning 'of lower rank', it is also a term that has gained a specific currency in Postcolonial Studies, largely due to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Subaltern Studies group. There it is used to describe a subordinated group or class who are oppressed within the dominant structures of power, and particularly in the colonial and post-colonial context.

'effeminacy' soon becomes highly contradictory, however, as the economic changes brought about by the new colonial administration, and its capitalist ethos, begin to impinge on the Umuofians' high regard for wealth and patriarchal acquisitiveness: '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' (Ch. 21, p. 128). When the 'feminine' Mr Brown is replaced by Reverend James Smith as head of the church, the narrative begins to attach a more masculine valency to the colonial enterprise: 'He condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness' (Ch. 22, p. 132). In this revealing speech the Reverend Smith voices one of the recurrent discourses of colonialism, what Frantz Fanon was describing when he famously stated that 'The colonial world is a Manichaeian world.'<sup>15</sup> The institutionalized systems of political domination and economic exploitation created under colonialism were predicated on a form of discourse that projected a set of antithetical values and attributes from the 'civilizing' European centre onto the marginalized colonies. In this Manichaeian world the native is viewed by the colonizer as irrational, depraved, childlike and 'different'; while the European is rational, virtuous, mature and 'normal'. Abdul JanMohamed similarly describes the duality at the heart of this colonial mentality and its discourses as being 'dominated by a manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object'.<sup>16</sup> Behind the duality signified in Reverend Smith's iteration of one of the archetypal discourses of colonialism is a *Weltanschauung* (world-view) that also identifies the missionary as a 'masculine' warrior on the battlefield, engaged in mortal conflict with the forces of darkness in Africa.

The climax of the narrative is brief indeed, taking only some eight pages to reach its tragic conclusion. With the arrival of Reverend Smith a new fanaticism within the ranks of the Christians in the community takes hold. One of the most zealous and combative is Enoch, who causes widespread outrage when he commits 'one of the greatest crimes a man could commit' (Ch. 22, p. 133) by unmasking one of the sacred ancestral *egwugwu*s. The clan responds decisively and immediately razes the new church to the ground. The District Commissioner inflicts a heavy retribution on the clan when he deceives Okonkwo and five other high-ranking men from the village into being arrested, then demands a punitive ransom for their release. In a novel that is steeped in ironic significations, there is hardly a more incongruously ironic utterance than that of the District Commissioner when he addresses the handcuffed prisoners: 'We shall not do you

15 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) trans. Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1965, p. 31. Fanon is here referring to the religious and philosophical theory of Manichaeian dualism, a theory that conceives of the universe as composed of two powerful opposing forces, usually described in terms of good and evil. The term has been employed by postcolonial theorists to describe how the discourses of colonialism divided the world into colonizer and colonized; self and other; white and black; and by extension, good and evil.

16 Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, p. 4.

any harm . . . if only you agree to co-operate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy' (Ch. 23, p. 139). There is no hint of irony, however, when he goes on to assert the dominance of British colonial power over its colonial subjects: 'We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my country under a great queen . . . the most powerful ruler in the world' (Ch. 23, p. 139). Despite the District Commissioner ordering that the prisoners are to be treated with respect, the comprador court messengers shave the men's heads and mock their titled status, then over the course of the next few days ensure their total humiliation: 'They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together' (Ch. 23, p. 140).

When news of the men's humiliating capture and the ransom being demanded for their release reaches the village, Achebe employs an opportune simile to describe the reaction: 'Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run' (Ch. 23, p. 141). No longer the embodiment of the fearless (masculine) hunter, Umuofia itself has been transformed into a confused and cataleptic quarry. The crucial point is reached when Okonkwo and the other leaders are ransomed and the clan gathers for a meeting at which 'Everyone knew that Umuofia was at last going to speak its mind about the things that were happening' (Ch. 24, p. 143). Before the gathered clansmen are able to decide on a course of action, court messengers arrive with instructions from the colonial administration for the meeting to disband. Outraged at this new imposition, Okonkwo immediately fells the head messenger, only to comprehend tragically 'that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult' (Ch. 24, pp. 146–147). At the precise moment at which Okonkwo instigates the possibility of violent insurrection, the clan breaks into a frightened 'effeminate' pandemonium, and the narrative completes the symbolic transfer of 'feminine' significations, from the colonial Other to the Umuofians themselves.

Okonkwo's ignominious death irrevocably severs his ties with his beloved clan, as his sacrilegious suicide ensures that he will be denied his place as a revered ancestor in the spirit realm and is instead transformed into an evil presence, one that cannot even be touched by fellow clansmen. On the first page of the novel he is described as a young man whose 'fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan' (Ch. 1, p. 3), one who is destined for greatness, yet at the end of *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo is reduced to a tragic pariah, an untouchable who must be buried by outsiders. The very earth in which he will be buried will become desecrated by the presence of his body and must be ritually cleansed by the clan. There is a tragic irony about the last paragraphs of the novel as the normally eloquent Obierika, devastated with grief, addresses the District Commissioner and haltingly pays tribute to his friend: '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 could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words' (Ch. 25, p. 149).

As an embodiment of his people, however flawed, Okonkwo's suicide can also be read as signifying the emasculation of the Umuofians, as their traditional way

of life is irrevocably changed by a British colonial domination which triggers a crisis within the culture, a result of its own inflexibility and internal inconsistencies. None of Achebe's ironic force is lost in his description of the District Commissioner unwittingly musing on how the story of Okonkwo's demise might make 'a reasonable paragraph' of 'interesting reading' in his memoirs, which he has speculatively entitled '*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*' (Ch. 25, pp. 149–150). What Achebe so vividly succeeds in highlighting in this passage is the difference between the ways the uncomprehending European colonizers recorded the history of the colonial encounter in Africa, together with their documentation of the peoples and cultures colonized, and the reality of this historical encounter as it was actually experienced by those being colonized. The final paragraph of the novel also describes the overthrow of an oral culture by a literate one, as Abiola Irele states: 'As the story advances, we witness a linguistic process that culminates in the triumph of the culture of literacy, a process that also signals the engulfing of the indigenous voice, which was carried exclusively through the oral medium, by the discourse of colonialism.'<sup>17</sup>

While the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* creates a strong sense of closure with Okonkwo's death, it is in reality an elliptical ending, for we are not privy to his ignominious burial or the effect that his suicide has on his friends and family, just as we do not witness the long-term effects of the colonial encounter on the Umuofians' traditional culture. Similarly, when the novel ends the District Commissioner's memoirs remain speculative, unwritten and unpublished. It is the reader who must supply the conclusion to this narrative, interpolating from their own particular experience and knowledge of the history of the colonial encounter in Africa. Although the novel ends in an unmistakably elegiac tone, when one considers the novel in its entirety it is clear that Achebe is by no means uncritical of the culture that he both celebrates and mourns. It is this ambivalence that helps to give the work such power and relevance in the contemporary world, as European countries struggle to come to terms with the legacy of their colonial histories, and the ongoing process of decolonization continues in former colonies around the world. Perhaps the last word on the novel should come from Chinua Achebe himself, in his usual understated and self-effacing way, with his reflections on the purpose of his 'historical' novels: 'I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that the past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.'<sup>18</sup>

## Literary contexts

When Chinua Achebe began writing *Things Fall Apart* in the mid-1950s, West African literature was still in its nascency and there was really no established indigenous literary tradition for him to engage with, and little in the way of one in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. The years following the Second World War were

<sup>17</sup> Irele, *The African Imagination*, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Chinua Achebe, 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1965) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 45.

witnessing the first sustained flowering of modern sub-Saharan African literature, and scattered across the continent a small number of writers were producing groundbreaking works: the Anglophone (English language) writers Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele and D. Can Themba in South Africa; the Francophone (French language) writers Mongo Beti in Cameroon and Camara Laye in Guinea, together with Sembene Ousmane and the poets Leon Damas and Leopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal. Although the works of the South African writers were known in Nigeria, where English was also the lingua franca (the imposed common language), the works of the contemporary Francophone writers were not widely available until they were translated in the 1960s.

The first modern West African novel written in English, however, was written by the Nigerian Amos Tutuola and had the monumental title *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town* (1952). Tutuola became the continent's first, and most improbable, international literary celebrity, and he went on to publish three further novels in the decade. His narratives, written in an idiosyncratic form of English, were heavily indebted to the oral folkloric traditions of his own Yoruba culture. Tutuola's novels created a unique synthesis of the mythic and the modern that came to influence the work of a number of later African writers, most notably Ben Okri. The only other Nigerian to produce a novel before Achebe was Cyprian Ekwensi, who had published *People of the City* in 1954. Ekwensi was an unashamedly populist writer who had a penchant for appropriating popular Western literary forms and adapting them to a Nigerian context. His first novel was heavily indebted to the pulp thriller genre, and has the distinction of being the first novel written by a West African to attempt to create a detailed portrait of a modern West African city (a thinly disguised Lagos), and one that also provided a fascinating description of the vibrant youth culture that was thriving in this new urban environment. Along with Tutuola and Ekwensi, Achebe was among the first generation of Nigerian novelists, all of whom were working in relative isolation, and as such it is difficult to identify a specific contemporary Nigerian literary context in which he was writing. Part of the problem lies in the fact that all of the early African writers were experimenting with the novelistic form, an eminently Western literary medium, and one that has no immediate correlation in traditional African cultural practices. This does not mean, however, that Achebe created his first novel in a literary vacuum, but it does mean that we must look further afield to understand the specific literary contexts in which his work was produced.

The final paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* provides one of the most explicit literary allusions in the novel, with its naming of a work (*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*) being contemplated by the District Commissioner, who imagines himself a 'student of primitive customs' (Ch. 25, p. 149). Although this is a purely fictional work, albeit one that has a darkly ironic significance in the novel, it is an important reference point for the work. In many ways *Things Fall Apart* is a direct response to a whole canon of books written about Africa's history and cultures by Europeans, which began appearing from the sixteenth century onwards, spurred by the increasing interaction between the two continents as a result of the organized slave trade. As European interest in its colonies in sub-Saharan Africa grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it came to be increasingly fuelled by an expanding body of

literature, principally written by explorers and adventurers, although the continent also proved a literary inspiration for many naturalists, novelists, traders, colonial administrators, big-game hunters and missionaries. As Europe's fascination with its exotic and mysterious 'Other' developed, particularly in the popular consciousness, it also came to be increasingly informed by the contemporary interest in the emerging sciences of botany, anthropology, comparative anatomy, palaeontology and archaeology.

One of the first Europeans to venture into the interior of Africa was the Scotsman Mungo Park, who published *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* in 1799. The book became phenomenally successful and ensured that Park attained national and international renown, but it also created a template for later writers with its mixture of adventure story, natural history, botany, and descriptions of the social and domestic life of the peoples encountered. By the middle of the nineteenth century other European explorers including the Frenchman Paul Belloni du Chaillu (purportedly the first European to see a gorilla) and the Italian Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (who gave his name to Brazzaville in the Congo) also produced books, based on their travels, that became international bestsellers. Other pioneering British explorers during this period were the inveterate traveller and prolific writer Sir Richard Burton (the first European to visit Lake Tanganyika in his unsuccessful search for the source of the Nile) and the explorer and missionary Dr David Livingstone (forever linked with the explorer and journalist Sir Henry Morton Stanley) who became internationally renowned figures, with the books recording their African exploits becoming enormously popular. As the so-called 'Scramble for Africa' among the European colonial powers gathered pace in the second half of the nineteenth century, the production of literature about Africa by Europeans also expanded rapidly. One notable later work that recorded the extraordinary travels of Mary Kingsley, the eccentric Victorian explorer, was her idiosyncratic memoir *Travels in West Africa* (1897). Unlike many other European visitors to Africa around this time, Kingsley became a fervent critic of British colonial policy in the continent and European attempts to 'reform' Africans along Christian or Western lines.

While these works were, to varying degrees, produced by writers broadly empathetic to the people and cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, many of the burgeoning numbers of other books written about the continent from this period were grievously misinformed, and often unashamedly sensationalist, in their portrayals of the 'Dark Continent'. Sub-Saharan Africa was typically portrayed in much of this literature as innately barbaric, a savage landscape without a history before European arrival, and certainly lacking anything that might resemble a sophisticated culture. The political empire building and economic exploitation that constituted the colonial era also came to be regularly cloaked in a discourse whose implicit ideological purposes were to 'civilize' non-Europeans and to bring religious, moral and educational 'enlightenment' to colonial subjects. Contemporary literary discourses often tended to reinforce and abet these objectives by creating a nexus of representations of Africa as a continent in pressing need of religious and moral reform. When the colonial powers eventually introduced organized education to their colonies, often under the auspices of the missionary movements, it was also done with the express desire to 'Europeanize' Africans. The educational curricula were entirely Eurocentric in focus, teaching



only about the European history of exploration and conquest of Africa, while at the same time glorifying European culture and denigrating indigenous African cultures.

As a product of both the missionary school and the British university systems in Nigeria, albeit one who was increasingly aware of the Eurocentrism of these systems, Achebe became conscious of how Africa's indigenous cultures and sense of history were being disparaged and eroded by the imperialist ideologies of colonialism. In a recent lecture Achebe has described the intersecting events of the 1950s in West Africa as 'the signal at long last to end Europe's imposition of a derogatory narrative upon Africa, a narrative designed to call African humanity into question', although he also ruefully admits that 'the hundreds and hundreds of books churned out in Britain, Europe and elsewhere to create the tradition of an Africa inhabited by barely recognizable humanity [had] taken their toll'.<sup>19</sup> One of the unique achievements of *Things Fall Apart* was that it was the first Anglophone African work of fiction to set out consciously to restore a sense of humanity and history to pre-colonial Africa, and to elucidate how Africans perceived the arrival of the colonizing Other. The novel succeeds in this purpose by judiciously depicting Umuofia as a civil society, with a sophisticated culture, that has a long and proud history. By doing so, Achebe explicitly challenges and counters the discourses of a received European literary canon, and a colonial education system, that were largely responsible for inculcating the myth that, for the inhabitants of pre-colonial Africa, life was 'one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them'. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe creates a narrative that places the African at the historic centre of the colonial encounter, with the imperialistic European as the usurping outsider, whose intervention brings about cataclysmic upheaval for the traditional African civilizations being colonized.

Through his childhood reading, and while studying at university in the early 1950s, Achebe became familiar with the work of a number of European writers who had set their novels in Africa, including H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, John Buchan, Elspeth Huxley and Graham Greene. Achebe has since been outspoken in his condemnation of the underlying racism apparent in these writers' portrayals of Africans, singling out Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), as one of the most highly regarded fictional portraits of Africa, for particular censure. He famously described Conrad as 'a thoroughgoing racist'<sup>20</sup> for the way he dehumanizes Africans in the novel, even going so far as to deny them the facility of language: 'It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds"'. They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy.'<sup>21</sup> Achebe argues that there is a historically deep-seated psychological need in the West to envisage

19 Published as the essay 'The Empire Fights Back' in *Home and Exile* (2001), Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003, pp. 45–47.

20 Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' (1976) reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987*, London: Heinemann, 1988, p. 8. Achebe defended, and further refined, his criticism of Conrad in 'Out of Africa: Caryl Phillips in Conversation with Chinua Achebe', *Guardian*, 22 February 2003.

21 Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', p. 6.

Africa 'as a foil to Europe, as a place of negation',<sup>22</sup> and that Conrad's novel represents an exemplar of this desire: '*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.'<sup>23</sup>

Achebe has also acknowledged the unlikely, and certainly unintended, influence that one particular novel played in his literary career. It was in 1952, while he was a university student in Ibadan, that his English Literature class was asked to study Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), a novel both set in Nigeria and taking its name from its Nigerian protagonist. The Anglo-Irishman Cary had been a colonial administrator in the country for many years from 1913 onwards, and when he retired he wrote a number of novels set in Africa: *Aissa Saved* (1931), *The American Visitor* (1932), *The African Witch* (1936) and *Mister Johnson* (1939). Of these, *Mister Johnson* was regarded as the most successful work.<sup>24</sup> It tells the story of a young Nigerian clerk who befriends Rudbeck, a British colonial officer, and encourages him to build a much-needed road through his district. Johnson accepts a bribe and loses his job, only to regain it, and then embezzles taxes to assist in the enterprise but is undone when he murders a white storekeeper. He is subsequently tried in court and eventually executed, at his own request, by Rudbeck. The novel seeks to celebrate Johnson as a Dionysian figure, characterized by his anarchic spontaneity, inspiration and energy, who is contrasted with the emotional constraint and earnest rationalism of the British colonial officers. Achebe has recently recalled the unequivocal reaction of his classmates to one of their number who declared that the only moment in the novel that he enjoyed was when Johnson was executed: 'we all shared our colleague's exasperation at this bumbling idiot of a character whom Joyce Cary and our teacher were so assiduously passing off as a poet when he was nothing but an embarrassing nitwit! Now, this incident, as I came to recognize later, was more than just an interesting episode in a colonial classroom. It was a landmark rebellion.'<sup>25</sup>

Cary's portrayal of Johnson, whom he vaguely describes as being a southern Nigerian, is egregious in almost every respect, and essentially racist in its intent, as Achebe notes: 'there is a certain undertow of uncharitableness just below the surface on which his narrative moves and from where, at the slightest chance, a contagion of distaste, hatred and mockery breaks through to poison his tale'.<sup>26</sup> One only needs to examine a typically lurid example of Cary's writing in the novel to appreciate Achebe's condemnation, as in this description of a party Johnson gives for his friends: 'the demonic appearance of the naked dancers, grinning, shrieking, scowling, or with faces which seemed entirely dislocated, senseless and unhuman, like twisted bags of lard, or burst bladders'.<sup>27</sup> What Achebe and his classmates so astutely identified in 1952 was a continuation, in Cary's novel,

22 Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', p. 2.

23 Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', p. 2.

24 In his essay 'My Home Under Imperial Fire' Achebe sardonically relates that in an article on Joyce Cary in the October 20, 1952, issue of *Time* magazine the novel was described as 'the best novel ever written about Africa', p. 22.

25 Achebe, 'My Home Under Imperial Fire', p. 23.

26 Achebe, 'My Home Under Imperial Fire', p. 24.

27 Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (1939), New York: New Directions, 1989, p. 138.

of the long-established European literary discourses that delineated the African as 'demonic', 'senseless' and 'unhuman'. In her perceptive analysis of Achebe's response to *Mister Johnson*, C. L. Innes has written of Cary: 'His characterization of Africa and Africans can be seen in the context of colonial interests and a whole tradition of colonial writing which contributed to the justification of the colonial presence in Africa.'<sup>28</sup>

Although Achebe had already tentatively begun his career as a writer before reading Cary, the influence of this novel on *Things Fall Apart* was considerable. It may not seem immediately apparent, but Achebe originally wanted his first novel to be an African version of, or response to, Cary's *Mister Johnson*. This becomes more obvious when one recalls that Achebe's first two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, were originally conceived of as one longer narrative that was eventually turned into two separate works during rewriting. Achebe's second novel is set in the contemporary world of 1950s Nigeria and tells the story of Okonkwo's grandson, Obi Okonkwo, who is working as a clerk for the British administration when he is disgraced and prosecuted for accepting bribes. Superficially, at least, it is this narrative that most closely resembles the plot of Cary's *Mister Johnson*, but C. L. Innes also argues that at a thematic level we can discern how *Things Fall Apart* is a direct response to the thematic concerns of Cary's novel, in that it

dramatizes the conflict between intuitive feeling and rigid social codes, between liberalism and conservatism, and between creativity and sterility. As Cary's novel opposes the spontaneous African man of feeling inspired by the romance of European civilization to the iron rule of native conservatism or of European law, so *Things Fall Apart* contrasts Okonkwo's rigidity and refusal to acknowledge feeling (a trait shared by the District Commissioner) with the intuitive knowledge and imaginative sympathy felt by Unoka and Nwoye, which the latter imagines to be a property of the western missionaries. Whereas in Cary's novel these opposing tendencies cluster around European and African respectively, in *Things Fall Apart* they become associated in Okonkwo's mind – and also in the reader's – with masculine and feminine principles.<sup>29</sup>

When both novels are examined side by side, one is struck by the number of shared dramatic scenes, particularly in their portrayals of elaborate betrothal and marriage rituals, traditional forms of governance and communal celebrations. What becomes immediately apparent, though, is that where Cary presents only a superficial picture of Nigerian culture, one that explicitly precludes any sense that it has intelligently conceived traditions or values, Achebe is at pains to represent the complexity and vibrancy of a traditional Igbo culture and its social, religious and intellectual systems. Just as Achebe employs dramatic irony to illuminate the District Commissioner's ignorance of, and indifference to, the culture he is planning to write about at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, so he holds up European

28 Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, p. 16. Another influential critic who has analysed the African novels of Joyce Cary is Abdul JanMohamed, who devotes a chapter to his work in *Manichean Aesthetics*.

29 Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, p. 22.

novels like Cary's *Mister Johnson*, which are manifestly ignorant of the people and cultures they denigrate, as the work of 'thoroughgoing racist[s]'.

While Joyce Cary may have unwittingly provided an exemplar of one European literary tradition for Achebe to assail, the other major literary allusion in the novel is much more overt. The title of Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is taken from W. B. Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' (1921), which also provides the novel's epigraph: '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.' Although writing from a specifically Anglo-Irish perspective, Yeats employed the metaphor of the gyratory flight of an unleashed falcon to signify his notion of the cyclical movements of Western history, which are subject to periodic convulsions as one epoch ends and another begins. He saw the cycle of Graeco-Roman civilization as having been brought to a close by the rise of Christianity, and believed that the violent contemporary paroxysms of the First World War and the Russian Revolution signalled the end of the 2000-year cycle of European Christian civilization, which in turn would be replaced by a system antithetical to it. Achebe appropriates and subverts Yeats' Eurocentric vision of the cyclical motions of history by instead depicting an African civilization which is convulsed and overwhelmed, only this time by the arrival of European Christian colonizers. One can therefore claim that *Things Fall Apart* functions in two distinct ways: first, and most significantly, as a stridently nationalist expression of literary recuperation and (re-)education that aimed to demonstrate to Nigerians that the past was assuredly not an 'antithesis of . . . civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are . . . mocked by triumphant bestiality'. Second, it can also be argued that *Things Fall Apart* was the first African novel to 'write back' to the European centre, expressly contesting and subverting the discourses of colonialism in a literary form (the Anglophone novel set in Africa), which Western writers had persistently employed to perpetuate the disparaging stereotyping of the continent, its people and cultures.

Yeats wrote his poem at a time when he evidently believed that contemporary events (the First World War and the Russian Revolution) were signalling the violent demise of the latest cycle of Western civilization: the poem therefore looks back to a previous rupture in European history (the end of Graeco-Roman civilization and the rise of Christianity) in order to divine the signs of a contemporary schism that would identify an approaching new epoch. It is similarly possible to postulate that, in focusing on a previous historical turning point, Achebe also perceived contemporary events in Nigeria as signalling the inevitable paroxysms that would accompany the end of colonial rule and the birth of the new nation. The epigraph of *Things Fall Apart* quotes the first four lines of Yeats' poem, although his original stanza continues with an apocalyptic description of his own era: 'The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.' Achebe's novel was produced in a historical period that was witnessing both the optimism of an anti-colonial cultural nationalism and the coming into being of the schismatic forces that would rapidly lead to Nigeria's First Republic spiralling into the chaos of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967. It is more than fortuitous that, at a time of epochal historical change, as the British were preparing to relinquish rule in Nigeria, Achebe produced a novel which

looks back to the arrival of the British colonial power, and the irredeemable historical rupture that this event had brought to Igbo civilization, yet which seemingly exhibits an awareness of the cataclysmic changes that were about to be brought about by the end of direct colonial rule. It is this sense of Achebe's Janus-like 'double vision' that makes *Things Fall Apart* such a uniquely prescient work of the 1950s.

## Cultural contexts

Achebe memorably described the experience of growing up in eastern Nigeria in the first half of the twentieth century as living 'at the crossroads of culture', and *Things Fall Apart* can also be considered as a novel which reflects that experience, one in which various cultural and literary 'pathways' converge at a textual 'crossroads'. In elucidating the cultural contexts of *Things Fall Apart* we examine two principal cultural frames of reference: first, we briefly explore the contemporary historical and cultural milieu of the post-war era in Nigeria and the political and cultural nationalism that was a defining feature of the period in which Achebe was writing, before going on to examine the nature of the pre-colonial Igbo culture that provides the crucial contextual background to the drama in the novel.

The years between the Second World War and 1960, when Nigeria became an independent nation, were particularly significant ones in the country's history. This was a period of intense modernization that engendered enormous changes in the social, political and economic landscape of the country. It also witnessed the optimistic culmination of the country's pro-independence nationalist movement and the last years of British colonial rule. Although there had long been concerted opposition to British colonial rule in Nigeria, it was generally restricted to a relatively small section of the population, and usually emanated from the educated elite. It was only the Second World War that proved to be the catalyst for a more widespread Nigerian anti-colonial nationalist movement, as the historian G. O. Olusanya has noted:

Although it is true that political activities had been carried on before the outbreak of war, they were nevertheless not intense considering that there was a great deal to complain of . . . With the outbreak and progress of the war, this lethargic attitude disappeared, and there arose a spate of criticism which increased as the hostilities deepened.<sup>30</sup>

At the outbreak of the war Nigerians initially provided enthusiastic support for the British war effort against Germany and its allies. Despite being a relatively poor country, ordinary Nigerians and their political representatives demonstrated their loyalty to the Allied cause, and its war against the racially supremacist ideologies of the fascists, by making substantial monetary contributions to the war effort and in support of various war-related charities. The country's support

30 G. O. Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria 1939–1953*, Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 1973, p. 51.

for Britain and the Allies was not only financial, however, and by 1941 over 16,000 Nigerians had joined the Nigerian Brigade, part of the British Colonial Forces, which became renowned for its discipline and fighting ability in the war, while even larger numbers of Nigerians were also employed by the British forces in non-combatant roles.

With the loss of a number of Britain's Far Eastern colonies and the consequent loss of sources of supply for raw materials, Nigeria became increasingly important to the war effort as a producer of tin, coal, rubber, foodstuffs and vegetable oils. With the Mediterranean cut off, Nigeria also came to occupy a strategically important position for wartime shipping and became a vital base for aircraft involved in the North Africa campaign. G. O. Olusanya describes the war years as a period of unprecedented development for the country, particularly in terms of its economic infrastructure and demographics:

As a result of this new strategic importance a great deal of activity began. Roads, airfields, harbours, camps, railways – all had to be built, creating a great demand for labour. The towns on which these activities were centred were filled almost overnight with masses of people moving from the rural areas to work in the towns where wages were very high by previous Nigerian standards, and Britain's need for manpower led to the recruitment of many Nigerians into the various branches of the Armed Forces.<sup>31</sup>

Although the war brought about a number of unforeseen benefits in a largely undeveloped country like Nigeria, it also created a great deal of hardship and exacerbated the inequities of life in the colony, which in turn fuelled the determination of nationalists to bring about change.

As the war progressed Nigeria's economy increasingly came under the control of the British government, who attempted to introduce strict production quotas, price controls, wage restraints, and the regulation of imports and exports. The effect of these impositions was felt most strongly among Nigeria's peasant farmers and market traders, and eventually led to conflict with the colonial authorities and a number of serious food shortages in the large cities later in the war. The principal spur for Nigerian nationalism, however, was almost certainly the intellectual climate which was fomenting during the war, as the historian Michael Crowder explains: 'For those Africans who were at all conversant with the language of their colonial masters, the war brought into question the whole fabric of the latter's authority.'<sup>32</sup> The myth of British imperial invincibility was shattered with the Japanese conquest of Britain's Far Eastern colonies, a significant victory by a non-white race. The prestige and aura of the British colonialists was also undermined when African soldiers and civilians began to meet and interact, often for the first time, with white men who were not from the upper classes.<sup>33</sup> Some of

31 Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria 1939–1953*, p. 48.

32 Michael Crowder, 'The 1939–45 War and West Africa' in J. F. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa: Volume Two*, London: Longman, 1974, p. 611.

33 This interaction was experienced not only by African troops serving overseas but also by civilians who came into contact with the estimated 100,000 British troops who were either stationed in, or passed through, West Africa during the war.

the British troops stationed in Africa also held radical political views about their subjugation by the ruling classes, and of the basic immorality of imperialism, which they disseminated to an African audience eager to garner support for their own anti-colonial sentiments. Africans in British colonies also came quickly to realize that one of the principal, and most loudly proclaimed, British justifications for the war – ‘the defence and preservation of freedom and democracy’ – was a noble ideal which was not about to be extended to them as colonial subjects.

The first signs of an intensified nationalist revolt during the war years coalesced around a number of grievances: the deepening economic hardship created by price controls on exports and the increasing cost of imports; the continuing discrimination against Nigerians in all aspects of the British colonial administration and armed forces; and, the obstinate resistance of the colonial power to any political change in the country. One of the most prominent leaders of the nationalist movement during this period was the charismatic and controversial Igbo politician, Nnamdi Azikiwe, whose newspaper the *West African Pilot* became one of the chief mediums for nationalist expression and agitation.<sup>34</sup> The economic hardships facing the country were further exacerbated as the war dragged on, and led to the most significant civil unrest the country had seen in June 1945 when a General Strike was called that lasted for forty-four days and paralysed the country. This unprecedented action by Nigerian workers eventually achieved significant concessions from the colonial government. Azikiwe and the other nationalists championed the cause of the striking workers and gave strong support for the Nigerian Trades Union Congress through their newspapers, and resulted in the nationalists recruiting large numbers of workers and trade unionists to their cause.

With the end of the war came an increase in nationalist agitation for change in the colony, although it was a distinct feature of the Nigerian independence movement that it did not produce any single revolutionary leader, like the neighbouring Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, who could unify the country behind a radical nationalist political agenda. Indeed, the historian Olajide Aluko has gone so far as to claim that in the post-war years ‘the Nigerian struggle for independence was, on the whole, non-violent and unheroic’, and that the struggle ‘was largely a verbal one. Newspaper agitation, petitions, violent verbal threats in political rallies and meetings were the weapons the nationalists employed to put pressure on the Colonial Government.’<sup>35</sup> Even when a politically militant organization advocating violent resistance to colonial rule did emerge, as it did in the late 1940s with the Zikist Movement, it was effectively disowned by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the very leader who had inspired the movement’s name.<sup>36</sup> The Zikists did manage to attract a considerable following among the young and disaffected, for a short period at least, and they organized a series of strikes, boycotts of British imported goods, and other forms of protest and civil disobedience. They were also to play

34 In a vast and often inaccessible country like Nigeria newspapers became a vital medium for the dissemination of news and political ideas, one that the nationalists effectively exploited to mobilize public support for their cause. During this period there were around eighteen independently produced newspapers on sale in the country.

35 Olajide Aluko, ‘Politics of Decolonisation in British West Africa, 1945–1960’ in J. F. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa: Volume Two*, London: Longman, 1974, p. 636.

36 Aluko, ‘Politics of Decolonisation in British West Africa, 1945–1960’, p. 635.

an important part in the country's most violent uprising of the post-war years, which occurred in November 1949 when twenty striking miners at the Enugu Colliery in eastern Nigeria were killed by police, with many more seriously injured. The Zikists were largely responsible for organizing a series of demonstrations and riots in nearly all the major cities across Nigeria in protest at the police brutality and the indifference of the colonial administration. The end of the movement was to come swiftly, however, when in February 1950 a leading Zikist attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate Hugh Foot, the Chief Secretary of the government, which led to the organization being banned and its leaders imprisoned. All of the fervent nationalist agitation of the post-war years did eventually lead to concessions from the colonial government, who introduced a new constitution and legislature in 1951. Although the changes were widely held to be unsatisfactory, from 1951 onwards the character of the nationalist struggle in the country changed, becoming largely non-violent and based on the agitation of constitutional political parties, as Olajide Aluko states: 'Under the new constitution . . . the struggle for independence was conducted mainly through constructive, and constitutional, agitation. This was to characterise the succeeding years until independence was gained in 1960.'<sup>37</sup>

The immense changes that took place in the political, economic and social circumstances in the country during the post-war years also generated an unprecedented sense of national idealism. One of Achebe's contemporaries who has recently written about this period is the noted Nigerian theorist and critic Abiola Irele, who was also a student at University College, Ibadan, during the decade:

The formal end of Nigeria's colonial status to which we all looked forward duly took place on the first of October 1960. In the ten years or so before that event, Nigeria went through a process of transformation of such magnitude that the period can be considered a truly momentous one – possibly, from the social point of view, the most significant – in the country's history. Constitutional changes leading to internal self-government provided the political setting for a determined modernizing effort marked by extensive economic initiatives, an effort that was epitomized by the tremendous expansion of education . . . The period thus witnessed a social revolution that has had far-reaching effects. But the most distinctive feature of the time was psychological in its nature and effect, marked by a powerful release of energies that contributed to the euphoria of the times, a distinct collective feeling that swept the country. We were keenly conscious of being engaged in a historic process; we were recovering the existential initiative that colonial rule had denied us.<sup>38</sup>

Although the decade ended with Nigeria's independence celebrations in 1960, the legacy of almost a century of British imperialism had been profound. Colonialism

37 Aluko, 'Politics of Decolonisation in British West Africa, 1945–1960', p. 639.

38 Irele, *The African Imagination*, pp. 180–181.



and the struggle for self-determination and decolonization were to become crucial issues for a number of Nigerian writers during this era, as they attempted to articulate, for the first time, a sense of the historical, political, social and cultural topography of their newly emerging nation. Being consciously 'engaged in a historical process' of collective psychological recovery meant reconnecting with the traditional African cultures that colonialism had done so much to denigrate. As Irele makes clear, the independence movement generated a 'powerful release of energies' through an affirmatory form of cultural nationalism, one that was manifested in contemporary literature as a conscious search for new forms of identity, capable of embracing traditional cultures within the context of a modern African nation state. In terms of Nigeria's subsequent history, the 1950s almost represents a golden age, an era of extraordinary energy, optimism and modernization which has rarely been equalled since.

The question of Achebe's personal subjectivity during this period becomes a crucial feature for an understanding of his narratological perspective in *Things Fall Apart*. In his essay 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1973) Achebe describes how he was brought up in a devoutly Christian family which had 'tended to look down on others . . . The others we called, with the conceit appropriate to followers of the true religion, the heathen or even "the people of nothing"'.<sup>39</sup> This sense of the superiority of Christian culture over traditional Igbo culture was not restricted to the realm of the spiritual, as Achebe goes on to concede: 'the bounties of the Christian God were not to be taken lightly – education, paid jobs and many other advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate'.<sup>40</sup> Achebe became one of the first of a new generation of Nigeria's Westernized educated elite to emerge after the Second World War, predominantly the products of the missionary school system, who had subsequently gone on to be educated in universities in their homeland rather than in Britain. This was a generation who apparently valued their own Christian upbringing and Western education yet who came to question and rebel against what was perceived as the previous generation's acquiescence to colonialism's Manichaean view of Africa's indigenous cultures (see *Texts and contexts*, p. 13). Simon Gikandi makes a similar assessment of Achebe's generation when he writes: 'the sons and daughters of the Igbo Christians who had renounced African traditions would become writers and nationalists bent on recovering and re-valoring the traditions their fathers had denounced and desecrated'.<sup>41</sup>

Achebe was later to describe, in a suitably Christian phraseology, the *raison d'être* for his first novel: 'Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son'.<sup>42</sup> Achebe's growing recognition of his indigenous cultural heritage during this period can be understood as a conscious development, one which he describes as having broader political antecedents: 'The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which

39 Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', p. 20.

40 Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', p. 20.

41 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, p. 15.

42 Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', p. 25.

began to reconcile us to ourselves.<sup>43</sup> Achebe was evidently also aware that his Euro-Christian upbringing and sensibility had created a dislocation with the history and traditions of his own Igbo culture. *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, became the work of a 'prodigal son', one who sought to recover and explore this denigrated history and culture in his fiction. This sense in which Achebe exhibits his double cultural awareness is crucial to the way the novel develops its realist style, and will be the subject of further discussions later in this book.

The second cultural frame of reference that needs to be explored, in order to achieve a fuller engagement with the novel, is the pre-colonial culture of the Igbo society that provides the contextual background for all of the drama in the novel. It is one of Achebe's significant achievements, in such a concise work as *Things Fall Apart*, that he manages to convey, in such vivid terms, a sense of the lives and sensibilities of the people and the culture that he writes about. One of the central ideological justifications of the British colonial enterprise was the replacement of the presumed anarchic 'savagery' of African societies with a form of 'civilization' based on the contemporary British models of capitalism, governance, education and Christianity. What the colonizers failed to understand was that African societies, such as that of the Igbos, already had highly evolved systems of agriculture, trade, religion and individual and collective democracy, as Robert M. Wren states: 'They saw only that the people were maddeningly difficult to deal with, proud, confident, self-satisfied, disinclined to proper humility, disdainful of any authority save their own, apparently indifferent even to their own leaders.'<sup>44</sup> Achebe succeeds in depicting Umuofia as an ordered and sophisticated society that has a complex juridical system, an acephalous form of egalitarian democracy, a highly developed religious belief-system and elaborate moral and ethical codes. By characterizing Umuofia as a civil society that has evolved a sophisticated culture, Achebe subverts the view that such societies are 'primitive', in the term's pejorative sense, and instead asserts the notion that this was, in reality, an advanced culture that displayed little in the way of 'savagery'. Achebe is careful, however, not to portray Umuofia as some form of idyllic pre-colonial utopia, for he is also clearly critical of some of the culture's practices and prohibitions.

*Things Fall Apart* is set in Igboland in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when Britain was in the process of colonizing the territories that it had been allocated at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–85, where West Africa was effectively carved up between the European nations. Igboland was located in what is now south-eastern Nigeria, and spread across a large area on both banks of the River Niger (known in Igbo as *Orimili* – the great river), from which the country derives its name. Igboland was predominantly an agrarian society that was organized into distinct districts, typically made up of a number of village groupings, with populations that could sometimes approach ten thousand people. The Igbos were estimated to be one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa at this time, and today number over twenty million. What was distinctive about the Igbos' social and political organization was that it was traditionally a very egalitarian and democratic society, one that historically had no rulers with autocratic

43 Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', p. 25.

44 Wren, *Achebe's World*, p. 18.

powers, either centrally or at a local level. The democratic nature of Igbo society was coupled with an encouragement of healthy individual and group rivalry and an emphasis on individual accomplishment. It was a society that was delineated by a patriarchal class system: with free-born men (*amadi*) at the top, slaves (*obu*) in the middle, and an ostracized class of untouchables who had been dedicated to a deity (*osu*) at the bottom.<sup>45</sup> A system of titles was bestowed on men, based on an individual's achievements and personal success, as a sign of their status and rank in their communities. This was not a unitary hierarchy, however, for other social groups and allegiances within the society created a system of checks and balances. Age was particularly revered in traditional Igbo society, and everyone belonged to a horizontal system of kinship groups based on their age. One of the most important decision-making groups in Igbo society was the *ndichie*, a group of the eldest titled men. When important decisions were to be made, as in *Things Fall Apart* when war is being contemplated, the *ndichie* would convene a meeting of all the men in the clan to decide what should be the community's response. As Achebe also shows, the Igbo system of exogamous marriage meant that everyone had a further web of interlinking relationships based on their home village and the birthplace of their mothers and wives, along with the villages that their sisters and brothers had married into.

This striving for a 'balance' between opposing forces in the social realm is also an important aspect of Igbo thinking in the wider context. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the Igbo proverb *Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya* (Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it). In Igbo thought, nothing can exist in its own terms, for wherever something exists there will always be a complementary or opposing force beside it, and this is particularly evident in Igbo cosmology and ontology. The Igbo conception of the cosmos can be characterized as dualistic, with an otherworldly domain coexisting with the phenomenal world of people, animals, plants, and things. The otherworldly domain is the realm of the Igbo's pantheon of deities (*alusi*), the ancestors, and various benevolent and malevolent spirits. The world of the living is in a constant interactive relationship with the otherworld, with human and supernatural spirits travelling back and forth between the two. This spiritual realm of undisclosed realities is mediated by diviners and priests, through the various cultic and ritual practices (divination, masked performances and possession trances) that are characteristic of Igbo religious culture.

Among the Igbo's numerous *alusi*, a number are referred to in *Things Fall Apart*: the most important is the ineffable *Chukwu*, the Supreme God, while some of the other deities who are mentioned are *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves; *Ufejioku*, the god of the harvest (and yams in particular); *Amadiora*, the god of thunderbolts; *Ogwugwu*, the giver and protector of life; and *Idemili*, the river goddess, who is honoured with a sacred python. Undoubtedly, however, the most important and influential deity in the novel is *Ani*, the Earth goddess, who is the arbiter of ethical conduct. Individual religious worship involves the performance of certain prescribed rituals, songs, libations and sacrifices at famil-

45 These were the particular Igbo terms for these classes in the Ogidi district where Achebe grew up, according to Wren, *Achebe's World*, p. 23.

ial and communal shrines dedicated to particular deities, while priests who were dedicated to individual deities perform rites and sacrifices at shrines to their gods and at sacred sites in the bush. As Achebe shows in his characterization of *Agbala's* priestess Chielo in *Things Fall Apart*, the role of priestess is one of the few roles open to women in Umuofian society where they can attain a powerful position in the community. He tells us that Chielo, as the human representative of the Oracle, is consulted in times of misfortune and dispute, when someone wants to know what the future may bring, or when they wish to consult with the spirits of their departed ancestors. In the social power structure, priests and priestesses play a crucial role as human intermediaries between the phenomenal world and the spiritual realm.

Ancestor worship is a central aspect of Igbo culture for they believe that if a person dies having lived a good life, and their families perform the appropriate funeral rites, that they are able to join the clan's powerful ancestors in the afterlife, where they take an active interest in the living members of their family. A belief in reincarnation is also an important aspect of Igbo cosmology, for they hold that if an ancestor is well cared for in the afterlife by their living relatives, they may take on new human bodies and be reborn as the loving children of their former sons and daughters. This movement between the worlds can also have a pernicious side, as in the scene in *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma is suspected of being an *ogbanje*, a wicked spirit-child who masquerades as a human baby, only to repeatedly die and be reborn, causing grief and mischief among the living. Perhaps one of the most dramatic examples of the interaction between the ancestors and their living descendants in the novel occurs when Achebe describes the masked *egwugwu*, the physical manifestations of the clan's ancestors, when they visit the clan at times of dispute and danger.

A personal choice of destiny is also a central notion in the Igbos' ontological tradition. They believe that each individual chooses a destiny before their birth, and that this destiny is witnessed by one's *chi*, a guiding spirit or personal god who accompanies each person at all times. In this sense the *chi* is akin to a 'god within' who can aid or hinder a person in their lives. The choice of destiny that each person makes often compensates for their circumstances in their previous life. Crucially, at the moment of incarnation a person loses all knowledge of their chosen destiny, which remains irrevocable. This amnesia ensures that an individual's predestined success or failure in life does not deter the person from striving to achieve the best possible life, as only their *chi* is privy to what their ultimate destiny will be. In this sense one is, and is not, in control of one's destiny. This uncertainty is demonstrated in two well-known, but apparently opposing, Igbo maxims: 'if a man says "yes" strongly enough, his *chi* will say "yes" too'; while on the other hand, 'a man could not rise above the destiny of his *chi*.' Where one might consider that the ambiguity surrounding one's destiny might tend to induce a fatalistic viewpoint, in Igbo culture this generally does not occur, due largely to the importance the culture places on personal achievement and success. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's powerful affirmation convinces him that his own *chi* was good, yet his own actions undermine his personal achievements, and in the end the narrator states 'Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation' (Ch.14, p. 94).

One of the first issues that Achebe addresses in *Things Fall Apart* is the problem of how to represent the traditional culture of Umuofia, which was a non-literate,

oral culture. For those who have grown up in a literate culture it is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage a world in which all information and knowledge is conveyed and preserved only in an oral medium. A number of critics have persuasively argued that the first part of the novel, in particular, is an attempt to replicate an oral discourse in a literary medium.<sup>46</sup> While Achebe's prose lacks the kind of unmediated connection to an oral discourse that is evident in earlier novels by other Nigerian authors such as D. O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola, nevertheless it is clear that one of the dominant narrative strategies employed in the text reveals a close filiation with Igbo orality. The first part of the novel can be understood, therefore, as an attempt to replicate, in a novelistic form, the circumlocutory rhetorical techniques ('skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally') that are an integral part of the oral culture that is being represented. Abdul JanMohamed argues, in an essay included in this volume, that the narrative and style in the first section of the novel are actually 'a syncretic combination of chirographic and oral techniques . . . the style represents in writing the syntax and thought patterns of oral cultures'.<sup>47</sup> In this analysis, therefore, it becomes significant that with the arrival of the white man, and his chirographic (literate) culture, the narrative loses much of its circularity, and the linear progression of the plot becomes much more dominant in the final two parts of the novel.

This circuitous narrative trajectory is not immediately apparent at the beginning of the novel, however, and *Things Fall Apart* opens with one of the most celebrated passages in African literature:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.

(Ch. 1, p. 3)

Achebe's prose in *Things Fall Apart* is immediately recognizable for its economy of style, with its short, uncomplicated sentence structures and lucid vocabulary. David Cook describes Achebe's style in the novel as 'direct, unclotted, [and] classically stark'.<sup>48</sup> The effect of this prose style is to create a flat surface that is

46 See JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism'; Innes, *Chinua Achebe*; and Irele, *The African Imagination*.

47 JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism', p. 30.

48 David Cook, *African Literature: A Critical View*, London: Longman, 1977, p. 76.

accentuated by Achebe's general eschewal of opaque and poetic language in the novel. This flat prose style is underscored further by his use of a third-person narrator and his tendency to portray characters without resorting to psychologically revealing interiority or narrative devices like the monologue. The narrative instead relies on the juxtaposition, accretion and repetition of various kinds of details to emphasize particular aspects of his characterization and to create meaning in the text. Significant descriptions and details are often reiterated at various points in the narrative. For example, Okonkwo's temper and propensity for violence are first introduced in the third paragraph of the novel: 'he did pounce on people quite often . . . and whenever he was angry . . . he would use his fists' (Ch, 1, p. 3); and are repeated in the next chapter: 'Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives . . . lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children' (Ch, 2, p. 9); and again in Chapter 4: 'Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness . . . He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else – with a heavy hand' (Ch. 4, p. 20).

The influence of Igbo orality on the language and prose of the novel is also evident in the way Achebe regularly introduces Igbo expressions and proverbs into the text, while at other times the narrator repeats or echoes those used by Okonkwo, Obierika, and others. Igbo expressions are also often used as descriptive devices in the novel, as when Okonkwo's fame is said to have 'grown like a bush-fire in the Harmattan' (Ch. 1, p. 3), while proverbs introduce aspects of Igbo epistemology and occasionally function as a form of explanatory meta-narrative, as when he states that 'proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten' (Ch. 1, p. 5). Achebe also freely incorporates the indigenous language of the Igbo throughout the novel, as in this description of Unoka: 'He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*' (Ch. 1, p. 5). Achebe occasionally provides an explication of Igbo words in the text, while at other times he includes Igbo expressions without any explanation or translation.<sup>49</sup> An example of this occurs when the young boy Ikemefuna is being led into the bush to be killed and he remembers a song from his childhood:

*Eze elina, elina!*  
*Sala*  
*Eze ilikwa ya*  
*Ikwaba akwa oligholi*  
*Ebe Danda nechi eze*  
*Ebe Uzuzu nete egwu*  
*Sala* (Ch. 7, p. 42)

Unaware of his intended fate (and deceived into thinking he is being returned to his home village), the boy is walking to the beat of the song and decides that if it ends on his right foot then his mother is alive, and if on the left then she is dead, or

<sup>49</sup> Achebe provided no translation of Igbo words and expressions in the first edition of the novel. However, later editions of the novel in Heinemann's African Writers Series included an explanatory glossary.

ill. The lyrics to the song are left untranslated as they are equivalent to a nursery rhyme that makes little sense in English, but more importantly it would distract from the mood of uncertainty and tension which are so deftly developed by Achebe in this scene.

It is important to stress that Achebe's transposition of oral discursive material into the novel is not purely for the sake of 'authenticity', although it clearly performs a task of cultural definition and differentiation. In traditional oral cultures many of these discursive elements (proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, epigrams, etc.) perform crucial epistemological functions: as repositories of communal wisdom and knowledge, as mnemonic devices for effective communication, and as educational tools. As *Things Fall Apart* makes abundantly clear, these functions are also capable of being transferred to the written text, particularly when they are incorporated on the scale that Achebe manages in the novel. In her influential essay on the effects of incorporating Igbo oral material into Anglophone novels, the linguist Chantal Zabus describes the 'discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material', which are transposed into Igbo Anglophone novels, as constituting an 'ethno-text'.<sup>50</sup> Zabus argues that the grafting of an Igbo ethno-text onto the novel creates an 'indigenization' of the 'European medium'.<sup>51</sup> Several of the elements of the Igbo ethno-text which Achebe syncretically incorporates into the novel form, such as mythopoeia (the making of myths), periphrasis (a roundabout way of speaking), parataxis (the placing of clauses one after another without words to indicate coordination or subordination), and non-linear structure, also have the effect of introducing a non-realist discourse into the medium of the realist novel. The subtle interface between the oral and the written, a 'textualized orality', which Achebe achieves in *Things Fall Apart* is, therefore, paradoxical. On the one hand, it portrays an Igbo reality which is seemingly 'unmediated' and 'authentic' in its representation, yet it is decidedly unlike the archetypal Western realist novel, which has historically distanced itself from its original archaic roots in Europe's oral traditions and the oral epic form.

As is clear from the preceding extract from the novel, *Things Fall Apart* opens with a description of Okonkwo which foregrounds his 'heroic' persona, initially describing his defeat of the renowned wrestler Amalinze the Cat, and then linking him with the legend of the eponymous founder of the town, who had engaged in a wrestling competition with 'a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights'. The novel begins with a narrative voice that appears to be recounting the well-known myth of a local hero to an audience who share the narrator's sphere of knowledge and experience. The first sentence states that Okonkwo is renowned 'throughout the nine villages and even beyond', without defining which villages are being referred to, and vaguely suggesting that his fame has even spread to the wider world. It is as if the narrative voice is addressing an audience who are both familiar with the local environment, and who have a shared belief that the world outside this locale is of little significance, belonging simply to that indeterminate

50 Chantal Zabus, 'The Logos-Eaters: The Igbo Ethno-Text' in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds), *Chimua Achebe: A Celebration*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 20.

51 Zabus, 'The Logos-Eaters', p. 19.

realm 'beyond'. The suggestion is that this is the voice of a member of Okonkwo's community, whose subjectivity is that of the cultural 'insider'.

If the resemblances to an oral discourse, and the subjectivity of the narrative voice, in the first part of *Things Fall Apart* indicate an insider's intimate knowledge of Umuofian society, then the other principal manifestation of the narrative voice in the text counters this notion. Throughout the novel, the narrator regularly interrupts the narrative with explanatory observations, such as: 'among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father' (Ch. 1, p. 5); 'Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them' (Ch. 2, p. 7); 'The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them . . . A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors' (Ch. 17, p. 109). Such interpolations suggest that the narrative voice occasionally shifts to that of an external observer, a perspective that implies a cultural distancing from the traditional society being scrutinized. In these passages, and particularly in the last example quoted, the narrative perspective becomes explicitly self-distancing and ethnographical in its focus and intent. The Nigerian critic David Ker perceptively observes that 'Umuofia is simultaneously "they" and "we" and this subtle combination of detachment and participation helps Achebe to manipulate point of view.'<sup>52</sup> Achebe's fascination and identification with traditional Igbo culture is balanced by an awareness that his modern Christian upbringing and education have also created a dislocation from the indigenous world that he seeks to represent in *Things Fall Apart*. The subtle manipulation of narrative voice in the novel, which oscillates between the 'authenticity' of the cultural insider and the 'objectivity' of the hybridized outsider, becomes the principal dialectic that informs Achebe's 'realist' representations of the pre-colonial history, culture and traditions of the Igbo of Umuofia.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel which looks back elegiacally at this pre-colonial culture and to the epochal changes wrought by British colonialism, yet it is also a text which looks forward to the future, inscribed with both the idealism and the anxieties of the decade in which it was written. This introduction to the life of Chinua Achebe and the historical, literary and cultural contexts of the novel has considered a number of significant issues, and raised important questions about the text, that will be explored in more detail in our next section, where we discuss the history of the critical reception of the novel. In Part 3 we include essays and excerpts from the work of a number of the critics that we discuss in the first two parts, and in Part 4 we make suggestions for further reading on all of the topics we cover.

52 David Ker, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition*, New York: Lang, 1997, p. 136.





2

## **Critical history**



## Introduction and early critical reception

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is now so firmly established as part of the African literary canon taught in schools, colleges and universities around the world that one might be tempted to think that its status has always been assured and indisputable. In fact, that could not be further from the truth, as a careful study of the early critical work on the novel reveals some deeply held antipathy towards it. It is notable that writing in 1959 and while lauding the authenticity of the novel, Ben Obumsele criticized it for its failure to capture the spirit of the African village, arguing that: 'I am in particular disappointed that there is in *Things Fall Apart* so little of the lyricism which marks our village life.'<sup>1</sup> Obumsele also accuses Achebe of merely imitating a European artistic form rather than imaginatively transforming it, imbuing it with an African flavour, arguing that:

The form of the novel ought to have shown some awareness of the art of the culture. We do not have the novel form, of course, but there are implications in our music, sculpture and folklore which the West African novelist cannot neglect if he wishes to do more than merely imitate a European fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, the general view that *Things Fall Apart* is a paradigm *par excellence* of the use of African oral culture in postcolonial novelistic practice was not shared by some of the novel's early critics. Apart from illustrating the fact that the novel has not always enjoyed universal acclaim, Obumsele's observations highlight what will be one of the key issues in subsequent discussions of the novel, namely, the question of the novel's cultural and political authenticity, a concern evident, for instance, in most postcolonial critical approaches to the text.

It is worth noting that Obumsele was also one of the earliest critics to highlight the question of language in the novel, remarking that

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1 Ben Obumsele, reprinted in Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards 1947–1966*, Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1988, p. 88.

2 Obumsele in Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 88.

The verbal peculiarities of *Things Fall Apart* suggest that Chinua Achebe has reflected much on this problem. His solution is to attempt literal fidelity, to translate wherever possible the actual words which might have been used in his own language and thereby preserve the native flavour of his situations. Such an experiment requires both imagination and originality. And though Mr. Achebe does not carry it off with distinction, he does so with credit. His experiment is a very positive contribution to the writing of West African English literature, and I believe it will make the work of subsequent authors easier.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Obumsele does more than represent the early reception of the novel, and a lukewarm one for that matter, he also focuses on some key problems in the subsequent critical reception of the novel and, briefly summarized, these are: the question of the authenticity of the novel's language, of its form and its world-view. These issues will cut across critical approaches, uniting Marxists (see Critical history, pp. 62–64) and Leavisites (critics influenced by the work of F. R. Leavis who concentrate on the civilizing and moral virtues of literature), for instance, and also polarizing critical friend and foe, as within a shared approach critics disagree as to the degree of the novel's embodiment of the privileged values of their conceptual framework. It is perhaps this quality of critical untidiness that makes the task of summarizing the critical history of *Things Fall Apart* not only a daunting one, but also a challenge to conventional literary historiography.

A simple way of organizing the discussion would entail tracing the criticism of the novel from an unsophisticated, and even naïve reception, focusing on the question of cultural conflict, through a concern with the novel's universality which is often elaborated in terms of the novel's comparability with Western literary forms and styles such as Aristotelian Tragedy or the Homeric Epic and even nineteenth-century Realism as well as the modernist writing of Joseph Conrad and W. B. Yeats.<sup>4</sup> Then one could arrange the subsequent criticism around the preoccupation with the question of the orality of the novel and its gender ideology. Lastly, one could conclude with the contemporary postcolonial approach in which questions of ideology and nation-formation, as well as the general problem of the novel's semiosis of representation, are foregrounded. This is a helpful structure so long as it is accompanied by an awareness that the seemingly disparate critical approaches and issues in fact do overlap considerably.

In addition to those specified above, in general, the critical reception of *Things Fall Apart* has predominantly been organized around the problem of mode, genre and style. Viewed from this perspective, an elaborate coverage of the approaches to the novel must of necessity not only cover the chronological lineaments of the critical terrain, but also call attention to fundamental aspects of the text, to which

3 Obumsele in Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 43.

4 By 'Aristotelian Tragedy' we refer to the view advanced by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, that Tragedy is about the downfall of a hero through a combination of his own inner flaws and fate. By 'Homeric Epics' we refer to the works of Homer, such as the *Odysey* and the *Iliad*, which often dramatize in verse battles between heroes fighting on behalf of their nations or communities. 'Nineteenth-century Realism' is a term usually employed to describe the novels of writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Jane Austen, all of whom were concerned with making their fictional worlds resemble as much as possible the actual world in which their works were set.

critics attend and which spill over the boundaries of their particular critical affiliations or dispositions. Our argument is that despite massive differences of opinion among Achebe's critics, it is evident that the abiding question they have been raising has been: what kind of text is *Things Fall Apart*, in terms of style, mode and meaning? We will thus be applying the same principle to the critics and their work by asking: what kind of critics are they and what particular type of criticism about the novel do they produce? In addition, how does a given approach differ from its own critical kind as well as others?

## Authenticity and the question of universality

It must be admitted that despite some misgivings about the novel, such as those expressed by Ben Obumsele, one thing that is certain is that between the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 and the 1962 conference on 'African Writers of English Expression', held at the University of Makerere in Kampala, Uganda, there was a general consensus that the novel was a radical departure from the way Africa and Africans had been represented in literature in the past. Even Obumsele had to admit, grudgingly perhaps, that: '*Things Fall Apart* will be seen as a first novel, not simply in the personal sense, but in the more important sense that it is the first English novel in which the life and institutions of a West African people is (*sic*) presented from the inside.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, the novel was generally perceived as authentic, not only as representing a real indigenous view of African subjects and their world, but also as doing so in a language that reflected that cultural context accurately. G. Adali Mortty, writing in 1959, puts the matter succinctly, asserting that Achebe

knows and uses English with consummate skill . . . His language has the ring and rhythm of poetry. At the background of the words can be heard the thrumming syncopation of the sound of Africa – the gongs, the drums, the castanets and the horns.<sup>6</sup>

This position was refined and developed further by Gerald Moore in *Seven African Writers* (1962), where he commends the novel for presenting an objective and realistic view of African traditional life that eschews the idealization found in Negritude writing, a movement principally associated with the work of Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire that began in the 1930s, and which sought to promote Black culture in all its diversity. He writes:

Camara Laye . . . looked back upon the vanishing life of his childhood with a gentle and somewhat idealizing eye. At about the same time another young African [Chinua Achebe] was also looking back; back to the life of his tribe before the first white man sent it reeling from its delicate equilibrium. His distinction is to have done so without any trace

5 Obumsele in Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 43.

6 G. Adali Mortty quoted in Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 43.

either of chauvinistic idealism or of neurotic rejection, those twin poles of so much African mythologizing. Instead, he has recreated for us a way of life which has almost disappeared, and has done so with understanding, with justice and with realism.<sup>7</sup>

There is an interesting shift here in the conception of realism, from its connotation of cultural authenticity in Obumselu to that of *verisimilitude* ('being true to life'). In this context, it is opposed to idealism, and even romanticism, as well as mythology, signifying a concern with the stuff of the everyday life in a manner that is believably true. As Moore puts it:

It is here that the novelist's manner is all important. Achebe's brief, almost laconic style, his refusal to justify, explain or condemn, are responsible for a good deal of the book's success. The novelist *presents* to us a picture of traditional Ibo life as just as he can make it. The final judgment of that life, as of the life which replaced it, is left to us. Only Achebe insists that we should see it as lived by plausible men and women before we dismiss it, with the usual shrug, as nothing but ignorance, darkness and death. His people win, and deservedly win, our full respect as individuals whose life had dignity, significance and positive value.<sup>8</sup>

Moore is to some extent deploying the idea of mimesis, or imitation, as cultural authenticity as espoused by Mortty and Obumselu, but his overall concern is with the notion of art as imitation of life elaborated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle argued that true art, especially as represented by Classical Tragedy, imitated only the actions of men and women that were *probable* in the real world. It is thus the plausibility of the life represented in the novel that endows the universe of *Things Fall Apart* with its authenticity. Significantly, in this respect, the novel's claim to authenticity is not merely a matter of the character of the world that it represents, but rather of the style or manner in which that world is represented. For Moore, it is this quality that primarily distinguishes the 'nostalgic realism' of Achebe's novel from the 'nostalgic idealism' of Camara Laye's *African Child* (1954).<sup>10</sup> This is very much the notion of realism as style, as distinct from that of realism as *Weltanschauung* ('world-view'), often used together with the former sense and sometimes separately by critics in the study of *Things Fall Apart*. It is helpful to bear the two senses of the word in mind in order to tell apart some of the critics who appear to be lauding the novel or indeed criticizing it seemingly on the same criterion of realism. Indeed, it is not unusual for critics to confuse the two categories in the pursuit of a single argument.

In fact, Moore himself does shift from the use of realism as style to realism as world-view, regarding the novel as presenting an anthropological reality, thereby subscribing, albeit from a slightly different angle, to Mortty's and Obumselu's

7 Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers*, Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 58.

8 Moore, *Seven African Writers*, p. 59. Note that older books use 'Ibo' instead of the contemporary spelling 'Igbo'.

9 Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. Stephen Halliwell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

10 For the contrast, see Moore, *Seven African Writers*, pp. 57–59.

perception of the novel as culturally authentic. He notes, for instance, that: 'Okonkwo is a real Iboman, utterly convincing in his character and reactions. He is virile, proud and fearless, with a personal dignity and a complete vulgarity which not all his descendants have retained in their struggle to gain other things.'<sup>11</sup> For Moore then, Okonkwo, the character, is a real Igbo man. It is this sleight-of-hand switch from a fictional character to an historical people that has lain at the bottom of most of the critical confusion surrounding Chinua Achebe's novel, to the point where sometimes the activities of Okonkwo have been attributed to the author himself. Though, to be fair, Gerald Moore is not that sort of critic. Nevertheless he so unashamedly consorts with this particular critical opinion that he could be easily mistaken for a card-carrying member. In a passage where he offers a commentary on the wrestling match between Ikezue and Okafo, without any sense of irony, he proceeds to suggest that Achebe's description is true to life, remarking that:

A scene like this expresses perfectly the strength and cohesion of tribal life. Anyone who has witnessed such a match, or any genuine tribal ceremony involving a large crowd, will have experienced the intense cumulative excitement of the hour, followed by a sensation of complete emotional exhaustion as the climax passes.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, realism is not simply a property of the text; it is also a matter of the text's effect on real readers in the real world. Thus, the Aristotelian notion of 'probability' is hereby replaced with the idea of 'affective actuality', with the critic's own individual emotional experience of the text as the touchstone of its 'mimetic authenticity'. This kind of approach reduces the critical appreciation of *Things Fall Apart* to a matter of individual taste or sensibility. There is also within this approach the suggestion that a good text will universally evoke similar feelings. Universalism is the view that certain ideas or concepts are true of all societies regardless of time and culture. Thus, while Moore is keen to show how the wrestling scene is particular to Igbo society, within the terms of his approach, he cannot leave matters there and so he generalizes the feelings evoked by the Igbo ceremony to any similar event anywhere in the world. Evidently, Moore is exhibiting the universalizing tendency that was at the heart of much of the early criticism of *Things Fall Apart* and which will underpin, in varying degrees, the general thrust of the subsequent critical analysis of the novel.

Worth highlighting as well is Moore's early recognition of the value of seeing Okonkwo as a tragic figure in the Aristotelian sense, though he does not overtly acknowledge it: 'although Okonkwo dominates the book, he is presented as a tragic rather than a typical figure', and refers to the reversal of fortune Okonkwo undergoes as evidence of the 'capriciousness of fate'.<sup>13</sup> However, he does not develop this insight sufficiently to be described as a neo-Aristotelian critic, leaving the full treatment of Okonkwo as a tragic hero to later critics. Nevertheless, this form of universalizing the specificity of *Things Fall Apart* can also serve as a way

11 Moore, *Seven African Writers*, p. 60.

12 Moore, *Seven African Writers*, p. 62.

13 Moore, *Seven African Writers*, pp. 60–62.



of appropriating African literature for Western cultural interests and even political ones, for that matter. It is noticeable that Moore introduces some particularly European nationalist distinctions in the study of African literature. The characterization of the Francophone novelist Camara Laye as 'nostalgically romantic' and the Anglophone Achebe as a true son of Aristotle, so to speak, belies the extension of European perceptions of each other's national character to the subjects of their respective colonies. What Moore offers is an instance of the reproduction of Englishness into the practice of critical judgment, but one that retrieves the radical Africanist message of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for a specifically European cultural tribal war. Thus, Achebe's 'sensible' and 'balanced' approach is viewed as quintessentially a superior achievement of the abiding English sensibility in British colonies, something perceived as not quite there in Francophone African literature, perhaps as a result of its roots in a perceived Gaelic excess of expression!

## Nationalist approaches

It may have been this attempt to read *Things Fall Apart* as an extension of the English novel, as exemplified by Moore, that partly inspired the rise of the nationalist school of literary criticism in Africa, starting with Obiajunwa Wali's intervention at the 1962 conference at Makerere, and culminating in Ngugi's hybrid Marxist-nationalist rejection of European languages as appropriate for the writing of African literature in the 1980s. Nationalist approaches generally tend to see culture and literature as the expression of a particular national identity. Indeed, in his essay 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' (1962), Chinua Achebe himself had expressed considerable disquiet over the growing tendency to incorporate African literature uncritically into European critical methods. As he puts it:

No, we are not opposed to criticism, but we are getting a little weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited. Perhaps being unused to the in-fighting which is part of the racket of European and American literary criticism, we tend to be unduly touchy . . . [One critic] said the trouble with what we have written so far is that it has concentrated too much on society and not sufficiently on individual characters and as a result it has lacked 'true' aesthetic proportions. I wondered when this *truth* became so self-evident and who decided that (unlike the other self-evident truth) this one should apply to black as well as white. It is all the cocksureness which I find so very annoying.<sup>14</sup>

In a later essay, 'Colonialist Criticism' (1975), Achebe phrases his position as a call for cultural humility on the part of Western critics when he says:

14 Chinua Achebe, 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' (1962) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*, London: Heinemann, 1975, pp. 46–47.

In 1962 I published an essay, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, in which I suggested that the European critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the African world and be purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to. That article, though couched in very moderate terms, won for me quite a few bitter enemies.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, Achebe's concern with colonialist criticism is part of a larger argument with Western representations of African culture, a subject that he has written about often. Perhaps his most famous intervention in this debate came with his analysis of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* which, he argued, for all its ambivalence, is essentially a racist text in its depiction of African humanity (see *Texts and contexts*, pp. 18–19). On the whole, Achebe's criticism of the universalizing tendency of European criticism was itself moderate compared with the position taken by some African critics who strongly contended that the problem was not so much with European criticism as such, but rather with the African writers themselves and their decision to write in European languages and not their mother tongues.

It was argued that so long as African literature was being written in English, not only would there be a lack of culturally sensitive criticism, but that such a practice would itself be incapable of doing justice to the complexity and originality of the African imagination. In his famous essay, Obiajunwa Wali proclaimed this position boldly, saying:

Perhaps, the most important achievement of the last Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere College, Kampala, in June 1962, is that African literature as now defined and understood, leads nowhere . . . is merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature. Both creative writers and literary critics read and devour European literature and critical methods. The new drama of J. P. Clark is seen in terms of not only the classical past of Aristotle and the Greeks, but in the current present of Tennessee Williams and the Absurds . . . In this kind of literary analysis, one just goes back to parrot Aristotle, and the current clichés of the English and American new critics.<sup>16</sup>

Wali decries the subordination of African art and criticism to European standards and, thus, for him a novel such as *Things Fall Apart* is not entirely African, since it employs English and borrows, most patently perhaps in its overt reference to W. B. Yeats' poem, from European modernist thematic concerns and narrative strategies (see *Texts and contexts*, pp. 21–22). It is in this context not fortuitous that Aristotelian or New Critics (see *Critical history*, pp. 55–56) find that the novel confirms their critical expectation, but rather a confirmation of, and a result of, the fact that African creative practice in English, through educational and cultural socialization, remains largely European. For Wali:

15 Chinua Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 8.

16 Obiajunwa Wali, 'The Dead End of African Literature', *Transition*, No. 10 (Sept. 1963), p. 13.

What one would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility. In fact, the secondary place which African languages now occupy in our educational system would be reversed if our writers would devote their tremendous gifts and ability to their own languages. Attempts have been made to include the study of African languages in the curriculum of some of the new African Universities. This programme would certainly have no future, for all that is available even at the university level is the usual string of proverbs, a few short stories on the tortoise and tiger . . . The student of Yoruba for instance, has no play available to him in that language, for Wole Soyinka, the most gifted Nigerian playwright at the moment, does not consider Yoruba suitable for *The Lion and the Jewel* or *The Dance of the Forest*.<sup>17</sup>

In Wali's strident dismissal of the possibility of African literature in European languages, the positive view towards Achebe's use of English in *Things Fall Apart*, adopted by Mortty for example, in which the writer was seen as articulating an authentically African voice, fell apart, as it were. It was no longer easy, so to speak, to read *Things Fall Apart* as the indisputable bearer of traditional African culture. Fundamentally, Wali had undermined the presumption that the English language was a transparent window through which an African writer could, with some appropriate tinkering, add a bit of local colour and represent an African world-view and sensibility. Thus, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is not as straightforwardly an Igboman as Gerald Moore had pronounced him – for Wali, he might be an Igboman, but one with an English inflection, if not complexion. In this regard, Okonkwo's perceived virility, for instance, may be less evidence of African origins and more of his Classical ancestry of Oedipus, Hercules and Achilles. In fact, a number of members of the Tragedian school of approach to the text do say as much and perhaps no more so than David Cook, who asserts that though slightly different, Okonkwo is in many respects like 'the prototype epic heroes of Homer and Virgil'.<sup>18</sup>

## Achebe and African literary language

It is evident that by 1964 Wali's position was gaining some international sympathy. Rand Bishop reports that Lilyan Lagneau-Kesteloot, at the Berlin conference of African poets, castigated African writers for modelling themselves on Europeans.<sup>19</sup> According to the critic, the South African writer Richard Rive retorted robustly, saying: 'To expect a literature that is essentially African, which is unique in its Africanness, is to deny the many differences in the African experience, the many and varied factors at work from which the true poet assimilates

17 Wali, 'The Dead End of African Literature', p. 13.

18 David Cook, *African Literature: A Critical View*, London: Longman, 1977, p. 67.

19 Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 2.

the best and fashions it as an instrument of his own.<sup>20</sup> Rive was thus arguing that one could not, as Wali hoped, recover a pure African literature that was not affected by the social and cultural hybridity the continent had undergone through its particular historical formation. In other words, there could be no essentialist African literature that displayed a pure African essence – cultural hybridity was inevitable.<sup>21</sup> Rive's response to Wali and like-minded critics is important, but what would surely have been awaited with much ardent expectation then would have been the reaction of the then most important African writer – Chinua Achebe. Achebe's response came in his essay 'The African Writer and the English Language', published in the influential journal *Transition* in 1965. He starts the essay by putting his own slant on what transpired at the Makerere conference, saying:

In June 1962, there was a writers' gathering at Makerere, impressively styled: 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression'. Despite this sonorous and rather solemn title, it turned out to be a very lively affair and a very exciting and useful experience for many of us. But there was something we tried to do and failed – that was to define 'African Literature' satisfactorily. Was it literature produced *in Africa* or *about Africa*? . . . A Nigerian critic, Obi Wali . . . said: 'Perhaps the most important achievement of the Conference [. . .] is that African literature as now defined and understood leads nowhere.'<sup>22</sup>

Evidently, Achebe is less negative about the achievements of the conference than Wali. While acknowledging the fact that the conference had failed to yield any consensus on what was meant by African literature, he thought it had been beneficial in other respects. It is not difficult to surmise what Achebe saw as the main benefit of the conference – as someone who believes in the importance of the English language as a unifying factor in Anglophone Africa, it was a rare and invaluable opportunity to meet and debate literary matters with writers from other parts of the continent, with whom he could not communicate without the benefit of the English language. As he explains:

The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in – English, French, Arabic. The other day I had a visit from Joseph Kariuki of Kenya. Although, I had read some of his poems and he had read my novels, we had not met before. But it didn't seem to matter. In fact I had met him through his poems . . . By contrast, when in 1960 I was travelling in East Africa and went to the home of the late Shabaan Robert, the Swahili poet of Tanganyika, things had been different. We spent some time talking about writing, but there was no real contact.<sup>23</sup>

20 Quoted by Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics*, p. 2.

21 It needs to be noted that the term 'hybridity' was not, in fact, invoked by the critics at this time and that it belongs very firmly, as a critical term, to the more recent approach known as Postcolonial Studies.

22 Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language' (1965) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 55.

23 Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', p. 55.

Thus English is the language not only of territorial and political unity, but also of intellectual and cultural exchange among Anglophone Africans. Chiding Wali and others, Achebe categorically states that:

Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, neither does Achebe regard the use of English in creative writing as inevitably leading to sterility. Responding to Wali directly, Achebe says: 'far from leading to sterility the work of many new African writers is full of the most exciting possibilities . . . I do not see any signs of sterility anywhere here. What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language.'<sup>25</sup> As far as he is concerned, the problem is not with the use of the English language per se, but rather with how one uses it. He argues that an African writer can use the English language effectively as a language of creative practice, but in order to do so it is neither desirable nor necessary to write as a native speaker of the language. Achebe goes on to advocate the simultaneous adoption and adaptation of the English language:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language so much that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.<sup>26</sup>

The problem of language is so central to Achebe's concerns as a writer that he exemplifies the kind of language use he has in mind with an example from one of his novels. He says:

Allow me to quote a small example, from *Arrow of God* which may give some idea of how I approach the use of English. The Chief Priest in the story is telling one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to church: 'I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow.' Now supposing I had put it another way. Like this for instance: 'I am sending you as my representative among those people

24 Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', p. 58.

25 Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', pp. 60–61.

26 Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', p. 61.

– just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.’ The material is the same. But the form of the one is *in character* and the other is not. It is largely a matter of instinct, but judgment comes into it too.<sup>27</sup>

The writer could equally have picked an example from *Things Fall Apart* to illustrate his linguistic departure from conventional English. He shows that the blanket dismissal by Wali of all African literature written in English glosses over the extent to which most of the really innovative African writers are not merely reproducing Standard English, but transforming it into a medium that is able to convey their particular view of the world. At issue here as well is the idea of language itself: is it a system that is invariant and therefore independent of the user? Achebe suggests that language is not merely an abstract system – it is very much inflected by the subject location of its user. Mikhail Bakhtin, the early twentieth-century Russian cultural critic, speaks of *discourse*, or language, as fundamentally characterized by the tension between its actual and potential use.<sup>28</sup> It can be argued that Achebe’s view of the English language is very much, to quote Bakhtin, a *dialogic* tension between its affiliation to the ideology of Empire and Colonialism and its new context of cultural decolonization and postcolonial formation.<sup>29</sup> It is in this context that Achebe is able to assert confidently that: ‘I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.’<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981) is critical of what he calls Achebe’s ‘fatalistic attitude’ to the dominance of English over African languages in Africa.

Nevertheless, for Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* is a textualization of that dialogic tension underlying the African postcolonial cultural formation itself. As he puts it: ‘those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs with an eye on the main chance – outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa.’<sup>31</sup> In this way, Achebe suggests that the African writer who writes in English is articulating a subject position consonant with the dominant post-colonial cultural formation, which is also the basis of postcolonial national identity. Radically, he is implying that Wali’s ideal subject is that of pre-colonial or pre-postcolonial formation, a citizen of a world that no longer exists and therefore an imaginary entity. The promotion of such a non-existent subjectivity amounts to a reckless abandonment of one’s patriotic duty to rise to the challenge of

27 Achebe, ‘The African Writer and the English Language’, pp. 61–62.

28 *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writing* ed. Pam Moriss, London: Edward Arnold, 1994.

29 By the term ‘dialogic’ Bakhtin refers to the way in which a language is often a site of conflict between the values of different classes or cultures.

30 Achebe, ‘The African Writer and the English Language’, p. 62.

31 Achebe, ‘The African Writer and the English Language’, p. 57.

contributing to the construction of the new postcolonial cultural society. It is thus implied that it might be Wali who is being unpatriotic through his romanticized cultural idealism rather than the writers using English as a pragmatic and enabling language of literary expression and cultural formation.

## Anthropological approaches

However, if Achebe was too Eurocentric for Wali, for other critics he was too nationalistic, bordering on being racist. In his essay 'The Offended *Chi* in Achebe's Novels' (1964), Austin J. Shelton argues that in his novels, including *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe blames the white man for the problems of his characters, when in fact it is clear from his own characterization that these characters fail because of particular personality flaws that propel them to offend the Igbo divinities. Shelton complains:

Achebe makes a vainglorious attempt in these two books [*Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*] – and I suspect he will continue to do so in *The Arrow of God* – to ascribe all the evils which occurred in Ibo society to the coming of the white men. But he stacks the cards in the novels, hinting here and there at the truth, yet not explaining fully the substratum of divine forces working to influence fully the characters. His own motives perhaps are linked with the patent desire to indicate that outsiders can never understand the works of Ibo-speaking writers (whose novels are in English) although one must properly leave the subject of authors' motivations to psychiatrists. Whatever the case may be, however, what caused 'things' to 'fall apart' and what made the Ibo man 'no longer at ease' in the case of Achebe's works were the evil actions of Okonkwo who brought the wrath of *Chukwu*, the *alusi*, and the *ndichie* upon his own lineage.<sup>32</sup>

He observes further that Okonkwo is brought down by 'extreme individualism and overcompensation for his father's inglorious life'.<sup>33</sup> He explains that

Okonkwo severely antagonized the *Ndichie* (ancestors) and *Chukwu* (Chineke, Eze, Chitoke, Eze-Binigwe, etc – the High God, Creator, and Giver of all life and power) by killing Ikemefuna, the boy who called Okonkwo 'father'. Okonkwo thus alienated his *chi* (*God Within*, not 'personal god' as Achebe blasphemously refers to *chi*, reflecting possibly a jaundiced attitude towards his own people's religion).<sup>34</sup>

A number of critics who have written on *Things Fall Apart* will agree with Shelton's attribution of Okonkwo's tragic fall from the pinnacle of power to his ill-

32 Austin J. Shelton, 'The Offended *Chi* in Achebe's Novels', *Transition*, No. 13 (March–April 1964), p. 37.

33 Shelton, 'The Offended *Chi* in Achebe's Novels', p. 36.

34 Shelton, 'The Offended *Chi* in Achebe's Novels', p. 36.

considered participation in the ritual killing of Ikemefuna, but would disagree with Shelton's view that that event and Okonkwo's individualism, both of which provoke the wrath of the gods, are the sole explanation for the tragic collapse of Umuofia's power and the demise of one of its most eminent leaders. Clearly, Shelton is offended by Achebe's strong implication in the novel that the arrival of the white man in the form of the Christian missionary and the Colonial Government administrator intruded so potently on Umuofia that its institutions as well as its collective will gave way, as the polity reluctantly submitted to the uncertain regime of strangers. Shelton's linking of the representation of white people in the novel to Achebe's 1962 statement in the *Nigeria Magazine*, made against what he terms colonialist critics, suggests that he is projecting his own subjective anxieties on the novel as well as on the colonial history of Nigeria.<sup>35</sup> It barely escapes notice that Shelton plays the amateur psychiatrist, though he admits that such things are best left to the professionals.

Additionally, Shelton positions himself as a professional student of African culture, an anthropologist, and thus, better able to understand the Igbo than the supposedly alienated and untrained Igbo man, Chinua Achebe. It is indicated strongly in Shelton's essay that he generalizes the alienation of Obi, the been-to, in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* to all Igbo post-colonial elites whom he regards as the offspring of Okonkwo's original sin in the Igboland of the colonial encounter. It is in this respect implied that the deracinated postcolonial Igbo man has no right to lay claim to cultural authenticity, since, as Shelton shows, he does not even know the true character and meaning of his gods. As the Canadian critic and writer Margaret Laurence has retorted, Shelton's interpretation of the novel is wrong. She remarks that, contrary to Shelton's claim:

In fact, Achebe specifically does not blame 'all evils which occurred in Ibo society' on the white man. It is plain throughout *Things Fall Apart* that the tragedy of Okonkwo is due to pressures from within as well as from the outside. Okonkwo is a man who is very greatly damaged by the external circumstances of his life. He is also a man who commits violence against the god within. In the same way, the old Ibo society is destroyed, as Achebe makes quite clear, by both inner flaws and outer assaults.<sup>36</sup>

The pomposity of Shelton's criticism apart, he was nevertheless remarkably prescient for anticipating an idea which became prevalent in later post-Marxist and post-structuralist approaches to literature, namely that a text can be read in terms of the relationship between its manifest and unconscious levels of meaning. It is this approach that is to inform Biodun Jeyifo's, Ato Quayson's and Simon Gikandi's postcolonial readings of *Things Fall Apart*, which we look at later in the chapter (see Critical history, pp. 69–75).

Moreover, Shelton, in his own way, formalized what can be termed the

35 Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', pp. 46–48.

36 Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952–1966*, London: Macmillan, 1968, pp. 105–106.



Anthropological approach to *Things Fall Apart*, which though by and large reproduced the kind of Primitivist pedantry seen in Shelton's own work, nevertheless inspired some of the most insightful readings of the novel.<sup>37</sup> Anthropological approaches adopt, for literary criticism, concepts and methods utilized in the field of Anthropology (the study of human societies and customs, and particularly so-called 'primitive' cultures). Margaret Laurence's is an example of the best of this approach. In her book *Long Drums and Cannons* (1968), she argues that in *Things Fall Apart* 'Achebe deals with the traditional society of the Ibo people, the reasons for its breakdown and the ways in which social changes have affected the lives of individual men'.<sup>38</sup> It is noticeable that Laurence regards the novel as a study of the historical society of the Igbo and less so as a novelistic representation of it. This is evidently an approach that treats the novel as a form of realism and, thus, similar to Gerald Moore's view. However, there is a difference between Moore's approach, which merely relies on the novel as the primary source of its evidence, and the typical anthropological approach, such as Laurence's, which correlates the novel's depiction of particular aspects of Igbo society with the available scholarly information. It is in this vein that Laurence is able to assert confidently that

Although the Ibo number some five million people, they never had any central organization or any kings. Their tribal set-up was markedly different from most tribal societies because of its individualism and its rejection of any inherited or hierarchical system of authority . . . The Ibo people's highly individualist society may have developed for geographical reasons, for the Ibo lived in forests which were all but impenetrable, and each village was invisible to the next. Living thus enclosed, it is not surprising that the Ibo tended to be a tense, excitable and nervous people. In the old days only the trading between various markets and the practice of exogamy lessened the isolation of each village, for it was a custom that a man must seek his wife outside his own village and each family therefore maintained ties with a few other villages . . . Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* recreates the first impact of European invasion upon the old Ibo society.<sup>39</sup>

One of Laurence's key arguments is that the novel locates the cause of Okonkwo's destruction within himself, and that

Achebe seems to be showing with the character of Okonkwo a man whose inner god prompts a gentleness which is always ignored. Okonkwo is constantly racked by anxiety, obsessed with his own publicly proclaimed strength and his own standing in the community. As

37 The term 'Primitivism' refers to a European artistic movement associated with André Breton, Pablo Picasso and others who believed that the cultural practices of so-called primitive societies offered ways of renewing what they saw as a spiritually exhausted Western culture.

38 Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, pp. 105–106.

39 Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, pp. 98–99.

such, he is a true representative of the Ibo of that period, living in villages which regarded one another with a mutual suspicion born of insecurity, a highly individualistic society which did not acknowledge inherited rulers but in which the wealthy became the virtual rulers.<sup>40</sup>

Thus Okonkwo is seen as a perfect exhibit of the quintessential Igbo man of the nineteenth century and thus a window into the essential character of his society. Deftly, Laurence views Okonkwo's individualism as both a personal attribute located in his own inner struggle against his personal god, and also a product of the general nature of Igbo society. However, it is in her imaginative analysis of the role of *chi* in Okonkwo's destruction that Laurence comes into her own as an anthropological critic. She observes that

Okonkwo may misunderstand his own deepest nature. In suppressing any gentleness and any acknowledgement of love, may he not have done some violence to himself? Far from Okonkwo saying *yes* while his *chi* said *no*, it may have been that the god within wanted to affirm the values of human contact, while Okonkwo out of fear and out of anxiety about the community's appraisal of him, said his hidden *no*.<sup>41</sup>

However, though Laurence offers a picture of Igbo society as an anthropological particularity, she also universalizes the culture, seeing Okonkwo as quintessentially Igbo as well as an everyman figure:

He is a true representative of the Ibo of that period . . . It hardly needs pointing out, however, that Okonkwo's spiritual afflictions are not limited to the Ibo society of the last century. Any city in America or Europe could provide Okonkwo's counterparts – a different language, a different background, a different way of earning one's living, a different set of beliefs, but the same anxieties which can cause a man to do violence to his own spirit.<sup>42</sup>

Laurence's reading of Okonkwo as an example of universal nature is indicative of the fundamental universalizing method of her approach. Even her attempt to describe the anthropological content of the Igbo society is subordinated to social categories derived less from the Igbo culture and more from a Western *Weltanschauung* (world-view). It is clear that the opposition between exogamous (marriage of a male outside his clan) and endogamous (marrying within one's clan) societies, in terms of which the Igbo marriage system is read by Laurence, is imposed on what might be a radically different system of marriage. Indeed, old man Uchendu in *Things Fall Apart* chides Okonkwo on his rigid application of the principle of exogamy, reminding him of how among the Igbo, the practice is

40 Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, p. 103.

41 Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, pp. 102–103.

42 Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, p. 103.

overridden by other considerations, such as the proverbial view that ‘Mother is supreme’ (Ch. 14, p. 96).<sup>43</sup>

Laurence’s universalizing strategy is also evident in her assertion of the value of certain concepts, such as those of craftsmanship, without suggesting that they might be understood differently in other cultures. Thus, though on the whole, a much more enlightened critic than earlier ones such as Shelton, she nevertheless remains caught up in the universalist discourses of her time. Another telling example is her claim that the Igbo have an innate nervous disposition. In fact the novel gives us a number of characters who contradict this claim, with Obierika, the supreme embodiment of sobriety and judiciousness, being one of them. Be that as it may, she rescues Achebe from the charge of racism and ultra-nationalism by showing that his novel represents exceptional craftsmanship through which the anthropological reality of traditional Igbo is reproduced authentically. Her approach combines a reading of the novel from within its cultural and historical terms with a universalist approach that sees the novel’s form in relation to the Western genre and its characters in humanist terms.

## Universalism as humanism

Unashamedly universalist, though, is John Povey who, perhaps responding to Achebe’s condemnation of ‘Colonialist Critics’, argues that

The basic assumption, which ought not to be so surprising, is that one can study African literature for the same reason that one reads French, German or Bengali writing. One assumes that it explores human concerns that are, in the final analysis, universal. One reads African literature not because it is African but because it is good.<sup>44</sup>

Povey does not attempt to define what good literature is and assumes that it is a self-evident universal value and that good African literature would be recognized as such by anyone coming into contact with it. Furthermore, Povey evidently subscribes to the humanist view, expressed by such critics as F. R. Leavis in his book *The Great Tradition* (1948), that literature embodies fundamental truths about human nature in general.<sup>45</sup> In the syllabus of African literature Povey puts forward in the article, it is evident that his approach is also based on his own idiosyncratic taste. As he himself confesses: ‘Like all debates of this sort, about the eleven best cricketers of all time or what records you want to take with you onto a desert island, there comes a point at which, in the America idiom, one must “put up or shut up”.’<sup>46</sup> Povey is clearly oblivious to the fact that he contradicts the premise of his own argument when he asserts universalism on the basis of an

43 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Oxford: Heinemann Writers Series, 1986, p. 96. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations from the novel are drawn from the same edition. Subsequent references will appear in the body of the text, taking the form of a chapter number and page number in parentheses.

44 John Povey, ‘How Do You Make a Course in African Literature?’, *Transition*, No. 18 (1965), p. 40.

45 See F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1948.

46 Povey, ‘How Do You Make a Course in African Literature?’, p. 41.

obviously ethnocentric strategy of closing off a debate. Although a British-born immigrant to America, it is Povey's assumption that the American way must be the only one available to resolve the problem, and that its efficacy is not debatable, that strikes one as smacking of the kind of cultural arrogance Achebe condemns in his essay 'Colonialist Criticism'. In that essay, commenting on this strategy, Achebe argues thus: 'the plain fact is that we are *not* Americans. Americans have their vision; we have ours. We do not claim that ours is superior; we only ask to keep it. For, as my forefathers said; the firewood which a people have is adequate for the kind of cooking they do.'<sup>47</sup>

If, in 1965, Povey was perhaps a little subtle in stating his case, in the 1970s he was less so, putting it bluntly that he felt comfortable with Achebe's work for the reason that it exemplified the key formal aspects of the 'Great Tradition' as defined by F. R. Leavis, stating that

Undoubtedly one of the reasons for Achebe's great success as a text in schools has been the relative orthodoxy of his handling of the genre of the novel. Teachers of literature have found that although the novels are written by an African they have a structure that allows the established tools of European criticism to be applied. When one can so readily make cross comparisons with the work of Achebe and, say, Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad, one has the satisfying sense that the African writer can be conveniently set within the context of the much wider field of English language writing: the whole 'Great Tradition', of which F. R. Leavis so persuasively writes. Not for Achebe those bold, though not necessarily successful, experiments in the novel such as have been attempted in that provocative first work *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara.<sup>48</sup>

Thus Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is seen an extension of a European form, since according to Povey, it shows that 'with the developed ease and variety of language, with the powerful handling of structure by change of pace and tone, through carefully developed sequences of events, he has all the equipment needed to become one of the major novelists of the period'.<sup>49</sup> However, it needs to be noted that though appropriative of the African text, similar to Laurence, Povey's universalist humanism is employed to valorize the African novel positively. Even so, the negative evaluation of Okara's imaginative linguistic experiments shows how this method is not capable of dealing with the radically culturally nationalistic African text, as that challenges the very assumptions of the universalist approach which demands of the African text that it be transparently comparative, that is, it set itself up with the Western reader in mind. This clearly is a denial of the autonomy of the African cultural text.

It is such an attitude that underlies Charles Larson's negative universalist humanism. In his view, *Things Fall Apart* is not stylistically successful as a novel, for it falls short of the strictures of the Western novel. He says, for instance, that

47 Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', p. 17.

48 John Povey, 'The Novels of Chinua Achebe' in Bruce King (ed.), *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, Lagos: University of Lagos, 1971, pp. 97-98.

49 Povey, 'How Do You Make a Course in African Literature?', p. 99.

there 'is not one place in the novel where authorial commentary extends beyond a few descriptive facts – nothing comparable to, for example, Joyce Cary's initial description (on the first page) of Mr. Johnson in his novel'.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, he finds fault with characterization in the novel, complaining that

There is no characterization of Okonkwo established by dialogue in the first chapter – Okonkwo says nothing until the last page of Chapter Two. Throughout the novel, it will also be seen that Achebe rarely uses dialogue to develop any of his characters . . . Achebe's dialogue in *Things Fall Apart* is extremely sparse. Okonkwo says very little at all; not of any one place in the novel may it be said that he has an extended speech or even a very lengthy conversation with another character.<sup>51</sup>

Larson attributes Achebe's failure to use dialogue effectively to his use of oral literary devices, claiming that

The significant development is Achebe's reliance on rhetorical devices, the devices of unwritten oral literature, to bring his initial chapter to a close and unify it into a separately-developed and tied-off incident . . . What is significant here is that Achebe has introduced a pattern in his first chapter which he will follow throughout much of his novel.<sup>52</sup>

He concludes that *Things Fall Apart* is an archetypal African novel. In his view, unlike in Western novels such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, it is not about character, but it is rather situational. He asserts that

*Things Fall Apart*, because of its emphasis on community rather than individuality, is a novel of situation rather than character, and this is undoubtedly its major difference from the traditional Western genre, which in the twentieth century, at least, has emphasized the psychological depiction of character.<sup>53</sup>

It is evident that Larson regards the Western novel as the ideal against which all others should be measured. Adrian Roscoe has taken a similar view on the effect of the oral style on Achebe's novel, while Chinweizu and his colleagues have condemned both critics for being Eurocentric in their notion of literary form.<sup>54</sup>

For Larson, *Things Fall Apart's* departure from that norm is not a wholly welcome development. Achebe himself has roundly criticized Larson, contending that he

50 Charles Larson, *The Emergence of the African Novel*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971, p. 32.

51 Larson, *The Emergence of the African Novel*, p. 33 and p. 40.

52 Larson, *The Emergence of the African Novel*, p. 37.

53 Larson, *The Emergence of the African Novel*, p. 63.

54 See Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1971; and Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

tells us a few revealing things about universality. In a chapter devoted to Lenrie Peters' novel which he finds particularly impressive he speaks of 'its universality, its very limited concern with Africa itself' . . . Does it ever occur to the Larsons of African literature to try out the game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works . . . In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So and so's work is universal; he has truly arrived!<sup>55</sup>

Achebe is impatient with the obsession with literary difference among universalist critics, in which the particularity of a novel such as *Things Fall Apart* is not accorded its due significance as an aspect of the novel's cultural specificity, its context, and the writer's desire to fashion an aesthetic embedded in his own culture as a way of validating that culture as worthy of literary representation. Cultural specificity or difference is regarded as abnormal and therefore a lack of literary merit. Achebe prescribes a drastic solution to the problem of universalism in criticism of African writing when he says: 'I should like to see the word *universal* banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world.'<sup>56</sup> Although one agrees with Achebe's argument, it must also be noted that some of the most illuminating work on *Things Fall Apart* has been undertaken under the rubric of universalism. As we demonstrate in this chapter, the work of Douglas Killam, David Carroll, Michael Echeruo and Abiola Irele, among others, has added greatly to our knowledge of the novel while, in varying degrees, being located in the universalist humanist project.

In Douglas Killam's *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* (1969) he argues that the earlier anthropological approaches to *Things Fall Apart*, as well as the view that the novel exemplifies the principles of Aristotelian Tragedy, are wholly misguided as they overlook 'the overall excellence of [Achebe's books] as pieces of fiction, as works of art'.<sup>57</sup> Of course, Larson too espouses a similar ambition, but in the end his is so cluttered with the ideological need to evaluate and produce a hierarchy of African literary texts in terms of their proximity to the 'Great Tradition' that the literariness of the texts is subsumed under the weight of an ideologically charged classification. However, in Killam's case, the aim is to retrieve African literature from being seen as merely an index of African cultural values, but, instead, explore how the writers represent their world in literature. So, the emphasis here, which is typical of New Criticism, an approach that emphasizes the compositional aspects of a work rather than its content, is on the devices Achebe uses in order to create the kind of literary text *Things Fall Apart* is. Killam sees the novel as exemplifying a quintessential verisimilitude ('being true or real'), observing that: 'Achebe's method of working affects complete verisimilitude, in its

55 Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', pp. 8–9.

56 Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', p. 9.

57 D. G. Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* (1969), London: Heinemann, revised edition 1977, p. 1.

presentation. He never imposes himself between us and the scene he presents. Achebe is the most objective of writers.<sup>58</sup> Killam very much sees Achebe as a writer who *mediates* rather than intervening in his representation of the world. This is of course linked to the New Criticism's notion of the text as autonomous of authorial intention, that a text does not reproduce the wishes and desires of its author, but exists as a 'verbal icon', to borrow from William Wimsatt, one of the founders of the School.<sup>59</sup> Killam's version is a subtle application of the notion of the text as a verbal icon.

It is also significant that he regards *Things Fall Apart* as being naturalistic, saying that 'the images are . . . chosen from nature and suggest the continuum of the natural world of which man is part and at the center'.<sup>60</sup> He is suggesting here that the novel exemplifies the Leavisite idea of an organic unity, thus fusing together into a single critical idiom the Leavisite approach and New Criticism. The two approaches are, however, conjoined in Killam's unacknowledged, though patently present, Romantic conception of literary value. The suggestion of the novel being at one with nature also recalls William Wordsworth's view that poetry must come to one as 'leaves to a tree'.<sup>61</sup> Killam's affiliation to the New Criticism school becomes more obvious when he says that Achebe's 'presentation is disinterested and this quality is reflected in the writing'.<sup>62</sup> There is also a constant attention to imagery, something particularly beloved of New Criticism, in Killam's analysis of the novel. However, it is in the final section of the chapter on *Things Fall Apart* that he discloses his full New Criticism credentials, describing the novel in this way:

The novel is in fact a structure of ironies – irony of the tragic kind which shows an exceptional man see his best hopes and achievements destroyed through an inexorable flow of events which he is powerless to restrain, tragic irony suggested and supported by a carefully integrated pattern of minor ironies throughout the work – the accidental shooting which brings about his exile, the irony of the appeal of Christianity to Nwoye . . . in whom he placed his hopes, the irony contained in the persistent comment by Okonkwo that his daughter Ezinma ought to have been born a male child. And there is the more general irony made explicit in the closing paragraph of the book, but implicit in the encounter between Africans and Europeans . . . that Christianity, seen as a 'civilizing agent', acts as a catalyst in destroying a civilization which heretofore had strength and cohesion.<sup>63</sup>

This is the best example of this kind of approach to *Things Fall Apart* and one that has endured the test of time. Perhaps the most important achievement of Killam's work is that it shows that a rigorous universalist approach that defines its

58 Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, p. 15.

59 See William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

60 Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, p. 19.

61 Markham Peacock, Jr., *The Critical Opinions of William Wordsworth*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950.

62 Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, p. 15.

63 Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, pp. 32–33.

terms clearly can be an invaluable tool for reading literature, being sensitive to its distinctiveness of radical political and textual articulation. In other words, a universalist humanist does not need to be patronizing, racist or Eurocentric as a matter of theoretical or methodological necessity.

## Nationalist universalist humanism

Indeed, quite a number of African nationalist critics do employ this approach in a way that makes the critical task a collaborative and supportive venture of literary production, without, of course, compromising on the role of literary criticism to evaluate impartially writers and their works. Among them are to be found some eminent critics such as Michael Echeruo and Abiola Irele who have fashioned a reading of African literature that attends to its international character and its rootedness in English letters while addressing the immediacy of its grounding in the African soil. Abiola Irele has defined the role of this kind of criticism succinctly in his essay 'The Criticism of Modern African Literature' (1971), counselling that

We need to consider . . . how far the reality of the literary tradition in Africa permits a balanced criticism which makes due allowance for the restriction imposed by the linguistic problem, but which does not lose sight of the need to maintain a reasonable standard of evaluation. The terms of reference of evaluating modern African literature are being provided at the moment by the critical tradition which has grown up alongside Western literature. The problem now is to apply them without either frustrating our writers and stultifying the development of a vigorous movement among us; or, on the other hand, by excessive indulgence in encouraging second-rate work and condemning our literature for ever to a minor position. This is the dilemma which the critic has to resolve . . . [and which should] encourage the cultivation of a more flexible and a more subtle critical awareness which will establish the necessary relevance between critical judgement and its immediate object, approaching it and grasping it in all its peculiarities, in its specific relation within a cultural perspective.<sup>64</sup>

Irele's idea of a pragmatic culturally sensitive criticism is shared by Dan S. Izvebaye who explains that

The call for African critical 'concepts', 'standards' or 'criteria' is not a rejection of established modes of literary study like structuralism, neo-Aristotelianism and the like, but a rejection of certain entrenched modes of thinking which perpetuate the stock attitudes to Africa . . . [and a preference for] an open-minded approach which will take the literature

64 Abiola Irele, 'The Criticism of Modern African Literature' in Christopher Heywood (ed.), *Perspectives on African Literature*, London: Heinemann, 1971, p. 13.



on its own terms and use only the internal characteristics of the literary works for critical appraisal, and finally, critical techniques to be evolved by adapting the attitudes and literary patterns abstracted from African folk traditions . . . The critic is expected to start from a sympathetic position which would enable him to identify the general features of the literature.<sup>65</sup>

Both critics agree on the need for criticism of African literature to be stringent, but they also demand that it emanate not from colonial or neo-colonial attitudes of denigrating the continent, but from a deeper understanding of the culture, history, and political role of the African writer and literary text.

Perhaps, Michael Echeruo's and Earnest Emenyonu's interpretations of Achebe's work best demonstrate the kind of criticism recommended by Irele and Izevbaye. In his essay 'Chinua Achebe' (1975), Echeruo tells us that

Behind [Achebe's] novels, short stories and poems there is this immense presence of a patrimony, a land, a people, a way of life. But while characterizing that land, detailing the history of its many crises, Achebe sees it as the one unchanging feature of the artistic and moral landscape, as the one permanent Being to which all the efforts of the children of the land must be devoted. If we recognize this, we can then appreciate why Achebe is not the urban African, why his art is not the art of the metropolis. Rather Achebe is the artist in the traditional communal sense of the term, the man of great wisdom, working within the limits and through the norms of his society. His 'truth', therefore, depends as much on the immediacy and the integrity of his society as on the universality of his own personal vision. It is [an] absolute [achievement] in the sense that his novels demonstrate that it is possible for an African writer with his roots firmly planted in the local African soil and writing in a foreign language to produce work that is authentic as regards local colour and universal in terms of the humanity and the empathy that informs it.<sup>66</sup>

Focusing on *Things Fall Apart*, he argues that Achebe presents a tragic view of life, without offering an opportunity for catharsis, for to do so would be to diminish linkage between the past and the present in the writer's vision of history. He observes that

Okonkwo, the hero of *Things Fall Apart*, is fit subject for tragedy because he looked life in the face and did what he thought was right. But he is destroyed in the process, and Achebe deliberately lets the District Commissioner decide to allot to him an untidy and insignificant place in the official history of the times.<sup>67</sup>

65 D. S. Izevbaye, 'The State of Criticism in African Literature' in Eldred Durosimi Jones (ed.), *African Literature Today*, No. 7, 1975, p. 3.

66 M. J. C. Echeruo, 'Chinua Achebe' in Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan (eds), *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, Oxford and Zaria: Oxford University Press and Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1975, p. 151.

67 Echeruo, 'Chinua Achebe', p. 151.

Additionally, Echeruo regards the novel as offering a contrast between the melodramatic plot in which Okonkwo's life is caricatured and Obierika's and the narrator's real measure of Okonkwo's heroic stature. Thus, though deploying a Leavisite approach and an Aristotelian framework, Echeruo is able to adapt them to the specific demands of an African novel. In this regard, he differs considerably from critics such as Larson and Shelton and is closer to Laurence and Killam. Even more remarkable is the fact that Echeruo's characterization of the text as primarily a tension between Obierika's perspective, and that of Okonkwo and others, underpins Biodun Jeyifo's contemporary post-structuralist study that we examine later in this section.

In his book *Studies on the Nigerian Novel* (1991), Ernest Emenyonu embraces universalism, but with a difference, when he says:

Very often . . . *Things Fall Apart* is seen as a classic study in character – the complex character of the hero, Okonkwo, is memorable and indelible, in much the same way as Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard or Shakespeare's King Lear. The perspective emphasizes Okonkwo's inflexibility, his stubborn individualism, his resistance to change and his perfect role as a cog in the wheel of inevitable progress. His death, therefore, had to be, if Christianity and Western civilization must permeate the 'dark continent'. The colonial over-lord is exonerated. The diehard, one-track minded missionary would deserve praise for being the link through which Western European techniques reached the Africans in a way that made sense and in an atmosphere of mutual trust. This approach misses the real universal significance of *Things Fall Apart* as world literature . . . *Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization. Seen from this perspective, the lesson of *Things Fall Apart* comes across clearly as the unique manifestation of human blindness and blissful ignorance at a point in time.<sup>68</sup>

Emenyonu manages to appropriate Leavisite universalism for a strong nationalist political position. However, there is a related viewpoint that is the extreme opposite of Emenyonu's position, one that reproduces the rather conservative model of the European universalist perspective. Achebe has criticized, for instance, Eldred Jones for pandering to the latter kind of approach in his discussion of Soyinka, when Jones writes that

This is the confrontation which *The Interpreters* presents. It is not an 'African' problem. Events all over the world have shown in the new generation a similar dissatisfaction. [. . .] Thus Soyinka, using a Nigerian

68 Ernest Emenyonu, *Studies on the Nigerian Novel*, Lagos: Heinemann, 1991, pp. 46–47.

setting has portrayed a universal problem. This is what makes both this novel and the whole corpus of Soyinka's work universally valid.<sup>69</sup>

Achebe criticizes him thus:

What Professor Eldred Jones is proposing is that I renounce my vision which . . . is necessarily local and particular . . . I don't really believe that Eldred Jones thought seriously about this. He has simply and uncritically accepted the norms of some of the prevailing colonialist criticism, which I must say is most unlike him.<sup>70</sup>

Evidently, not all African universalist critics are able to adapt their critical tools to the particular requirements of African literature, as enjoined by Irele and Izevbaye, among others. The debate between the universalist and particularist approaches to the study of *Things Fall Apart*, which emerged in the early 1960s with critics such as Gerald Moore and Austin Shelton, and Achebe's response in his essay 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' (1962), has continued to dominate the discussion of the novel in one form or the other, with different critics taking different positions on it, or perfecting older ones.

Abiola Irele's essay 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', first published in 1967 by the Mbari Writers' group, remains one of the most nuanced, clearly thought-out, and certainly most influential readings of *Things Fall Apart*.<sup>71</sup> Irele was perhaps one of the first critics to look at the novel as representing cultural as well as tragic conflict. With perceptive clarity, he sees *Things Fall Apart* as: 'concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by impact with another way of life. The reconstruction of Ibo village life is directed at revealing the forces at work both inside and outside traditional society that prepared the way for its eventual disintegration.'<sup>72</sup> He regards Achebe's representation of traditional society not as a way of exhibiting its values per se, but rather as a frame within which takes place the drama of the individual characters as they confront larger historical forces. It is in that context that the novel explores the dynamic interplay between the protagonist's individual propensities and the society that has moulded him. In Irele's view:

The double level of action is realised through the relationship that exists between Okonkwo, the principal character, and his society. In many ways, Okonkwo represents his society in so far as the society has made the man by proposing to him certain values and lines of conduct. On the other hand, the man's personal disposition, his reaction to these social determinations stemming from his subjective perception of them, prepares his individual fate.<sup>73</sup>

69 Cited in Achebe, 'Thoughts on the African Novel' (1973) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, pp. 51–52.

70 Achebe, 'Thoughts on the African Novel', pp. 52–53.

71 Abiola Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe' (1967) reprinted in C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978, pp. 10–21. An extract from this essay is reprinted in our Critical readings section.

72 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', p. 10.

73 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', pp. 10–11.

It is noticeable that Irele manages to fuse the idea of cultural conflict with Aristotelianism, that is, the view that *Things Fall Apart* embodies the structure of Classical Tragedy, thus reconciling the universalism implicit in the use of the Aristotelian idea of Tragedy with a concern with the cultural and historical specificity of the text and its status as a document of cultural and political decolonization. According to him:

The immediate subject of Chinua Achebe's novels is the tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe . . . His novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the incursion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society, and the disarray in the African consciousness that has followed.<sup>74</sup>

Pursuing the idea of the tragic further, Irele regards Okonkwo as embodying a tragic flaw through his acute sense of individualism that in the end leads to his own dehumanization. Irele also sees him as simultaneously engaged in a large-scale struggle with the cosmic forces of destiny, noting that: 'On a greater scale than his passion [for individualism] is the struggle of the man with his fate (symbolised by his *chi*). His ambition and impatience drive him on to calculate on a larger scale than others, to demand more of his fate and to force the pace.'<sup>75</sup>

He even notices a touch of the 'Oedipus Complex' in Okonkwo's relationship with his son Nwoye, and his preference for his daughter Enzinma. It is Nwoye who will be one of the catalysts in the reversal of the hero's fortune, as he stands as 'a symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all that Okonkwo accepts and stands for'.<sup>76</sup> Irele comes down firmly on the side of the novel as an exemplification of Classical Tragedy, saying: '*Things Fall Apart* turns out to present the whole tragic drama of a society, vividly and concretely enacted in the tragic destiny of a representative individual.'<sup>77</sup> Thus, Irele adds another dimension to his critical arsenal as he brings the idea of symbolism, a particular kind of universalist criticism, into his reading of Okonkwo. For him, 'This use of an individual character as a symbolic receptacle, the living theatre, of a social dilemma, is what gives Achebe's novels their real measure of strength.'<sup>78</sup> It is perhaps this critical eclecticism that fuses seemingly dissimilar approaches into a coherent framework that has enabled Irele's piece to stand the test of time and ensured its centrality in the reading of Achebe's novel. It is this brand of criticism that is evident in some of the key texts on Achebe, such as David Carroll's *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic* (1980), which is particularly strong on narrative technique and point of view, and C. L. Innes's *Chinua Achebe* (1990), which is especially good on the importance of story-telling in Achebe's recounting of the past. Moreover, as will be shown later, the view of *Things Fall Apart* held by these two critics is also largely part of the 'anxiety of influence' school

74 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', p. 10.

75 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', p. 12.

76 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', p. 13.

77 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', p. 14.

78 Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', pp. 14–15.

championed most vigorously by Simon Gikandi in the essay we examine later in the section.<sup>79</sup>

## Marxist criticism

Another important intervention in critical approaches to *Things Fall Apart* has been Marxist criticism, which had a significant presence in the critical landscape in the 1970 and 1980s. Despite the variety of Marxist literary approaches that have arisen over the years, all have their foundations in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, with most tending to analyse literary texts in terms of class, the control of capital and the means of production, class-consciousness, ideological forces, and class conflict. Marxist criticism aims to connect all aspects of life and consciousness to the material conditions of existence, and has a political agenda of its own, which is to bring about progressive political and social change and the overthrow of the upper and middle classes, leading to the introduction of a classless society and an equal distribution of wealth. Chidi Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature* (1989) encapsulates the broad concerns of this approach to African literature in general and to Chinua Achebe in particular. Amuta views *Things Fall Apart* as focusing not so much on a cultural conflict, but rather on an economic one in which the forces of capitalism triumph unfairly over those of traditional African communalism. Referring to *Arrow of God* as well, he says:

The contention being entered here is that both works constitute realistic depictions of social experience in the context of a pre-literate communal socio-economic formation at its point of impact with a nascent Western Imperialist capitalist formation. It is precisely this unequal collision that provides the basis of conflict in the novels and also furnishes the ground rules for the resolution of the experiential conflicts through form.<sup>80</sup>

Thus for Amuta, *Things Fall Apart* is primarily a clash of two modes of production. In this context, the representation of the past in the novel is of interest not only in terms of the cultural values represented, but also for the description of the economic conditions and social relations of pre-colonial African society. As he puts it:

*Things Fall Apart* serves to furnish, albeit fictionally, the essential aspects of pre-literate communalism. Its fictional world is one in which the basic unit of organization is the village which also serves as the locus of communal life and values. The village economy is essentially agrarian, depending for its subsistence on land as the principal means of production. Manual labour applied through basic iron tools – such as hoes or machetes – defines the dominant mode of production while

<sup>79</sup> We are referring here to the notion proposed by Harold Bloom that writers are shaped by their relationship to their predecessors. For a full account, see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>80</sup> Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, London: Zed Books, 1989, p. 130.

production relations are essentially communalistic, characterized by co-operation and mutual assistance.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, Amuta places emphasis on the means of production, such as land and levels of technology, in order to specify the particularity of the pre-colonial world of the novel. He also explores the relationship between the pre-colonial African society's ideology and its material means of production, observing that

From this economic base arise certain beliefs, customs and practices which accord legitimacy and coherence to social experience. The *Ozo* title, for instance, into which men of outstanding achievement are admitted becomes a political-cum-juridical instrument not only for rewarding achievement but also for preserving social morality among its most privileged members. In addition, the religious beliefs and practices of the people arise from a purely instrumental conception of deity rather than from a blind self-surrender to the whims of immutable and inscrutable supernatural agencies. In the world of Umuofia, belief in the supernatural is a product of man's incomplete control over nature and his limited understanding of its mechanisms.<sup>82</sup>

For Amuta, the cultural values of Umuofia are directly related to its economic structure and its conception of the religious, both serving as instrumentalist means of managing capricious nature. It is thus suggested that, with a better scientific and technological understanding of the laws of nature, Umuofia's belief in the supernatural could give way to secularism and a belief in the importance of the economic forces.

Furthermore, within this Marxist reading of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is seen as a revolutionary hero who embodies 'the spirit of his age and the dramatization of the spirit of forces hostile to the stability of his society and its culture'.<sup>83</sup> He is the quintessential socialist hero, according to Amuta, for in his view:

His decisive and heroic response to the colonialists must be seen as a revolutionary anti-colonialist stance. When he stands up in open arrogant defiance of the colonialists, he is not defending culture as a super-structural proposition but the totality of the socio-economic formation and therefore cultural identity of his people.<sup>84</sup>

Not only is Okonkwo a proto-nationalist, precursor of the twentieth-century freedom fighter and leader of the nationalist independence movement, but he is also in the vanguard of the socialist revolutionary class struggle against capitalism. He is also seen as belonging to what Amílcar Cabral holds as the privileged revolutionary class in Africa, the peasantry.<sup>85</sup> It is worth noting that the universalist

81 Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 130.

82 Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 131.

83 Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 134.

84 Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 134.

85 Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 134.

realism of Moore, Larson and Irele has, in the hands of Marxism, given way to a universalist realism based on the epochal and international character of class struggle against oppressive modes of production. The difference between the two approaches is primarily a matter of what is regarded as constituting the universal human experience: for traditional universalists, it is the innate human essence of personhood or the soul whereas for the Marxists it is the inequalities in the production and consumption of goods and in the social relations of production.

It is in the insistence on class to the exclusion of other forms of social oppression that the Marxist approach runs the risk of being limited in its scope. Chidi Amuta, for instance, justifies traditional patriarchy on the grounds that it is part of the objective world of pre-colonial Africa:

Achebe's depiction of pre-colonial Igbo society as an essentially patriarchal one is largely realistic to the extent that it is based on a recognition of physical strength as a decisive factor in social life. Men and women are engaged in productive labour but the more exerting functions are reserved for the menfolk. Achebe is nevertheless critical of the excesses of this male-dominated society.<sup>86</sup>

It is such an ideological lacuna, as evident in Amuta's failure to use Marxism to illuminate the unequal social relations pertaining to gender in the novel that, among others, will engender feminist approaches to Chinua Achebe, and *Things Fall Apart* in particular.

## Feminist approaches

In her book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton addresses the question of gender ideology in *Things Fall Apart*, arguing that the nationalist and anti-imperialist project of the novel homogenizes African subjectivity, thereby effacing internal social differentiation based on gender. She sets up the problem as follows:

Achebe subverts and dismantles the racial codes of [the] paradigmatic colonial text by contextualising it in an alternative discourse – one which seeks to 'restore dignity and self-respect' to 'African people'. For Chinua Achebe's own version of the story – *Things Fall Apart* – tells the tragic consequences of imperialism, of the destruction of a culture which manifested 'great depth and value and beauty'. The question is, however: Does Achebe attempt to restore 'dignity and respect' to African women? Does he tell his female readers 'where the rain began to beat them'?<sup>87</sup>

At the end of her essay Stratton's clear answer is:

<sup>86</sup> Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, p. 131.

<sup>87</sup> Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 24. This essay is reprinted in our Critical readings section.

Achebe does not tell African women 'where the rain began to beat them'. Nor does he attempt to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to African women. However, although women have been explicitly excluded from Achebe's constituency of readers, they have, in contrast to his female characters, refused to remain silent. As writers they have undertaken the task of refuting Achebe, of presenting an alternative view of colonization and of African society, one which challenges Achebe's underlying assumption that things could not fall apart for African women because they never had been and never would be together.<sup>88</sup>

Citing the work of African women anthropologists, such as Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), Stratton argues that in *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe attributes to men cultural roles and forms that in traditional Igbo culture are allotted to women. She notes that Amadiume has criticized Achebe for making the divinity Idimilli male when in fact she is female in reality. Amadiume's exposure of how Achebe had in fact misrepresented gender identity and roles within traditional Igbo culture represents one of the most powerful feminist interventions in the reading of *Things Fall Apart*. It is also, however, worth noting that the term 'Feminist' itself has been a subject of much debate within African studies, with some women critics preferring the term 'Womanist', arguing that the term Feminist does not sufficiently problematize the unequal relations between African or Third World women and their Western counterparts.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Stratton argues that women are absent from power in the novel and are silent and silenced in *Things Fall Apart*, and that the few women who are in positions of power, such as Chielo, are shown as despotic, in the same way that women are represented in some colonialist novels, such as those of H. Rider Haggard. Fundamentally, Achebe is being accused of using the same tropes of representation of the Other as the colonialist novelist, except that for Achebe, the Other is not the 'native', but women.

In the course of analysing *Things Fall Apart*, Stratton engages with one of the most influential approaches to the novel, contrasting her reading of the novel with Abdul JanMohamed's essay 'Sophisticated Primitivism'.<sup>90</sup> JanMohamed was one of the first critics to use what was later to be formalized as the postcolonial approach to the study of *Things Fall Apart*. Among other things, he asserted that in his work, Achebe offered a realistic representation of Africa against the *racial romances* of colonialist discourse. By romance, a term he borrows from Northrop Frye's criticism, JanMohamed refers to texts that rely on archetypes and stereotypes. Thus the difference between Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and a colonialist text such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* is more than an ideological one; it has to do, as well, with the general modes of narrative representation the two texts

88 Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, pp. 37–38.

89 For more discussion of Feminism and Gender in African literature, see Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African-Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994. Elleke Boehmer's *Stories of Women*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, also has an excellent chapter on gender in the work of Chinua Achebe.

90 Abdul JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*' in *Ariel*, 15: 4 (Oct. 1984), pp. 18–39. An extract from this essay is reprinted in our Critical readings section.



deploy. It is particularly adept of Stratton to adapt JanMohamed's application of Frye's model to colonialist texts and argue that within the discourse of gender, *Things Fall Apart* functions similarly to such texts, as a form of romance in which archetypes form the main fabric of the structure of the text. Her argument is that far from being realistic as JanMohamed argues, in fact, *Things Fall Apart* is a non-realist representation of the gender relations in Igbo society and in Africa as a whole, as it works within the Manichaeon economy of traditional patriarchy.

## The intervention of postcolonial theory

However, to be fair, JanMohamed's radical interpretation of *Things Fall Apart* goes beyond presenting the novel as a realist text, in the conventional sense of the word. For him, the novel is realistic in so far as it captures the lived experience of a predominantly oral culture rather than seeking to represent that culture in terms of the Western written tradition. He argues that the novel subverts chirographic or literate structures of representation that underwrite the Western cultural and political project which annihilates Umuofia, and instead narrates the story of Umuofia through a language and narrative mode that is predominantly oral in structure, asserting the cultural values of the very pre-colonial society that had been overwhelmed by writing. He remarks that

Chinua Achebe's style in *Things Fall Apart* is consonant with the oral culture that he represents. In fact, the congruence between the style, elements of the narrative structure, and characterization, on the one hand, and the nature of the culture represented, on the other, accounts for the success of the novel: because Achebe is able to capture the flavour of an oral society in his style and narrative organization, *Things Fall Apart* is able to represent successfully the specificity of a culture alien to most Western readers.<sup>91</sup>

Thus it is in the synchronization of the language of the novel and its narrative structure with the modes of linguistic and narrative representation of pre-colonial Africa that Achebe engenders the realism of the novel. It is noticeable that JanMohamed is not using the term realism in the same way as it is employed by the neo-Aristotelians, implying art as imitation, but rather in the manner of the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukacs, as the representation of underlying structures of the totality of a given social and cultural formation.

It is also possible to read JanMohamed's approach as merely a more theoretically nuanced application of the old idea of realism: in the end his argument, like that of Mortty, Moore and others, is that *Things Fall Apart* is not an idealization of the African past, but a successful attempt at entering the spirit of the world it represents, at evoking the authenticity of traditional African culture. Perhaps the most significant difference between JanMohamed's and the earlier approaches to the text is that his presents realism as a textual effect rather than as an achieved

<sup>91</sup> JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism', p. 28.

state or essence of the text, which puts him in a similar position to other postcolonial critics of the novel, such as Quayson, Jeyifo and Gikandi. Principally, JanMohamed regards the novel's strategy of fashioning and deploying realism as equivalent to Pablo Picasso's 'Primitivism', saying that

By deliberately adhering to a flat surface Achebe obtains a result curiously similar to the effect obtained by one of Picasso's paintings: the illusion of depth and perspective, of the third dimension in symbolic representation, is deliberately wrenched and displaced in order to create a two-dimensional representation that includes within it an abstract reminder about the third dimension. While Picasso drew his inspiration from West African art, Achebe draws his from West European fiction. Like Picasso's paintings, Achebe's novel presents us with sophisticated primitivism, with a deliberate return to an innocence re-presented.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, Achebe employs Western chirography or literate structures in order to reproduce a mode of representation that Picasso attained through the appropriation of traditional African art.<sup>93</sup> Thus the authenticity of Achebe's novel lies less in the world it represents, but more in Achebe's fidelity to his location in a postcolonial cultural hybridity, from where he recovers for modern consumption the oral forms of his ancestors and his rural community. From this vantage point, Achebe produces a syncretic novelist practice, of which *Things Fall Apart* is its best exemplification. Furthermore, and most perceptively, JanMohamed depicts the novel as a self-consuming narrative, saying:

*Things Fall Apart* documents, among other things, the destruction of oral culture by a chirographic one. However, Achebe uses that very process of chirographic documentation in order to recreate and preserve a symbolic version of the destroyed culture; in recording the oral culture's preoccupation with the present, Achebe historicizes its evanescence. The novel incorporates its own condition and occasion into itself. However, the most fascinating aspect of this totalization is that while *Things Fall Apart* depicts the mutual misunderstanding and antagonism of the colonizing and colonized worlds, the very process of this depiction, in its capacity as a *written oral* narrative, transcends the Manichean relations by a brilliant synthesis of oral and chirographic cultures.<sup>94</sup>

Significantly, while fundamentally subscribing to the cultural conflict approach to *Things Fall Apart*, for JanMohamed, the novel goes beyond the dramatization of cultural conflict, synthesizing the antagonistic elements into a new artistic hybridity.

92 JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism', pp. 36–37.

93 JanMohamed uses the term 'chirographic' to refer to a predominantly writing culture, as opposed to a predominantly oral culture. He borrows this usage from the anthropologist Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Methuen, 1982.

94 JanMohamed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism', p. 36.

It is to be noted, as well, that JanMohamed was contributing to an important critical approach to *Things Fall Apart* that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s that emphasized its status as an oral text. The aim of the approach was to attend to the oral aspects of the novel and, among others, to use the techniques of oral literary analysis to illuminate it. One of its most notable early examples is Bernth Lindfors's essay 'The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words are Eaten' (1968), in which he argues that in *Things Fall Apart*, as in his other work, Achebe evolves his own 'African vernacular style' based on a distinctive use of proverbs, contending that: 'Achebe's use of an African vernacular style is not limited to dialogue. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, novels set in tribal society, the narrative itself is studded with proverbs and similes which help to evoke the cultural milieu in which the action takes place.'<sup>95</sup> Lindfors sees the proverb not only as accounting for the cultural and historical authenticity of the novel, but also as an important narrative and thematic stylistic device. In his own words:

It is my contention that Achebe, a skillful artist, achieves an appropriate language . . . largely through the use of proverbs. Indeed, Achebe's proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local color but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying. Proverbs thus provide a 'grammar of values' by which the deeds of a hero can be measured and evaluated. By studying Achebe's proverbs we are better able to interpret his novels.<sup>96</sup>

However, it is worth highlighting the fact that Lindfors's oral literary approach to the novel is also grounded in a neo-Aristotelian view of the artist and the text, as the following comment demonstrates: 'He is a careful and fastidious artist in full control of his art, a serious craftsman who disciplines himself not only to write regularly but to write well. He has that sense of decorum, proportion and design lacked by too many contemporary novelists, African and non-African alike.'<sup>97</sup> Thus, whereas Larson and Roscoe regarded the influence of oral tradition as having handicapped Achebe as a novelist, Lindfors and other critics of this mould see it as in fact his forte.

However, an example of this approach closest to JanMohamed's is contained in Solomon Iyesere's earlier essay 'Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature' (1975) in which he argues that

Any criticism of . . . [African] literature must be significantly responsive to the unique methods the writers use to give form and pattern to their experiences . . . One of the most popular persuasive contemporary methods, the Eurocentric, emphasizing the disinterested contemplation

95 Bernth Lindfors, 'The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words are Eaten' (1968) reprinted in C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978, p. 49.

96 Lindfors, 'The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words are Eaten', pp. 50–51.

97 Lindfors, 'The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words are Eaten', p. 47.

of the aesthetic features of a work is too limited and restrictive when applied to the evaluation of African fiction. It is unable to account for those aspects of the literature that differ from the Western tradition – elements such as the lack of character delineation, the African conception of time, the ‘loose’ narrative structures, and other features of the traditional verbal art . . . My point is that a culture-sensitive approach, informed by an intelligent understanding of the traditional background, will prove more responsive to the unique nativism of African writers . . . To appreciate fully the works of modern African writers, then we must recognize the ‘pastness’ of their works, even though they are ‘eternally present’.<sup>98</sup>

It is noticeable that Iyesere’s ‘nativism’ becomes ‘primitivism’ in JanMohamed’s work, and that change of register marks the distinction in the location of the two critical projects. Iyesere’s standpoint is very much grounded in the nationalist discourses of authenticity and JanMohamed’s is positioned between the nationalist project, on the one hand, and the Western tradition, on the other, while seeking simultaneously to avow and to disavow affiliation to either, which is very much the location of the contemporary postcolonial critical enterprise. More surprising, however, is JanMohamed’s blindness to the fact that within the cultural politics of decolonization in which he locates Achebe, the term ‘primitivism’, however subtly deployed, is unambiguously seen as signifying negativity, as the quintessential expression of the colonialist economy of representation of the African Other. The difficulty is that JanMohamed lacks a positive vocabulary in which to articulate Achebe’s aesthetic. Even the term ‘syncretic’ he proposes, which is much more accurately descriptive of Achebe’s style and which is also less negative, is similarly caught up in colonialist valorized ideologies of signification. Perhaps Lindfors’s more modest ‘African vernacular style’ is more persuasive than either JanMohamed’s or Iyesere’s descriptive terms. Perhaps the term ‘hybridity’, which Homi Bhabha proffers in his *Location of Culture* (1994), best sums up what JanMohamed and the others attribute to *Things Fall Apart*. Even so, it would be unfair to dismiss JanMohamed’s radical and illuminating critique as a form of colonialist discourse. It is a rigorous attempt to recover the ambivalence at the heart of *Things Fall Apart*, its simultaneous location in the space of oral culture and that of Western chirography and its author’s desire to use that space for a poetics of liberation. It is important, though, to underscore JanMohamed’s debt to the earlier critics such as Lindfors and Iyesere who provided a framework for some key aspects of his argument.

It is essentially the quest to illuminate the ambivalence of the novel that underpins Biodun Jeyifo’s essay ‘For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika’ (1990).<sup>99</sup> However, in contrast with JanMohamed, in his view, the primary ambivalence in the text is not simply between orality and chirography

98 Solomon Iyesere, ‘Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature’ in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, No. 1, 13 (March), 1975, pp. 108–110.

99 Biodun Jeyifo, ‘For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika’ in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds), *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, Oxford: Heinemann and Dangeroo Press, 1990, pp. 51–70. An extract from this essay is reprinted in our Critical readings section.

and the cultural values and modes of cognition and aesthetic representation they embody and articulate and promote, but rather between the affirmation of hegemonic values, on the one hand, and their negation from below and outside, on the other. For Jeyifo:

There is . . . at work in the mesh of significations . . . a dialectic of, on the one hand, cultural affirmation and on the other hand a cultural critique and deflation. One pole, the pole of affirmation, may be said to coalesce around *doxa*: belief, opinion, or custom perceived in terms of elementary structures of ordered meaning, and centred, cohering values. *Things Fall Apart* may be regarded in this respect as a vast doxological compendium of Igbo culture before the advent of colonialism. Indeed, it has been so critically examined by several scholars. At the opposite pole from *doxa* we have of course the pole of para-dox(a), or irony and dialectic. This is the pole of cultural demystification of which *Things Fall Apart*, like Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, is also an exemplary textual articulation.<sup>100</sup>

It is worth noting that, unlike most critics of the novel who focus on Okonkwo, Jeyifo refreshingly privileges Obierika as the key to the ideological and formal structure of the novel. Within this framework, Okonkwo, Reverend Smith and the District Commissioner represent the pursuit of hegemonic ideals without the kind of critical reflexivity of an Obierika, and to some extent perhaps, even of a Reverend Brown.

For Jeyifo, it is a matter of some regret that critics have not picked up on the way in which Achebe is producing a critique not only of colonialism and imperialism in *Things Fall Apart*, but also of traditional African society itself. It is the way in which the critical voice is embedded in the fragment, in the minor characters such as Obierika, that makes Achebe's novel illustrative of the critique of totalizing narrative central to postcolonial theory, post-structuralism and post-modernism.<sup>101</sup> However, the virtue of Achebe's narrative logic is that while doing that it still holds on to the value of totality and grand narratives, and as such, in Jeyifo's view, it enacts a profound criticism of the fetishization of the fragment and the fear of totality in contemporary critical theory. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* is both a nationalist and an anti-nationalist text, postcolonialist and postmodernist, as well as anti-postcolonialist and anti-postmodernist. In this regard, Jeyifo's extremely original reading of *Things Fall Apart* seems to stage the same structure of ambivalence evident in Abdul JanMohamed, while accusing contemporary

100 Jeyifo, 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika', p. 61.

101 By postcolonial theory, we refer to post-structuralist and post-Marxist applications to literature from formerly colonized countries. The terms post-Marxist and post-structuralist refer to the theories and critical approaches that emerged in the 1960s, often associated with the work of Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, among others, which challenged both the Marxist view, that literature could be understood solely through its relationship to the economy, and the structuralist one, that understanding the underlying structures of literary texts was the key to their meaning. The term postmodernism refers to critical approaches that seek to go beyond the ideas of modernism by dispensing with such concepts as truth, organic unity and linear narrative, regarding them as an imposition on creative and critical practice by grand conceptions of the world and experience.

Western theory of marginalizing subaltern critical voices such as Achebe's (see *Texts and contexts*, p. 12). It may also be added that, in fact, by ignoring the pioneering work of critics such as Abiola Irele in his essay, Jeyifo not only contributes to the marginalization of critical labour from Africa, from the local cultural resource, but also misses the opportunity to situate his own work in a different history of critical theory from that of mainstream postcolonial theory and postmodernism. An even more glaring omission is Michael Echeruo's essay on Achebe in which, like Jeyifo, he urges that we attend to the contrast between Obierika's judicious affiliation to tradition and Okonkwo's uncritical identification with it. Be that as it may, Jeyifo's essay represents a substantial rethinking of the place of Chinua Achebe's text. He is perhaps the first critic to acknowledge that *Things Fall Apart* is literature functioning as critical practice and that is a deep insight into the nature of the text, but also into the different modes of theorization.

However, in his essay 'Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', Ato Quayson is critical of Jeyifo's work, arguing that he, like many critics on the novel, privileges realism uncritically, without attending to the constructedness of the novel's discourses of realism. He argues that

Much of the criticism relating to the novel . . . shares implicit assumptions with the nature of the 'realism' that the novel itself offers. These assumptions subtly valorize the hermeneutical and exegetical approaches to the work without paying attention to the fact that its 'realism' is a construct whose basic premises cannot be taken unproblematically.<sup>102</sup>

According to Quayson, the debate among African critics generally has been over preferences of realist traditions rather than on how African literary texts employ specific strategies to achieve particular realistic effects. Furthermore, in his view, there are other kinds of literary representation in Africa than the realist ones, such as the mythological representations of Amos Tutuola's work.

According to Quayson, realist texts such as *Things Fall Apart* must be read as 'symbolic discourses that continually restructure a variety of subtexts: cultural, political, historical, and at times even biographical'.<sup>103</sup> For him the fundamental structure of *Things Fall Apart* is played out in the tension between its metonymic and metaphoric levels,<sup>104</sup> with the former presenting the story of the rise and fall of Umuofia, and the latter the digressions from, contradictions in, and qualifications of the metonymic order. For Quayson, it is particularly in the novel's representation of patriarchy that this tension is most clearly demonstrated. He

102 Ato Quayson, 'Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It' in *Research in African Literature*, 25: 4, Winter 1994. p. 118. An extract from this essay is reprinted in our Critical readings section.

103 Quayson, 'Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', p. 133.

104 The term 'metonymy' refers to a figure of speech whereby a part stands for the whole, for example, when we say 'the crown' to refer to the queen or king. The term 'metaphor' refers to a figure of speech in which two different elements are presented as having similar qualities, such as 'The king is a lion'.

contents that at the metonymic level the novel asserts the traditional patriarchal order embodied by Okonkwo, but in its metaphorical dimension that order is contradicted and undermined through irony and self-doubt. Thus, far from merely reflecting and affirming the reality of pre-colonial culture, the novel in fact subverts that culture, distancing itself from it and producing a critique of its founding ideology. In the end, for Quayson, in its profound ambivalence towards the male-dominated culture of Umuofia, the novel enacts a critique of realism and the tendency to read cultural texts in representational terms. Quayson's focus on the question of gender in the novel is part of the general development in the study of Chinua Achebe that examines his work, and indeed that of other African writers, in terms of the representation of the interplay between gender and power. This has been the particular focus of what is termed feminist or womanist criticism, a form of criticism that focuses on the way women's gender identity is presented and contested in literary texts.

Quayson's reading addresses the central problem at the heart of much of the criticism of the novel, in the tendency to see it as a faithful translation into fictional representation of pre-colonial Africa, especially Igbo culture. He reminds us of the need to attend to the text as literature, something that a number of critics before him have called for, but in the end failed to live up to themselves, as the mimetic aspects of *Things Fall Apart* and the novel's relationship to the pre-colonial Igbo culture could not be fully explained by a formalistic approach, that is, one that focused solely on the form of the text. Indeed, that is also the problem with Quayson's approach. His characterization of the metonymic level in the novel conforms to the Real and the metaphorical to those elements which undermine the Real, and thus the text is seen as staging the opposition between the tendency toward the Real and its Other. That, of course, does not amount to banishing the Real from African literary criticism, but rather adding another configuration to the Real. Moreover, it is difficult to see a fundamental difference between Jeyifo's and Quayson's structures of critique, as they both argue for an essential ambivalence at the heart of the text, between the drive to unitary and hegemonic ideology, on the one hand, and the staging of a critique of the novel's ideological intentionality in the margins. Perhaps there is an artificial tension here between, on the one hand, the mimetic, the representational, the demand for texts to embody some truth, in dominant and hegemonic ideology and, on the other, the non-mimetic, non-representational, mythical, subversive margin and the 'female principle'. The whole text is a fictional discourse that is presented to us as having an ideological, historical and aesthetic relationship to contemporary and historical Africa, its politics, its culture, and its world-view.

It is the relationship between representation and truth in *Things Fall Apart* that Simon Gikandi's *Reading Chinua Achebe* (1991) addresses. Taking a cue from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), he argues that *Things Fall Apart* should be seen as primarily a form of representation and as such whatever truths it conveys have to be seen as mediated by the strategies of representation. He quotes the following passage from Said in order to anchor his argument:

Another reason for insisting upon exteriority is that I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourses and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations

. . . In any instance of a written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, for Gikandi, *Things Fall Apart* cannot be regarded as representing a 'real' Igbo culture, nor is the division between the mimetic and the representational proposed by Jeyifo and Quayson sustainable, raising the question: how can there be a zone of the real within what is an overall representational structure?

For him, what is real are the semiotic sign systems or codes with which Igbo culture, as represented by Achebe, constitutes its reality. In other words, mimesis is a product of representation, but that does not make its effects unreal. Thus, as far as Gikandi is concerned, the effects of colonialist representations of Africa form part of the representational unconscious of *Things Fall Apart*. He contends that Achebe

develops techniques – and promotes ideologies – whose primary purpose is to contest, and wrestle with, the silent shadows and forms of colonialist discourse . . . My contention here is that if we do not tune our ears to the written and unwritten discourse that blocks Achebe's attempt to recover the essential forms of Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart* – whether we believe such a recovery possible or not – then we will often miss the value of the novel as a form of cultural formation. The first question we need to take up, then, relates to the strategies Achebe develops to reply to his colonialist precursors, or rather to turn the Western fantasy on Africa upside down, a gesture of reversal which, I will insist, makes it possible for Achebe to initiate narratives of resistance. A reading of *Things Fall Apart* which fails to relate it to the discourse that shadows it, misses the revolutionary nature of Achebe's text.<sup>106</sup>

Gikandi sees the novel as asserting the validity of African culture and its concepts of time and being, but he does so well aware of the fact that the Igbo world in the novel is mediated by the novelist's sources, both Igbo and colonial. Achebe thus restructures the cultural traditions, particularly oral forms, into a representation which among other things interrogates the idea of a unified objective reality outside the novel's own mode of representation while at the same time affirming the validity of writing as the site of cultural production.

Gikandi's approach highlights Achebe's ambivalence, but also re-appropriates the earlier nationalist readings of *Things Fall Apart* for a postcolonial cultural politics of strategic resistance. He sums up his concerns as follows:

The District Commissioner writes to compress the history of Umuofia into a general text of colonization; Achebe writes to liberate his people from that text and to inscribe the values and ideological claims of Igbo culture in the language and form that sought to repress it. The ultimate irony of the novel is that although the Commissioner has the final word

105 Edward Said, quoted in Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, London: James Currey, 1991, p. 24.

106 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, p. 26.



in the fictional text, Achebe – the African writer who has appropriated a Western narrative practice – writes the colonizer’s words and hence commemorates an African culture which the colonizer thought he had written out of existence.<sup>107</sup>

Thus Gikandi relocates the discussion of *Things Fall Apart* into a context in which the text is inserted into a critical language that is itself aware of the problems of representation as well as the fact that the novel is not an entirely true representation of African culture and society or the writer’s own ideological intentions. However, such an awareness does not preclude recognizing the novel’s radical function in its contesting colonial discourse and promoting African post-colonial cultural self-determination. In this sense, Gikandi’s approach is perhaps less consonant with the theoretical positions of Jeyifo and Quayson, and has more in common with some of the early nationalist receptions of the novel, which predominantly saw the novel as affirming African culture and identity.

In addition, Gikandi’s approach illustrates the notion, encapsulated in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), that postcolonial texts ‘write back’ to the former colonial centre and thus contest colonial representations of the colonized, an idea that has become central to Postcolonial Studies. More significantly, he has a lot in common with David Carroll’s and C. L. Innes’s approaches to Chinua Achebe, which take the writer as primarily interrogating the colonialist representation of Africa. Innes observes that: ‘Achebe had originally planned his first novel as another version of *Mister Johnson*. However, the rewriting turned into two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*.’<sup>108</sup> She argues that though it is the latter novel that mostly offered a direct response to Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, *Things Fall Apart* does also offer a response to it, in that it deliberately sets out to present a ‘less than superficial’ picture of Igbo society than presented in Cary’s novel. She also notes the presence of the opposition between spontaneity and rigidity of feeling in both novels, with Okonkwo embodying the tension that is separately and racially portioned out to the protagonist Johnson and the District Commissioner in Cary’s novel.

For David Carroll, *Things Fall Apart*, similar to Achebe’s other writing, offers a contrast to the idea of Africa as the ‘Dark Continent’, and he argues that: ‘The Dark Continent of Africa has a tenacious hold upon the European imagination. From the time of Prince Henry the Navigator in the fifteenth century to the present the mind of Europe has found Africa both fascinating and repellent.’<sup>109</sup> In his view, Achebe instead offers ‘the figures missing from the earlier landscape and following a way of life which does not need questioning or justifying. The meaningless collective activity of the frenzied mob has given place to the gentle dialectic between the individual and the forms of ancient custom.’<sup>110</sup> Carroll sees Achebe as opposing the European exoticization of Africa with a realist representation of

107 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, p. 50.

108 C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 21.

109 David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic* (1980), Basingstoke: Macmillan, revised edition 1990, p. 1.

110 Carroll, *Chinua Achebe*, p. 11.

the African subjectivity and landscape. It could be argued that Carroll does fit well within the dominant realist school approach to *Things Fall Apart*. However, that would be a simplification of his approach as he also, although not employing the high language of post-structuralism, attends to the ways in which the world of *Things Fall Apart* is mediated by Achebe's use of various stylistic features such as 'narrative point of view'. He remarks that

The success of [the novel] is due in large part to Achebe's sensitive control of the narrative voice. The novel is narrated in the third person, but there is no suggestion of an omniscient observer scrutinising and analysing customs and habits of this Igbo community. The voice is that of a wise and sympathetic elder of the tribe who has witnessed time and time again the cycle of the seasons and the accompanying rituals in the village.<sup>111</sup>

In some ways, Carroll's recognition of *Things Fall Apart* as an effect of language suggests a profound similarity with Gikandi's post-structuralist and post-Marxist view of *Things Fall Apart* as a discourse of representation. However, as Gikandi has argued, Carroll's suggestion that the voice in the text is that of a wise old man indicates the extent to which New Criticism (see Critical history, pp. 55–56), despite its acknowledgement of texts as artefacts, still worked with some fixed essentialist notions of subjectivity and an abiding concern with authenticity. In this regard, Carroll's old man is similar to the 'true' and 'virile' Igbo Man of Gerald Moore's imagination and, indeed, to the African cultural nationalist. Indeed, even Gikandi cannot free himself completely from the idea of authenticity, though his version is predicated not so much on the text being true to life as on its being true to the semiotic codes that constitute social and cultural reality.

## Conclusion

In concluding, it needs to be noted that *Things Fall Apart*, perhaps one of the most famous novels of the twentieth century, has not always attracted unqualified praise, but also its fair share of criticism. It has been applauded as well as denigrated by both Africans and Europeans. It has been a subject of varied and often passionate critical debate, engendering a variety of approaches: from cultural nationalists, humanist universalists, neo-Aristotelians and new critics to neo-Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist and postcolonial approaches. Indeed, just about every conceivable critical tendency has addressed itself to the text in the past fifty years. In this context, one might be tempted to think that perhaps *Things Fall Apart* itself is different things to different readers. While that might be true, there is also a sense in which the various critical approaches and opinions coalesce around particular issues, among which, the principal one has to do with what kind of novel is *Things Fall Apart*, and how does its particular form reflect the authenticity of the culture, history and politics of pre-colonial Igbo, Nigerian and

111 Carroll, *Chimua Achebe*, p. 33.

African society; and in what ways does it contribute to the recovery and re-writing of the African past, and how does that serve the interests of contemporary postcolonial cultural formation? This concern with the novel's relationship to the world, with its authenticity, has made strange bedfellows of various critical types, linking, for instance Ben Obumsele's 1959 response to the novel to those of contemporary critics such as Florence Stratton, Simon Gikandi, Biodun Jeyifo and Ato Quayson.

**3**

## **Critical readings**



**Abiola Irele**, From 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe' (1967) reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (1978) edited by C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors. Washington DC: Three Continents Press, pp. 10–21.

The Nigerian Abiola Irele was a near contemporary of Chinua Achebe, having studied at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s, only a few years after Achebe was a student there. Irele has long been regarded as one of the country's pre-eminent cultural theorists and literary critics and his landmark work *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981) remains one of the most influential studies of African literature. His recent book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and The Black Diaspora* (2001) has proved to be another groundbreaking work, one which includes an excellent chapter on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that builds on his earlier analysis of the novel in the light of contemporary postcolonial approaches. This extract from his influential early essay provides a 'classic' reading of the novel that perceptively mixes psychological insights with a sociological analysis of Okonkwo and the society that produced him. Irele's reading of the novel combines a neo-Aristotelian approach, seeing Okonkwo's downfall as analogous to a Classical Tragedy, with a nuanced analysis of the historical and cultural conflict that engenders this tragedy. He argues that Okonkwo's tragic destiny becomes 'a symbolic receptacle, a living theatre, of a [wider] social dilemma' that affects Umuofian culture, while never losing sight of the important political implications of the text as a document of cultural decolonization.

[. . .]

*Things Fall Apart*, as the title suggests, is concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by impact with another way of life. The reconstruction of Ibo village life is directed at revealing the forces at work both inside and outside traditional society that prepared the way for its eventual disintegration. Achebe's purpose is therefore not primarily to show its values – though this is an

undoubtedly significant side line – but rather to show it as a living structure, as an organism animated with the life and movement of its members: and within this framework is contained the sphere of action which involves the personal drama of the characters themselves.

The double level of action is realised through the relationship that exists between Okonkwo, the principal character, and his society. In many ways, Okonkwo represents his society in so far as the society has made the man by proposing to him certain values and lines of conduct. On the other hand, the man's personal disposition, his reaction to these social determinations stemming from his subjective perception of them, prepares his individual fate.

In the case of Okonkwo, he is a man who has grown up in a community which, because of its passionate desire for survival, places its faith above all in the individual quality of 'manliness'. And it is an irony of fate that makes Okonkwo start off with a disadvantage on this score – the failure of his own father to satisfy this social norm, which adds an urgency to his own particular position. It is the need for him to live down the shame of his father that compels him to an excessive adherence to the social code to an extent which in fact transforms a value into a weakness.

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.

(Ch. 4, p. 20)<sup>1</sup>

Besides, in order to justify himself, he pursues distinction with an obsessive single-mindedness that soon degenerates into egocentricity, until he comes to map out for himself very narrow limits of action or reflection:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one

1 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Oxford: Heinemann Writers Series, 1986, p. 20. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations from the novel are drawn from the same edition. Subsequent references will appear in the body of the text, taking the form of a chapter number and page number in parentheses.

passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.

(Ch. 2, pp. 9–10)

It is clear from this passage that we are in fact dealing with a psychological case. Okonkwo's way of shutting everything else out of his view, aware only of himself, is an indication that his ambition has become a blinding passion of a pathetic kind. The stage is set in the very mind of the character for a tragic career.

Outside factors afford the accessories of this tragic movement. As a result of his own mental attitude, Okonkwo's relationship with other people is thrown off balance. His own rigidity towards himself is reflected in his impatience with others, and in particular with his son, Nwoye:

Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.

(Ch. 4, p. 24)

In a way, Okonkwo's way of conforming, besides being an inverted sort of non-conformity, is a perversion. The meaning he attaches to 'manliness' amounts to fierceness, *violence*. His insistence is such that he becomes a menace to his society even within the limits of its code. On one occasion he contravenes a sacred custom by beating his wife during a sacred week – he was 'not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess'. And one of the elders, commenting on his action, remarks: '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' (Ch. 4, pp. 21–22).

This incident looks forward to that in which he kills another villager at a feast (though accidentally) and has to be expelled and go into an exile pregnant with consequences. But apart from the driving propulsion of his life and the consequent mental stress that this involves for him and for his immediate circle, his concern for a public image takes him to a point where his actions become a pure contradiction of the values they are meant to defend. His participation in the killing of Ikemefuna is one of the most significant events in the novel.

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, 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 matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.

(Ch. 7, p. 43)

Okonkwo has had to steel himself against ordinary human feelings, so that he becomes *dehumanised*.

On a greater scale than his passion is the struggle of the man with his fate (symbolised by his *chi*). His ambition and impatience drive him on to calculate on



a larger scale than others, to demand more of his fate and to force the pace. Ironically, the reversals begin with his own son, who is the very antithesis of his father. There is an Oedipus touch to the relationship of Nwoye with his father – further emphasised by the way Achebe portrays Okonkwo's predilection for his daughter, Ezinma. In the immediate context of the novel, the conflict is created out of the gradual breakdown of a normal relationship between father and son, and Nwoye's final alienation from his father which prevents a resolution. The final breaking of the filial bond is directly related to the killing of Ikemefuna:

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.

(Ch. 7, p. 43)

But this incident is not confined merely to the simple question of the son's reaction to his father's place in his own life and its consequences upon his sensibility, but is also related in the same passage to the wider issues of the boy's reaction to his society. Nwoye is presented all along as a sensitive young man whose psychology turns against certain customs of the village, particularly the casting away of twins into the forest. In fact, Nwoye's defection to Christianity later on has a double significance – it is at the same time an act of revolt against his father as well as a rejection of the society that he embodied; and it is essentially as such that Okonkwo himself views his son's gesture:

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 shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation.

(Ch. 17, p. 110)

Nwoye thus stands as a symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all that Okonkwo accepts and stands for.

The disaffection and the final defection of his son is only part of a general reversal of Okonkwo's fortunes. His accidental killing of a villager and his subsequent exile from Umuofia are the workings of a blind fate crossing his path to his own conception of self-realisation. His exile, which he bears with bad grace, has not only brought him a setback, but has also added to his ambitious drive the sharp edge of frustration. But Okonkwo is a man who is prepared to grapple with his fate, to bend everything to his irrepressible will. Only at one stage, when the true propositions of his struggle appear to him, does he seem to relent:

Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true – that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.

(Ch. 14, p. 94)

His return to Umuofia when he comes back to meet new circumstances – the presence of the white man and his success in making converts – is the occasion for relaunching his struggle on a new footing. For the situation is to Okonkwo a personal issue. The fact that his son Nwoye is among the Christians is only symptomatic of the way in which the new religion strikes at his own heart, as it were; the real point is that he has to use the fight against the Christians to regain his lost place in the village. This is even easier than his inflamed passion makes him realise, and he is naturally involved in the attack on the Christian Church that leads to the arrest and humiliation of those responsible. The impact of this incident on Okonkwo's mind prepares the last phase of his tragedy:

As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself.

(Ch. 24, p. 142)

For, characteristically, he sums up the situation in terms of violence. His final action in killing the messenger of the colonial administration is in a sense his 'revenge'. And his final defeat is the utter futility of his action, his final realisation that he has gone so far beyond reasonable limits in championing his society as to have lost touch with it:

Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: 'Why did he do it?' He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away.

(Ch. 24, pp. 146–147)

*Things Fall Apart* is the tragedy of one man, worked out of his personal conflicts – his neurosis, almost – as well as out of the contrariness of his destiny. Yet the title is not without relevance, for the novel does have another dimension, that of social comment. Okonkwo's suicide is a gesture that symbolises at the same time his personal refusal of a new order, as well as the collapse of the old order which he represents. For Okonkwo's inflexibility, his tragic flaw, is a reflection of his society; his defect, though a deformation, derives from a corresponding trait in his society, an aspect of it pushed to its extreme logical frontiers.

It is true, of course, that Achebe presents the society as one that has positive qualities of its own. The coherence and order that make social life one long ceremonial, the intense warmth of personal relationships and the passionate energy of the religious life, all these reveal the other side of the coin. But if the social is carefully reconstructed – with a fondness that at least reveals, if it does not betray, the author's attachment to his social background – so also is the suddenness of the final bolt that strikes it carefully prepared for the disastrous effect it is going to have, the cracks in the edifice where the falling apart begins being carefully shown up. It is thus significant that the earliest converts should include the outcasts and particularly the mothers of the unfortunate twins. A

correlative theme is here attached to the whole portrayal of Umuofia – that of the liberating influence of the new religion. Consider for example the effect of Nwoye’s conversion upon the boy:

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 marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in the 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.

(Ch. 16, p. 106)

*Things Fall Apart* turns out to present the whole tragic drama of a society, vividly and concretely enacted in the tragic destiny of a representative individual. This use of an individual character as a symbolic receptacle, the living theatre, of a social dilemma, is what gives Achebe’s novels their real measure of strength [. . .]

The distinctive quality of his style is *sobriety* – not the simplicity of limited talent, but the disciplined economy of an assured artist. Within the framework of a conventional medium, Achebe creates the complexity of human situations with the slightest of means. His prose is rigorously utilitarian, and what appears as an elaborate evocation of social customs (‘exoticism’ to some, ‘padding’ to others) simply serves as a *realistic* support for the human drama, relevant to the cultural context of his novels. He is concerned primarily with individuals. His narrative method is detached, almost impassive, made of objective formulations through which the human drama is unfolded. Yet it is not impersonal, for instead of the flamboyant colours of a heated imagination, we have rather the clear lines that compose a picture by a dispassionate observer of human destiny, who constructs a vision out of his awareness of an inexorable order.

Achebe has justly been called a chronicler, for in the last resort he is not dealing simply with the collapse of African society, but with its transformation. He is examining from the inside the historical evolution of African society at its moment of crisis, and the inevitable tensions attendant upon this process. In the final analysis, his novels reveal the intimate circumstances of the African Becoming.

**Abdul JanMohamed**, from 'Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"'. *Ariel*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October 1984, pp. 19–39.

The Kenyan Abdul JanMohamed produced one of the foundational works of postcolonial criticism and theory in his *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983). In this extract from a later essay he employs the techniques of oral textual analysis, usually associated with the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology, to illuminate the way Achebe's novel produces a complex syncretism of oral and chirographic discourses which, he argues, 'transcends the Manichean relations' between the colonizer and the colonized (see Texts and contexts, p. 13). JanMohamed employs the anthropological term 'chirographic' to describe a predominantly writing (literate) culture, as opposed to a predominantly oral culture. JanMohamed argues that the novel subverts the chirographic or literate structures of representation that underwrite the Western cultural and political project that annihilates Umuofia, and instead narrates the story of Umuofia through a language and narrative mode that is predominantly oral in style and structure. In doing so, Achebe successfully asserts the specificity of the cultural values of that society and subverts the Western novelistic form. Significantly, while fundamentally subscribing to the cultural conflict approach to *Things Fall Apart*, for JanMohamed, the novel goes beyond the dramatization of cultural conflict, synthesizing the antagonistic elements into a new aesthetic of postcolonial hybridity. JanMohamed employs a number of recondite and technical terms in the essay which may require some initial explanation: syncretism/syncretic ('the reconciling or unifying of differing ideas or discourses'); parataxis/paratactic (grammatical terms referring to 'the placing of clauses one after another without words indicating coordination or subordination'); hypotaxis/hypotactic (grammatical terms referring to 'the subordination of one clause to another'); leitmotif ('a recurrent theme associated throughout a work with a particular person, idea or situation'); and apostasy ('renunciation of a belief or faith'). This is a challenging essay which more than

repays the effort of grappling with its, at times, complex theoretical and conceptual framework.

[. . .]

Chinua Achebe's style in *Things Fall Apart* is consonant with the oral culture that he represents. In fact, the congruence between the style, elements of the narrative structure, and characterization, on the one hand, and the nature of the culture represented, on the other, account for the success of the novel: because Achebe is able to capture the flavour of an oral society in his style and narrative organization, *Things Fall Apart* is able to represent successfully the specificity of a culture alien to most Western readers.

His sentence structure is on the whole paratactic; it achieves its effect largely through juxtaposition, addition, and aggregation. Consider the opening paragraph of the novel:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight . . .

(Ch. 1, p. 3)

In spite of the glaring opportunities for consolidating the short, simple sentences and subordinating some of them as modifying clauses, thereby emphasizing the more important elements, Achebe refuses to do so precisely because syntactic subordination is more characteristic of chirographic representation than it is of oral speech. The desired effect of this parataxis, which, as we will see, is echoed in the narrative organization of the novel, is the creation of a flat surface: since one fact is not subordinated to another more important one, everything exists on the same plane and is equally important. Of course, as one proceeds through the novel one begins to see that all the details coalesce around the heroic figure of Okonkwo, but while reading any one paragraph or chapter the initial effect is one of equivalence. This style and its effects, it must be emphasized, are deliberate. As Achebe himself has shown by comparing a more abstract and hypotactic version of a paragraph from *Arrow of God* with the concrete and paratactic original, the former is inappropriate for the protagonist of the novel and his context.<sup>1</sup> The deliberateness of this style is also emphasized by its contrast with passages of oratory at political gatherings, funerals, and other formal occasions when the language, though still paratactic, is characterized by greater rhetorical formality.

1 [All footnotes are JanMohamed's] Achebe feels that a 'new English' will have to be 'still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'. For his discussion of this topic see 'The African Writer and the English Language' (1965) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: Heinemann, 1975, pp. 55–62.

For instance, Uchendu's avuncular advice to Okonkwo is not only very dramatic and punctuated effectively with rhetorical questions but is also tightly structured according to the demands of the logic of his argument (Ch. 14, pp. 95–97).

The effect of parataxis, however, is modulated by the repetition of various kinds of details. Significant facts keep resurfacing like a leitmotif: for example, Okonkwo's achievement of fame through wrestling is introduced in the first paragraph on page three, then repeated again on pages six and nineteen, and finally the narrator devotes an entire chapter (Ch. 6, pp. 33–36) to the importance of this sport in Igbo culture. At times virtually identical statements are repeated. Chapter three begins with the following statement: 'Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit' (Ch. 3, p. 12). This is followed by a two-page depiction of his father's laziness, which ends with 'With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife' (Ch. 3, p. 13). Playing against the flat surface of the paratactic prose, such repetitions create a sense of rhythm and valorize some facts above others. This does produce a kind of subordination, but the fact that these repetitions are embedded in a flat narrative surface implies that they must be understood in terms of the overall situation; without the context these facts lose their value. In this novel significance is a function of recurrence, not of logical analytic valorization. The importance of context is illustrated by the fact that meaning of complex concepts is defined by reference to concrete situations rather than abstract elaboration. Thus, for example, *efulefu*, a worthless individual, is defined as follows: 'The imagery of an *efulefu* in the language of the clan was a man who sold his matchet and wore the sheath to battle' (Ch. 16, p. 103). Or the apparent contradiction between the two definitions of *chi* as they appear on pages nineteen and twenty-two is explained by the context, which makes it clear that the *chi* is in agreement with the self when one is in harmony with oneself and the entire culture but that it becomes antagonistic when one is alienated from self and society. Though repetition and contextual definition modify the flat surface of the narrative, they do not, as we shall see later, create a distinction between background and foreground. Rather their function is to create a series of patterns on that surface.

Elements of the narrative structure and organization repeat and amplify, on a different register, the same effects. Yet the narrative, like the style, is the product of a double consciousness, of a syncretic combination of chirographic and oral techniques. Just as the style represents in writing the syntax and thought patterns of oral cultures, so the narrative operates on two levels: in its novelistic form the story of Okonkwo is unique and historical, yet it is told as if it were a well-known myth. The narrative acknowledges the latter fact in its opening sentence: 'Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond' (Ch. 1, p. 3). The story of his poverty 'was told in Umuofia' (Ch. 3, p. 12), and that of Ikemefuna's sacrifice 'is still told in Umuofia unto this day' (Ch. 2, p. 9). Similarly other aspects of this narrative manifest themselves as circulating oral tales, and the white colonizers first appear to the hero in the form of stories. The reader is left with an impression that these tales are loosely connected but that the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* will (re)stitch them in his own unique order. However, even though the myth about Okonkwo and his family is common knowledge it has to

be told (and heard) as if for the first time. Thus, for example, after introducing the fact of Nwoye's apostasy and after depicting for several pages the first encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Igbos, Achebe returns to Nwoye's conversion with the following sentences: 'But there was a young lad who had been captivated [by Christianity]. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son' (Ch. 16, p. 106). This presentation of the apostasy, the name of the character, and his parentage as if for the first time is not due, we must assume, to narrative amnesia. Rather it is a part of the process of remembering in a public way, a product of returning, after a 'digression' and in the absence of a text, to the facts. This technique of public remembrance, which seems to annoy many 'literate' readers, accounts for the pervasive pattern wherein Achebe introduces a topic and then repeatedly returns to it in order to explain it piecemeal (see, for example, the series of reversions to the story of Ikemefuna until he is finally executed in Chapter seven). Aspects of this pattern can be accounted for by the need to foreshadow, which is common to both chirographic and oral narratives. The overall effect of this pattern of postponements and reversions, of the juxtapositions of central themes and 'digressions' is to create an interlocking mosaic of episodes out of which the significance of the story gradually emerges.

By proceeding through public remembrance the narrative makes ample use of periphrasis, which, according to Achebe, is a highly prized technique of Igbo conversation: 'Among the Ibo the act of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally' (Ch. 1, p. 5). Like Okoye, the narrator skirts around his subject but carefully maintains certain ambiguities (which we shall examine later). The first chapter provides a good example of this narrative circularity. It covers the following subjects in that order: Okonkwo's fame, wrestling ability, personality, his father's character and indebtedness, Okonkwo's shame, his struggle for recognition and wealth, and his consequent custody of Ikemefuna, and the latter's destiny. In this spiral the chapter encapsulates the entire plot of part one of *Things Fall Apart*. The other twelve chapters of part one explore all of these issues in much greater detail, but not in the same order. In fact, the topics are thoroughly scrambled and a great deal of space is devoted to the depiction of the central events in the life of the agrarian community – planting, harvesting, etc., and the various festivals that accompany them – as well as rituals such as marriages, funerals, convening of the legal-spiritual court of the *egwugwus*, etc. Out of the one-hundred-and-eighteen pages that comprise part one of the novel only about eight are devoted, strictly speaking, to the development of the plot. The narrator is therefore anxious to represent the cultural 'background' as much as the heroic figure, and in doing so he is able to depict the core of his culture and show that Okonkwo is one of its heroic representatives. Having thus depicted the interconnected totality of the culture and having established Okonkwo as its emblem in part one of the novel, the narrator, who in keeping with the already known narrative, is sensitively aware of the arrival of the destructive colonialists and their chirographic culture, changes the organization and the pace of the second and third parts of the novel: the plot now follows a more rigorous and increasingly urgent chronological and causal pattern until it ends suddenly with Okonkwo fixed as a minor detail in a minor book of a vast chirographic culture. The elaborate oral narrative that has

been sustained throughout the novel is startlingly displaced by a causal, 'objective' paragraph about Okonkwo in the District Officer's book.

However, the narrative principle that leads to this dramatic end is not causality but contiguity. As the outline of the first chapter illustrates, most often the narrative proceeds through association of subject matter. At times, however, the association focuses explicitly on a word, such as 'household' which provides the link between the three parts of the second chapter. Achebe's studied avoidance of causality as an organizational principle is consonant with the epistemology of oral cultures, which have not developed their analytic capacities because they do not have access to literacy. The subsequent dependence of the plot on contiguity results in parataxis at the narrative level, which in turn reinforces the flat surface of the novel.

Nowhere is the decision to preserve this flatness, the refusal to emphasize the divisions between foreground and background, between the phenomenal and the numenal more apparent than in the narrator's management of the border between the secular and the sacred. In pure oral cultures such a distinction does not exist, but Achebe and his novel both exist in the margins of chirographic and oral cultures. The author is thus challenged with the unenviable task of ensuring that his characters do not seem foolish because they believe in the absence of that border while he is obliged to acknowledge it for the same reason. Achebe meets this challenge by endowing his characters and narrator with a double consciousness. At the beginning of the legal-spiritual court where *egwugwus* first appear, the narrator tells us that 'Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might have also noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible . . .' (Ch. 10, p. 65). Thus the narrator demonstrates for us the double consciousness – the awareness of the border and its deep repression – of the characters, while admitting to the reader that Okonkwo is 'dressed up' as an *egwugwu* and then proceeding to deny that admission (i.e., Okonkwo '*was* one of the dead fathers . . .', italics added). By maintaining a deliberate ambiguity, a double consciousness in keeping with the syncretism of a written narrative about an oral culture, the narrator refuses to emphasize either the chirographic/scientific or the oral/mythic viewpoint, thereby once again reinforcing the flat surface.

The same effect is obtained through the monotony of the narrative voice and the timeless aura of the story. The voice remains unchanging even when it is retelling a folktale recounted by one of the characters (e.g., Ch. 11, p. 69). The chronology is extremely vague; temporal locations are designated only by phrases such as 'many years ago' (Ch. 1, p. 3), 'years ago' (Ch. 1, p. 4), 'as old as the clan itself' (Ch. 2, p. 8), 'the worst year in living memory' (Ch. 3, p. 16), and so on. The only specific periods in the novel are associated with ritual punishment: Ikemefuna's three years in Okonkwo's custody and Okonkwo's seven years in exile. Otherwise the novel is as timeless as one with a historical setting (indicated most obviously by the arrival of the English colonialists to this area, around 1905) can be: the narrative, as an aggregation of already known, circulating stories, exists in seamless mythic time rather than segmented historical time.



Characterization too is a product of the oral aesthetic economy; it is, however, more clearly modified by the historicizing demands of the (chirographic) novelistic imperatives. As Bakhtin points out, in the historicizing move from the epic to the novel, it is 'precisely the zone of contact with an inconclusive present (and consequently with the future) that creates the necessity of [the] incongruity of man with himself. There always remains in him unrealised potential and unrealised demands.' Unlike the tragic or epic hero, who can be incarnated quite satisfactorily within the existing sociohistorical categories, the 'individual' in the novel invariably raises the issue of his inadequacy to his fate and situation, and thereby calls into question the efficacy of the existing sociohistorical categories. The move from the monochronic and totalized world of the epic to the historicized and dialogic world of the novel also leads to the disintegration of the individual in other ways: 'A crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation . . .'<sup>2</sup> *Things Fall Apart* is delicately poised at the transition from the epic (oral) to the novel (chirographic). In keeping with its oral origins, Achebe's novel entirely lacks the tension between internal and external man. Although Okonkwo's repression of the 'feminine' emotions and Nwoye's revulsion towards the discarding of twins and the execution of Ikemefuna are so crucial to the plot and the meaning of the novel, Achebe never explores them as dense interiorities (as a contemporary western writer would have). Rather he stays on the flat surface and represents the emotions through concrete metaphors. Consider, for example, Okonkwo's 'meditation' of his son's apostasy. As he contemplates the incredulity of his son's action, Okonkwo, whose nickname is 'Roaring Flame', gazes into the fire in his hut. The narrator finally presents the results of the ruminations as follows: '[Okonkwo] sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply' (Ch. 17, p. 111). From our viewpoint, the crucial aspect of this procedure is that Achebe chooses to represent interiority only through its concrete, material manifestation or reflection. Similarly, Nwoye's revulsion is represented through metaphors of physical sensation: when confronted with Ikemefuna's death 'something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow' (Ch. 7, p. 43). Thus, unlike Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, *Things Fall Apart* refuses to 'experiment' with the representation of subjectivity in a way that is familiar to contemporary Western readers.

However, the externality of representation does not mean that Okonkwo lacks subjectivity. The reader is made fully aware of the pride and anger with which the hero attempts to mask his shame and fear. In fact, the narrative focuses on the binary relationship of these emotions to the point where other aspects of the hero's psyche are ignored. Thus in keeping with the tradition of oral narrative Okonkwo remains a relatively flat character, whose efficacy must be judged not according to the criteria of some vague realistic notion of 'roundness' but rather in terms of his twofold narrative function. First, he is an emblem of his culture.

2 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 37.

Through his mundane preoccupations and tribulations – his involvement in harvesting, planting, building houses, weddings, funerals, legal and spiritual rituals, etc. – we are allowed to penetrate the interiority of the Igbo culture before the arrival of British colonizers. Consequently when he commits suicide – which not only cuts him off from his ancestors but which is also the product of a complicated alienation from the principle of the continuity of ancestral lineage (he rejects his father, kills his foster son, and drives away his real son) – his death leaves us with the feeling of massive cultural destruction, of an end of traditional Igbo culture. His second, ideological function is tied to the first; his shame and pride are emblematic: the former represents the shame produced among the colonized by the colonizers' rhetoric and savagery and the latter reflects the resurgence in the African's pride in the moral efficacy of his culture as he understands it. For if Achebe introduces us to traditional Igbo culture through Okonkwo, he is doing so in order to show that it was civilized and, by extension, that the colonized individual need not be ashamed of his past. Yet in the process of using Okonkwo as an emblem Achebe also accedes to novelistic pressures. The transformation of Okonkwo from a heroic figure to an insignificant detail in a paragraph about savage custom is clearly a deflationary movement that raises questions about his potentiality and his adequacy to his situation. The novel is content neither with leaving Okonkwo as a completely stylized heroic figure nor with the impulse to idealize traditional Igbo culture. The reflexivity of the novel manifests itself through the dialogic relation between Okonkwo and his friend Obierika. While the former, driven by his fear, voices a simplified version of his culture's values, the latter voices its doubts. Obierika briefly but significantly questions general practices such as the discarding of twins and Okonkwo's participation in the execution of Ikemefuna, and at the end of the novel he is left contemplating the transition of Okonkwo from hero to pariah. Similarly, Nwoye's apostasy opens up another horizon: by espousing the new chirographic culture he creates the potential for one of his descendents to write a novel like *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe's first novel, then, can be seen as a unique totalizing and syncretic achievement. Its totalizing ability is most clearly visible in its syncretism. While rescuing oral cultures from their inevitable transitoriness, writing also alienates the objects as well as the unreflexive (or rather less reflexive) subject of that world by allowing one to examine them at a distance. In turn the fixity, distance, and scrutiny permitted by writing facilitate greater familiarity with and understanding of self and the real world. This dialectic of distance and proximity, of alienation and understanding is inevitably involved in the configuration of Achebe's novel. *Things Fall Apart* documents, among other things, the destruction of oral culture by a chirographic one. However, Achebe uses that very process of chirographic documentation in order to recreate and preserve a symbolic version of the destroyed culture; in recording the oral culture's preoccupation with the present, Achebe historicizes its evanescence. The novel incorporates its own condition and occasion into itself. However, the most fascinating aspect of this totalization is that while *Things Fall Apart* depicts the mutual misunderstanding and antagonism of the colonizing and colonized worlds, the very process of this depiction, in its capacity as a *written oral* narrative, transcends the manichean relations by a brilliant synthesis of oral and chirographic cultures. By deliberately adhering to a flat surface Achebe obtains a result curiously similar to the effect obtained by one

of Picasso's paintings: the illusion of depth and perspective, of the third dimension in symbolic representation, is deliberately wrenched and displaced in order to create a two-dimensional representation that includes within it an abstract reminder about the third dimension. While Picasso drew his inspiration from West African art, Achebe draws his from West European fiction. Like Picasso's paintings, Achebe's novel presents us with sophisticated primitivism, with a deliberate return to an innocence re-presented. [. . .]

**Biodun Jeyifo**, from 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika' in *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* (1990) edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books and Dangaroo Press (First published by Kunapipi), pp. 51–70.

Biodun Jeyifo is a renowned Nigerian critic who has written extensively on Nigerian literature and theatre, and is best known for his neo-Marxist and post-structuralist readings of African literature (see Critical history, pp. 69–71). In this extract from his essay he undertakes a fascinating comparison between Okonkwo and his alter ego Obierika, which employs a post-structuralist approach to the notions of narrative hierarchy and ideological hegemony in the novel. Unlike most critics of the novel, who focus on Okonkwo, Jeyifo refreshingly privileges Obierika as the key to the ideological and formal structure of the novel, arguing that he provides a critical self-reflexivity absent from most of the other characters. He also points to a contradictory tension between what he describes as the 'grand narrative of the colonial encounter' and a series of counter-narratives in the text that reveal, beneath and alongside Okonkwo's tragedy, a series of liberatory narratives that demonstrate the resilience of Igbo culture.

[. . .]

The general celebration of *Things Fall Apart* as a work of great realistic fiction which more or less inaugurated the novelistic exploration by African authors of pre-colonial and colonial Africa has often, quite appropriately, acknowledged the superb irony of the novel's last page as a rhetorical trope, a narrative tactic of great power and cogency. This issue requires a closer, more nuanced scrutiny, with regard to some perspectives of contemporary critical theory in relation to the subject of this critical tribute. For what is figured in this last page of *Things Fall Apart* in this short, narratological and rhetorical space, goes to the heart of the

politics of representation as a central concern of post-colonial fiction and critical discourse.

The details can be quickly, summaratively recalled. Obierika, leading the party of the colonial District Commissioner – a figure of great *political* authority in the colonial context – to the dangling body of Okonkwo who has hanged himself, asks the great man to have the corpse brought down by one of his men. Then we are told: ‘The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs’ (Ch. 25, p. 149). A dialogue then ensues in which the Commissioner, now become an inquiring cognitive subject, questions Okonkwo’s people about the customs and ritual practices which forbade them to touch Okonkwo’s body, thus requiring the assistance of strangers to do the simple, humane service. A few paragraphs later, the ‘student of primitive customs’ having received the ‘data’ from his native informants, is transformed into a figure, not merely of political, administrative power, but also of *narrative, discursive, epistemic* authority, as the following ruminations from that much quoted, much admired final paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* reveal:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled 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 to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from a tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book 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*.

(Ch. 25, pp. 149–150)

Much critical commentary has been made on the ironic juxtaposition of the Commissioner’s projected ‘reasonable paragraph’ on the tragedy of Okonkwo with the *entire* narrative space of *Things Fall Apart* of which it is indeed a part: the last paragraph of a whole narrative sets itself up in an authoritarian fashion as *the* only significant detail in the narrative; far more tellingly, for the District Commissioner, the banished, excluded substantive narrative, as a version of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized, simply doesn’t exist. In other words, already in 1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe had in this short, condensed narratological moment of the text, prefigured the post-modern scepticism toward the *grand récits* of the transcendent cognitive (European) subject, the grand totalizing meta-narratives of the bourgeois-imperial imagination of European culture, especially in its encounter with ‘native’ peoples and cultures. This is a point that Edward Said, among other contemporary critics and theorists, makes in relation to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* which, according to him,

works so effectively precisely because its aesthetics and politics . . . are imperialist; and that, by the time Conrad wrote, seemed an attitude that was inevitable and for which there could be no alternative. For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if, as a result, we must depend simply upon the assertive authority of the sort of power Kurtz wields in the jungle or that Marlow possesses as narrator, there is no use looking for non-imperialist alternatives in a system that has simply eliminated, made unthinkable, all other alternatives to it. The circularity of the whole thing is unassailable.<sup>1</sup>

Achebe's famous, and much discussed (and much controverted) essay on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is thus only one further instance, one further elaboration of Achebe's novelistic and essayistic engagement not only on the representation of empire and imperialism – in the light of images, distortions, myths and stereotypes of 'native' peoples and cultures – but also, and perhaps more importantly, of *the imperialism of representation* which, in this historic case, excludes, or simply ignores (alter)-native versions and constructions 'from below'. This battle over representation has continued as a central problematic of post-colonial discourse, as we shall see later in the concluding section of this essay. Meanwhile, it is important to note here that part of this battle over representation involves the trench war of *preferred versions*: a V. S. Naipaul being more preferred than say a Mahasweta Devi as a 'witness' to the agony and contradictions of post-colonial India, or an Isak Dinesen being more beloved than an Ngugi wa Thiong'o on Africans in East Africa caught in the dilemmas and antimonies of the cultural representation of the colonial encounter.

Achebe looms large then in post-colonial discourse on account of the quality, wit and intelligence of his engagement in this war over representation which pits the post-coloniality of the developing world and its writers, theorists and critics against residual metropolitan colonialist preferences and predilections. What is more important, however, is that this engagement goes much deeper, for his purview has also taken into account the same totalizing, exclusionary and reifying representational logic *within* the cultural and signifying ensembles of the colonized: Okonkwo, in the multiple ironic articulations of the narrative which constructs him, also prefigures the 'assertive sovereign inclusiveness' which Said identifies in Marlowe and Conrad,<sup>2</sup> and which we find so brilliantly encoded in the District Commissioner's projected 'reasonable paragraph' on our tragic protagonist. This is a perspective, a narratological 'alienation effect' which we obtain through Obierika, Okonkwo's great friend and *alter ego*.

Concerning Obierika the character and his author, Chinua Achebe, the following excerpt from a long interview I once had with the author is an appropriate frame for the reflections in this critical tribute on the post-colonial politics of identity and (self)-representation:

1 [All footnotes are Jeyifo's] Edward Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World', *Salmagundi*, No. 70–71, Spring–Summer 1986, p. 49.

2 Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World', p. 49.

JEYIFO: If I may ask a question which I've always wanted to ask you but which is . . . I know it's always a little too bold to see a writer in terms of his fictional characters . . . However, I have always wanted to ask if there is something of Achebe in Obierika in *Things Fall Apart*?

ACHEBE: Yes, that is very bold indeed! Well, the answer is yes, in the sense that at the crucial moment when things are happening, he represents the other alternative. This is a society in *Things Fall Apart* that believes in strength and manliness and the masculine ideals. Okonkwo accepts them in a rather *literal* sense . . . [and] the culture 'betrays' him. He is 'betrayed' because he's doing exactly what the culture preaches. But you see, the culture is devious and flexible, because if it wasn't it wouldn't survive. The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength the culture says, no, hold it! The culture has to be ambivalent, so it immediately raises the virtues of the women, of love, of tenderness . . . and holds up abominations: You cannot do this, even though the cultural norms say you must do it . . . Obierika is therefore more subtle and more in tune with the danger, the impending betrayal by the culture, and he's not likely to be crushed because he holds something in reserve.<sup>3</sup>

It is widely recognized that in Achebe's texts names and naming convey layers of cultural codes and information. We need to stress the analytic extensions of this principle, for it is within this that the name Obierika achieves its tremendous resonance. Two sets of terms are linked in the name: 'Obi', heart, soul or mind; and 'rika', great, fulsome, capacious. There is also a sense in which 'obi', with a proper tonal inflection, is the hut, or the *homestead*, in its more social, affective connotation. From these aspects of the etymology of the name we may project several linked or associative meanings: great-heartedness, generosity of spirit; capacity of fellow-feeling; the mind/soul/heart of an individual, a group, a people is infinite in its potentialities. It should be added that the name does imply in all of these possible significations, an ethical, rationalist cast of mind or disposition: 'greatness' here is not an ethically neutral capaciousness, even if it does not exclude an imaginative or reflective awareness of the 'banality of evil', in Hannah Arendt's famous words.

Even the most cursory textual scrutiny of *Things Fall Apart* would reveal that Obierika 'lives his name', so to speak; in other words, the significations encoded in the name inhabit the character's experience of intersubjective sociality. He is astute in discerning the small, barely tangible but socially cementing velleities of personality and character; he is deeply humane and sensitive; he is imbued with a sagacious but unflaunted moral imagination. He is also of a generous, tolerant disposition and where his friend is a man of few or no words, much of the information about, and reflection on the realities and consequences

3 'Literature and Conscientization: An Interview with Chinua Achebe' in Biodun Jeyifo (ed.), *Contemporary Nigerian Literature*, Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1988, pp. 12–13.

of the invading colonial capitalism is given by Obierika. And he is not only Okonkwo's 'greatest friend', his is that loyalty in friendship that is deeply informed by a balanced sense of the friend's strengths, weaknesses and even neurotic susceptibilities.

While a moral and psychological portrait would find abundant textual details to cast Obierika as his friend's *alter ego*, the upshot of our interest here points away from such moralism and psychologism. For the crucial factor here is that Obierika is a *device* in the text of *Things Fall Apart*; he is a nexus of significations which allows us considerable purchase on a perception of culture as a necessary but expendable medium through which identity is negotiated between the self and others. It is this heuristic structure which subtends the textually pervasive inscription of both characters as fundamentally discrepant cultural avatars: Okonkwo as the culture hero who is doomed because of his rigid, superficial understanding – really misrecognition – of his culture; Obierika as a sceptical, dissenting and prescient observer of the culture's encounter with the self and the colonizing Other. The problem with most critical commentaries on these aspects of *Things Fall Apart* is to have almost completely missed out on the demythologization of identity and culture *within* the pre-colonial social order while fastening one-sidedly on the novel's ironic deflations of the binarisms and polarities of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized.

Thus, it is Obierika who registers the falling apart of things; it is Obierika who records the collapse of the most vital identity-forming connections of the culture: kinship, community, ritual and ceremonial institutions. And it is significant that Obierika has to insist on this tragic insight – tragic because he is utterly helpless before its *historic*, and not merely metaphysical inevitability – against the wilful refusal of Okonkwo to see the cracks in the culture's fortifications:

'Perhaps I have been away too long,' Okonkwo said, almost to himself. 'But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?'

'Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?' asked Obierika.

'I have heard,' said Okonkwo. 'But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land.'

'It is already too late,' said Obierika sadly. 'Our own men and our own sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame.' He paused for a long time and then said: 'I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto.'

'What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?' asked Okonkwo.

'The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's



family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter.'

'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 hold us together and we have fallen apart.'

(Ch. 20, pp. 126–127)

But Obierika's melancholy bears a janus face: he registers the myths and distortions of the colonizer about the 'natives' which both justify and inscribe the violent usurpation that is the regime of colonialism; at the same time his discomfited gaze had taken in the negating, destructive myths and hypostatizations in the central, identity-giving institutions and practices of his culture. It is indeed not over-extending the significations embedded in the text to read in Obierika a divided, alienated subjectivity long before the avalanche of colonizing reifications of the 'native' culture arrives on the scene and initiates a new epoch. 'If the Oracle said that my son should be killed,' Obierika had spat out his condemnation of Okonkwo's participation in the killing of the youth, Ikemefuna, 'I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it' (Ch. 8, p. 48). This split is more poignantly and powerfully rendered when Obierika *had* to, by the force of the cultural compulsion, enact, with others, the despoliation of his friend's homestead:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezendu'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 cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Obierika was a man who thought about these things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led to greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?

(Ch. 13, p. 89)

It is important to recognize that Obierika's scepticism towards his culture achieves its tremendous force precisely because he bears deep, positive currents of values, predispositions, identity from the very same culture. A case in point is his notion of abomination which astutely plays upon, and somewhat secularizes its

normative, sacral connotations.<sup>4</sup> Another affecting instantiation of this point comes across in the following exchange in which the discussion turns on customary prohibitions and exclusions of the titled 'ozo' holders from some mundane activities of the work-a-day world:

'Sometimes, I wish I had not taken the *ozo* title,' said Obierika. 'It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping.'

'It is so indeed,' Okonkwo agreed. 'But the law of the land must be obeyed.'

'I don't know how we got that law,' said Obierika. 'In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall tree but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting up dog-meat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth.'

(Ch. 8, p. 49)

In the very idiom of his critical disquisitions on his culture, Obierika draws from the culture's common stock of imagery, rhetoric and humour.

There is thus at work in the mesh of significations in the construction of Obierika as a complex heuristic device a dialectic of, on the one hand, cultural affirmation and on the other hand cultural critique and deflation. One pole, the pole of affirmation, may be said to coalesce around *doxa*: belief, opinion, or custom perceived in terms of elementary structures of ordered meanings, and centred, cohering values. *Things Fall Apart* may be regarded in this respect as a vast doxological compendium of Igbo culture before the advent of colonialism. Indeed, it has been so critically examined by several scholars.<sup>5</sup> At the opposite pole from *doxa* we have of course the pole of para-dox(a), or irony and dialectic. This is the pole of cultural demystification of which *Things Fall Apart*, like Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, is also an exemplary textual articulation. If *Things Fall Apart* bears a special significance for post-colonial discourse it is to the extent that these two contradictory, dialectic poles of cultural affirmation and cultural demystification find balanced textual inscription in the novel. For one pole is freighted with the discourse of the post-coloniality of nationalist assertion against colonial and imperial cultural subjugation, displacement or depersonalization; the other pole is infused with the discourse of the critique of nationalism such as we find, in different but apposite demythologizing registers, in Cabral's notion of a necessarily *critical* 'return to the source',<sup>6</sup> or Fanon's

4 This pertains to his mythological but moral and philosophical interpretation of the 'abomination' of Okonkwo's participation in the killing of Ikemefuna, an action which, in his view, could bring ruin on whole families, as retribution from the earth goddess (Ch. 8, p. 47).

5 An example of this kind of scholarship on Achebe's works is Robert Wren, *Achebe's World: the Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980.

6 Amilcar Cabral, 'The Weapon of Theory' and 'National Liberation and Culture' in *Unity and Struggle*, London: Heinemann, 1980.

famous exhortations on the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’.<sup>7</sup> In moving to the concluding sections of this essay, I would like to briefly explore the ideological assumptions and the narrative machinery through, and by which Achebe is able to consummate this double articulation.

To Leopold von Ranke is credited an expression which, I believe, superbly captures the spirit of Achebe’s narrativisation of nationalist self-assertion in *Things Fall Apart*: all ages are equally immediate to God. This bears a striking homology to a Yoruba proverbial expression: ‘Ko si ede t’olorun Ko gbo’ – there is no language or tongue that is unintelligible to God. Both expressions seem to affirm the underlying premise of cultural relativism: each age or epoch, each culture or society is an integrated, systematic, coherent whole or totality which obeys its own laws and is comprehensible in terms of its own reference points, no matter how imperfect these may be. This conception in turn accords, in almost all respects, with the following statement of intent by Achebe relatively early in his novelistic and essayist career: ‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.’<sup>8</sup>

Given the ideological and emotional charge of this statement of intent by Achebe, it is remarkable that it has not led to consummated grand narratives of emancipation, or for that matter, meta-narratives of retrieval of an absolutely originary past. It is also remarkable that this has not been adequately critically examined, given all the critical attention which Achebe has attracted to his work as a sustained response to the colonialist master narratives of European writers like Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster, Graham Greene and Joyce Cary. In other words, why hasn’t Achebe written a master narrative like *Heart of Darkness* or *A Passage to India*?

The answer to this question seems to be that since Achebe had, perforce, to write *reactive* counter-narratives to these meta-narratives of Western representations of the colonizing Self and the colonized Other, he was thus structurally precluded from producing a master-narrative. But this seems too mechanistic an expression of something more complexly inscribed in the interstices of history, ideology and artistic discourse. One answer surely lies in the historic fact that the post-colonial writer is axiomatically and imaginatively excluded from the kind of intuitive, subjective access to the ideology of imperialism which makes the production of colonialist master-narratives possible.

Speculations such as these somewhat occlude the specificity of Achebe’s narrative art and more pertinently, the fact that this narrative art involves a representational economy located at the juncture between the totalizing meta-narratives we now identify with a hegemonizing imperialism of representation and the counter-narratives and fictions of de-totalizing, fragmenting discourses and inscriptions from the margins and from below. Thus the ‘main’ narrative logic of the text is linear, omniscient, centred around Okonkwo’s ‘inevitable’ tragic des-

7 Frantz Fanon, ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963.

8 Chinua Achebe, ‘The Novelist as Teacher’ (1965) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 45.

tiny. For this, Achebe adopted the 'objectivity' and 'impersonality' which many scholars have remarked as the 'realistic' provenance of *Things Fall Apart*.<sup>9</sup> Some of the expressions of this 'objectivity' are quite exceptional in the tradition of African post-colonial fiction of the colonial past, both in their conception and execution. For instance, it is hard to find in this fictional tradition the kind of ethnographic self-distancing which allows Achebe's authorial voice such articulations as: 'Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them' (Ch. 2, p. 7). Or: 'In Umuofia's latest war he [Okonkwo] 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' (Ch. 2, p. 8). Moreover, this omniscient narrative logic presents both the pre-colonial social order and the new colonial presence, at least in their respective self-representations, as contending *totalities*. We are told that the 'new religion and government and trading stores' constituted an integral formation in the evolving consciousness of the historic encounter; and the representation of the pre-colonial order is itself all-encompassingly *systemic*: the democratic village assemblies and ritual-judicial institutions as political-administrative units; the inscription of conversational arts and a vast stock of proverbs, aphorisms, myths, legends, ceremonies as embodiment of an elaborate *superstructural* symbolic realm; farming, trading, warfare, recreation and the separate, parallel but hierarchically bounded orders of men's and women's lives and activities as the content of a mundane but primary sociality. Inside these totalities the logic and tragedy and 'inevitability' works itself out, propelled by the polarized agency of an Okonkwo among the colonized and among the colonizers by the manichean-minded missionary, Mr Smith who 'saw things as black and white' (Ch. 22, p. 132).

Outside this omniscient totalizing meta-narrative, however, are the counter-narratives 'from below', the stories within stories, the fragments, episodic fictions, motifs and tropes which reveal a far more complex, dynamic, ambiguous and paradoxical world than that of the closed circuit of the 'main' narrative line, a world which in particular calls into question Okonkwo's rigid, authoritarian and masculinist identity. As I have argued elsewhere, the most central of these stories, motifs and tropes collectively inscribe a *topos* within the text of *Things Fall Apart* which explores the fundamentally *gendered* nature of Okonkwo's world (and not merely his personality or subjectivity, as most critics have tended to see it). In this *topos*, there are 'men's stories' and 'women's stories', 'male' crops and 'female' crops, 'male' and 'female' crimes and abominations, as well as, more centrally, 'male' and 'female' deities. It is indeed significant that the 'female' deity Ani (by the way, 'the most important deity in the lives' of Okonkwo's people) has a *male* priest, Ezeani, while the 'male' deity of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has a *female* priestess, Chielo. But this is a point beyond Okonkwo's ken: he completely represses the 'female' principle and values in himself and his tragedy in fact largely derives from his remarkable success in this venture.

9 See especially Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 45.

One cannot read the countless fragmentary stories around ‘minor’ characters like Unoka, Chielo, Ogbuefi Nbulue and his wife Ozoemena, Ikemefuna and Nwoye, Ekwefi and Ezinma, Okonkwo’s uncle Uchendu, Akunna, Obiako and many others, without consciously or unconsciously feeling oneself in the presence of a narrative and discursive logic which admits of illogic and which makes *everything* negotiable, including the most sacrosanct values of the culture. Obiako’s ‘story’ which confounds one of the supposedly most inviolable ritual and psychological injunctions of the culture – deference to the cult of the ancestors – is particularly trenchant in the way in which it asks such questions Okonkwo’s reified conception of the culture and the ‘inevitability’ of his fate:

‘Obiako has always been a strange one,’ said Nwakibie. ‘I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, “Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.” Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, “Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.”’ Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because, as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. Okonkwo remembered his own father.

(Ch. 3, p. 15)

This story of Obiako, like many of the fragmentary stories within the main linear, totalizing narrative of Okonkwo’s tragedy and historic colonial ‘pacification’, has an emblematic significance within the double, fractured narrative scheme of the novel. The main totalizing narrative as it were deals with History capitalized, with the ‘great’ events and epochal shifts, all with a seeming inevitability, if not with a secret Hegelian telos. But the story fragments, the episodic fictions about the Obiakos deal with *histories*, with the interstices of the ‘great’ epochal movements. It is significant that these ‘mini’ narratives have to do with ‘small people’ in the community, not the ‘lords of the land’, the *male* ‘ozo’ title holders like Okonkwo who, it seems, always dominate discussions at the otherwise ‘democratic’, egalitarian village assemblies. Indeed, in the deeply *gendered* discourse of personality and identity in the novel, the other *name* for these small people, where they are men, is *agbala*, which means ‘woman’; collectively both men and women within this subaltern group are named *efulefu*, which means ‘worthless’. Among many of the ironic twists and articulations of *Things Fall Apart* is the fact that while the main narrative line about Okonkwo leads to tragedy and a general sense of social malaise, the fragmentary stories and motifs of the *agbala* and *efulefu* move this social category to restitution at the end of the novel. Almost all the first converts to the new religion, the first minor functionaries of the colonial administration, the first teacher-pupils of the new school, are drawn from this subaltern group. For this group, things certainly did not fall apart! However, Achebe’s ironic vision extends as well to their ‘liberation’ by colonialism: already at the very inception of their incorporation into a new social and economic order, new forms of subjectivity are crystallizing as the corruptions and alienation of a new social class are prefigured in the venality, insensitivity and brutality of the messengers and petty officials of the colonial administration and over-zealous

Christian converts like Enoch. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize Achebe's depiction of the process of 'othering' within the pre-colonial social order, a process which creates a vast body of marginalized Others made up mainly of the *osu* (slaves), social outcasts and, significantly, women.

Obiako in the short, fragmentary story we examined above takes on the attributes of resilience and the salutary, worldly and human-centred scepticism which we find brilliantly encoded in Obierika. Obierika, on the other hand, leads us to the paradigmatic narrative and discursive stance of the author, Chinua Achebe, in many of his novels and essays: stubborn hope, and an ethical rationalism marked by a deeply ironic view of history and existence. We are some three decades into our post-independence disillusionment, and at this stage of our neo-colonial history when things, again, seem to be falling apart, we can learn much from this resilience. Historical calamities like the many civil wars and the endless run of inter-communal strife on the continent; political disasters like the regimes of the likes of Idi Amin, Bokassa, Nguema, Mobutu; and the seeming historical impasse of arrested decolonization: all these contradictions and negations will not crush us. This resilience, though, is not without its predicament: unlike Okonkwo, Obierika is not crushed; but his survival, and the survival of the *agbala* and *efulefu* of the neo-colonial present, is haunted by a sense of failure, of diffidence before these historical negations.

**Florence Stratton**, 'How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Not Together?' in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) by Florence Stratton. London: Routledge, pp. 22–38.

As we have noted, critical reactions to *Things Fall Apart* have not always been universally positive, and a growing number of contemporary critics have argued that despite Achebe's much-vaunted focus on the 'feminine principle' in Umuofian culture, his novel actually reveals a deeply patriarchal disposition in its representation of women. In this essay, the Canadian feminist critic Florence Stratton undertakes a radical critique of Achebe's novel that is scathing in its condemnation of the 'subjective bias' at the heart of his representations of women and the gender hierarchies in Igbo society and culture. Stratton argues that, unlike in the real pre-colonial Igbo society, where women did have considerable influence and power within the culture, women are largely absent from positions of power and are consistently marginalized and silenced in *Things Fall Apart*. She argues that the contemporary Nationalist and anti-imperialist movements in Nigeria, with which Achebe conspicuously aligned his work, were largely patriarchal in their desire to exclude women from post-colonial politics and public affairs, and that Achebe legitimizes this position by representing pre-colonial Umuofia as male-dominated, and thus replicating these discourses of female oppression in *Things Fall Apart*.

Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is the most important work by an African author. 'Over five million copies' of the book have been sold and it has been translated into thirty languages.<sup>1</sup> Its influence on the development of the contemporary African literary and critical tradition has been substantial. In

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1 [All footnotes are Stratton's] These figures were provided by the moderator for the Annual South Bank Show Lecture for 1990, delivered by Achebe on 18 January 1990.

the view of H. L. B. Moody, Elizabeth Gunner, and Edward Finnegan, it can be taken 'to mark the beginning of modern African literature',<sup>2</sup> while for C. L. Innes, its author 'may be deemed the "father of the African novel in English"'.<sup>3</sup>

As numerous critics have noted, *Things Fall Apart* provided a model for succeeding writers to follow. Thus David Cook states that it 'has become an early landmark . . . because it is a worthy archetype'.<sup>4</sup> And while Kofi Awoonor writes of how Achebe's 'style and thematic preoccupations . . . inspired a whole new school of writers who may be referred to as the "clash of cultures" novelists',<sup>5</sup> C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors speak of the 'School of Achebe'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Lewis Nkosi states that in his reconstruction of the past – his establishment of 'history as the "hero" of the African novel' – Achebe 'blazed a trail large enough to be followed by other writers';<sup>7</sup> and that in his innovative handling of the language, he '[set] an example which has influenced many younger writers'.<sup>8</sup> *Things Fall Apart* also provided a model for critics. In the words of Gerald Moore:

[Its] appearance . . . in 1958 won for its author a position of eminence in African literature which for a long time led to his being elevated above his fellows, in his own and the succeeding generation. The book was quickly recognized as a classic and tended to be used as a yardstick with which to measure the many Anglophone novels, Nigerian and other, that followed it.<sup>9</sup>

*Things Fall Apart*, then, has been a very influential novel, founding a new era in African literature, providing a pattern for countless other novels, and serving as an arbiter of critical standards.

Achebe's own later comments on colonial fiction and on the role of the African writer suggest that he was himself aware when he was writing that he was creating a new literature. While studying at Ibadan, he says, 'I read some appalling novels about Africa . . . 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'.<sup>10</sup> One of those novels was Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and another, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, works which he has accused of racism in various speeches and essays. Achebe is especially emphatic in his condemnation of *Heart of Darkness*:

Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against

2 H. I. B. Moody, Elizabeth Gunner and Edward Finnegan, *A Teacher's Guide to African Literature*, London: Macmillan, 1984, p. vii.

3 C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 19.

4 David Cook, *African Literature: A Critical View*, London: Longman, 1977, p. 65.

5 Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture, and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara*, New York: Anchor, 1975, pp. 279–280.

6 C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978, p. 6.

7 Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*, Harlow: Longman, 1981, p. 33.

8 Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p. 53.

9 Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers*, London: Hutchinson, 1980, p. 123.

10 Chinua Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1973) reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 70.



Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. . . . Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and the Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, Achebe has recounted how reading Cary, Conrad, and other colonial writers, including Rider Haggard, made him realize 'that stories are not innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you'.<sup>12</sup>

In the face of colonial derogation, the prime duty of the African writer in the first few years after independence was, according to Achebe, to restore dignity to the past, to show

that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them.<sup>13</sup>

I have quoted Achebe extensively on the issue of the racial politics of literary texts because his comments provide a context for my discussions of the sexual politics of Achebe's own celebrated text. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Carys and Conrads of colonial Africa are represented by the District Commissioner whose own version of the story of imperial conquest is to be told in a book entitled '*The Pacification*

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- 11 Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' (1976) reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987*, London: Heinemann, 1988, pp. 8-9. For Achebe's view of Cary, see Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (eds), *African Writers Talking*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 4; and Achebe, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', p. 70.
- 12 Chinua Achebe, 'African Literature as Restoration of Celebration', *Kunapipi*, 12: 2, 1990, p. 7.
- 13 Chinua Achebe, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation' (1964) reprinted in G. D. Killam (ed.) *African Writers on African Writing*, London: Heinemann, 1973, p. 8.

of the *Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*' (Ch. 25, p. 150), a book in which Africans are to be represented as primitive savages, and the destruction of a sophisticated culture rendered as 'pacification'. Achebe subverts and dismantles the racial codes of this paradigmatic colonial text by contextualizing it in an alternative discourse – one which seeks to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to 'African people'. For Achebe's own version of the story – *Things Fall Apart* – tells of the tragic consequences of imperialism, of the destruction of a culture which manifested 'great depth and value and beauty'. The question is, however: Does Achebe attempt to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to African women? Does he tell his female readers 'where the rain began to beat them'?

Part One of *Things Fall Apart* is primarily concerned with the restoration of humanity to African society through the recreation of pre-colonial social, political, and religious institutions. We might therefore begin our analysis by examining the first scene in the novel that focuses on the women of Umuofia. The young Okonkwo, having inherited nothing from his father – 'neither . . . a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife' (Ch. 3, p. 13) – has come to borrow seed yams from his clansman, Nwakibie. Before they settle down to business, the palm-wine Okonkwo has brought is shared among the men present. Nwakibie calls in his wives:

Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear.

She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away.

(Ch. 3, pp. 14–15)

Eustace Palmer chooses this excerpt as one of the passages he particularly admires, stating that from it 'the reader gains a sense of an alien, but nevertheless strong, self-assured, and civilized society'.<sup>14</sup> But where in this passage is the gendered African reader to locate herself? For while she will immediately recognize the strength and self-assurance of the male culture of Umuofia, she will have no such experience of its female culture. Might she not wonder if the abject servitude of women is the hallmark of a 'civilized society'?

In its representation of male–female power relations, this passage is emblematic. For with the notable exception of Chielo, the powerful priestess of Agbala, Achebe's women are, indeed, 'down on one knee', if not both, before their men folk and they are regularly making an exit, no doubt 'in their proper order', from all the spaces in which power, economic or otherwise, is exercised.

The status of women in Umuofia is very low: 'He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives' (Ch. 1, p. 5). They are mere objects circulated among their men folk, willed, for example, by a father to a son as part of an estate, or

14 Eustace Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, London: Heinemann, 1972, p. 51.

traded for a bag full of cowries. The only escape, it would seem, from this demeaning classification is for a woman to outlive the men who could own her. This might explain the position of *widow* Chielo.

Women are also systematically excluded from the political, the economic, the judicial, and even the discursive life of the community. This is indicated not only through the composition of the governing council of elders, the *ndichie*, or the membership of the powerful *egwugwu* cult, which is, in both cases, all male. For a repetition of the meaning underlying the closing sentence of the passage Palmer admires so much – ‘The other wives . . . went away’ – provides the novel with a kind of semantic refrain. For example, when a townswoman is killed by a neighbouring clan, the town-crier disturbs the slumbering people of Umuofia: ‘And this was the message. Every man of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market-place tomorrow morning’ (Ch. 2, p. 7). Or the people gather to witness the court proceedings in a marital dispute: ‘It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders’ (Ch. 10, p. 63). Or, the women repair the exterior of the *egwugwu* house: ‘These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did . . . No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan’ (Ch. 10, p. 64). As another passage which reiterates the refrain indicates, women are even excluded from their own betrothal ceremonies:

Akueke [entered] carrying a wooden dish with three kola nuts and alligator pepper. She gave the dish to her father’s eldest brother and then shook hands, very shyly, with her suitor and his relatives . . . When she had shaken hands, or rather held out her hand to be shaken, she returned to her mother’s hut to help with the cooking.

(Ch. 8, pp. 50–51)

And sadly, but almost predictably, the one ceremony which is designated ‘a woman’s ceremony’ (Ch. 12, p. 79) excludes women from all but the cooking:

Then the bride, her mother and half a dozen other women and girls emerged from the inner compound, and went round the circle [of men] shaking hands with all. The bride’s mother led the way, followed by the bride and the other women . . . When the women retired, Obierika presented kola nuts to his in-laws.

(Ch. 12, pp. 83–84)

While women are excluded from the male domain of community power, men are permitted to intrude into the domestic domain. Moreover, if Okonkwo is representative, the intrusion is often violent. Thus, when his third wife fails to produce her afternoon meal at the prescribed time, Okonkwo goes to her hut, then interrogates his other wives, and eventually beats the delinquent spouse. The prohibition on women from so much as approaching the male arena is, on the other hand, so absolute that even speech is forbidden them. This is the case not only when, as with the *egwugwu*, a secret male ritual is involved, but also when the concern is domestic. Thus in response to her query on how long she is, as she has

been ordered, to look after Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's first wife is informed: 'Do what you are told, woman. . . . When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia?' (Ch. 2, p. 11).

We might pause for a moment in our analysis to consider, along with Ifi Amadiume, the authenticity of Achebe's representation of male-female power relations in pre-colonial Igbo society, not so much with a view to questioning the mimetic adequacy of the novel but in order to examine the relationship between the novel and the patriarchal situation which provided an important component of its generative ambience. 'The famous Igbo novelist, Chinua Achebe . . . a product of Western education, is no less guilty of the masculinization of the water goddess, whom he describes in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, as "god of water" ', than are male historians and anthropologists.<sup>15</sup> So writes Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, her revisionist study of gender relations in Igbo society. In his most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Achebe himself acknowledges that he was in error in assigning masculine gender to the deity. For he devotes a chapter to the water goddess Idemili. He also implies through his characterization of the novel's heroine, Beatrice Okoh, herself an unwitting avatar of Idemili, that his ascriptive failure can be attributed to his western education:

Beatrice . . . did not know [the] traditions and legends of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing. She was born . . . into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved.<sup>16</sup>

The son of Christian converts, of a father who was a catechist for the Church Missionary Society, Achebe was himself 'born . . . into a world apart', and he attended church schools from an early age.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, it should be noted that *Things Fall Apart* was written and published in the years immediately preceding Nigerian independence in 1960, a transitional period when political power was being transferred from the colonial masters to a Nigerian male elite. *Things Fall Apart* legitimizes this process whereby women were excluded from post-colonial politics and public affairs through its representation of pre-colonial Igbo society as governed entirely by men.

In Amadiume's analysis, Idemili was 'the central religious deity'<sup>18</sup> of the Igbo living in the Nnobi area of Eastern Nigeria where both she and Achebe were born. Associated with female industriousness, assertiveness, and prosperity, as well as other qualities, Idemili embodied the matriarchal principle, a principle which, in its ideological opposition to the patriarchal principle embodied in 'the cult of

15 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, London: Zed, 1987, p. 121.

16 Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1988, p. 105.

17 A considerable amount of useful biographical information on Achebe is provided by Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, pp. 4-12.

18 Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 27.

ancestral spirits<sup>19</sup> (Achebe's *egwugwu*), ensured that Igbo gender construction was flexible. Furthermore, the qualities associated with Idemili ensured that women were not marginalized either politically or economically. Hence the 'male daughters' and 'female husbands' of Amadiume's title – women who, through inheritance or self-generated wealth, acquired the status and power of men. There was also a title reserved for women, the *Ekwe* title, which was associated with Idemili, and which prosperous women could take, after which they 'would wear a string anklet . . . like all titled men'<sup>20</sup> and become members of the Women's Council. This Council, Amadiume writes, 'appears to have been answerable to no one', not even to 'ozo titled men' (Achebe's elders or *ndichie*), its special strength residing in its authority to order mass strikes by all women.<sup>21</sup>

The central divinity in Achebe's *Umuofia* is also a female deity, the Earth Goddess, Ani. The values Ani embodies, however, do not serve women's interests. Okonkwo commits a number of crimes against Ani for which he is punished: beating his youngest wife during the Week of Peace; participating in the killing of Ikemefuna, the boy who calls him father; and accidentally shooting another teenaged boy. But Ani does not even protect women from male brutality. For Okonkwo's first crime is not the beating of his wife, wife-battering being sanctioned by the goddess, but the perpetration of an act of violence during the Week of Peace.

Reading *Things Fall Apart* from the vantage of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* uncovers silences in Achebe's narrative. Achebe himself generally avoids questioning the hierarchical nature of gender relations in *Umuofia* society, an indication of his attitude toward the status quo of male domination. Problems do, however, arise on at least two occasions, but in each case the narrative backs away from the issue. One concerns the story of Ndulue, whose wife dies immediately after she learns of his death. 'It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind', Okonkwo's friend Obierika recalls. 'I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her' (Ch. 8, pp. 48–49). Okonkwo is incredulous when he learns that Ndulue has also been a renowned warrior. While the novel does take up as one of its primary concerns the issue of the over-valuation in *Umuofia* of masculine qualities to the exclusion of feminine ones, it retreats from a consideration of the issue of the imbalance of power in gender relations which the story of Ndulue and Ozoemena also raises.<sup>22</sup>

Another occasion concerns the efforts of Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, to reconcile his nephew to the punishment he has received as a result of his accidental shooting of a young man: exile in his 'motherland'. 'We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding', Uchendu says to Okonkwo. 'A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say

19 Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 53.

20 Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 43.

21 Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 67.

22 Flora Nwapa's *Idu* (1970) interrogates *Things Fall Apart* on this matter by expanding the Ndulue–Ozoemena story into a novel in which women are represented as having substantial social and economic power. '[Idu and Adiewere] understand each other so well', the townspeople say, 'that nobody ever hears their quarrel' (2). When Adiewere dies suddenly, Idu wills herself to die, too.

Nneka – “Mother is Supreme”. Why is that?’ Uchendu answers his own question by explaining that a mother’s supremacy resides in her role as protector. Just as a child ‘seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut’, so a man ‘finds refuge in his motherland’ (Ch. 14, pp. 96–97). As Lloyd Brown states, Achebe offers in this passage ‘an important distinction between . . . a mythic concept of supreme motherhood and the limited status of the woman who is required to do her husband’s bidding in her day-to-day life’.<sup>23</sup> However, Achebe is not critical of this contradiction. For although the narrative momentarily focuses on the discrepancy between woman in myth and woman in reality, it eschews treatment of the issues as it relates to gender inequality.

As if to reflect their social insignificance, women are marginalized in the text. Achebe does not even bother to name Okonkwo’s wives until the narrative is well under way. At the end of Chapter One they are merely numbers, representing an apparently minor part of Okonkwo’s achievement:

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars.

(Ch. 1, p. 6)

It is not until Chapter Four that it is revealed that Okonkwo’s first wife is called ‘Nwoye’s mother’ and his third ‘Ojiugo’. His second wife is not named Ekwefi until after she has, in anonymity, first been beaten and then narrowly escaped being murdered by Okonkwo.

Innes states that ‘Achebe’s characters’, in contrast to Joyce Cary’s portrayal of Africans, ‘are complex individuals, types rather than archetypes, the resolution of whose conflicts is central to the plot’.<sup>24</sup> But this assertion is valid only with regard to Achebe’s male characters. For while a fair number of the male cast – Okonkwo, Unoka, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, Obierika, Uchendu – are complex personalities, of the female characters, all but Ekwefi, her daughter Ezinma, and Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, remain shadowy figures. Furthermore, the portrayals of Ekwefi and Ezinma collapse into stereotypes, while Chielo is a feminine archetype.

The primary focus of Ekwefi and Ezinma is to reveal Okonkwo’s well-hidden capacity for tender feelings and hence to ensure that, despite his violent temperament, he retains the sympathy of readers. This leads to a tension in their characterization between masculine assertiveness and feminine passivity and dependence, a tension which is ultimately resolved in favour of the feminine stereotype. Ekwefi and Ezinma gain Okonkwo’s affectionate interest in the first instance because they exhibit characteristics which are atypical of their gender as Okonkwo conventionally defines it. Thus, whereas, in Okonkwo’s view, his son Nwoye is ‘degenerate and effeminate’ (Ch. 17, p. 110), Ezinma ‘has the right spirit’ (Ch. 8, p. 47): ‘He never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl’ (Ch. 20,

23 Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa*, Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1981, pp. 8–9.

24 Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, p. 22.

p. 124). Okonkwo attempts to make both children conform to traditional definitions of their separate genders, encouraging Nwoye, for example, to listen to 'masculine stories of violence and bloodshed' (Ch. 7, p. 37) and ordering Ezinma to 'Sit like a woman!' (Ch. 5, p. 32). But he succeeds only with Ezinma. For in contrast to Nwoye who ultimately rebels against his father's strict model of masculinity, she submits to his definition of her gender, taking on the role of the tractable, serviceable, selfless daughter. Thus, for example, she agrees to reject all suitors until the family returns from exile to Umuofia when it will give a much needed boost to her father's prestige to have a marriageable daughter in the house.

Similarly, Ekwefi, who runs away from her first husband so that she can live with Okonkwo, is passive in her response to the beatings she receives from him and even to his attempted murder of her. She is, it would seem, content with her condition as a battered wife.

As the Priestess of the Oracle, Agbala, Chielo is the one woman in Umuofia who has power. Speaking of 'the Chielo-Ezinma episode' – the episode in which Okonkwo follows his wife and daughter when the latter is taken by Chielo on a late-night journey to the Oracle's shrine – Carole Boyce Davies observes that it 'is one of those situations over which Okonkwo has no control. . . . His machete, the symbol of male aggression, is of no use at all in this context'.<sup>25</sup>

Innes pays scant attention to this episode and JanMohamed glosses over it all together. This is possibly partly because both critics read *Things Fall Apart* dialogically solely through Cary's novels. However, as I hope to show, for this episode to be fully appreciated, the novel must be examined in juxtaposition to other colonial fiction, in particular Rider Haggard's novels. What such a reading indicates is that Chielo is a latter-day descendant, following Conrad's 'savage and superb' African woman in *Heart of Darkness*, of the female figure in Haggard's *She*.

Chielo, the Priestess, is a femme fatale, sharing with Ayesha of *She* many of the features of this feminine archetype as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar outline them in their discussion of Haggard's novels.<sup>26</sup> Like Ayesha, the Priestess of Agbala is 'She-who-must-be-obeyed'. 'Beware', she screams at Okonkwo when he pleads with her not to carry Ezinma off. 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?' (Ch. 11, p. 72). Like Ayesha, too, the Priestess makes demands that are cruel and irrational: that a sickly child be taken away from its parents and on a long journey in the middle of the night. It is also Agbala who orders the execution of Ikemefuna. In addition, the Priestess speaks an enigmatic language through the command of which she manifests her power and mystery, and she dwells in a cave, as does Ayesha. Furthermore, as Haggard does in both *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, Achebe feminizes and eroticizes the landscape 'She' inhabits. Thus Agbala's 'house' is 'in the hills and the caves' (Ch. 11, p. 72); and while the way to the shrine is through 'a circular

25 Carole Boyce Davies, 'Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu' in Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (eds), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986, p. 247.

26 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Sexchanges*, Vol. 2 of *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 3–41.

ring [of hills] with a break at one point' (Ch. 11, p. 77), the way into the shrine is through a small 'round hole at the side of a hill' (Ch. 3, p. 12). The Priestess 'crawl[s] out of the shrine on her belly like a snake' (Ch. 12, p. 79). Confronted with this phallic woman, Okonkwo is, of course, as Davies has indicated, rendered impotent, deprived of *his* powers, as are Haggard's male protagonists in similar encounters.

What we have here, then, is an instance of intertextual affirmation. How does this representation of female power function in its new context – in the African, as opposed to a colonial, text? The first thing we might note is that there is no contradiction between Achebe's feminization of the landscape and his professed desire to help 'African people' regain 'their dignity and self-respect', even though, in so sexualizing the terrain, Achebe has taken over what David Bunn refers to as 'one of the most recurrent enabling metaphors of colonialism'.<sup>27</sup> For the landscape that is feminized is very localized, the territory marked as 'alien' being confined to that in the immediate environs of the Oracle's shrine, the Priestess's seat of power. Further, Achebe counters the conventional colonial practice of feminizing Africa and Africans with a representation in which African society is masculinized.

The characterization of Chielo, however, seems to be based on contradictory impulses: on the one hand to show that African cultures have 'great depth and value and beauty', and on the other to demonstrate that women are incapable of exercising power responsibly. For what Achebe implies through the portrayal of Chielo is that women in positions of power are despotic and destructive because they are irrational. By contrast, men in positions of power are shown to be reasonable, impartial, and constructive, as in the court scene in which the *egwugwu*, 'the dead fathers of the clan' (Ch. 10, p. 65), settle disputes. Again, it should be noted that *Things Fall Apart* was written during the transitional years between colonial rule and independence following which women were to be given equal franchise with men. The Chielo–Ezinma episode can in this light be seen as an expression of Achebe's fear of female power. Achebe's success in anathematizing female power is suggested by Palmer who describes the scene as 'blood-chilling'.<sup>28</sup>

At the very end of the scene, Achebe symbolically restores Okonkwo's virility by having Ekwefi recall her first meeting with him after she has run away from her first husband: 'He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth' (Ch. 11, p. 78). Shortly after, Achebe drives Chielo out of his novel. And while, in comparison with Haggard's 'willed destruction of Ayesha by a phallic pillar of fire',<sup>29</sup> Achebe's treatment of the Priestess looks quite innocuous, Chielo's absence from the second half of the novel plays, as we shall see, a key role in the novel's performance of its function of legitimating male domination.

Underlying the portrayals of Ezinma, Ekwefi, and Chielo is one of the manichean allegories that defines Achebe's society – the sexual allegory of male and female, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, rationality and irrationality,

27 David Bunn, 'Embodying Africa: Woman and Romance in Colonial Fiction', *English in Africa*, 15: 1, 1988, p. 11.

28 Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London: Heinemann, 1979, p. 74.

29 Gilbert and Gubar, *Sexchanges*, p. 46.



activity and passivity. The frequent association of women with children in the narrative is another manifestation of the allegory. Thus we are told that Okonkwo's 'wives and young children were not as strong [as he was], and so suffered' from the work regimen he imposed (Ch. 2, p. 10). We also learn that '[t]he women and children . . . took to their heels [when the *egwugwu* appeared]. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight' (Ch. 10, p. 64).

Commendation of Achebe for impartiality with which he recreates Igbo society is a critical commonplace. In the words of JanMohamed, Achebe reproduces 'a version of Igbo society in an objective rather than an idealist or subjective manner'.<sup>30</sup> This claim loses a certain amount of credibility, however, when the treatment of female characters in the novel is considered. As I have already indicated, a subjective bias is evident in the portrayal of women. Furthermore, the narrator does not always maintain an objective stance on the issue of gender relations, but instead aligns himself with the sexist views of the male characters. Thus according to the narrator, when Ojiugo does not return from her friend's house in time to serve Okonkwo his afternoon meal, Okonkwo is 'provoked to *justifiable* anger' (Ch. 4, p. 21, emphasis added). In beating Ojiugo, Okonkwo breaks the sacred peace of Ani, but the beating itself is implicitly sanctioned by the narrator. By contrast, the narrator is quite scrupulous about distancing himself from the views of Okonkwo on other matters. For example, after noting that Nwoye has a tendency towards laziness, he adds: 'At any rate, that was how it looked to his father' (Ch. 2, p. 10). While this distancing manoeuvre creates space in the narrative for the telling of Nwoye's side of the story, the coincidence between the narrator's and male characters' attitudes toward women leaves no room for Ojiugo to express her viewpoint. And while space is provided for the viewpoint of a sensitive boy on what it is like to live under Okonkwo's harsh authority, no such provision is made for Okonkwo's wives and daughters. This limits the reader's sympathy for and interest in the female characters.

Innes argues that 'authorial consciousness' is to be distinguished from 'narrative voice', that while the former corresponds to 'the questioning and alienated vision of Nwoye', the latter 'represents a collective voice' and articulates 'the values and assumptions of [the] community'.<sup>31</sup> Palmer, on the other hand, evidently considers author and narrator to be similarly positioned in the novel. For he, too, exonerates Okonkwo from the blame when he beats Ojiugo: 'On this occasion he has a plausible excuse [for the sacrilege he commits], the girl being clearly in the wrong'.<sup>32</sup> The question of the relationship between author and narrator is, however, relatively unimportant in my analysis. What is significant is that nothing in the novel constitutes a serious challenge to the view of either the narrator or the male characters on women. This view therefore becomes invested with authority.

Achebe does not, however, idealize Igbo society, but as we shall see, his criticism

30 Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, p. 161. See also Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, pp. 52–53; Moore, *Twelve African Writers*, p. 125; and Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p. 36.

31 Innes, *Chimua Achebe*, pp. 32 and 35.

32 Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, p. 55.

does not encompass the condition of women in Umuofia. As the novel progresses the emphasis shifts from a concern with recreating pre-colonial Igbo society to the question of the reason for its rapid capitulation to the invading colonial forces. Achebe presents the collapse as being due not solely or even primarily to British military superiority, but also to an internal disorder. There is general critical agreement on the nature of that disorder: the clan's failure to maintain a balance between masculine and feminine values.<sup>33</sup> This imbalance accounts for the social sanctioning of such cruel practices as the killing of war hostages like Ikemefuna and the sacrifice of twins.

There is also substantial critical agreement on Okonkwo's function in the novel as the embodiment of Umuofia's values.<sup>34</sup> But his character is defined not so much by 'the subject-object dialectic' as that dialectic is constituted by the colonial situation, which is what JanMohamed claims.<sup>35</sup> Rather it is the relation between Self and Other in a patriarchal situation that defines Okonkwo's character. Okonkwo provides a classic example of male psychology in a patriarchal society, from the perspective of which women are inferior because of their otherness. Insisting on sexual otherness, Okonkwo projects on to women those qualities he despises in himself. Thus, when a man who has taken no titles contradicts him in a meeting, Okonkwo 'call[s] him a woman' (Ch. 4, p. 19). Thus, too, when thinking of Nwoye, wonders how he, who at Nwoye's age 'had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and fearlessness', could 'have begotten a woman for a son' (Ch. 17, p. 110). And when Okonkwo concludes that his anguish over his involvement in the killing of Ikemefuna is a sign of weakness, he curses himself with the very worst words of abuse he can think of:

'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'.

(Ch. 8, p. 46)

The primary motive of Okonkwo's existence is to avoid being thought effeminate like his father who was called *agbala*, a word which Okonkwo is mortified to learn not only means 'a man who has taken no title', but is also 'another name for a woman' (Ch. 2, p. 10). It is this fear – a fear of femininity – that impels Okonkwo to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna, the act which inaugurates his own decline.

Okonkwo is not unique in defining himself in opposition to women. Even though he is sometimes extreme in his reactions because of the peculiarities of his upbringing. That he is simply conforming to a cultural norm is emphasized by the double-meaning of the word '*agbala*'. It is in order to prove to themselves that they are strong and not weak like a woman that the men of Umuofia callously and

33 See, for example, JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, pp. 162–165; Davies, 'Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers', pp. 245–246; and Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, pp. 25–29.

34 See, for example, Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, p. 53; Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p. 35; Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth*, p. 253; and JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 183.

35 JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 273.

routinely commit acts of brutality. These are the 'things' which, when the white man 'put[s] a knife' on them, cause Umuofia to fall apart (Ch. 20, p. 127).

The imbalance in Umuofia society, then, does not pertain to the power imbalance between men and women but is located within the male personality. Bu-Buakei Jabbi refers to it as a 'manliness complex'.<sup>36</sup> But the nature of the disorder is more adequately conveyed by Juli Loesch's terms 'penisotence' and 'testeria', for these account both for the acts of destructive aggression committed by the men of Umuofia and for their repression of tender or sympathetic feelings.<sup>37</sup> It is for this suppressed element in the male personality that the feminine stands in the novel, for male thoughts and feelings that have no expression in the culture: Obierika's silent musings on cultural injustices; Nwoye's unspoken outrage at the killing of Ikemefuna and the sacrifice of twins; and Okonkwo's inner torment over his part in the slaying of the boy who called him father. Indeed, the feminine is, in the words of the text, the 'silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Igbo man' (Ch. 16, p. 105, emphasis added).

But this male heart is not moved by the oppression of women, by their degradation in their definition as chattel, or by their marginalization in society. Nor is Achebe's. For although he avoids idealization by including in the novel an implicit criticism of certain aspects of life in Umuofia, that criticism, which is in part expressed through the reflections of male characters such as Nwoye and Obierika, does not cover the condition of women in Umuofia. Moreover, not only does the male inner voice fail to question the harsh injustice done to women, the female inner voice is utterly mute. The defection from the community of some of its members performs the same critical function as the reflections of the male characters. But while some of Achebe's female characters convert to Christianity, they do so not because they resent their oppression *as women* in Umuofia society but because they are the mothers of twins or members of the *osu* caste.

The women of Umuofia, then, are content with their lot. In their silence they assent to their status as the property of a man and to their reduction to a level lower than a barn full of yams in their role as signifiers of their husbands' wealth. So, too, does Achebe. For although he exposes, through the defection of *osu*, the injustice of Umuofia's social class system, he remains silent (mute like his women) on its gender hierarchy. And while critics continue to eulogize Achebe for the balance he has achieved in his portrayal of Umuofia's strengths and weaknesses, they have generally avoided pointing to the subjugation of women as one of those weaknesses or to the novel's failure to make the same point. This critical silence on the work's sexism can be attributed to the same cause as that to which Achebe assigns responsibility for the silence on Conrad's racism: sexism 'is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected'.

Moreover, just as Achebe's women are silent in the face of their oppression under Igbo patriarchy, so, too, they express no opposition to the imposition of a regime which will add racial to further sexual oppression. This is true of Ezinma who, according to her father, 'has the right spirit', and even Chielo who, as the

36 Bu-Buakei Jabbi, 'Fire and Transition in *Things Fall Apart*' in Innes and Bernth Lindfors, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, p. 135.

37 Loesch's definition of these terms is cited in Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women*, New York: Anchor, 1977, p. 44.

Priestess of Agbala, stands to lose her considerable prestige and power to the priests of the Christian religion who, in affirmation of the manichean allegory of race, see 'things as black and white. And black [is] evil' (Ch. 21, p. 132).

Abena P. A. Busia has shown that what she calls 'the voicelessness of the black woman' is a recurring trope in colonial fiction.<sup>38</sup> She sees *The Tempest* as providing the model for a number of later figures, including Kurtz's African woman in *Heart of Darkness*, in its portrayal of Caliban's mother, the silent, absent Sycorax. But such figures are not confined to colonial discourse, for in their 'inactive silence' the female characters in *Things Fall Apart* also conform to the model as Busia defines it.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, women all over Africa did, in fact, participate in the struggle against colonialism, sometimes as leaders. In Nigeria there were mass protests by Igbo women against the British and their agents which began in 1925 and culminated in the Women's War of 1929–30.<sup>40</sup> The question of the authenticity of Achebe's representation can, however, be most dramatically focused by comparing Amadiume's account of an incident which took place in Nnobi 'towards the middle of this century' to Achebe's version of the same or a similar incident: the killing by a Christian zealot of the sacred python, which is, in his story, 'the emanation of the god of water', and in hers, 'a totemic symbol of those who worship the goddess Idemili'. This is the 'people's' response in this story: 'the [male] rulers and elders of Mbanta assembled to decide on their action', their decision being 'to ostracize the Christians' (Ch. 18, pp. 114–115); while in hers: the women of Nnobi 'demonstrated their anger by . . . marching half naked to the provisional headquarters, Onitsha, to besiege the resident's office' and then 'returned to Nnobi, went straight to the [home of the man who killed the python] and razed it to the ground'. This was, Amadiume adds, 'the indigenous Igbo female custom of dealing with offending men'.<sup>41</sup>

By failing to imagine either a sister for Okonkwo, a female nationalist hero, or a female counterpart for Nwoye, a woman in revolt against Umuofia's definition of her gender, Achebe alienates Igbo women from history. Thus, if 'history' is the "hero" of [this] African novel', if, in other words, the novel features, as Nkosi claims, 'history as a collective working out of a people's destiny',<sup>42</sup> then that hero and those people are male. Alienated from history, women are relegated to 'tradition', their inferiority naturalized by the ahistorical identity Achebe has

38 Abena P. A. Busia, 'Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female', *Cultural Critique*, 14, 1989–90, p. 90.

39 Busia, 'Silencing Sycorax', p. 86.

40 For a brief account of women's engagement in the anti-colonial struggle in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia, see Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984, pp. 257, 393, 497–498, and 741. See also Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression*, trans. Nicolas Romano, London: Zed, 1983, pp. 170–175; Agnes Akosua Aidoo, 'Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century' in Filomena Chioma Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Cambridge: Schenkman, 1985, pp. 74–75; Judith Van Allen, '“Aba Riots” or “Women's War”? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women' in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (eds), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976, pp. 59–85; and Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, pp. 120–122 and 138–140.

41 Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, pp. 121–122.

42 Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p. 13.

constructed for their gender: woman as passive object, acted upon, never acting in her own right.

As Achebe says, 'stories are not innocent'. '[T]hey can be used to put you in the wrong crowd.' For where in this story is the African woman reader to locate herself? If, as the novel leads her to do, she identifies with the hero, Okonkwo, she identifies against herself, with a hero for whom woman is the Other. Even Nwoye who cherishes feminine values does not provide the woman reader with a self-affirming image, for like other Umuofia males he is not critical of the gender hierarchy. Is she, then, Ezinma who remains passively at home, as indifferent to the newly imposed colonial restrictions as she has always been to those of Igbo patriarchy, while her brother goes off to the school that has been set up 'to teach young Christians to read and write'? (Ch. 17, p. 110).

JanMohamed argues that Cary's fiction can best be understood in terms of racial romance, using 'romance' as Northrop Frye defines it in *Anatomy of Criticism*.<sup>43</sup> He also claims that '[t]he major function of [Achebe's] novels as symbolic acts is the refutation of Cary's romances through his own realism'<sup>44</sup> and that '[h]is realism . . . makes Achebe the best contemporary African writer'.<sup>45</sup> It could be argued, however, that *Things Fall Apart* is also a version of romance, the gender romance, for it, too, conforms to some of the criteria of the genre as Frye outlines them. Briefly, like Cary's African characters, Achebe's female ones are not realistically portrayed. For, as we have seen, they do not change in response to their specific social or historical situations, but instead remain true to conventional gender characteristics. Further, Chielo, who, arguably, is the central female character in the novel, is a stylized figure, a psychological archetype; she is also a shadow, a demonic parody of powerful men, despotic and destructive. Finally, the subjective bias of romance is evident in the coincidence of the narrator's and male characters' attitude toward women, but most especially in the absence of anything in the novel to undercut Okonkwo's stereotypical view of women.

Quite clearly, then, *Things Fall Apart* has another function in addition to that of refuting Cary's romances, one which I will try to highlight once again by considering Achebe's masculinization of Igbo society from two different perspectives. When *Things Fall Apart* is read dialogically through Haggard's and Conrad's novels, the characterization of Umuofia as an aggressively masculine society appears as Achebe's response to colonial writers who, in their feminization of Africa and Africans, contributed to the justification of the colonial presence in Africa. But when the novel is read with a view to examining its relation to patriarchal ideology, the portrayal appears as a means of legitimizing male domination. For, despite his critical stance, Achebe does not relate the brutality of masculinity to the excess of power a patriarchal society makes available to men. Hence, what he advocates is not a dismantling of the structures of male domination but the incorporation into the male personality of qualities conventionally associated with the feminine.

43 For a summary of this argument, see JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 42. I draw on this summary in the discussion that follows.

44 JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 273.

45 JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 179.

What we have, then, is a story whose concern is wholly for men and their dilemmas, one in which what happens to women is of no consequence. Even the folktale which Ekwefi is assigned the role of telling to Ezinma – the story of the visit paid to the sky by the birds and the crafty tortoise – relates only to male behaviour. A cautionary tale which tells of the consequences of over-weening pride, of challenging one's *chi* in the idiom of the larger narrative, it serves to foreshadow the decline of Okonkwo's fortunes.

As we have seen, in Achebe's view, a novel which valorizes racist ideology cannot be 'called a great work of art'. As we have also seen Achebe attempts to undermine the authority of such canonical western texts as *Heart of Darkness* by giving an account of his own experience of reading them and by providing alternative readings – ones which identify the race bias not only in colonial fiction but also in western criticism. As JanMohamed has shown, *Things Fall Apart* is also a conscious attempt on Achebe's part to refute colonial authors like Joyce Cary. However, while seeking to subvert the manichean allegory of race, Achebe valorizes a version of the sexual allegory. This, then, has been my project in this essay: to challenge the authority of Achebe's most canonical novel by offering an alternative reading, one which reveals its male bias as well as that of Achebe criticism.

Achebe does not tell African women 'where the rain began to beat them'. Nor does he attempt to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to African women. However, although women have been explicitly excluded from Achebe's constituency of readers, they have, in contrast to his female characters, refused to remain silent. As writers they have undertaken the task of refuting Achebe, of presenting an alternative view of colonization and of African society, one which challenges Achebe's underlying assumption that things could not fall apart for African women because they never had been and never would be together.

**Ato Quayson**, from 'Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It'. *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 1994, pp. 117–136.

The Ghanaian critic and theorist Ato Quayson has written extensively on African literature and his book *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997) is regarded as a landmark work of postcolonial analysis and criticism. In this extract from an earlier essay Quayson provides one of the most radical and innovative readings of *Things Fall Apart* to date. Quayson employs postmodernist and postcolonial theory to argue that the purported 'realist' discourses of the novel cannot be viewed as unproblematic without attending to the notion that literary realism is a 'construction'. He argues that the novel's realism actually operates on two separate levels, which he describes as the metonymic and the symbolic/metaphorical (see *Critical history*, pp. 71–72), with the former presenting the story of the rise and fall of Umuofia, and the latter dealing with the digressions from, contradictions in, and qualifications of the metonymic order. Taking a number of the arguments expounded in the work of Florence Stratton and other feminist critiques, his analysis of the shifting tropes of masculinity and femininity in the novel uncovers a number of subtle but important contradictions which disclose, in turn, Achebe's deeply ambivalent attitudes to pre-colonial Igbo culture and the repercussions brought about in the colonial encounter.

[. . .]

This reading of *Things Fall Apart*, then, is offered as a means of exposing the gap that exists between the realist African text and the reality that it is seen to represent. The novel is particularly useful for this enterprise because of its highly acclaimed (and well deserved) literary status and the fact that it has been taken unproblematically since its publication thirty years ago.

It seems fruitful to conceive of the realism of *Things Fall Apart* as constructed

on two levels simultaneously. At one level, the novel concerns itself with a description of Umuofian culture and its subversion by the contact with Western imperialism. This level of the novel can be perceived as metonymic of an Igbo or African reality. In Jakobsonian terms, the narrative progresses metonymically, with narrative elements selected for attention because they exist in discernible contiguous relation to one another. Significantly, however, the text frequently departs from the overarching narrative of the fall of Okonkwo and the division of the clan to pursue numerous anecdotes and digressions that are demonstrably not related to the main narrative but embody subtle qualifications of it. Furthermore, within the context of the unfolding events, the narrative generates a secondary conceptualization that can be seen as symbolic/metaphorical. This level subtends the metonymic text but gathers around itself all the antinomies associated with metaphor: ambiguity, contradiction, irony, and paradox.

The symbolic/metaphorical level of conceptualization reveals two closely related strata both at the level of content, the culture of Umuofia, and *also* at the level of the narrative's discursive strategies in general. On the one hand, Umuofia, as a culture, has institutions governed by a viable symbolic order. Though the narrative text itself reflects some of the central concerns of the culture, both in relation to the cultural institutions and more generally in relation to the culture's governing symbolic system, it employs certain discursive strategies that articulate a symbolic/metaphorical system not relatable solely to the symbolic order reflected by the actual culture. The narrative's own order is derivable from the various configurations of significances, and in its structuration of the narrated events. And it is at this strategic level of symbolic structuration that the novel's hierarchization of gender and the subtle subversion of its proffered hierarchy are played out, showing that the novel's realism, in the characteristic manner of a *writing* continually produces excessive meanings. Taking it at face value then becomes inadequate and problematic.

Several critics have rightly pointed out that Okonkwo's downfall is mainly due to a neurotic concern with 'manliness'. Okonkwo pursues distinction, in the words of Abiola Irele, with an 'obsessive single-mindedness that soon degenerates into egocentricity, until he comes to map out for himself very narrow limits of action or reflection'.<sup>1</sup> Almost every critic of the novel pays attention to the nature of Okonkwo's tragic character, relating it to the narrow limits of action defined by his society as 'manly' and showing how his character precludes the exercise of the more 'feminine' virtues of tolerance, tenderness and patience. Innes argues that it is a flaw encoded in the very symbolic order of Umuofian society and purveyed by its linguistic codes. Okonkwo's attitudes are framed by the culture's language and its implications, and it is this that makes him 'unable to acknowledge the mythic implications of femininity and its values'.<sup>2</sup> What seems to have been ignored, however, is the fact that in totally focalizing the narrative through Okonkwo and the male-dominated institutions of Umuofia, the novel itself implies a patriarchal discourse within which women, and much of what they can be taken to represent

1 [All footnotes are Quayson's] Abiola Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe' reprinted in C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978, p. 11.

2 C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 117.



in the novel, are restricted to the perceptual fringes. In spite of this demonstrable patriarchy, however, Okonkwo is at various times ironized by the text suggesting the inadequacy of the values he represents and ultimately those of the hierarchy that ensures his social status. It is important to stress that it is not just Okonkwo's values that are shown as inadequate, but those of a patriarchal society in general, he representing an extreme manifestation of the patriarchy that pervades the society as a whole.

Part of the structuration of the male–female hierarchy in the novel derives from what Chantal Zabus, in talking about the use of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*, refers to as the 'ethno-text'. She defines the term in relation to 'the discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material'.<sup>3</sup> Her focus is mainly on the implications for the demise of orality that the transposition of traditional discursive elements into the Europhone novel implies, but it is useful to expand the term ethno-text to embrace all the traditional cultural practices that are depicted in a novel, be they linguistically based or not. It is the structuration derivable from Igbo culture itself that arguably offers the raw materials for the construction of the fictional world of Umuofia. It is noticeable, for instance, that the female principle has a very important part to play in Umuofia's governing cosmogony. Ani, goddess of the earth, 'played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity' (Ch. 5, p. 26). The Week of Peace set aside for her before celebration of the New Yam Festival is a time of tolerance, relaxation, and peaceful co-existence. And so important is Ani that all the society's activities are judged in terms of what is or is not acceptable to her; indeed, she is 'the ultimate judge of morality and conduct' (Ch. 5, p. 26). G. D. Killam has been led to suggest, from an examination of the role of Ani in the lives of the people, that 'a powerful "female principle" pervades the whole society of Umuofia'.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, however, that this powerful female principle is most potent at a symbolic/metaphorical level. It finds its most powerful expression at the level of the clan's governing cosmogony. And, at all times, the female principle always attracts some masculine essentiality in its definition. Ani has constant communion with the 'fathers of the clan' because they are buried within her. She has a male priest, while Agbala, god of the Hills and Caves, has a priestess as spokesperson. And in the arena of the traditionally most masculine centred activity, war, the governing principle of Umuofian war medicine is believed to be an old woman with one leg, *agadi-nwayi* (Ch. 2, pp. 8–9). The clan's cultural values institute the feminine in a very powerful position within the governing symbolic system, taking care to suggest a subtle interfusion of the two principles of male and female. In that sense, Umuofia's governing symbolic system suggests a necessary balancing of the two principles, so that the notion of a pervasive single essence 'female principle' requires qualification.

At the level of the metonymic realist description of the institutional practices of Umuofia, however, the ethno-text yields a completely different reality. Umuofia is a male dominated society, and the narrative reflects this aspect of the culture. The continuing emphasis in the text is on depicting male dominated activities – the

3 Chantal Zabus, 'The Logos-Eaters: The Igbo Ethno-Text' in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds), *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 20.

4 G. D. Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, London: Heinemann, 1977, p. 20.

oratory of men before the gathered clan, the acquisition and cultivation of farmlands, courage and resourcefulness in sport and war and the giving and taking of brides. The text's focus on the patriarchy inscribed in the ethno-text is particularly evident in the portrayal of the political institution of justice. Since the Umuofians are acephalous, their central political power is invested in the *ndichie*, a council of elders, and in the *egwugwu*, masked spirits of the ancestors who come to sit in judgement over civil and criminal disputes.

It is in the attitude of women to the *egwugwu* that the hierarchy of power is unmasked. The *egwugwu* emerge to sit in judgement with 'guttural and awesome' voices. And the sounds of their voices are no less mystifying than the sounds that herald their entry:

*Aru oyim de de de dei!* flew around the dark, closed hut like tongues of fire. The ancestral spirits of the clan were abroad. The metal gong beat continuously now and the flute, shrill and powerful, floated on the chaos.

And then the *egwugwu* appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle. Even Mgbafo took to her heels and had to be restrained by her brothers.

(Ch. 10, p. 64)

It is interesting that in its presentation of the scene the narrative betrays its attitude to the relationship between women and power. Significantly, the *egwugwu* are described in an idiom of grandeur, the 'tongues of fire' recalling the dramatic events of Pentecost recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 2.1–4. And the women's 'instinctive' flight at their emergence can be read as the awestruck response to these masked spirits. A few lines later, however, the women reveal that they have more knowledge of the reality behind the masked spirits than they care to express: 'Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. . . . But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves' (Ch. 10, p. 65). The narrative paints the scene with so much detail, objective distancing and humour, that it is impossible not to regard it as of the clearest 'realistic' vintage. But the 'thoughtful silence' of the women before this all-important masculine institution is ironic. The narrative works both to reveal the 'natural' and 'instinctive' female attitude to Power and also to ironize the pretensions of the masculine social institutions. But it is important to note that the irony does not work to radically undermine the hierarchy at the centre of the power structure because the women constrain themselves to 'thinking' their knowledge, but leave it unexpressed.

Some aspects of the narrative can be construed wholly as fictional constructions and not as trajectories of the ethno-text. Here it is the narrative, in terms of its own discursive strategies, that is responsible for any impression of patriarchy that comes across. In the relationships in Okonkwo's household, for instance, we find a subtle definition of his masculinity that depends on a particular view of the women in his domestic set-up. Twice we are told Okonkwo beats his wives. The

first time, it is Ojiugo, his last wife. The narrator's preface to the incident must be noted: 'Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to prepare the afternoon meal' (Ch. 4, p. 21). If Okonkwo's anger is 'justifiable' then the narrative has passed judgement on Ojiugo's 'irrationality' and 'thoughtlessness' from her husband's perspective. And it is significant that the text does not bother to let Ojiugo explain herself on her return. It is just reported that 'when she returned he beat her very heavily' (Ch. 4, p. 21). In Okonkwo's anger he forgets that it is the Week of Peace, and even when he is reminded, he does not stop because, as we are told, he 'was not the man to stop beating somebody half way through, not even for fear of a goddess' (Ch. 4, p. 21). In earning a severe reprimand from Ani's priest for flouting the rules governing the observance of the Week of Peace, his 'manly' values are clearly shown as inadequate, but his character as derivable from this scene is as significant in terms of his attitudes to his wives as it is in his attitudes to the cultural mores he violates. In this segment of the narrative, however, there is a tacit but emphatic foregrounding of the social as against the private, because the beating occurs during a period of heightened cultural consciousness due to the Week of Peace.

At another time it is Ekwefi who is to suffer the brunt of her husband's violent temper. In this instance it is only to satisfy his suppressed anger at the enforced laxity that precedes the New Yam Festival (Ch. 5, pp. 27–28). Both these instances are explications of what the text has already told us earlier on but only now depicts: 'Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children' (Ch. 2, p. 9).

The importance of this method of characterization for the patriarchal discourse inscribed in the text is that it depends on a binary opposition being established between Okonkwo and the other characters. And it is a binarism that frequently takes him as the primary value. When the binarism works to undermine Okonkwo and his relative values, it regularly foregrounds other men-folk around whom alternative values in the text can be seen as being organized. Obierika and Nwoye are important nuclei of alternative values in this sense. In relation to his wives, however, the binarism implies a secondary role for them. Whatever significance is recovered for them must be gleaned from their silence, for they are not portrayed by the narrative as contributing to the *action* and its outcome.

The essential discursive operation of containing the significance of the women is most evident in relation to the handling of Ekwefi and Ezinma. The text builds them up till they seem to be alternative centres of significations, but it frustrates the completion of these significations by banishing them out of the narrative at some point. Ezinma and her mother Ekwefi are the only female characters developed by the narrative. We are told that Ekwefi ran away from her first husband to marry Okonkwo (Ch. 5, p. 28). By focusing on the relationship between her and her daughter, the narrative reveals the joys of motherhood and the closeness that mother and daughter enjoyed:

Ezinma did not call her mother *Nne* like all children. She called her by her name, Ekwefi, as her father and other grown-up people did. The relationship between them was not only that of mother and child. There

was something in it like the companionship of equals, which was strengthened by such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom.

(Ch. 9, p. 55)

The warmth depicted in the relationship between mother and daughter aids in eliciting the reader's empathy with them, and thereby opens up a space for possible significations around these two. The significations, however, seem to be limited to a definition of maternal and filial instincts only. The episodes around Ekwefi's pursuit of Chielo when her daughter is taken on a nocturnal round of the villages by the priestess are significant in that respect (Ch. 11, pp. 72–76). And when she stands with tears in her eyes at the mouth of the cave into which Chielo has entered with her daughter and swears within herself that if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world, we know we are seeing terribly courageous maternal, and indeed human, instincts at play. Indeed, the scene even gains wider significance if perceived in contrast to Okonkwo's handling of Ikemefuna who called him 'father'. In both instances where parental instincts are put to the test, the central characters are, significantly, taken outside the village into the forest. In Ekwefi's case as in Okonkwo's, an element of eeriness governs the atmosphere, with Ekwefi's situation being the more frightening of the two. And both episodes involve the enigmatic injunction of deities, but whereas Ekwefi is prepared to defy the gods in defending her daughter, Okonkwo submits to cowardice and participates in Ikemefuna's ritual murder. Ekwefi has been given admirable but limited stature by the text, and this is partly because it refuses to lend her a more crucial role in the action.

In Ezinma, we see a tough-minded and questioning personality. When her mother tells her the tale of the Tortoise and the Birds, she is quick to point out that the tale does not have a song (Ch. 11, p. 71). She joins the ranks of other male characters who *pose* questions of varying interest in the narrative: Obierika, Nwoye, Rev. Brown, Okonkwo, the District Commissioner. Interestingly, her questions are posed in relation to what is not of great consequence in the narrative, the tales of women told in their huts at night to children, a context which Okonkwo thinks his sons should be excluded from the better to ensure the growth of their 'manliness'. At another time, Ezinma ventures to carry her father's stool to the village *ilo*, a move she is reminded is the male preserve of a son (Ch. 5, p. 32). And when she sits, she often fails to adopt the proper sitting posture prescribed for her sex and has to be forcefully reminded by her father in his characteristic bellowing command (Ch. 5, p. 32). When, in the quest for her *iyi-uwa*, she calmly takes her impatient father, a renowned medicine-man, and indeed much of the village on a circular 'treasure-hunt', we see she enjoys the momentary leadership position that the situation permits her (Ch. 9, pp. 56–61).

It is also significant that Ezinma comes to take the place of a boy and someone that can be trusted in her father's eyes.<sup>5</sup> At periods when he is in the greatest emotional crises, Okonkwo instinctively turns to his daughter. Such is the case for instance after his participation in the murder of Ikemefuna. After the boy's

5 It is significant that in seeing her as a 'son' Okonkwo attempts to erase his daughter's femininity. This then becomes a manifestation of his neurotic concern with 'manliness' and his attitude towards his daughter opens up a further space for a criticism of his values.

sacrifice 'he did not taste any food for two days' and drinks palm-wine 'from morning till night'. His eyes were 'red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor' (Ch. 8, p. 45). On the third day, he asks Ekwefi to prepare him roast plantains, and these are brought by Ezinma. We notice the filial attachment that passes between the two:

'You have not eaten for two days,' said his daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. 'So you must finish this.' She sat down and stretched her legs in front of her. Okonkwo ate the food absent-mindedly. 'She should have been a boy,' he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter. He passed her a piece of fish.

(Ch. 8, p. 45)

The narrative further registers a crucial position for Ezinma in our eyes when it tells us that during his enforced exile Okonkwo 'never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl' and that of all his children 'she alone understood his every mood. A bond of sympathy had grown between them' (Ch. 20, p. 124). It is to her that her father gives the task of convincing her other sisters not to marry any eligible man from Mbanta, but to wait till they return to Umuofia to make a better social impact on arrival. Thus, the space for registering significations around Ezinma, and for exploring a viable notion of femaleness that would offer a possible contrast with Okonkwo's notions of manliness are clearly built by the narrative. It is then highly problematic that Ezinma vanishes from the story after the return from exile, and is never referred to again. It is as if to suggest that in the crucial exercise of delineating the climactic consequences of the meeting of the two cultures at the end of the novel, there is no space for women.

How, we might speculate, would the novel have been if it were to have focused on Ezinma's reaction to the changes in Umuofia from the specific standpoint of the institution of marriage? Or how would the society's value systems have been perceived if their interrogation had been focalized through Ezinma instead of Nwoye and Obierika? And what would our attitudes to Okonkwo's death have been if Ezinma's reaction to the event had been registered alongside Obierika's? In fact, is it not valid to ponder what the reaction of the womenfolk in general was to the mores of the society and the radical changes that unfold in the course of the narrative? There seems to be an unconscious recognition of the potential inherent in Ezinma and Ekwefi's characterization for subverting the patriarchal discourse of the text. The significations around them go to join the various meanings around those 'othered' by Umuofia and the narrative, such as twins, *osus* and those who die of abominable ailments. These come briefly into the perceptual horizon, and though marginalized, remain potentially disruptive, partly because the mere fact of their presence constitutes a qualification of what has been centralized by the narrative. Though it has foregrounded the masculine in the male-female hierarchy inscribed at the level of the description of events, the narrative has also opened the hierarchy to a subtle interrogation of its values, even if ultimately leaving it intact. Considering the ways in which women are handled in the novel, it is possible to perceive *Things Fall Apart* as operating a mode of realism that does not just 'name' an African reality; it also seeks to fix certain concepts such as those around 'woman' within a carefully hierarchized system of values

that underprivileges them. In this light, *Things Fall Apart* would almost answer to the charges levelled by Hélène Cixous at the language of philosophical systems in general: they are all phallogentric and seek to privilege the masculine in the patterns of male–female binary pairs often proffered as ‘natural’. Cixous’s charge would require some qualification in the context of *Things Fall Apart*, however, particularly because its hierarchization of the masculine–feminine undergoes a continual subversion revealing a more profound contradiction at the heart of its construction of the ‘natural’ relations between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

If, on the one hand, patriarchy is privileged by both the ethno-text and the narrative itself, then this same patriarchy is alternatively shown as sitting uneasily within the general discourse of symbolization that the text constructs. And it is in the area of the political themes of the novel that this is most evident. The contract between the colonizing and the traditional cultures is attended by a subtle construction of the male–female polarities which this time are not hierarchical but rather intermingle and change places in restless slippage.

When the white man first appears on the perceptual horizon of Umuofia, he is naturalized by being linked to the marginal. The white man is first referred to as a leper (Ch. 8, p. 53). And later, when their violent intrusion into the perceptual horizon through the riot of Abame has to be confronted, Obierika reflects other previous self-satisfied attitudes to these white men in his reporting of the rout: ‘I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about the white men who made powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the sea, but no one thought the stories were true’ (Ch. 15, p. 99). In other words, they were harmless because they inhabited what was thought to be the realm of the fictive. When white men make their first physical appearance in the shape of Christian missionaries, they are first confined to the Evil Forest in which were buried ‘all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox’ (Ch. 17, p. 107). They were not wanted in the clan and so were given land that was thought to be only marginally useful to the clan. But the early Christianity is depicted by the narrative as embodying and stressing qualities considered womanish – love, tolerance, affection and mercy; Okonkwo characteristically evaluates the missionaries as a ‘lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens’ (Ch. 17, p. 110). A feminine ‘valence’ attaches to the Christians. In this sense, the early relationship between Umuofia and Christianity describes a male–female hierarchy in which Umuofia is masculine and privileged. In effect the narrative suggests that the white missionary vanguard of the colonizing enterprise possessed an initial effeminacy which was amusing and, in effect, tolerable.

The effeminacy turns out to be highly contradictory and sinister, however. The church succeeds in attracting to itself all those marginalized by the society, *efulefus*, *osus*, and the men of no title, *agbala*. In doing this, it emasculates the society, making it incapable of standing as one. And as Obierika observes with uncanny perspicacity, ‘the white man . . . has put a knife on the things that held us together’ (Ch. 20, p. 127). In figuring the white man’s intrusion firstly in terms of ‘effeminate clucking’, and now in terms of an invading knife, the narrative prepares the way for an inversion of the implied male–female hierarchization that it suggested in describing the first contact between the missionaries and the culture of Umuofia. Indeed, it is significant that at the crucial point when Okonkwo seeks to assert the possibilities of a violent rebellion, his own clan breaks into a

catatonic 'effeminate' confusion. At that point the text transfers the feminine valence with which it first constructed the white man onto the Umuofians. The shift of the feminine valence from the invaders to the invaded helps to define an important contradiction at the heart of the text's attitudes to the colonial encounter. Colonialism is perceived at one and the same time as feminine (in the missionaries) and masculine (at the level of the British administration and their ruthless exercise of power). And for colonialism to be able to succeed, Umuofia has to be transformed from the essential masculinity which has governed the textual construction of the society, to an enervated femininity at the crucial point when rebellion was an option. In that sense, the narrative depicts Umuofia's 'castration', with Okonkwo's suicide representing the ultimate overthrow of its masculinity.

It is arguable, then, that the textual strategies have ascribed different values to the male-female hierarchy at two different levels of the text. At the level of metonymic realistic description, a certain ironized patriarchy governs the construction of the fictional Umuofia that derives its impulse partly from the ethno-text. But at the level of symbolic conceptualization, the narrative has hinted at its own patriarchal discourse which it has proceeded to undermine most powerfully when describing the colonial encounter. Then, the male-female hierarchy that has governed the text completely collapses, and its place is taken over by an exchange of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' among the two poles of the contending cultures. *Things Fall Apart* thus explores a loving image of Umuofia at the same time as it reveals a dissatisfaction with the values of the society it describes in such detail. And this is undertaken at a more subtle level than the mere explication of content can reveal. In a very important sense, the 'naming' of a pre-colonial culture and the depiction of its subversion by a marauding imperialism has involved the necessary construction of philosophical categories both *within* the pre-colonial culture and *between* it and the invading one which fail to stand still, involving a doubling back of the categories such as to problematize the very assumptions on which the enterprise of 'naming' was undertaken in the first place. The novel thus reveals that its own realism is a construction traversed by both sensitivity and imbalance so that it cannot be addressed unproblematically.

## **Further reading and web resources**





## Further reading

### The author: Chinua Achebe

Achebe has written a number of illuminating essays that he has either published separately or anthologized in the three collections of his non-fiction writing we list below. Many of these address his formative early life, his literary and cultural influences, and his thoughts on the nature of African literature and the role of the African writer. There have been numerous biographical essays and two book-length biographies on Achebe's life and work. The more comprehensive biography has been indicated below.

Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*, London: Heinemann, 1975.

— *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987*, London: Heinemann, 1988.

— *Home and Exile*, New York: Random House, 2001.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe*, Oxford: James Currey, 1997.

### The history of colonialism in Africa

There are a large number of works on the history of Africa and colonialism that are widely available and worth consulting, and we recommend several that include sections that concentrate on the historical periods in which *Things Fall Apart* is set and in which Achebe was writing.

J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa: Volume 2*, London: Longman, 1974. This eminent collection of essays encompasses the period between 1800 and 1960, and includes essays on pre-colonial and colonial West Africa that provide an accessible history of the colonial encounter and the post-war period in which Achebe was writing.

Guy Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History*, London: Atlantic, 2005. This work provides a comprehensive history of modern Africa from the end of the Second World War to the present. The first section entitled 'The decade of hope' is

particularly relevant, in that it examines the high point of the anti-colonial nationalist movements in the post-war years that were to prove so influential on Achebe's political outlook when he was writing *Things Fall Apart*.

J. D. Fage with William Tordoff, *A History of Africa*, fourth edition, London: Routledge, 2002. Originally published in the early 1960s, this is a classic text on African history that employs oral, archaeological and archival sources to offer a comprehensive account of the history of the continent from pre-colonial to post-colonial times.

Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship – to 1906*, London: Faber, 1973. An in-depth study of the Igbos' encounter with European colonialism that offers a nuanced interpretation by one of the most original of the first generation of academic African historians.

Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: 1876–1912*, London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1991. This accessible work provides an excellent general introduction to the history of European colonialism and imperialism in Africa during the period in which *Things Fall Apart* is set.

### Postcolonial literary theory

There is now an increasing number of works available on postcolonial theory and literature and we have recommended several which range from accessible introductions to more complex approaches to the discipline. We have also tried to mention texts that either examine Achebe's work or are particularly relevant to the study of *Things Fall Apart*.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, London: Routledge, 1989. This groundbreaking work provides an accessible introduction to a number of the defining features of postcolonial literature and the theoretical approaches of the discipline.

— *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995. This excellent anthology includes excerpts from most of the important postcolonial theorists, which the editors have helpfully grouped into sections that concentrate on particular issues or questions.

Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. This wide-ranging book provides a broad contextual examination of the evolution of both colonial and postcolonial writing in English as well as a number of the key theoretical terms.

Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonialism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003. This accessible work examines some of the key theoretical debates and critical notions of postcolonialism, alongside a critical analysis of a number of important texts.

John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. This is a lucid and concise introduction to most of the key terms in use in postcolonial theory and criticism.

Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. This is, at times, a more complex analysis of the theories and

practices of postcolonialism which examines a number of the critical terms and key debates of the discipline.

Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. This largely accessible work explains the historical and theoretical origins of postcolonial theory and analyses the concepts and issues involved, offering the meaning of key terms, and interpreting the work of several of the major postcolonial writers.

## African and Nigerian literature

With the growing academic and popular interest in African literature, a considerable number of books devoted to the subject have been produced and we have highlighted several which are especially relevant to the study of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. This recent collection of essays examines intersections between independence, nationalism and gender in postcolonial literature and contains a perceptive essay on gender and politics in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

M. Keith Booker, *The African Novel: An Introduction*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. This work begins with an introductory section on how to read the African novel and a brief historical survey of the ways in which theorists have engaged with African literature. It includes chapters on eight important African texts, including Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, together with brief overviews of their authors, the countries they come from, and each country's history and culture.

Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, London: Heinemann, 1981. This influential work examines the relationship between what Irele describes as the 'African experience', and particularly as it is embodied in the continent's oral traditions, and modern African literature. Irele controversially argues that an uninterrupted continuity exists between this oral heritage, which he describes as Africa's 'classical tradition', and the literature produced on the continent.

— *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Irele's more recent work represents a progression and refinement of his earlier position, one that focuses on the specific historical and cultural conditions that inform the 'African imagination' and the continent's literature. The work includes a particularly insightful essay titled 'The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*'.

Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Obiechina's groundbreaking work examines the historical and cultural antecedents of the novel in West Africa, with sections that explore the spread of literacy; the growth of the mass media; cultural nationalism; and the oral and literary traditions in West Africa. *Things Fall Apart* is one of the key texts that Obiechina examines in some depth.

Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, Oxford: James

Currey, 1997. Quayson's text represents an important contribution to the ongoing debate around African literature, and its relationship to the continent's history and culture. He argues that too often there is a tendency in theoretical approaches to African literature to idealize the continent's oral traditions, and to see the written text as evolving out of this heritage in an unproblematic way. Quayson instead argues that Nigerian writers have employed a variety of strategic positions to their indigenous cultural resources that vary according to their project and the wider social and political context in which they are working.

### **Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

Achebe's writing has attracted considerable academic and critical interest and we have chosen to recommend a number of monographs on his work that include some of the most perceptive analyses of *Things Fall Apart*.

David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990. This revised and updated edition of Carroll's 1980 text includes an accessible introduction to European colonialism, Achebe's writing and thinking, and Igbo history and culture. He devotes a chapter to a close analysis of *Things Fall Apart*.

Ernest N. Emenyonu, *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004. This collection attempts to present new critical work on Chinua Achebe, emphasizing the importance of the cultural context in the appreciation of Achebe's work.

Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, London: James Currey, 1991. Gikandi's text represents an important contribution to recent critical approaches to Achebe's work. He begins with a detailed theoretical consideration of the relationship between the history of African nationalism and the development of the African novel. His chapter on *Things Fall Apart* provides a perceptive analysis of Okonkwo and his relationship with the Igbo culture that produced him.

C. L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Innes begins with an excellent introduction to Igbo history and culture and its influence on Achebe's work. Her illuminating chapter on *Things Fall Apart* is largely based around a comparison between the novel and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, together with their respective representations of their protagonists and their cultures.

Solomon O. Iyasere, *Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism*, New York: Whitson Publishing, 1998. This is one of the most useful collections on *Things Fall Apart*, bringing together essays employing a variety of approaches, and includes an excellent example of Abdul JanMohamed's postcolonial Marxist approach.

G. D. Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, London: Heinemann, 1977. This revised edition of Killam's groundbreaking work from 1969 is an important early attempt to locate Achebe's writing within an African cultural tradition, and was the first to identify the 'female principle' in Umuofian culture.

Chinwe Christiana Okechukwu, *Achebe the Orator: The Art of Persuasion in*

*Chinua Achebe's Novels*, London: Greenwood Press, 2001. This is an excellent example of both the oral and rhetorical approaches to Chinua Achebe's work, including *Things Fall Apart*.

Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, Oxford: Heinemann and Dangaroo Press, 1990. This is one of the key collections on Chinua Achebe in terms of its breadth of critical approaches as well as its coverage of Achebe's work.

Robert M. Wren, *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980. Wren's work remains the best available source of information on references to Igbo history, politics, religion, society and culture in Achebe's novels. He provides a detailed contextual analysis of *Things Fall Apart*, and explains much of the cultural and historical background to the text.

## Journals and periodicals

There are a number of journals that have occasionally included essays on Achebe's work and we recommend several which are particularly focused on African literature and which have regularly published essays that are relevant to the study of *Things Fall Apart*.

Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds), *Transition: An International Review*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Founded at the University of Makerere in Uganda in the early 1960s by Rajat Neogy and others, this is one of the most historic journals on African literature, having had among its early editors Ali Mazrui and Wole Soyinka. Indeed, some of Achebe's influential early essays first appeared in this journal. It continues to explore African literature within the international context of African Diaspora.

John Conteh-Morgan (ed.), *Research in African Literatures*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. This long-running journal often includes relevant essays in issues, with guest editors, which address specific themes or regions of Africa.

Eldred Durosimi Jones (ed.), *African Literature Today*, London: Heinemann. This long-running series often includes relevant essays that are helpfully collected under an overarching theme for each edition.

## Web resources

There are numerous internet sites which contain information about African history, culture and literature, and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in particular, but most are only introductory or cursory in their scope. We have included a few recommended sites and portals.

[www.britac.ac.uk/portal/bysection.asp?section=H3](http://www.britac.ac.uk/portal/bysection.asp?section=H3) – The British Academy African and Oriental Studies portal to internet resources has links to many useful sites.

[www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/africa/cuvl/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/africa/cuvl/) – Columbia University's collection of African Studies internet resources is an ongoing compilation of electronic

resources available on the internet and has links to many useful sites and journals.

[www.postcolonialweb.org](http://www.postcolonialweb.org) – This website is maintained by the National University of Singapore and provides brief introductions to postcolonial literary theory, writers and their work.

[www.royalafricansociety.org/](http://www.royalafricansociety.org/) – The Royal African Society maintains an up-to-date list of internet resources and websites on all aspects of Africa, including a number of links to useful sites and portals.

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Abdul JanMohamed is Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley and his publications include *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983) and he has co-edited *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990).

Biodun Jeyifo is Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and his publications include *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (1984) and *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (1984) and he has edited *Conversations with Wole Soyinka* (2001) and *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (2001).

Ato Quayson is Professor and Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto, and his publications include *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997) and *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (2000) and he has co-edited *Relocating Postcolonialism: A Critical Reader* (2002).

Florence Stratton is Associate Professor of English at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan and her publications include *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994).



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