

## The Paradox of Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart, a fictional work by Chinua Achebe, is a paradoxical tale of cultural familiarities and un-familiarities to the reader. For the first 125 of the book, the reader is thrown into a world that they are completely lost in, being introduced to the culture as they read. They are forced to absorb the minute details of the Igbo culture and become familiar with their ritualistic ways. From the second part forward, the reader is introduced to a culture they are familiar with, that of the white people that invade village. At the same, Achebe has cleverly written the book in such a way that the reader is forced to take in the culture collision from the perspective of the Umuofia while understanding the difficulties and strange ways of the white man.

The Umuofia, the Igbo tribe that held the majority of the attention in Things Fall Apart, were a highly ritualistic and superstitious people. The spirits of the ancestors indirectly ruled the village. Nine clan members represented these spirits to decide what the village would do in certain situations. The Umuofia, being highly superstitious, constantly did their best to the ancestral spirits, the Oracle, and the earth goddess.

Though they were a culture that followed the demands and prophecies of their Oracle, they showed little resistance to change when the white man finally arrived. They did show a bit of initial resistance, believing that the spirits would take care of the white people before long, but after the spirits failed to exterminate the white people, the Umuofia agreed to accept them. The majority of the Umuofia, that is, except for Okonkwo.

Okonkwo, the protagonist of Things Fall Apart, was a character with rather predictable

personality traits once introduced to them. An attribute that won him fame and respect among the Umuofia, Okonkwo's tragic character fell under severe conflict once the white people arrived, and as the cultures collided, Okonkwo's life was what seemed to fall apart the most.

Okonkwo, who despised his own child, Nwoye, for most of the book, also showed great pride in what Nwoye could have become through his adopted son, Ikemefuna. Much like any man with a poor paternal relationship, Okonkwo tried his best to be everything his father, an extremely lazy man who was constantly in great debt, was not. He hated Nwoye because he saw too much of his own father in him. After he heard his son grumble about doing "manly" work for one of Okonkwo's wives, Okonkwo gained pride in his son, though he showed it only inwardly.

He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man (52-53).

Okonkwo's pride and mean spirited nature were also made evident after one of his wives killed one of his banana trees. The banana tree wasn't really dead; just a few leaves had been cut. He beat her severely before he left to go hunting. Wives in the culture were not allowed to express their own opinions, but his second wife still felt the need to rebuke Okonkwo under her breath for his actions. Okonkwo's anger was never truly satisfied, and he had a very quick temper.

His anger thus satisfied, Okonkwo decided to go out hunting [...] He was not a hunter. In fact he had not killed a rat with a gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger (38-39).

While the protagonist clearly had a sentimental side, he did everything possible to make it appear nonexistent. His daughter, Enzinma, became ill, and though he felt bad for her, he never let it show. When he murdered Ikemefuna, he regretted the loss, and he was mad at himself for feeling hurt about what needed to be done. Due largely in part to his complicated and spontaneously outraged character, Okonkwo was eventually exiled from the village of Umuofia.

The Umuofia had a much higher tolerance for accepting destiny than Okonkwo did. When the white man came to the village and the spirits failed to kill them off, the Umuofia accepted them and allowed them to stay in the village. Okonkwo couldn't stand this, and even ended up killing at least one of the white men to show his outrage at his own people.

Okonkwo's character could be familiar to most people, though he lived in a foreign land. His personality could be matched with someone in the reader's circle of influence. What are unfamiliar are the reactions of the people in the village to Okonkwo's actions. His actions are tolerated for so long and even looked up to that the reader finally begins to get used to them and is even a bit shocked when Okonkwo is finally exiled from the village.

Simply put, the way the Umuofia live is completely unfamiliar to most readers. It is a culture that we aren't used to, and Achebe does his best to make it that way. In the first part, he wants the reader to be completely lost so they are forced to take in everything that he says about the way they live and why. We live in a culture that isn't as superstitious or spirit-driven as the Umuofia, yet Achebe details it so well that by the time the white man finally arrives in second part that we are able to understand what a severe collision of cultures it is.

Things Fall Apart provides a descriptive fictional world in which the reader can get a full understanding of both the unfamiliar world of the Igbo people as well as continuing to

understand the familiar world of the white people. Initially unfamiliar, the reader becomes accustomed to the Umuofia ways so the reader is able to understand the significance of the culture clash as well as the tragedy that is Okonkwo's life.

## Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart : A Novel. New York: Broadway Books, 1994.