

## Modernity in Tradition Represented in African Literature: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*

Dr. Julia Devardhi  
&

Dr. Deepika Nelson  
School of Foreign Language Studies  
Haramaya University  
Ethiopia-251

Achebe:

*Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the worlds' cultural harvest and mankind will all be richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings.*

### Introduction

Chinua Achebe's early novels have been popularly received for their representation of an early African nationalist tradition that repudiates imperialist and colonialist ideology. Achebe, born thirty years after the creation of Nigeria and thirty years before it attained political independence, had direct experience of the British colonization of Nigeria and Igboland. He was raised in the village of Ogidi, one of the first centers of Anglican missionary work in Eastern Nigeria, only a few dozen miles away from the Niger River. In 2002 he was awarded German Booksellers Peace Prize for promoting human understanding through literature, and in 2007 he was again awarded the Man Booker International Prize for producing a body of work that has added significantly to world of literature.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was one of the first novels that was internationally acclaimed. The title aptly reflected the spirit of the modernist age. His second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960) was given the title from T. S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*. These two titles used by Achebe were suggestive of the chaos created by colonialism.

Achebe made a conscious attempt to respond to the chaotic scenario caused by colonialism as it resembled the horror and nightmare of history that was being written about by the modernist writers in Europe and America. His novels are meant at once to "write back" to the Western canon, correcting erroneous representations of Africa and Africans, and to restore to his people an awareness of the dignity and humanity of pre colonial Africa—reminding them "what they lost" through colonization (Achebe 1973, 8). Published two years before Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain, *Things Fall Apart* (from now onwards TFA) aims to wrest from the colonial metropole control over the representation of African lives, staking a claim to the right to self-representation. And 'Modernism' was a boon to the African novelist. It provided him with an art that helped to express his view of history.

The definition of modernism according to Bradbury and Macfarlane was as 'the movement toward sophistication and mannerism, towards introspection, technical display and internal self-skepticism.' shows quite correctly that modernism's experimentation does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty as their definition above implies. It also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation and disintegration. The modernist artist is not simply an artist set free in the Joycean sense but the artist under a specific historical strain. For the African novelist, colonialism is the strain that brought him into the international literary modernist scene.

Many African novelists took advantage of the fact that modernism helped them to handle their own 'crisis of culture'. However, very few of them could keep up in their novel writing the technical developments in the novel form in the respective language of their writing, since they were satisfied with the conventional norms of the European novel.

The definition of "tradition" in Achebe's work hinges upon ideological conflict, it comments also on the varying forms of consciousness that arise within discourses of self-definition within Igbo traditional culture. Moreover, it communicates the idea of complex rather than simple relationships between individuals and groups in the world of Achebe's "fictional" Igbo communities.

Representing an African worldview through narratives that speak for themselves meant that Achebe would draw upon Igbo oral traditions to narrate the stories of his communities, while bearing in mind Richard Bauman's exhortations that in utilizing oral traditions to engage the "canons of elite" Western literary "traditions and texts," oral narrative must not be taken merely to be "the reflection of culture" or "the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes" in historical writing: instead, oral narratives must be utilized "contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning".

The tendency of modernist writers to break with all traditions has an attraction for the African novelist who is strategically placed to witness what may be described as the apocalyptic moment of transition into the new. By 1958 when TFA was published, modernism may be said to have passed its point of intensity but for the African novelist, colonialism became that apocalyptic moment that had spurred writers of Europe and America a few decades back. Consequently, for them, modernism is far from an exhausted, apocalyptic moment of transition into the new.

### **Challenging and displacing the narratives of colonialist (Things Fall Apart)**

Things Fall Apart is not a novel without a cultural context. It is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The characters and their actions are better understood when they are examined in that light.

The Igbo clan is a group of African people with a complex, vigorous, and self-sufficient way of life. Prior to the invasion of their land and the eclipse of their culture by foreign powers, they

were undisturbed by the present, and they had no nostalgia for the past. In the novel, Achebe portrayed a people who are now caught between two conflicting cultures. On the one hand, there is the traditional way of life pulling on the Umuofia people and one man's struggle to maintain that cultural integrity against an overwhelming force of the colonial imperialism.

On the other hand, we have the European style which, as presented, seems to represent the future, a new community of the so-called "civilized world." It now appears this African man, Okonkwo, and the entire society of Umuofia must make a choice between the old and the new—if they have the power. The desire to become a member of European-style society has its attraction. For one, it is conveyed to the Umuofia people, including Okonkwo, as a means of enjoying the spoils of twentieth-century civilization. But Okonkwo refused to endorse the appeal. He recognized that accepting the invitation is done at the expense of the things that comprised his identity and defined his values. That is why when some members of the Umuofia community accepted the invitation and took on the "strange faith", things began to fall apart for the Igbo people in Achebe's novel, TFA. The integrated, organic community was irreparably 'fractured'. Their gods were blasphemed and their hero Okonkwo disabled. The whole community was shattered and divided among themselves. So we have what seems like a total imposition of one cultural, social, and political structure upon another.

The hero of the novel found he was plunged into disaster. He had to kill himself. Obierika, one of the characters in the novel, expressed it this way: "That man [Okonkwo] was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself: and now he will be buried like a dog"

Achebe's title and the novel's epigraph from Yeats' poem "The Second Coming"—"things fall apart, the center cannot hold"—acquires new force, inflected with the strained power relations of colonialism. In these moments, the man we had taken to be the novel's central figure is undone, and becomes little more than a small, anonymous part in a very different story.

*Things Fall Apart* has used the usual elements of fiction -- plot structure, point of view and language, tone and voice, setting, characters, and symbols and imagery -- to convey its themes, with unique quality of "Africanness," which makes the novel a hybrid genre in terms of verbal art, cultural elements, and overall contents -- a quality that separates it from the British corpus. Hence the novel can be aptly interpreted as a realization in fiction of the same spirit that expressed itself politically in the struggle for independence by African politicians. The publication of this modern African novel in 1958 gave Nigeria her literary independence. It also inspired other African writers to write in the same fictional mode, just as Kwame Nkrumah won political independence for Ghana in 1957 and inspired other West African political leaders to do so for their countries, including Nnamdi Azikiwe, whose political leadership won independence for Nigeria in 1960.

### Conflict between Modernity and Tradition (No Longer at Ease)

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* is "a tragicomic postscript to the moving events of his first novel" (Carroll, 1970). It is a story of a promising young urban executive who succumbs to temptation when he is no longer able to maintain appearances and make ends meet. The central character is Obi Okonkwo, son of Nwoye and grandson of Okonkwo, and the action takes place in Nigeria in the 1950s in a world which is the result of the intermingling of Europe and Africa whose original confrontation is witnessed in *Things Fall Apart* (ibid, p.65).

Obi Okonkwo, the hero, takes us to the 1950's, the Nigerian pre-independence era, a period of African awakening and militant aspiration for political independence. At this time the indomitable wills of Europe and Africa have seen the need for compromise in the interest of peace and order, for the transfer of political power from the British to Africans.

The story of Obi Okonkwo, a young civil servant and executive, who wants to live like the Joneses, has universal import. It is more or less an illustration of what Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, has feared would happen with the importation of foreign cultures into his society such as the debilitating, nerve-racking experiences and the seas of cataclysms that accompany the destruction of one set of cultural elements, and replacing it with another almost diametrically opposed.

Wherever something stands,  
there something else will stand.  
—Igbo saying

The novel depicts the traumatic decline of Obi Okonkwo from his period of intellectual brilliance as a college student to his attachment to Nigeria Civil Service at which time he is convicted of bribery and corruption (Ibid, p.65). The movement is anti-climactic. Obi Okonkwo is lured by the excesses of Lagos elegant society, which urges him to keep up appearances. This means living above his means, even though such is against Christian principles. Thus "the forces of Christianity which officially superseded the old tribal ethic are themselves shown to be on the wane in the new generation and no new creed appears likely to take their place" (Ibid, p.65). The traditional ethics of Igbo society has been shattered by Christian ethics. Christianity is ploughing deeply on foreign strands and has not been deeply rooted as yet. The early missionaries were not fully aware of some cold hard social realities of cultural and religious transformations.

*No Longer at Ease* does not have a conventional beginning and a logical sequence of events. It does not begin in media res like epics or Fielding *Tom Jones*, *The History of Foundling*. It begins with the trial of Obi Okonkwo, the culmination of his decline, or simply at the end of his mundane career. The first chapter introduces us to the final career of Obi Okonkwo, while the first six chapters of the novel sketch his life and career from the time he leaves for higher education in England to the time he returns to Umuofia, his home in Anambara State. From these

chapters we discover some conflicts in his home environment. We are made to differentiate these from those conflicts arising from his university education in England. Moreover, these chapters typically introduce us to the difficulties of reintegration and adjustment when one leaves his native shores and returns to it to live.

Ordinarily, higher education should prepare its recipient to maintain and promote moral and cultural sanity. Education should have taught Obi Okonkwo the simple virtues of truth, honesty, and the necessity for a high sense of morality in society. He should have learned that no amount of material, social, and economic panaceas can substitute for a good moral and ethical citizen. Even the Judge of the High Court of Lagos raises a pertinent question, which seems to be the main issue of *No Longer at Ease*: "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (Achebe, 1960).

Obi Okonkwo's moral decay cannot be blamed on the ecological syndrome or even on his contact with Western cultures. It is also inappropriate to assume that Western education and Western culture is a panacea for our moral ills. In the 1950's the democratic statutes, respect for law and order, and moral rectitude was under attack from within and without. The foundations of the Western morality seemed to be shattered and cast adrift.

On the other hand, the tradition of the Umuofia society holds that physical growth should generate intellectual maturity and wisdom. But Obi Okonkwo presents moral incongruity. His intellectual development lacks a moral base to nurture it (Irele, 1967). The tradition taught that true higher education is an instrument for social, political, cultural, and moral development. Tradition should have helped him to acquire an understanding of the human spirit as handed down from the elders. It should have taught him to resist the heavy pressure against the traditional way of life, but instead Obi Okonkwo "has shown great disrespect" to the Umuofia Progressive Union. They had paid eight hundred pounds for his education in England and they were disappointed with his ingratitude towards them just because of a useless girl, who belonged to the *osu* community.

However, the people of Umuofia tried to stick to their favorite son who was isolated and alienation by law and the others. They felt that society conspired to destroy the only person they had trained above the common level. This support given by them shows that they had higher expectations of him, and this also explains the incredulity of the learned judge, the British council man, and even his own people (Carroll, p.66)

According to C. P. Snow, Obi Okonkwo is a hybrid of two cultures, the African and the European. The Europeans could not understand how someone who had the privilege of a Western education did not follow the rules of conduct he had imbibed. In a society where education advancement is taken seriously and ethnic groups compete with one another on the basis of how many among them have been to overseas, this is definitely a great psychic problem.

Obi is in love with his native tongue, and it holds a place in his heart. At the same time, however, he is also comfortable with the English language. African tradition and English culture collide with each other in this novel through the struggle of language. Obi is dedicated to his family and therefore to his roots. But, this does not mean that he will not revolt against his roots because of the new things he has learnt through his education in England. He is more liberal and 'European' in his beliefs and is ready to marry anyone, even though his family and fellow countrymen might oppose it. Obi wishes to marry Clara, despite her history, but in the end, he gives in to his mother's words and proves that blood is thicker than water. In other words, his mother is symbolic of his traditional culture and Obi proves that he is no better than any other. He has also turned to his roots.

Obi Okonkwo's situation is because it was aggravated by the lack of social protection of conscience and lack of public morality. There is inevitable conflict between these and the hero's urgent need to develop a mature autonomy in his existence, for a freedom from all bonds of dependence on tradition. How can he become fully himself when he is faced with unlimited possibilities for domination? Everywhere in his society there are evidences of social corruption. The reason for such a crisis was the increased human expectations in the Nigerian society in 1950's and the ongoing struggle for decolonization and human emancipation as well as the rapid economic and social progress. To these was added the revolt against paternalism. The bonds of human communication had begun to break down as a result of coming in contact with a wider world. Most of the traditional structures in the area of politics and religion were falling apart.

Nigerian society was evolving into modernity and this new climate confronted Obi Okonkwo. He is torn apart in his desire to follow the path of his forefathers and at the same time to blaze his own trail and finally he seeks his own path and risks his whole future and position. His heightened awareness of self-fulfilled personhood is unfortunately misdirected. What he revolts against is the danger of human homogenization, robotization, and depersonalization, which have begun to plague his social order. He seeks to overcome the enslavement of custom and the boredom of tradition. He is firmly set against any constrain against his personal moral decisions, even if means steeping himself in evil practices. He is opposed to outmoded social institutions, ideologies, traditions, and even patterns of thought and behavior.

Finally we see that Obi Okonkwo must commiserate with himself for a dual failure of responsibility. He committed exactly what he had set out to fight against—breaking tradition and corruption. He was not true to his salt, rebelling against tradition and an ancestral world picture. Again he was not true to his new social status as an educated man, whose character should have been irreproachable. In other words, Obi could have used his education to take his country back into his own hands, even though it was given to him by the colonizer. The only way to survive in a world where two cultures meet is to allow a certain amount of mixing which should be used in a positive regard.

The sad thing is that Obi Okonkwo did not do the expected. The novel ends where it began. The people of Umuofia, the judge, the British Council man, and everyone are asking themselves why a man of such promise committed such an act. Of course, the entire novel is answering this question by tracing Obi's life, but there are really no answers in the end. The most pessimistic aspect of the novel is that it is cyclical. Sometimes cycles can mean rebirth, but in this case, the cycle is one of repletion and endless mistakes. One might ask him or herself why it is that Achebe has done this and whether or not there can be a break in that cycle. To answer these questions is to understand the novel. Achebe wanted the novel to be cyclical to indicate a continuous sense of desperation and even stagnation. In the end, Obi finds himself expelled from his old idealistic self and in a mode of complacency, and the circle emphasizes the danger of that complacency.

As for whether or not this circle can be broken, the answer to the question is yes. The reason for this answer is that Achebe is the person who breaks the cycle. By writing this story, Achebe forces people to stop reading at the end, inviting each of us to think about the predicaments he has narrated individually. We are compelled to stop and think. Achebe makes us realize that it is we who have to forge a new path and hopefully stop repeating the cycle. Finally, it is apparent throughout the novel that change is occurring and that Obi is right to believe that the future of a post-colonial Nigeria is in the hands of those who can come to terms with, or an understanding of, their "double heritage."

Although Obi gets caught, he has reached a point at which he cannot take lying to himself anymore. He cannot stand the complacency of the bribe, and he has regained a guilt that has been somewhat latent. This is, in itself a positive thing, because whether or not he gets caught is not the issue. Perhaps the most important factor is that he regains a sense of conviction and strength to fight for that in which he once believed. This is the modernist tendency to take the world in a brave personal way.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has tried to show that a profound interaction and appropriation has taken place and the African novelist deserves to be read more seriously. There is, as Rene Wellek argues, 'a common humanity that makes all art, however remote in time and place, accessible to us.' Wellek suggests further that: We can rise beyond the limitations of traditional tastes into a realm, if not of absolute, then of universal art, varied in its manifestations but still amenable to description, analysis, interpretation and finally inevitably, to evaluation. The state of African poetics so far suggests that we will do well to heed Wellek's call.

In both the novels under discussion we find that Achebe excels in linguistic excellence and in keen portrayal of the inevitable struggle between the old and the new. In the situation that ex-colonial people find themselves it is difficult to dissociate their literature from the inevitable

conflict between traditional culture and the culture of the metropolitan European authority. Achebe captures revolutionary experiences and depicts them with explicitness. His novels portray traditional and revolutionary periods of national life, such as could have been written in the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of English history.

Achebe's novels were born out of the stress arising from struggle for independence and the trauma of the first decade of independence. They are products of the quest for self-identity and self-sufficiency following the soft winds of freedom. The poignant perceptions of social, cultural, moral and political issues confronting the pre- and post- independence years bristle with energy, passion and vitality. Achebe literarily invokes the tremendous geographical, historical, cultural and social distances separating independence and colonial era, the problem of blending two cultural heritages that are difficult to synthesize.

The author's foci are social rather than theological, literal and historical, aesthetic and redemptive rather than doctrinal, expressionistic rather than impressionistic, evaluative rather than retributive. The novels are necessary responses to rootlessness and alienation in one's homeland, to colonialism, and to corruption and oppression that normally follows new found independence. This is a universally accepted fact.

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