

A Study of Existential Crisis in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of existential crisis as depicted in Chinua Achebe's seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Nigeria comprises three main ethnic groups: the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* highlights the Igbo society. With the arrival of the European colonizers and their rules, there was a clash between tradition and modernity. Okonkwo, the protagonist, and his community experienced many hurdles while searching for their identity. The study analyzes a colonized community's struggle to cling to an established existence and the imposed new order. This novel is considered a classic of African literature and explores the themes of identity crisis, colonialism, and cultural collision.

Keywords: Colonialism, Identity Crisis, Cultural Collision, Chinua Achebe

INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the existential crisis in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. The novel was published in 1958. It tells the story of Okonkwo and his downfall due to colonization. He is a proud and respected warrior in the Igbo village of Umuofia in Nigeria. He is famous for his physical strength, bravery, and strict commitment to the traditions of his people. Achebe writes, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Achebe, 1958, p. 3). He is afraid of being seen as weak or failing, especially because his father, Unoka, was poor, gentle, and unsuccessful. This fear pushed him to build his life around power, respect, and hard work. However, when British colonizers and Christian missionaries arrived in his land, they brought new laws, beliefs, and ways of life that challenged everything Okonkwo believed in and valued. Literary critic Simon Gikandi points out that Achebe's novel shows "the clash between tradition and modernity, a collision that ruptures identity and community" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 45). *Things Fall Apart* tells a deeper story of Okonkwo's existential crisis. An existential crisis is when a person loses their sense of meaning, purpose, or identity and begins to question the world around them. His life is built on being strong, respected, and connected to his culture, but when these foundations collapsed, he felt lost and defeated. His tragic decision to end his own life at the end of the novel, which goes against Igbo customs, shows just how deeply he felt broken inside. This paper points out that Okonkwo's crisis is not only a personal tragedy but also a sign of a much larger cultural and spiritual breakdown caused by colonialism.

1. Igbo Culture and Okonkwo's Identity

Masculinity, Reputation, and the Fear of Weakness

From the novel's beginning, we can see that Okonkwo's main motivation is to be the exact opposite of his father, Unoka, who was gentle, poor, and considered weak by others in the village. Unoka's failures haunted him, and he is terrified of becoming like his father. To prove his strength and worth, Okonkwo works harder than anyone else. He became a powerful wrestler, grew huge yam farms, and won important titles that gave him status and respect in Umuofia. In Igbo society, these things show a man's power and honour. For him, being strong and tough is not just about how others see him; it is the center of his identity. He believed that showing feelings or weakness is shameful and dangerous. In his mind, if he cannot be a "real man," he is a failure as a human being. Critic Bernth Lindfors argues that, Okonkwo's idea of being a "real man" is something forced both by society and by his fear of appearing weak (Lindfors, 1977). This shows that Okonkwo's identity is fragile and tied to external approval, which makes him unable to handle change. This fear controls almost all his actions throughout the story.

Role of Chi and Destiny

Okonkwo's identity is not only shaped by physical strength or cultural expectations but also by a deeply spiritual belief in the chi. In Igbo tradition, each person has a personal spirit or guardian called a chi, which influences their fate or destiny. He believed that if he were strong, disciplined, and worked hard, his chi would support and help him succeed. "When a man says yes, his chi says yes also" (Achebe, 1958, p. 20). According to him, his efforts and willpower align with his spiritual destiny. But after tragic events happened, like when he killed Ikemefuna, the boy who called him "father," or when he was exiled from his village for killing a clansman, Ezeulu's sixteen-year-old son, he began to feel that his chi was against him. He felt abandoned by his chi and that the universe was rejecting him. For him, this spiritual failure was worse than bad luck; it was like a sign that he was cursed or doomed, deepening his sense of crisis. Scholar Peter O. Nwankwo writes that the chi represents a person's spiritual fate and cultural identity, so losing faith in it is losing hope itself (Nwankwo, 2000).

Community and Tradition

The Igbo community gives its people a clear structure for life. Achebe writes, "The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another" (Achebe, 1958, p. 31), showing the community's resilience. Their customs include religious rituals, festivals, decisions made by village elders, the egwugwu (masked ancestral spirits), and laws passed down through generations. These traditions tell people what is right and wrong and give everyone a role and sense of purpose. For Okonkwo, his sense of honor, success, and morality comes directly from these shared traditions. Life in Umuofia is well-ordered and meaningful because of these customs. People feel connected to their ancestors and each other through these shared beliefs. But when the British colonizers arrived with their new laws, Christian religion, and different customs, they started breaking down the Igbo way of life. The strong structure that once gave Okonkwo and his people meaning began to fall apart, and with it, his identity started to fall apart. For Okonkwo, his identity is tightly tied to Igbo culture, this loss is a loss of meaning and stability. Achebe stated that colonialism caused a "crisis in the soul" for Nigerians, making people lose their connection to their culture (Achebe, 1988).

2. Cultural Disruption and Displacement

Missionaries and the Disruption of Order

The arrival of Christian missionaries created confusion and conflict within the Igbo community. They

preached a religion that challenged the Igbo beliefs about ancestors, spirits, and the chi. For many Igbo people, especially those who felt excluded or oppressed by traditional Igbo society, Christianity offered a new hope and a more equal community. Eze explains that Christianity “offered a new identity but also caused many to reject their traditional culture” (Eze, 1997, p. 52). Some villagers, including Okonkwo’s son Nwoye, converted to Christianity. Achebe writes, “Nwoye’s face was tear-stained. He had heard that he would not be allowed to see his father again” (Achebe, 1958, p. 115). This weakened the old spiritual order and caused tension between those who wanted to keep their traditions and those who embraced the new religion. The spiritual foundation that once gave life meaning began to fall apart and broke the unity of the community.

Colonial Administration and Structural Change

Alongside the missionaries, British colonial officials brought a new political system and took over local authority. They imposed foreign laws, administrators, and replaced the Igbo leaders and their traditional justice system. This political takeover leaves the people without their old system of justice and identity. The colonial officials publicly humiliated village leaders by shaving their heads and whipping them, showing that the old power structures had been broken. This caused shame and confusion among the Igbo people. When the clan’s traditional authority and legal system disappeared, the community lost the structure that gave them control over their lives. This change strips the people of their identity and the cultural rules that once gave them purpose. Achebe describes colonial officials humiliating Igbo leaders: “They put a man on trial who did not know the customs of his own clan” (Achebe, 1958, p. 160). Critic Abiola Irele writes that colonial rule was meant to weaken traditional authority and cultural order (Irele, 1986).

Fragmentation of the Community’s Unity

Achebe used the symbol of the “iron-horse” (a bicycle) to represent the disruptive influence of colonizers on Igbo society. “The bicycle came like the iron horse to the village” (Achebe, 1958, p. 45). When the village of Abame was destroyed as a result of contact with the colonizers, it showed how outside forces brought destruction and fulfilled a dark prophecy. As some villagers accepted Christianity and others resisted, the unity of the community broke apart. The title *Things Fall Apart* references Yeats’s poem: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (Yeats, 1919). It describes chaos and the loss of order, just like what happens to Umuofia and to Okonkwo’s life. When Okonkwo returned from exile, he found his son Nwoye had converted to Christianity and that many traditions no longer held power. The loss of culture outside reflects the loss of stability and meaning inside Okonkwo himself. Critic Simon Gikandi observes that this shows how both the society and people like Okonkwo begin to break inside (Gikandi, 1991).

3. Okonkwo’s Inner Collapse: Alienation, Loneliness, Despair

Alienation from Son and Community

Okonkwo was deeply hurt by his son Nwoye’s decision to join Christianity. He felt that his son had rejected everything he believed in and had become weak and soft, which he despised. This emotional rejection broke the strong bond between father and son. Further, it isolated Okonkwo from the family’s support he once depended on. Without his son’s loyalty and the community’s respect, he felt cut off from the things that once gave his life meaning. Achebe writes, “He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (Achebe, 1958, p. 130). Critic Eustace Palmer notes that Okonkwo’s alienation from his son symbolizes the breaking of cultural ties across generations (Palmer, 1979).

Loss of the Community's Support

When Okonkwo returned from exile and tried to resist the colonial changes, his community no longer supported his resistance. Many were afraid of the colonizers, or had accepted the new rules and regulations imposed by the colonizers. He realized that he no longer had the backing of his people and that he was alone in his struggle. This moment highlights his deep loneliness and despair that he is no longer the leader or hero he once was, but a man abandoned by his community. Achebe shows his despair: "He mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (Achebe, 1958, p. 160). Achebe himself said Okonkwo is "a man stranded by his own people and history" (Achebe, 1988).

Psychological Impact

Okonkwo's emotional pain can be seen in his violent actions and silence. He felt abandoned by his chi and overwhelmed by the collapse of his traditions. He no longer saw any way to rebuild his life because the world he believed in had vanished. He experienced a deep existential crisis, feeling hopeless, confused, and completely alone. This internal pain is the core of his tragedy and shows the devastating effects of losing one's spiritual and cultural foundation. Achebe describes a tragic accident: "Okonkwo's gun had exploded accidentally and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart" (Achebe, 1958, p. 60). Scholar Barbara Harlow interprets this as the destruction of Okonkwo's entire system of meaning (Harlow, 1994).

Internal versus External Crisis

Although the colonial invasion caused many external problems for Okonkwo, his real struggle was inside himself. He was unable to change who he was. Once he was a proud, short-tempered, and unwilling to show weakness. His refusal to change and adapt to the new rules trapped him in a painful crisis. The outside world changed around him, but he remained stuck in the old ways, which increased his suffering and eventually led to his downfall. Achebe writes, "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape" (Achebe, 1958, p. 183). Critic Obi Ekwueme notes Okonkwo's tragedy is his "inability to change himself or his view in a new world" (Ekwueme, 1987).

4. Suicide as Symbolic Resolution of Existential Crisis

Defiance and Despair

Okonkwo took his life at the end of the novel. His suicide shocked the Igbo people because it broke an important Igbo cultural rule. Suicide is forbidden and considered dishonourable in Igbo culture. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life" (Achebe, 1958, p. 184). But for him, taking his own life was the only way to preserve his honor when he could no longer live in a world that rejects his values. His friend Obierika says, "You forced him to kill himself... now he will be buried like a dog," showing how tragic and shameful this act is in Igbo culture. Okonkwo's suicide was both a desperate act of defiance against change and a sign of his complete despair. Critic Abiola Irele writes that this act "symbolizes ultimate despair and alienation from both tradition and colonial society" (Irele, 1986).

Existential Meaning of Suicide

In existential philosophy, suicide can sometimes be seen as a person's way of escaping a life that feels utterly meaningless. Okonkwo's choice to kill himself reflects the deep sadness and hopelessness he feels. The world he trusted, built on strength, tradition, and spiritual meaning had disappeared, leaving no place for him to live with dignity. Kwame Anthony Appiah states, "Okonkwo's suicide is an act of defiance against a world that refuses to recognize his identity" (Appiah, 1992, p. 88).

Collective Impacts: Umuofia's Collapse

Okonkwo's death reflects the end of traditional Umuofia. The colonial District Commissioner dismissed

Okonkwo as a “small part” of history to be used in a colonial book (Achebe, 1958, p. 186). Critics argue this erases African identity and pain (Gikandi, 1991). Okonkwo’s death symbolizes the cultural death of his people. His death is not only personal; it also represents the collapse of his entire community, Umuofia, because the village was torn apart by new ideas and lost its unity. His suicide symbolizes the death of the old ways and the spiritual heart of the village.

Colonizer’s Perspective

The District Commissioner, a colonial official, treated Okonkwo’s story as a small example to include in his book about “Pacification of the Primitive Tribes.” This showed how colonizers erase the personal pain, struggles, and identity of people like Okonkwo, reducing them to mere footnotes in their history. His rich inner life and cultural resistance are ignored and devalued.

5. Broader Significance and Interpretations

Achebe’s Crisis

Achebe described colonialism as causing a “crisis in the soul” for the Nigerian people, a deep loss of self-respect, cultural connection, and confidence. Many Nigerians felt confused, less valuable, and disconnected from their heritage because of foreign domination. *Things Fall Apart*, through Okonkwo’s story, vividly shows the existential crisis, his inner life felt torn apart just as his society’s identity was destroyed by colonialism. Critic Chinua O. Eze explains, “The novel shows the deep psychological wounds colonialism inflicted on African societies” (Eze, 1997).

Existential Crisis as Cultural Critique

Okonkwo’s crisis is a metaphor for the destruction of culture. Henry Louis Gates Jr. says Achebe “exposes colonialism’s spiritual violence that destroys identity” (Gates, 1987). Through Okonkwo’s tragic fate, Achebe critiques colonialism as more than just political or economic domination. It is also a deep spiritual and cultural harm that causes loneliness, confusion, and identity loss. The novel shows how colonialism damages the human spirit and community ties, leaving people alienated and suffering.

Universal Theme

Although the novel is set in Nigeria, its themes are universal. Ashcroft et al. notes that “addresses the struggle to maintain identity amid global change” (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Although *Things Fall Apart* is about colonial Nigeria, its themes are universal. Many people today face similar struggles, losing old traditions due to modernization or globalization, and feeling confused about who they are. This novel helps us understand the difficult process of adapting to change while trying to keep our identity and meaning.

Obierika and Mr. Brown as Existential Contrast

Obierika and Mr. Brown represent different responses. Not all characters in the novel react like Okonkwo. Obierika, his close friend, thinks deeply about change and supports the village’s survival in new ways. Obierika reflects, “We have put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe, 1958, p. 176). Mr. Brown encouraged dialogue and understanding. Paul B. Rich writes that these characters show “adaptation and hope in changing times” (Rich, 1990). Mr. Brown, the Christian missionary, respects local customs and encourages gentle, respectful dialogue. These characters offer hope that people can find new meaning and identity without completely losing their roots.

Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s downfall is an existential tragedy caused by the destruction of his culture,

identity, and spiritual beliefs. His suicide is the ultimate expression of despair in a world that no longer values his way of life. Achebe writes, “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion... but we were not strong enough to fight him” (Achebe, 1958, p. 176). Examining Okonkwo’s crisis helps us understand not only one man’s pain but the wider suffering of a community and culture facing overwhelming change. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s downfall is more than a personal tragedy or a cultural loss. It is an existential crisis where his sense of self completely breaks down. His identity was built on strength, tradition, and spiritual belief, but colonialism destroyed the world that gave his life meaning. His suicide is the final expression of his despair, a life emptied of hope and purpose.

Seeing the novel through the lens of existential crisis gives us a deeper understanding of Okonkwo’s inner pain and the wider destruction of his culture. His tragedy reflects the spiritual death of Umuofia. Yet Achebe also shows hope through characters who adapt and survive, reminding us that identity can be rebuilt even after great loss.

Things Fall Apart is still important today because it helps us understand issues like identity, feeling lost, and finding meaning during times of big change. Okonkwo’s story shows what can happen when someone loses their sense of purpose. But it also encourages us to think about how we can build new meaning in a world that is always changing.

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