

E-Content

POSTCOLONIAL & NEW WRITINGS

Semester: III

Lecture 16

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**GALGOTIAS
UNIVERSITY**

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COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

Critical Appreciation of *Things Fall Apart* *Lecture 16*

Topics to be Covered

- Critical Analysis of *Things Fall Apart*
- Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* Critical Appreciation
- Exposition on the Background of the Novel
- Critical Analysis of Characters
- Title Analysis

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COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

To Revise

Characters in *Things Fall Apart*

- The characters in *Things Fall Apart* are mostly from Nigeria, a country in Central Africa. These particular Nigerians are members of the Igbo (also known as Ibo) people, a particular ethnic group within Nigeria. Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart*, shows how each character lives as an Igbo in Nigeria both before and during the opening stages of English colonization. This was when the English came to Nigeria to settle there and to take the leadership of the land. However, these characters are not simply their culture; they also have their own individual strengths and weaknesses that lead them to react to one another and to events in the story in different ways.
- **Okonkwo** : Okonkwo is a man who values masculinity, strength, and respect above all else. He is seen as a leader within his clan and his family, which includes three wives and a number of children. A man of action, Okonkwo overcomes his poor background and achieves great success. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, was lazy and a poor provider, and Okonkwo is driven to be everything his father was not. Okonkwo's rigidity causes great harm, first within his family—the killing of Ikemefuna and the rift with Nwoye—and then within society. Okonkwo is unable to adapt when the white man/missionaries come to his village. He commits suicide rather than adhere to the rules of the changed society.
- **Unoka**
Unoka is viewed by Okonkwo and the clan as lazy, although he was also a gifted musician and a gentle man. Rather than working, Unoka preferred to play his flute and drink wine. He was seen as a coward because he was afraid of war. He had poor harvests because he was unwilling to put in the effort to care for the land. When Unoka died, he was in debt to all of his neighbors. Okonkwo cannot see his father's good qualities and hates him. He lives his life with the intention of avoiding anything his father enjoyed.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

Ikemefuna : Ikemefuna comes to the clan as a form of payment for a murder that one of his tribesmen committed. The elders place Ikemefuna with Okonkwo, who puts his first wife in charge of the boy. Ikemefuna misses his family but comes to feel at home in Umuofia. He becomes popular within the family, particularly with Okonkwo's oldest son, Nwoye. Okonkwo is also fond of Ikemefuna, though he does not reveal his feelings and eventually participates in Ikemefuna's murder.

Nwoye : Nwoye seems to have adopted some of Unoka's traits, which upsets Okonkwo. Okonkwo worries that Nwoye will grow up behaving as his grandfather behaved. Because of his concern, Okonkwo is even harder on Nwoye and beats him regularly. Nwoye begins to change under the influence of Ikemefuna. When Ikemefuna is killed, Nwoye retreats into himself and is cut off from his father. With the arrival of the missionaries, Nwoye revives. He breaks away from his father and becomes a Christian convert.

Ekwefi : Ekwefi is Okonkwo's second wife. Ekwefi was attracted to Okonkwo when she saw him defeat Amalinze the Cat in wrestling. She could not marry him because he was too poor. After he achieves success, she leaves her husband and goes to Okonkwo, who takes her in with no questions. She is particularly close with her only child, Ezinma. After losing nine children, Ekwefi was a broken woman. When Ezinma lived beyond infancy, Ekwefi rejoiced. She treats her daughter more like an equal than a child. The loss of children has also created a connection to Okonkwo, who accepts behaviors from her that he does not from his other wives. He shows her more care and concern.

Ezinma : Ezinma is the only child of Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi. She is particularly close to her mother. Okonkwo also favors Ezinma. He feels a connection to her and appreciates her boldness. Her behaviors and attitude make Okonkwo wish she were a boy. Ezinma feels a similar fondness for her father.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

Critical Analysis of *Things Fall Apart*

- *Things Fall Apart* is an English language novel written by a Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and published in 1958. This novel is widely read and studied in English-speaking countries around the world. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, and one of the first African novels written in English to receive global critical acclaim.
- Chinua Achebe put African literature on the map with his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Frustrated with Western novelists' depictions of Africa as a dark, savage continent, Achebe set out to write a complex, thoughtful novel, one that would counter Western stereotypes and give Africans a story with in which they could recognize themselves. Taking its title from a line in W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," about the cultural dissipation of postwar Europe, *Things Fall Apart* recounts the tragic life of an Igbo warrior and the collapse of his society with the encroachment of colonialization. It became an international success not long after its 1958 publication and has since exerted a tremendous influence over other African writers who, like Achebe, have sought to re-create African life in fiction.
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School of Liberal Education

Course Code : ENG2003 Course Name: Post Colonial & New Writings

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- Okonkwo is a leader and wrestling champion in his village. He is known to be hard working and shows no weakness to anyone. Although brusque with his family and neighbors, he is wealthy, courageous, and powerful among the people of his village. He is a leader of his village, and his place in that society is what he has striven for his entire life.

- Because of his great esteem, Okonkwo is selected to be the guardian of Ikemefuna, a boy taken prisoner by the village as a peace settlement between two villages after his father killed an Umuofian woman. Ikemefuna is to stay with Okonkwo for three years until the Oracle instructs the elders to kill the boy. The oldest man in the village warns Okonkwo, telling him to have nothing to do with the murder because it would be like killing his own child. In fact, Okonkwo ignores the warning and he himself strikes the killing blow as Ikemefuna begs him for protection in order to doesn't seem weak and feminine.

- Shortly after Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo accidentally kills someone at a ritual funeral ceremony. So, he and his family are sent into exile for seven years to appease the gods he has offended. While Okonkwo is away in exile, white men begin coming to Umuofia and they peacefully introduce their religion. As the number of converts increases, the foothold of the white people grows beyond their religion and a new government is introduced.

- The novel's structure, on the other hand, is formal. There are twenty-five chapters: thirteen in book 1, six in book 2, and six in book 3. The pivotal chapter about Okonkwo's accidental shooting of a young boy and his subsequent banishment is at the book's center, in chapter 13. Achebe establishes the nature of the Umuofian society and Okonkwo's character in book 1. In book 2 tension heightens as the outsiders appear. In book 3 the conflict comes to a head when Okonkwo kills the clerk and his people retreat before the power of the new government. The novel's last page has the required unexpected yet inevitable ending. The novel is a very orderly work.

School of Liberal Education

Course Code : ENG2003 Course Name: Post Colonial & New Writings

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- This volume in the Critical Insights series, edited and with an introduction by M. Keith Booker, James E. and Ellen Wadley Roper Professor of English at the University of Arkansas, brings together a wide variety of criticism on Achebe's seminal novel. In the opening section of the volume, Booker's introduction reflects on Achebe's pioneering achievement, and Petrina Crockford, writing for *The Paris Review*, evaluates the enduring, international popularity of *Things Fall Apart*. A brief biography of Achebe contextualizes the novel within his life and the course of his career.
- For readers studying *Things Fall Apart* for the first time, a quartet of introductory essays provide a framework for in-depth study. Joseph McLaren describes the culture of precolonial Nigeria and the arrival of British colonialists to the region as well as the literary and political movements that surrounded Achebe as he was writing his novel. Amy Sickels surveys the major trends in criticism of *Things Fall Apart*. Thomas Jay Lynn discusses Achebe's masterful use of language, and Matthew J. Bolton compares *Things Fall Apart* to major literary works within the Western cannon, such as the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and the works of Yeats, James Joyce, and T. S.
- Okonkwo's character which shows his injustices to his children and wives reevaluates the significance of not only the pain of these women and children, but also their importance as individuals within their community. But one of Achebe's great achievements is his ability to keep alive our sympathy for Okonkwo despite the moral revulsion from some of his violent, inhuman acts. Even though Okonkwo shows a bad moral by doing many violence, but the way he struggle to achieve his success and be different from his father gives the readers a message about the importance of hard work and not being lazy. Opposite of Okonkwo, Nwoye (Okonkwo oldest son) precisely similar to his grandfather Unoka. he's being more callous, shows the feminine side and doesn't like violence.

The volume continues with a selection of classic and contemporary criticism of the novel. Margaret Laurence and M. Keith Booker offer overviews of the novel, and David Cook describes the novel's portrayal of colonialization's effects on the Igbo. David Hoegberg and Carey Snyder attend to cultural violence in both the novel and readers' responses to it, and B. Eugene McCarthy and Richard Begam discuss Achebe's narrative strategies. Biodun Jeyifo and Ada Uzoamaka Azodo address how gender is depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, and Patrick C. Nnoromele and Alan R Friesen consider whether Achebe's protagonist, Okonkwo, can be cast as a tragic hero.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- For readers wishing to study the novel in even greater detail, a chronology of Achebe's life, a list of his major works, and a bibliography of helpful resources round out the volume.
- In this novel, Ekwefi is the relict of woman condition in that era where women are viewed mainly as child bearers and help mates for their husbands. Woman doesn't have right to show their opinion. Besides that, Ekwefi represent the figure of women as a good mother for their children.
- As the conclusion, overall this story convey the message to the reader that it is important to be ambitious but when we couldn't control our ambition, it will shatter ourselves. It is important to be firm and struck but it must be balance with our conscience. We also should not too fanatical because everything needs a changing.
- Besides that, the relation between character is this story tell the reader that male and female roles are societal constructs, and thus, male and female should behave accordance to their nature. Women are taught to mother, while men are conditioned to dominate and control. Hence, we know that men may also read as women, if they are willing to rethink their positions, as well as women's positions within patriarchal constructs. For a woman to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, and so does man.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

Analysis of the Text

- The narrative structure of *Things Fall Apart* follows a cyclical pattern that chronicles Okonkwo's youth in Umuofia, his seven-year exile in Mbanta, and his eventual return home. Each of the novel's three parts covers one of these periods of Okonkwo's life. The novel's three parts also map onto a gendered narrative structure that follows Okonkwo from fatherland to motherland back to fatherland. This gendered narrative structure functions in counterpoint with Okonkwo's ongoing obsession with his own masculinity. Despite every attempt to gain status and become an exemplar of traditional Igbo masculinity, Okonkwo suffers from a feeling of relentless emasculation. Okonkwo's struggle to achieve recognition repeatedly draws him into conflict with his community, eventually leading both to his own downfall and to that of Umuofia and the nine villages.
- Part One of *Things Fall Apart* emphasizes Okonkwo's coming-of-age and his attempts to distance himself from the disreputable legacy of his father, Unoka. Okonkwo's tireless efforts and singular drive, along with his local fame as a wrestling champion, go a long way in securing him a place among the titled men of Umuofia. Yet Okonkwo's zeal frequently leads him astray, as when he executes Ikemefuna, the young boy who became his surrogate son after being surrendered to Umuofia by another village to settle a violent dispute. When the clan elders decide it is time for Ikemefuna's execution, an elder named Ogbuefi Ezeudu warns Okonkwo that he should "not bear a hand in [Ikemefuna's] death." Despite this warning, a moment of panic ultimately drives Okonkwo to bring his machete down on his surrogate son: "He was afraid of being weak." At other points in Part One, Okonkwo shows himself quick to anger with his wives and short in patience with his children. His obsession with upward mobility and traditional masculinity tends to alienate others, leaving him in a precarious social position.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- In addition to narrating Okonkwo's struggle to build a distinguished reputation, Part One also provides a broad view of the precolonial Igbo cultural world. Achebe showcases numerous Igbo cultural values, religious beliefs, and ritual practices to provide the reader with a sense of the Igbo world. By the end of Part One, however, both Okonkwo's life and the life of his community teeter on the brink of disaster. The first blow comes with the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village, and the same man who warned Okonkwo against killing Ikemefuna. The second blow comes when, during Ezeudu's nighttime burial, Okonkwo's gun misfires and kills Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. The ominous manslaughter of Ezeudu's son forces the remaining village elders to burn Okonkwo's huts, kill his livestock, and send him and his family into exile for seven years.
- Exiled for committing a "feminine" (i.e., accidental) crime, Okonkwo retreats from his fatherland to the land of his mother's kin, a retreat that Okonkwo finds deeply emasculating. This personal sense of emasculation parallels larger cultural and historical changes, as white Christian missionaries begin to infiltrate the lower Niger region, including both Umuofia and Okonkwo's site of exile, Mbanta. The personal and historical senses of emasculation come to a head when an old friend from Umuofia visits Okonkwo in Mbanta to inform him that his eldest son, Nwoye, has abandoned traditional Igbo beliefs and joined the Christian faith. Realizing that this event constitutes a major rupture in his patrilineal line, Okonkwo disowns Nwoye.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

To Conclude

Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* Critical Appreciation : Introduction

- The novel *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) (1958) is written by the late Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) who was a Nigerian author. The setting of the novel is in the outskirts of Nigeria in a small fictional village, Umuofia just before the arrival of white missionaries into their land. Due to the unexpected arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia, the villagers do not know how to react to the sudden cultural changes that the missionaries threaten to change with their new political structure and institutions. Hence, this essay aims at analysing the effects of European colonisation on Igbo culture.
- Towards the end of the nineteenth century most European states migrated to Africa and other parts of the world where they established colonies. Nigeria was amongst other African nations that received visitors who were on a colonising mission; introducing their religion and culture that is later imposed on Igbo. The culture of the people of Umuofia (Igbo culture) is immensely threatened by this change.
- Achebe's primary purpose of writing the novel is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* provides readers with an insight of Igbo society right before the white missionaries' invasion on their land. The invasion of the colonising force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society; from religion, traditional gender roles and relations, family structure to trade.

School of Liberal Education

Course Code : ENG2003 Course Name: Post Colonial & New Writings

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- Consequently, Achebe blames the white missionaries' colonial rule and/or invasion for the post-colonial oppressed Igbo culture; this oppression can be seen in terms of the oppressed social coherence between the individual and their society. Furthermore, Achebe educates readers extensively about Igbo society's myths and proverbs.
- Before Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, all the novels that had been written about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans. Mostly, the European writings described Africans as uncivilised and uneducated persons. The Europeans, seeing that they thought of themselves as more advanced than Africans, were determined to help Africans shift from the old era into the modern era of civilisation and education.
- Heart of Darkness, for instance, by Joseph Conrad was one of the most read novels around the time of its publication in 1899. Conrad described Africa as a "wild, 'dark', and uncivilised continent" (Sickels 1). Following Conrad's novel in 1952 was Mister Johnson, a novel by Joyce Cary. Like Heart of Darkness, Mister Johnson was also quite a popular read; its reviews suggest it was a more popular read than Heart of Darkness. According to Sickels, Mister Johnson, describes the novel's protagonist Mr Johnson generally as a "childish, semieducated African who reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africa" .
- Based on the descriptions of Africa and its people by both Conrad and Cary, it comes as no surprise that Achebe and other African writers began to emerge and tell their story of Africa and its people. Not only were Conrad and Cary's novels a misrepresentation of Africa, they were also humiliating to its people. It is through the insights of Things Fall Apart that the world became more appreciative of Africa and its people and at the same time the truth surrounding the stereotypical ideas that once existed about Africa began to appear in a much clearer light.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* to encourage his fellow countrymen to take advantage of the educational system that the missionaries introduced to them so as to better their lives. He is determined to take the modern African Literature genre to greater heights as well as to prove to the Europeans the value of the African culture. The novel was published during a period when a lot of writers emerged from Nigeria; among them are Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri. These writers all play an influential role in modern African Literature, both in their countries, and internationally. However, Achebe was the most successful writer of the lot because he “has been critical of the role of Christianity in Africa, his criticism has been regarded generally as moderate and his creative work has won almost universal praise for its objectivity and detachment”. In fact, he is “one of the writers of his time with fluency in the English language”. Nonetheless, this does not imply that Soyinka and Okri were not successful in their writing careers.
- In the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the history of Igbo; he does so by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made them different from Western cultures. For example, their beliefs in the power of ancestral gods, the sacrifice of young boys, the killing of twins and the oppression of women to name a few. In the novel, the reader is also made aware of the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia as well as the reactions of Igbo to their arrival. Although the arrival of the missionaries had some benefits to Igbo, there were also a number of challenges that faced the future of Igbo.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

Exposition on the Background of the Novel

- *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most influential novels of its time, both on a local and global scale. In order to fully understand the novel and its contents, it is important to look into the history of the novel that led to its publication. When Nigeria became a colony of Britain in 1906, the country became exposed to the British political structure and its various institutions. Achebe was born in 1930 almost a quarter of a century after the British assumed direct control of Nigeria. Although Achebe's parents at that time had been converted to Christianity, his grandparents were still firm believers in their traditional culture. It is under these circumstances that Achebe then came to know of both the British culture as well as Nigerian culture. Since neither of them understood the other's culture and neither of them was willing to abandon their own beliefs to follow the beliefs of the other, it can be assumed that there was a lot of tension. Aware of this, Achebe said, - "in an interview that the conflict that existed between these two cultures created sparks in his imagination". This resulted in the birth of his novel *Things Fall Apart*.
- Achebe's main concern in two of his publications namely *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of God*, seems to be the introduction of a new religion as well as its destructiveness in society. In the novel *Things Fall Apart* the people of Umuofia are separated into two groups immediately following the arrival of the white missionaries in their land. The first group of people are Igbo followers and the second group of people are followers of the white missionaries. Converts to Christianity choose to abandon their own religion, traditional ways of life and fellow people to follow the white man and his ways.
- *Things Fall Apart* is all about the "collapse, breaking into pieces, chaos, and confusion" of traditional Igbo culture that suffers at the hand of the white man's arrival in Umuofia along with his religion. The views about life that the white men have are totally different from the views that the Igbo have.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

- The difference between Achebe's novel and other colonial novels is that his novel thoroughly examines Igbo society as he portrays them in a manner in which shows all aspects of Igbo culture and not only the desirable aspect of their culture. He also predicts of the future of Igbo and where they are headed if the white missionaries are to be successful in taking control of Umuofia.
- With the use of the English language, Achebe is successful in fully detailing the life of Okonkwo who at the beginning of the novel is a very famous young man in all the nine villages of Umuofia. However, as the novel develops and white missionaries begin arriving in Umuofia along with their government and institutions, Okonkwo who tries to protest the change is in the end buried without respect or dignity and his fame is soon forgotten because of the greatest sin in Igbo religion that he commits by taking away his own life.
- One of the main reasons that Things Fall Apart was successful is because of its detailed descriptiveness of Igbo culture as seen from the perspective of its author, who had an insider outsider position as a result of being raised in a Christian household, which meant that he was not allowed to participate in traditional Igbo rituals although he was Igbo (Owomoyela 18). Owomoyela further asserts that "Achebe presents a thorough understanding of narrative organisation and style, and a keen observation of and absorption with day-to-day happenings, not through the lenses of the anthropologist, but through the clear insight of one who was involved with and felt at one with his culture while at the same time inculcating western ideas". And it's for these reasons that Achebe is able to fully convince his audience of the ideas in his novel.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-II

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