

# A Study on the “Things” in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines the reasons of the fall of the Umuofia tribe and the main character, Okonkwo. There are certain events, both internally and externally, caused things to fall apart. This study divides these “things” into two main subtitles: “Okonkwo’s dreams that fall apart” and “The tribal system that falls apart”. These subtitles include main influences of the changes that occur in the book. The first chapter includes the events such as Ikemefuna’s death, Nwoye’s conversion, Okonkwo’s desire to rule the tribe etc. The second chapter includes the reasons for Okonkwo’s exile, the arrival of Christianity, the death of python, tribe’s not acting as one, etc.*

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Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958. It is regarded as a classic work not only in the African literature but also in the world literature, taught in African literature classes (Samatar 61). That is because this masterpiece of Achebe is seen as the heritage of the next generation, as a record of the history of his culture.

*Things Fall Apart* is a book depicting the coming of European colonizers to West Africa from the point of view of inhabitants of a tribe, the Umuofia.

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As the name of the book suggests it is a story of disintegration of both tribe and an individual man, Okonkwo (Samatar 63). When reading, one can easily understand the emphasis made on Igbo culture in the first half of the book. There are no statements about West. Achebe clearly wants us to feel as if we are one of the members of the tribe. Therefore, we can easily realize the changes that western people make in the next parts of the text. Samatar says:

The steps that make the desecration possible are clearly outlined: the missionaries proceed from proselytizing in chapter sixteen, to building a church on tabooed land in the Evil Forest in chapter seventeen, to co-opting the tabooed bodies of outcasts and shaving their long hair, the mark of their taboo, in chapter eighteen. By chapter twenty the church in Umuofia has gained a certain acceptance. (63)

When disintegration is examined, it is impossible to move beyond without mentioning the concept of modernization. David Harvey describes the process of modernization as a condition leading to an "overwhelming sense of fragmentation, ephemerality, and chaotic change" (11). In the Achebe's novel we see this fragmentation through the religious motives; people haven't only one god.

### **Okonkwo's Dreams that Fall Apart**

The character of Okonkwo in the book is obsessed with the idea of being a "real man". He is always trying to prove his masculine character which is actually the main reason for his own fall. He thinks he has proven his masculinity by beating his wives and son.

From the very beginnings of the book, Achebe allows the reader to read the mind of Okonkwo. He never shows any sign of fear or weakness. Although Okonkwo is described as fearless, powerfull wrestler and meaning so much to village as it stated following lines, the reader sees this character as a total loser by the end of the book.

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. .... Although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. (Achebe 3, 8)

He promises to himself that he will be the opposite of his father whom “people laughed at because he was a loafer and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back” (Achebe 5). In the novel, Okonkwo does many things in order to see in the respect of people, proving that he is a “real man”, and achieving his dream of being the leader of the tribe. He never shows any sign of weakness. However, the things he did actually prepared his downfall.

In the novel, Okonkwo is always beating his wives and son, Nwoye. It is because he fears being thought of being as a weak person. He thinks that his son Nwoye looks like his father and he cannot bear this feeling. This is the main reason why Okonkwo never hesitates to punish or beat Nwoye every time. Even, one day when Nwoye was cutting the yams, Okonkwo came and gave a treatment to Nwoye because the size of the yams. According to Okonkwo, Nwoye was cutting with a wrong size and said: “*if you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw*” (Achebe 32). This masculine character of Okonkwo was the main reason for the conversion of Nwoye. His dreams about Nwoye have fallen apart because of himself. His desire to hide his emotions for his son actually drove a great distance between father and son. Therefore, during Okonkwo’s exile years, Nwoye converted to Christianity. Additionally, Nwoye abandoned most of the traditions and customs of his own tribe.

Another important factor that divides Nwoye and his father Okonkwo was tribal law. Nwoye never understood the taboo on twins and he has always questioned the murder of Ikemefuna who had been like a brother to Nwoye. Samatar listed the reasons of Nwoye’s fall apart:

Nwoye is moved by the preaching of the Christians; he seeks a refuge in the new religion from what terrifies him in his own: *"the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed"* (137). Twins are taboo for his clan and are thrown into the forest as infants to die; Ikemefuna, a boy from another village who lived with Okonkwo for three years and was like a brother to Nwoye, was killed by a group of Umuofia men, Okonkwo among them, as a ritual revenge for the death of a woman from their own clan. Nwoye's refusal or inability to accept such incidents sets him apart from his father, who upholds the law even when it goes against him, paying the fine when he beats his wife during the Week of Peace (32) and going into exile without protest after he accidentally kills a young man of Umuofia (117). In contrast to his father, Nwoye finds Umuofia's laws intolerable. He is one of those marginalized members of Okonkwo's society who, like the *"low-born and the outcast,"* find solace in the new way of thinking represented by the Christian religion. (65)

The case of Ikemefuna is the other example of Okonkwo's fear of weakness. Ikemefuna is a boy from the tribe of Mbaino. His father has killed a girl from Umuofia and he is given to Okonkwo for three years. During this period, Okonkwo was asked to care for the son. In these three years, Ikemefuna got used to the family of Okonkwo and saw them as if they were his real family. However, everybody in the family revealed the same emotions of Ikemefuna except for Okonkwo. It is not surprising that Okonkwo has done this once again for fear of being thought of as a weak man. His has only one emotion, anger. One day Okonkwo learned that tribe decided to kill Ikemefuna. Okokwo was strictly warned not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna, because Ikemefuna was calling him "father". However, he did not do what was said to him and killed Ikemefuna with his machete. Once again being afraid of weakness, he ended the life of Ikemefuna. The inner voice of the Okonkwo clearly shows his affection for Ikemefuna, loving him more than his own son, Nwoye. However, his emotions did not stop him. At this point readers see how his life has been dominated by fear.

Okonkwo breaks many rules throughout the book; he beats his wife in the week of Peace, he beats his son, etc. However, he takes the worst punishment this time and kills a boy from his own tribe. As a result he is exiled for seven years. The reader can guess the arrival of this punishment when Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna because in the book it is strictly demonstrated that if someone disobeys the Oracle, he will be punished for his disobedience.

After the death of Ikemefuna, Ezeudu dies and during his funeral Okonkwo commits another unforgivable fault, accidentally killing Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. This costs Okonkwo dearly. One can conclude that all of these things Okonkwo causes in his life is a result of the fear of weakness that totally controls his life. His dream of being the leader of the tribe is missed because when he returns from exile, nothing was the same. Everything was deeply changed. He was a stranger in his homeland.

After the seven years of exile, Okonkwo and his family return to their homeland. He was regretful that he was not in Umuofia over the last seven years. This time Okonkwo was different. Samatar stated that:

Okonkwo could not do anything about the white men. He was miles away from Umuofia and still had a few years left before he could return. For once, he was unable to make "masculine moves" and take charge. If only he knew to the extent what was really going on in his village. The white men were spreading Christianity all over. They were getting the villagers to break their traditions, escape their culture, and believe their gods were dead. They even demanded that the villagers attend church every seventh day to worship their god. They were destroying the Evil Forest and building houses for themselves. Surprisingly, no one was stopping them. It was as if the villagers did not care that their lives were being taken over and would soon be changed forever. By the time Okonkwo would return, everything would be different. (65)

He knows that he has lost everything, even his dream of being the leader of the tribe. However, there was still a little hope in him. This hope actually symbolizes his total downfall in the end. In other words, if he did not want to

be the leader of the tribe again, how can we consider him a loser in the end?

Okonkwo's greatest fears were failure, being thought of as being weak, and being seen to be just like his father. When he committed suicide at the end of the book, he did the only thing he feared. He became a total loser just like his father. No matter what he did, he could not escape his fate. Therefore, we can see the irony, the tragedy of the Okonkwo. All he wanted to do was to be the leader of the tribe and live happily after. However, his masculine character and the arrival of the white people did not let that happen.

### **The Tribal System that Falls Apart**

It can be said that Okonkwo's exile was a failure for both himself and his tribe. When Okonkwo returned from exile, he believed that if he had not gone to exile, his tribe wouldn't be in this situation. In other words, he felt extreme regret for what he had done. His homeland was now a different place anymore. White men made many changes without native support.

The most important change whites wanted to change on the native people was with "*religion*". In the book *Things Fall Apart*, the gods of the natives were made of stones and wood. They had more than one god, each representing different aspect. Their main god was called Chukwu and the natives thought that he created the sky and the earth. Chi was their personal god, if someone says "yes"; chi is believed to say the same. They were very obedient to their gods. When there is a war situation, if their gods told them not to fight, they would not fight. If someone breaks the rules, they are strictly punished. For example, one day Okonkwo beat his wife during the week of Peace and he was punished. There was no tolerance for those who disobeyed the laws. That is because the people of Umuofia believed that "if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others" (Achebe 87).

Samatar also concentrates on a different aspect that in the partition of the Umuofia tribe, the tribe itself plays a role.

The power of the new religion is firmly established by chapter twentytwo, when one of its followers unmasks and thereby kills an ancestral spirit (171). Umuofia is "thrown into confusion"

(159). The spirit has been unmasked, not by a stranger, but by one of Umuofia's own. This is the moment of disintegration, of which Okonkwo's suicide is merely an effect: "it seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death". (171,172)

Samatar argues that "when *things fall apart* and Umuofia's independence is lost, it is due to cracks in its own structure; unhappy and outcast people whose desire for a different way of life allows Christianity, and with it the colonial project as a whole, to take root" (65). Therefore it can be concluded that the Umuofia tribe actually did not really act as one or speak as one. If we consider the last part of the book in which Okonkwo killed the messenger with his machete, some people asked "why did he do it?" and this situation is revealed in the book with these words:

How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? 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 no longer acts like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (162)

While converting the natives to Christianity, white men also humiliated the gods of the people of Umuofia, telling the natives that their gods are no good and they are not alive. They have totally different gods. For the whites, their god created earth and sky and even the god of the native people. That clearly explains why the whites want the natives to convert to Christianity. Greenberg points out the issue saying:

The white man believes in one God which he believes to have made heaven and earth. Also said his God made the entire world and the Umuofia's gods. He wanted the people of Umuofia to abandon their gods and follow his own religion. The white men belittle the people of Umuofia's gods by saying different things about their gods. The white man says that the people of Umuofia's god are gods of deceit who tell them to kill their

fellow and destroy innocent children. The white man says that their gods are not alive and cannot do them harm and that they are made of piece of wood and stone. Hearing and seeing all these from the white man, the people of Umuofia were not happy with the white man's religion which was a reason for a culture conflict. (9)

There were ones who already had doubts about their religion. Therefore, it was easy to convert them to Christianity. At this point Achebe's sentence from the book clearly shows the situation, "*He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart*" (176). Okonkwo's son, Nwoye was the one of those who converted to Christianity. That was a real disaster for Okonkwo.

The arrival of whites did not bring them happiness, civilization or modernity as the whites suggested. The religion of the natives that endured for centuries was changed by whites. Additionally, it was said that this conversion was for the love of God. However, if the reader read between the lines of the Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, they can surely understand that it is not for the love of God but for love of money and power. Gikandi explained the situation:

By introducing Christianity into the villages, and creating conflict amongst the natives, they were able to gain a foothold into the psyches of the tribe's people. Converted Christians, having been ostracized by the rest of their communities, were forced to rely on the British for support. The presence of natives loyal to the Queen gave the British blanket jurisdiction over the entire village, and the Royal administrative and judicial system could now enforce British law over the Ibo. (45)

Additionally, the famous quote from Desmond Tutu is worthy to mention, "Before the White man came, we had the land and they had the Bible. Now we had the Bible and they had the land." Further evidence of this situation is found the last part of the book. A District Commissioner who explained the death of Okonkwo in one paragraph, decided to title his book the "Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger". Here the



word “pacification” explains their “real” aim which was to colonize. The Commissioner could have used the words such as “conversion” or “salvation”, but he preferred to use “pacification”.

The changes in religion were not enough for the whites. They also altered the economy of the Umuofia tribe. The economy of the people of Umuofia was based on agriculture. If one has lots of barns, that meant they were one of the richest amongst the tribe. People worked really hard to plant yams, working as a family; father, wife, son and daughter. Farming was really important for them. They even celebrate a festival every year giving thanks to this yams. However, here again the natives conflicted with the whites, as in the case of religion, because whites values were very different than the native’s.

Whites did what was appropriate for their interests. They made agriculture worthless because what was important for them was nothing but money. Therefore, whites introduced their own trade and this destroyed the economics value of the Umuofia tribe. “Money” can buy everything now. Everything that natives worked really hard could be bought with “money”. The rich people are poor and the poor are rich. Whites in a way turned the natives upside down. Before the whites came, there was a hierarchy. This hierarchy showed similar features to patriarchal society. In this society, the father was the head of the family, their wives and children respect them. Readers clearly see this alteration in the relationship of Nwoye and Okonkwo. After Nwoye converted to Christianity, he did not want to visit his father. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe says about Nwoye ““he told Mr. Kiaga that he had decided to go to Umuofia, where the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write” (102).

As it is stated, the people of Umuofia tribe strictly obey the laws. However, white people destroyed the beliefs of the tribe and did the kind of things which were prohibited in the tribe. For example white people came and built a church in the Evil Forest. According to the natives, the ones who went there were expected to die within four days. However the natives saw that nothing happened. As a result, natives went through a chaos thinking that white people had incredible power.

Another point of view Samatar reveals is that natives believed that their god will take their revenge, "*a prophecy that fails to materialize*" (67). There are some facts that Okonkwo has been already familiar with. This issue is also revealed in the poem of "The Second Coming" which is located at the beginning of the story. The line of "*The falcon cannot hear the falconer*" is the reference to the generations in the book, Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Samatar points out that:

Okonkwo knows that the "*white man's god*" represents a new order, a dissolution of the intimate relationship between past and present. He also knows that he belongs to the old way, which until now was the eternal way: he and his father's will await worship and sacrifice together, and in vain. When Umuofia's sons abandon its gods, its sacred time is shattered, giving way to a time in which the past is no longer experienced as before and a new, modern reality must take its place. It is in the context of this jarring re-ordering of the world that Okonkwo hangs himself. (67)

The generation gap is one of the most important issues of the book. One can conclude that the "*falcon*" refers to Nwoye, the young generation, and the "*falconer*" to the Okonkwo, old generation. Therefore, this lack of intimacy is one reason for the falling apart not only for son and father, but also for the tribe. Additionally, the masculine character of Okonkwo is another reason of this partition.

At the end Okonkwo has no option and kills himself "*when war is no longer possible*" (Samatar 69). However, there are other characters such as Nwoye and Obierika who survive at the end of the book. Harold Scheub declares that "*we do not, in this novel, witness the death throes of a society*" (98). Another important reason comes to mind when Greenberg's essay Okonkwo and the Storyteller is read:

Since Igbo people did not construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe and the place of man in it, preferring the metaphor of myth and poetry, anyone seeking an insight into their world must seek it along their own way. Some of these ways are folk tales and proverbs. (161)

Okonkwo hangs himself and Commissioners and the people of his tribe find his dead body. This final paragraph clearly shows that the novel *Things Fall Apart* can “most readily be perceived to be confronting colonial discourse, presenting the reader with the Commissioner’s callous and self-satisfied musing” (Ten Kortenaar 32).

*Things Fall Apart* not only reveals the history of African culture, but also provides a general overview of the Igbo society; their customs, traditions, life style, fears, laws etc. We cannot deny the effect of the novel, that is, after approximately 50 years, the book still touches on contemporary issues. Therefore, its importance survived and will survive in the modern times in which the definition of history must be “discovered and defined from within the maelstrom of change” (Harvey 11). Achebe’s novel proves its uniqueness with both its historical and literal value.

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