

E-Content

POSTCOLONIAL & NEW WRITINGS

Semester: III

Lecture 10

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Achebe's Purpose for writing *Things Fall Apart* Lecture- 10

Topics to be Covered

- Context of *Things Fall Apart*
- Achebe at the Crossroads of European Modernism and African Realism
- Setting
- Point of View
- Foreshadowing in *Things Fall Apart*

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To Revise

- *Things Fall Apart* is the debut novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, first published in 1958. Its story chronicles pre-colonial life in the southeastern part of Nigeria and the arrival of Europeans during the late 19th century. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, and one of the first to receive global critical acclaim. It is a staple book in schools throughout Africa and is widely read and studied in English-speaking countries around the world. The novel was first published in the UK in 1962 by William Heinemann Ltd., and became the first work published in Heinemann's African Writers Series.
- Originally written in English and published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was one of the first novels by an African author to garner worldwide acclaim. Though mostly fictional, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe claims that the book documents Africa's spiritual history – the civilized and rich life the Igbo lived before the arrival of Europeans and the ruinous social and cultural consequences that the arrival of European missionaries brought. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as a sharp criticism of imperialism, or the European colonization of countries outside of the European continent (especially Africa and the Americas). The novel also critiques Joseph Conrad's famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which documented the African natives from an imperialist's (or white colonizer's) point of view. Achebe followed *Things Fall Apart* with two other novels, *No Longer At Ease* and *Arrow of God*, both of which also depict the African experience with Europeans.

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Context of *Things Fall Apart*

- Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on November 16, 1930, in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. Although he was the child of a Protestant missionary and received his early education in English, his upbringing was multicultural, as the inhabitants of Ogidi still lived according to many aspects of traditional Igbo (formerly written as Ibo) culture. Achebe attended the Government College in Umuahia from 1944 to 1947. He graduated from University College, Ibadan, in 1953. While he was in college, Achebe studied history and theology. He also developed his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures, and he rejected his Christian name, Albert, for his indigenous one, Chinua.
- In the 1950s, Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous peoples. In 1959, he published *Things Fall Apart* as a response to novels, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that treat Africa as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Tired of reading white men's accounts of how primitive, socially backward, and, most important, language-less native Africans were, Achebe sought to convey a fuller understanding of one African culture and, in so doing, give voice to an underrepresented and exploited colonial subject.
- *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s and portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. Achebe's novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. He is careful to portray the complex, advanced social institutions and artistic traditions of Igbo culture prior to its contact with Europeans. Yet he is just as careful not to stereotype the Europeans; he offers varying depictions of the white man, such as the mostly benevolent Mr. Brown, the zealous Reverend Smith, and the ruthlessly calculating District Commissioner

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- Achebe's education in English and exposure to European customs have allowed him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture. His decision to write *Things Fall Apart* in English is an important one. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; his choice of language was thus political. Unlike some later African authors who chose to revitalize native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture, Achebe wanted to achieve cultural revitalization within and through English. Nevertheless, he manages to capture the rhythm of the Igbo language and he integrates Igbo vocabulary into the narrative.
- Achebe has become renowned throughout the world as a father of modern African literature, essayist, and professor of English literature at Bard College in New York. But Achebe's achievements are most concretely reflected by his prominence in Nigeria's academic culture and in its literary and political institutions. He worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company for over a decade and later became an English professor at the University of Nigeria. He has also been quite influential in the publication of new Nigerian writers. In 1967, he co-founded a publishing company with a Nigerian poet named Christopher Okigbo and in 1971, he began editing *Okike*, a respected journal of Nigerian writing. In 1984, he founded *Uwa ndi Igbo*, a bilingual magazine containing a great deal of information about Igbo culture. He has been active in Nigerian politics since the 1960s, and many of his novels address the post-colonial social and political problems that Nigeria still faces.

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Things Fall Apart on the Eve of Nigerian Independence

- The 1950s in Nigeria was a decade of increasing political and ethnic tensions as the British colony inched its way ever closer to independence. The British Empire had come under strain during the Second World War. After the war Nigerians began to pursue independence with greater fervor. Debates raged between British and Nigerian politicians as to how quickly power could—and should—be handed over. As independence drew nearer, Nigerian politics began splitting along ethnic lines, with ethnically defined political groups each vying for representation. What we now call Nigeria gathers together numerous ethnic groups that historically had never formed a political unity, and independence presented an urgent need to come together as a modern political state. Yet Nigeria's many natural resources—petroleum foremost among them—are distributed unevenly across the country. The fact that the country's three largest ethnic groups occupied regional majorities (Hausa in the north, Yoruba in the southeast, and Igbo in the south) caused great concern about the uneven distribution of wealth in the post-independence period.
- When Achebe drafted *Things Fall Apart* in the mid-1950s, he wrote against the dynamic, anxious background of a soon-to-be-independent Nigeria. So why, given the significance of Nigeria's coming independence, did Achebe write a novel about the precolonial past? To answer this question, consider the way the novel ends, with a British District Officer reducing the last two hundred pages to a single paragraph. The British Empire swallows up Igbo history and culture, at once erasing it and absorbing it into the more encompassing history of the British colonial adventure. Something similar could be said for the histories of the Hausa, Yoruba, and many other ethnic groups that the British forced into a single geographical entity. By setting his novel in the precolonial past, Achebe suggests that modern Nigeria is a newfangled idea. As independence approaches, *Things Fall Apart* reminds its readers—and particularly its African readers—that the precolonial past can be a resource for navigating the postcolonial era.

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- Writing about an African past clearly had political significance given the previous century of British colonial rule. However, some fellow Nigerian writers did not share Achebe's enthusiasm about using literature to recount the past at a future-oriented moment. In his play *A Dance of the Forests*, Yoruba writer Wole Soyinka cautioned against just such a project. Soyinka's play premiered at the Nigerian independence ceremony in 1960, and warned against the social and political dangers of misrepresenting precolonial history to launch a fledgling nation.
- Although Achebe resists idealizing precolonial Igbo life, Soyinka's concerns did prove prescient. In 1967, eager for autonomy and for control of petroleum reserves located in its region, the Igbo-majority state known as Biafra attempted to secede from Nigeria.
- The three-year civil war that ensued stirred up animosity against the Igbo, a majority-Christian people often cast as having been privileged during the colonial period.
- Igbo dominance of Nigerian literature since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* has only enhanced this perception of Igbo privilege and elitism. In this sense, Achebe's emphasis on a specifically Igbo past introduces further complication to an already complex debate about the meaning and use of African history.

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Achebe at the Crossroads of European Modernism and African Realism

- When Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s, he was responding to centuries of European writing that had portrayed Africa as a “dark continent,” plagued by savagery and superstition. Negative European representations of Africa functioned in multiple, contradictory ways. They situated “darkest Africa” in contrast to an Enlightened Europe, which affirmed both the spiritual and material superiority of European civilization. Negative representations of Africa also proved useful for European nations that were engaged in imperialism and the slave trade. These nations needed to justify their involvement in such despicable practices in order to preserve their moral superiority, a problem that could be solved by producing dehumanizing images of African peoples. Centuries’ worth of negative images shaped not only how Europeans thought about Africans, but also how Africans thought about themselves. The “civilizing mission” of European imperialism involved widespread educational efforts, and in colonial schools Africans were taught European languages as well as European history and literature. African students absorbed all of Europe’s accumulated anti-African biases. Generations of Africans under colonial rule grew up with deeply problematic self-images.
- Achebe, who grew up in British colonial Nigeria, said he wrote *Things Fall Apart* to counter the kinds of flawed representations he encountered during his education. When he was a student at the University College in Ibadan in the early 1950s, Achebe read Joyce Cary’s 1939 novel *Mister Johnson*, which was set in colonial Nigeria. While most of the literature curriculum at Ibadan emphasized Shakespeare, Milton, and the British Romantics, Cary’s modernist novel hit closer to home. But *Mister Johnson* also proved frustrating because of everything it got wrong. Achebe and his peers at school challenged Cary’s simplistic portrayal of the Nigerian protagonist. In making this critique, Achebe also recognized the power of such problematic representations of Africans. As Achebe writes in the opening essay from the book *Home and Exile*, Cary’s novel “open[ed] my eyes to the fact that my home was under attack and that my home was not merely a house or a town but, more importantly, an awakening story.” Soon after this realization, Achebe completed his first-ever manuscript and sent it to England to be typewritten and, eventually, published.

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Setting

- *Things Fall Apart* takes place sometime in the final decade of the nineteenth century in Igboland, which occupies the southeastern portion of what is now known as Nigeria. Most of the action unfolds prior to the arrival of European missionaries. Accordingly, the geography of the novel is dictated by precolonial norms of political and social organization. In Igboland, clusters of villages band together to protect each other and guarantee their own safety. The action of *Things Fall Apart* centers on the fictional village of Umuofia, which is part of a larger political entity made up by the so-called “nine villages.” In Igboland, geography takes on gendered aspects depending on where a person’s parents were born. For instance, Umuofia is Okonkwo’s father’s home village, which makes it Okonkwo’s fatherland. When Okonkwo gets exiled for the crime of manslaughter, he and his family travel to another of the nine villages, Mbanta, which is Okonkwo’s motherland—that is, the village where his mother was born. The gendering of geography plays an important symbolic role in the novel, since Okonkwo sees his seven-year exile in the motherland as an emasculating threat to his reputation.
- Just as geography has meaning in *Things Fall Apart*, so too does time. The novel is set in the 1890s, at the beginning of the British colonial incursion into Igboland. The story takes place in a moment of rupture, as the old ways of the precolonial period come under threat from—and eventually buckle under the weight of—pressure from Europeans. The novel dramatizes the very beginnings of British imperialism in the region, which started not with guns but with Bibles. As Achebe depicts in the book, it was missionaries who arrived first, paving the way for the civil servants who would eventually wrest political control at the point of a pen or, if need be, a gun. Although Achebe shows very little direct violence being perpetrated against the Igbo people, he implies the violence to come at the novel’s end, when the District Commissioner contemplates his book in progress, titled *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. As any reader with a knowledge of Nigerian history will know, this “pacification” would be achieved with a great deal of bloodshed and heartache.

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Point of View

- *Things Fall Apart* takes a third-person omniscient perspective, which means that the narrator knows and communicates the thoughts and feelings of all the characters. The narrator refuses to judge characters or their actions. For instance, despite Okonkwo's resolute rejection of his father, the narrator presents Unoka's story neutrally: "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. . . . And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed." Although Unoka deviates from cultural norms dictating that men should be fearless warriors, the narrator does not judge him for his deviance, and instead indicates his love of music. Likewise, despite Okonkwo's outward harshness, the narrator explains that his disagreeable characteristics obscure a deeper sensitivity: "Down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man." The narrator extends the same objectivity to European characters, such as the missionaries and the District Commissioner. Notably, however, given that the bulk of the narrative centers on Igbo perspectives, the reader has a difficult time feeling sympathetic with European perspectives, even if the narrator presents them objectively.
- One curious aspect of point of view in *Things Fall Apart* is the ethnographic perspective threaded throughout the novel. At many points, the narrator inserts commentary to explain certain elements of Igbo culture. Take one example from early in the novel, when the skilled orator Okoye asks Unoka to repay a debt: "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." Instead of presenting the exact proverbs Okoye uses to request that Unoka pay him back, the narrator simply informs the reader about the cultural importance of such rhetoric. The reader learns that proverbs function to diminish the impact of difficult conversations and can then apply this lesson when encountering other proverbs later in the story. Similar examples of an ethnographic perspective occur throughout the novel, and although they serve an explanatory, contextualizing purpose, they also impose a certain narrative distance. When the narrator explains, "Darkness held a vague terror for these people," the use of the phrase "these people" creates added distance that situates the implied reader outside of the Igbo cultural world. The narrator therefore serves as a cultural intermediary.

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Foreshadowing

- Foreshadowing in Things Fall Apart begins with the novel's title, which indicates that the story to come does not end well. Achebe amplifies this sense of impending doom by prefacing Part One with an epigraph containing the quote from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" from which the novel gets its name. Yeats's poem presents a deeply ominous vision of some mysterious future event, which its speaker envisions arising from the chaos and anarchy that characterizes the present moment. It is not at all clear, however, whether this future event bodes well or ill: "[W]hat rough beast," the speaker asks, "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" Achebe's use of Yeats is significant. Yeats wrote his poem at the start of the Irish War of Independence, when Ireland sought its freedom from British colonialism. While Yeats envisions an obscure future beyond the horror of colonialism, Achebe uses Yeats to signal not the end but the beginning of colonialism in Nigeria.
- In addition to the title and the epigraph from Yeats, Achebe uses other strategies to foreshadow the arrival of the British. Take, for instance, the coming of the locusts. The narrator explains how the first swarm of locusts that came was small: "They were the harbingers sent to survey the land" before the rest descended. The locusts prefigure the missionaries, who in turn prefigure the eventual coming of colonial governance.

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The narrator makes this connection explicit later in the novel, when Obierika informs Okonkwo of the oracle's prophecy following the first appearance of a white man in the nine villages: "It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain." The narrator also uses proverbs to accomplish a similar effect. For instance, after the accident that results in Okonkwo's exile, the narrator makes an ominous nod to proverbial wisdom: "As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others." This sentence appears at the very end of Part One and suggests the challenges that will arise throughout Parts Two and Three.

Nwoye's Conversion

- Although Nwoye's conversion to Christianity comes as a surprise to Okonkwo, the narrator foreshadows this event by frequently underlining Nwoye's frustration both with his father's harsh expectations and with certain Igbo cultural practices he finds morally questionable. One clear instance of foreshadowing comes in Nwoye's love for the tales his mother tells. Okonkwo dismisses these as "women's" stories and forces Nwoye to listen to "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" instead. When Nwoye later hears "the poetry of the new religion," it captivates him like his mother's stories and lays the groundwork for his conversion. In addition to its poetry, the Christian tradition also illuminates aspects of Igbo culture that trouble Nwoye. For example, "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question . . . of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed." These questions first haunted Nwoye many years earlier, which was the first time "something [gave] away inside of him," foreshadowing his eventual decision to abandon Igbo customs.

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Okonkwo's Suicide

- Just as clues predict Nwoye's conversion, clues also predict Okonkwo's suicide. The first clue comes early in the novel, when a farmer succumbs to despair following a particularly devastating yam harvest: "One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself," just like Okonkwo will do at the novel's conclusion.
- A second clue comes much later, when Okonkwo is exiled in Mbanta and Obierika comes to deliver the profits from his friend's yam harvest. In a morbid, joking exchange, Okonkwo expresses that he does not know how to thank Obierika. When Okonkwo indicates that it would not even be enough to kill one of his sons in gratitude, Obierika suggests an alternative: "Then kill yourself." Although meant as a joke, the reader recalls this grim suggestion ten pages later when Obierika returns to Mbanta to inform Okonkwo of Nwoye's conversion to Christianity.
- Okonkwo has a premonition of doom: "[He] felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation." The sense of doom Okonkwo feels here speaks at once to the annihilation of the Igbo world and to his own future suicide.

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To Conclude

- When *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe announced that one of his purposes was to present a complex, dynamic society to a Western audience who perceived African society as primitive, simple, and backward. Unless Africans could tell their side of their story, Achebe believed that the African experience would forever be "mistold," even by such well-meaning authors as Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson*.
- Cary worked in Nigeria as a colonial administrator and was sympathetic to the Nigerian people. Yet Achebe feels that Cary, along with other Western writers such as Joseph Conrad, misunderstood Africa.
- Many European writers have presented the continent as a dark place inhabited by people with impenetrable, primitive minds; Achebe considers this reductionist portrayal of Africa racist. He points to Conrad, who wrote against imperialism but reduced Africans to mysterious, animalistic, and exotic "others."
- In an interview published in 1994, Achebe explains that his anger about the inaccurate portrayal of African culture by white colonial writers does not imply that students should not read works by Conrad or Cary. On the contrary, Achebe urges students to read such works in order to better understand the racism of the colonial era.

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