

# CLASH OF CULTURES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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## ABSTRACT

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) presents Iboland (western Nigeria) in the period between 1850-1900, covering life both before and after the arrival of British colonies and Christian missionaries. In this novel, Achebe offers an almost documentary account of the daily life, customs, ceremonies and beliefs of the Igbo people without evasion or romanticizing. Tired of the misrepresentations of Africa and the Africans in the western canon, Achebe tries to portray western colonialism and Christianity confronting an animist tribal system in Nigeria in its full complexity. His target audience is the Western readers and he wants to show that Igbo culture is also democratic, tolerant, balanced, open to progress and has a functioning belief system and an effective justice system. He is proposing that Africa is not a silent or incomprehensible continent to Europeans, in English and in the novel form which is a European genre by demonstrating the common humanity of these cultures. Commenting on Achebe's presentation of Igbo culture in this study, I will focus on how Achebe complicates and problematizes multicultural representation and validation in his novel.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, colonialism, representation, clash of cultures.

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## CHINUA ACHEBE'NİN *THINGS FALL APART* ADLI ROMANINDA KÜLTÜR ÇATIŞMASI

### ÖZ

Nijeryalı yazar Chinua Achebe 1959 yılında yazdığı Things Fall Apart adlı romanında Batı Nijerya'da yaşayan İboların 1850-1900 yılları arasında, İngiliz kolonilerinin ve Hristiyan misyonerlerinin gelişinden önceki ve sonraki hayatlarını anlatır. Achebe romanında, İboların günlük hayatlarını, geleneklerini, törenlerini ve inançlarını neredeyse bir belgesel tarzında, romantizmden uzak bir şekilde bütün çıplaklığıyla gözler önüne serer. Batı kanonunda Afrika ve Afrikalıların yanlış şekillerde temsi edilmelerine bir tepki olarak Nijerya'daki kabile kültürü ile Batı sömürgeciliğinin karşılaşmasını tüm yönleriyle anlatmaya çalışır. Hedef kitlesi Batılı okuyuculardır ve İbo kültürünün de kendi içinde dengeli, hoşgörülü, demokratik, gelişmeye açık bir sistem olduğunu, ayrıca tutarlı ve işlevsel bir inanç sistemi ile yargı sistemine sahip olduğunu romanın kurgusu içinde anlatır. Afrika'nın sessiz ya da anlaşılmasız bir kıta olmadığını İngilizce olarak ve Avrupalı bir tür olan roman türü ile göstermesi dikkat çekicidir. Bu çalışmada İbo kültürünün temsilini inceleyerek Achebe'nin romanında çokkültürcülük kavramını nasıl sorgulayıp derinleştirdiği üzerinde durulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çokkültürcülük, sömürgecilik, temsil, kültür çatışması.

*“There is no story that is not true. The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (Things Fall Apart 130)*

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959) presents Iboland (western Nigeria) in the period between 1850-1900, covering the incidents both before and after the arrival of the Christian missionaries. In this novel, Achebe offers an almost documentary account of the daily life, customs, ceremonies and beliefs of the Igbo people without evasion or romanticizing. Tired of the misrepresentations of Africa and the Africans in the western canon, Achebe tries to portray western colonialism and Christianity confronting an animist tribal system in Nigeria in its full complexity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes both the positive and the negative aspects of the Igbo people without romanticizing or sentimentalizing them. He also avoids a total condemnation of the White man. Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* as a response to the ideology represented by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. The description of Africa as the Dark Continent, animalistic qualities given to Africans, darkness of souls suggested by the dark skin color were the ideas that Achebe was reacting against. Targeting the Western readers, he wants to demonstrate that Igbo culture is democratic, tolerant, balanced, open to progress and has a functioning belief system and an effective justice system. Commenting on Achebe’s presentation of Igbo culture, this study will focus on how Achebe complicates and problematizes multicultural representation in his novel.

African literature emphasizes the interrelatedness of literature with morality, the didactic quality of literature. As Ojaide mentions “The writer in modern-day Africa has assumed the role of the conscience of the society, reminding readers and society of the high cultural ethos that must be upheld.” (Ojaide, 1992: 44) Achebe believes in the political role of the writer and that art has the power to change things. According to him, the abasement of Africa in the Western imagination was supplied and reinforced by writers like Conrad. In his lecture on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) entitled “An Image of Africa,” Chinua Achebe reminded Western readers that there is another way of looking at Africa and Africans. He calls Conrad “a bloody racist”: obsessed with blackness, denying speech to people whose undeniable likeness to himself he could only find ‘ugly,’ and convinced that the inhabitants of Africa were what he called ‘rudimentary souls’” (Fleming, 1993: 90). According to Achebe, Conrad’s Africa lacks individuals; Africans are presented as a monolithic whole and consequently their voice and their humanity are denied. In an essay on teaching *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe points out that:

one general point...is fundamental and essential to the appreciation of African issues by Americans. Africans are people in the same way that

Americans, Europeans, Asians, and others are people.... Although the action of *Things Fall Apart* takes place in a setting with which most Americans are unfamiliar, the characters are normal people and their events are real human events. The necessity even to say this is part of a burden imposed on us by the customary denigration of Africa in the popular imagination of the West. (Lindfors 1991, 21, quoted in Rhoads 61)

Achebe wants to have his cultural heritage, the oral tradition, rituals, family, social life and religion in the records. According to Diana Akers Rhoads, in her essay "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," "One of Achebe's aims is to present the peculiarities of the Igbo culture, especially the beauties and wisdom of its art and institutions, though...Achebe also presents its weaknesses which require change and which aid in its destruction. A further aim, however, is the presentation of a common humanity which transcends the European and the African, which belongs to both but is peculiar to neither" (Akers Rhoads, 1993: 62). Therefore, Achebe wants to write back to the Western canon, correcting misrepresentations of Africa in western fiction. While presenting his vision of Africa, he complicates and problematizes multicultural representation in the novel. His defense of African culture against western invasions and prejudices is not one sided and without depth. There are many disturbing elements to the traditional Igbo culture and the character of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Achebe does not try to hide them.

The novel was written around the time when Nigeria was gaining its independence from Britain. Simon Gikandi in his essay "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture" comments on the colonial anxieties that the novel generates:

Up until the 1950s, the education of Africans was predicated on their relocation from the darkness associated with the "tribal" to the sweetness and light of colonial institutions. ...*Things Fall Apart* is as anxious about its colonial context as other texts from this period; at the same time, however, it seems to exist in excess of this context; for a novel written within colonialism, it seems confident about its ability to represent its African background as it is of its power to manage the colonial anxieties that generated it in the first place. (Gikandi, 2001:7)

In Achebe's presentation, Igbos are a self-governing people. For big decisions, all Umuofia gathers together under the leadership of the *ndichie* (the elders) and during these meetings everybody can speak his mind. They have developed a fairly democratic system of government where "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father." (11)

Igbos also have developed a well-established and effective justice system. When a member of their clan was killed by another clan, all the nine villages of

Umuofia came together in the market place and decided to follow the normal procedure. “An ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation.” (15) Everything seemed to work out in a harmonious manner as the people of Umuofia work together to settle the disputes among themselves or with other clans.

The young man who was taken as compensation is given to the care of the main character of the novel, Okonkwo who later murders the boy even though he was like a son to him. The killing was sanctioned and demanded by the Oracle, it was supposed to complete the cycle of violence that brought the boy to Umuofia in the first place. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Gene Girard writes that “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a “sacrificeable” victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (Girard, 1977: 4). Yet Okonkwo’s act does not successfully finish the violence. When he causes a second death, albeit accidentally, he accepts the punishment of exile together with his family. In his absence, the clansmen, dressed in “garbs of war” set fire to his house and barns and kill his animals. His life is wiped out so that community may heal and regain order. As Ojaide comments “order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group. For this reason, an individual could be sacrificed to avoid a war, a plague, or any anticipated communal disaster. In other words, the individual can be sacrificed for the well-being of the community.” (Ojaide, 1992: 48).

The clan sacrifices Okonkwo by exiling him to appease the earth goddess, against whom Okonkwo has committed three sins; he has beaten his wife on a day of peace, he’s killed Ikemefuna when he was warned not to, and he has accidentally shot another man. Okonkwo embraces the exile. This procedure ends the violence as Girard suggests in primitive cultures. The clan as an organic unity establishes its moral continuity. Whether the culture is appreciated or not from a western point of view, what they do on a daily basis allows them to function in the world and to make sense of it.

The character of Okonkwo is presented as a complicated individual. “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.” (16) So he beat his wife “heavily” for “no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children he was not really a man.” “His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness” (16). On the other side “perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man” (16). The harsh

conditions in Nigeria required warlike men but they also have systems to calm down the aggressiveness of their people, their own ways of anger management. There is a Week of Peace when the tribesmen cannot demonstrate any aggressive behavior. They can't kill a member of their own clan; even inadvertent death of Ezeudu's son by Okonkwo must be punished.

Achebe offers a complex, self-sufficient, harmonious culture before the invasion of their land. There are no jails; justice is accomplished by the reconciliation of the opposing parties. On the other hand, the colonialists try to impose their laws, their police, and their jail on Africans. "They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law" (160). The result is a group of people who are caught between the conflicting demands of two cultures. Furthermore, the colonialists and the missionaries also have other things to offer: a government, trade, money, schools, salvation of people. The white missionary, Mr. Brown tells them "that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them...From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand" (166).

Achebe's presentation of tribal beliefs against Christianity does not create a hierarchy of one over the other. The two religions are equally developed, equally irrational, equally effective. Achebe gives the example of Nwoye as a convert. Just as Okonkwo rebelled against his father, Okonkwo's son Nwoye was rebelling against his father and all of the values that Okonkwo represents. Nwoye finds what he is looking for in Christianity. To him:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion; something felt in the hymn about brothers who set in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul. The question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (137)

The growing feeling about the new religion was also strengthened by the fact that the local economy was improved with the arrival of the white man so that now "much money flowed to Umuofia."

Within the Igbo culture, another problematic issue is the treatment of women. Although the women are treated harshly and not in any ways considered as equal to

men, in their system the earth goddess balances the male strength. Although masculinity is held in high esteem and femininity is used as an insult, the Igbos have a high place for women in their lives. Apart from taking care of the children and help the economy of the family by working in the fields, they also hold a supreme position. When Okonkwo is exiled to his mother's village, Okonkwo's uncle explains the idea that mother is supreme: "It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you." (124).

Another positive quality of the Igbo culture that Achebe emphasizes is the tolerance of other cultures. As opposed to the missionaries' comments like "We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die," he said. (135) or "Unless you shave off the mark of your heathen belief I will not admit you into the church" (147), "We shall not do you any harm" said the District Commissioner to them later, "if only you agree to cooperate with us" (177-8), we have the Igbo people saying "You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and spirits of his fathers" (175) or "There is no story that is not true. The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others" (130).

Achebe also emphasizes the capacity to realize the shortcomings of the system and change for the better within the culture. In the past, the punishment for breaking the Week of Peace was harder: "a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve" (33). They realized that it was not an appropriate punishment for the crime and changed it.

When Okonkwo is exiled to his mother's village because of his accidental killing of a man, his friend Obierika functions as the conscience of the clan:

Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. (118)

Because there are people like Obierika who are thinking and questioning the customs and the traditions of their clan, progress is possible without the intervention of the white man. As Ojaide points out Achebe is demonstrating that “such practices as the throwing away of twins, the osu caste system, human sacrifice and exiling a person for inadvertent murder were already being questioned from within by Obierika and others. Africa did not need colonists and the Christian religion to change.” (Ojaide, 1992: 46-7)

Okonkwo comes back from exile to find his clan changed, their traditions broken, his community fractured. He wants to fight and drive away the white man but Obierika analyzes the situation more soundly: “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 things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (162) When did things actually start to fall apart? Although Achebe seems ambiguous about the “falling apart” suggesting that it began before the white missionaries appeared in Umuofia, clearly there is more falling apart caused by their arrival. The clan that was a united and harmonious group is now divided religiously and economically.

Okonkwo is a fighter and he wants to fight for his clan. When he thinks that his clan, his culture and his beliefs were insulted repeatedly and he realizes that the clan will not go to war because of this, he kills the white messenger. After that he goes to kill himself. By taking his own life he offends the Earth and cannot be buried by his clansmen. The District Commissioner orders his men to bury him. Obierika says: “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,” (191). At the end of the novel, the district commissioner writes a report titled *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* and Okonkwo's suicide only gets a paragraph in his study.

Nnoromele says “Achebe saw his role as that of a neutral narrator. Thus, he presented, in a non-committal fashion, the tensions and conflicts between traditional values and alien culture” (Nnoromele, 2000: 155). Yet we can also see that Achebe wants to demonstrate the positive qualities of the Igbo culture in relation to a Western idea of progress and democracy. His target audience is the Western readers and he wants to show that Igbo culture is also democratic, tolerant, balanced, open to progress and has a functioning belief system and an effective justice system. He is presenting Africa in a way that it makes sense to Western readers. He is proposing that Africa is not a silent or incomprehensible continent to Europeans, in English and



in the novel form which is a European genre by demonstrating the common humanity of these cultures.

Bruce Fleming comments on the equivalences that Achebe establishes between what Africans do and what the Europeans do:

Now, it may seem the very basis of enlightened common sense to take for granted equivalences like this: of course all people, we might say, cook, and die, and exercise their bodies. But the point is precisely that this is the perception of an equivalence that must be created on the page by language. Earlier, less “enlightened” writers did not see the equivalence as primary, and so did not use these words: instead, for them, Africans (let us say) rolled around on the ground instead of wrestling, slit each other’s throats over trifles instead of going to war—and, rather than preparing food, cooked up a revolting mess of leaves and roots. Yet perhaps we may get a sense of the choice involved in such formulations by asking ourselves whether we would choose to express the Ibo practice of throwing away twins as religion, or merely inhumanity. Or whether we are willing to refer to the so-called female circumcision (that is clitoridectomy) still prevalent in both Black and White Africa as an initiation rite, or whether it should instead be described as sexist barbarism.” (Fleming, 1992: 95)

Advocates of multiculturalism generally emphasize the appreciation of difference among cultures, offering representation and validation to groups and cultures that are underrepresented, that don’t typically have a voice. Our focus is to recognize and appreciate the difference among the cultures. Yet when it is presented as universal human rights against the multicultural respect for other’s culture or cultural relativism against human rights, there remain too many questions that we cannot answer here.

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