

Things Fall Apart: The Title and Themes

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Abstract:

A stanza of Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" forms the epigraph Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart". Achebe lifts a phrase from the same piece to entitle his novel. In this work Yeats records the breakdown of the old order, the Christian civilization, and its displacement by a new order to be dominated by 'a beast'. Likewise, Achebe mourns the falling apart of the Ibo society and the disappearance of its culture as a consequence of the advent of European colonialism. But, unlike Yeats, the African writer focuses more on the old order at the moment of its collapse.

Keywords: Civilization, culture, society, colonialism

Introduction:

Achebe, in his article "The Novelist as a Teacher", discusses the relationship between the African writer and his society. To Achebe, the worst sin of his people is the acceptance of their racial inferiority. He wanted to tell that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather and "that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry." He also liked to teach them that their past was not "one long night of savagery" from which the Europeans delivered them; Achebe wrote the work "Things Fall Apart" with the aim of educating his fellow-Africans about these truths.

Title and themes:

This novel was set in the 1890s when European colonialism was taking roots in Africa. The Ibos (the Britishers called them Igbos) had their institution of family, system of governance, their gods, beliefs and customs and practices. And they had their own value systems. There was polygamy in marriage and bride -prices were paid to women. The extended family lived in a compound whose centre was the man's 'obi'. Elders were respected and ancestors worshipped. The staple food- Yam- was sacred to them. They had their wrestling matches on their 'ilos'(village grounds). The guests were treated with kola nuts and palm-wine. Their family ties were strong and killing of a fellow-clansman was

abominable. The egwugwu, the masked elders representing the spirits of ancestors, sat in judgement over disputes and settled them. They never had rulers. They observed their ‘weeks of peace’ and celebrated the New Yam Festivals marking harvests. They were fiercely loyal to their clans and defended them in inter-tribals wars. They had their stock of proverbs and adages. In short, Achebe presents a vibrant community.

But this collapsed on the entry of whites. It requires two kinds of contradictions, internal and external, for anything to change. The Ibo community had its own dissenters. The writer brings out the dissension in the society through Okonkwo’s friend, Obierika. He disapproved of Okonkwo having a hand in the killing the hostage, Ikemefuna. Obierika did so because the boy called Okonkwo father. The birth of twins was considered as an ill-omen and they were abandoned in the forest moments after their birth. Obierika rose the question what crime those infants had committed. And when Okonkwo was forced to go into exile for his accidental killing of his fellow-villager, this man was questioning the social custom and law. Achebe does not fail to mention that there was untouchability in his society. The ‘osu’, the forbidden castes, was denied the rights that the freeborn enjoyed. Hence they became the early converts as Christianity promised them equality.

Conclusion:

Europe enslaved Africa by brutal force. At the same time its education and religion played no less a role in this regard. As Obierika says, “He (the Whiteman) has put a knife on things that held together and we have fallen apart.” He likens the white man’s religion to a knife. Achebe faithfully records these developments in this work. Hence it can be read as a social document.

Though he was Christian by birth, Achebe substituted an African name for his Christian first name. Still he was not blind to the weaknesses of his native culture and civilization. Thus he realistically portrays the disintegration of his society. The title proves to be apt.

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