

Colonial Invasion and Indigenous Disintegration: A Study of Socio - Political Turmoil in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

The novel *Things Fall Apart* talks about the colonial invasion. It shows how the people in Umofia had suffered after the arrival of missionaries in the village. The British, after their arrival, changed their tradition, culture and the political life. Even the people in the village had been started adopting to their different cultures. This made the clan leader Okonkwo to think of the indigenous condition of the villages. There is a lot of chaos arose between the village. Even the clan leader was away from his village due to the turmoil which happened in the funeral and lost his position. He was executed from his village for 7 years. His downfall also could make him to lose his self- confidence. He fought to control the foreign tradition and culture. But nothing had changed only Umofia lost their powerful leader and their village. The new laws, religion, education challenges the traditional leadership. Overall, this research explains how the novel *Things Fall Apart* portrays the deep-socio-political change caused by the colonial invasion.

Keywords: Igbo society, Missionaries, Cultural and Traditional conflict, Loss of Leadership, socio-political turmoil, Colonialism, African oral traditions.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most influential novels in African literature, and it provides a powerful picture of how colonial invasion changed the lives, beliefs, and social systems of the Igbo people. The novel is set in pre-colonial Nigeria and later shifts to the period when European missionaries and colonial administrators enter the region, through this shift, Achebe shows how an organized and culturally rich indigenous society slowly breaks down under the pressure of foreign rule. This shows how the arrival of colonial forces creates conflict, weakens traditional structure and causes socio-political turmoil within the Igbo community. Before the colonizers arrive, the Igbo society shows as self-governed community with its own laws, customs, and justice system. Achebe presents the Igbo world as complex and balanced, even though it has flaws. Their political system is based on community discussions, elder's authority and respect for cultural traditions. Social life is guided by rituals, festivals, family roles and religious beliefs. This structured society functions through cooperation and shared identity. However, this balance begins to break when colonial forces introduce new systems that challenge the local way of life.

The novel ultimately shows that colonial invasion is not just a political takeover: it is also a cultural and psychological attack. When a foreign power controls people's religion, laws and education, they unity and strength of the indigenous society weaken. Achebe's narrative demonstrates how the Igbo community loses its sense of belonging as traditional beliefs are questioned and replaced. The disintegration of the society reflects the broader impact of colonialism across Africa, where many communities faced similar struggles. Through this research, we might know about how Achebe uses fiction to highlight real historical processes, showing that colonialism brought not only power but also destruction to native societies.

Structure of Precolonial Igbo Society

Precolonial Igbo life in *Things Fall Apart*, reflects a highly organized socio-cultural system grounded in patriarchal authority, communal values and agricultural discipline. Masculinity is the overarching marker of social worth and wealth is measured primarily through agricultural productivity, particularly yam cultivation. Yam, regarded as the "king of crops", becomes the central symbol of male achievement, as its cultivation requires physical strength, perseverance and strategic planning. "Before I put any crops in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers" (*Things Fall Apart* 14). Men who succeed in harvesting surplus yams gain both social prestige and political influence, while those who fails such as Unoka, suffer mockery and marginalization.

Polygamy further reinforces patriarchal dynamics. Wealthy men such as Okonkwo, Obierika and Uchendu maintain multiple wives, each responsible for different domestic spaces and agricultural tasks. Women contribute significantly to household stability, yet decision-making power rests predominantly with men. In this imbalance, women are central to religious rituals, food production, kinship networks and the nurturing of children, illustrating the complex interplay between authority and indispensability within the Igbo social fabric.

Rituals, Oral Tradition and Cultural Expression

Rituals play an essential role in reinforcing communal unity and transmitting cultural values. Ceremonies such as the Feast of the New Yam, wrestling festivals, marriage negotiations, naming ceremonies and ancestral worship structure the rhythm of Igbo life. During the New Yam Festival, homes are thoroughly cleaned, altars are decorated and enormous quantities of yam foo-foo and vegetable soup are prepared to welcome visiting relatives. Achebe's vivid description of this celebration highlights the cultural significance of renewal, fertility and thanksgiving. "New Yam Festival was celebrated with great joy in Okonkwo's household" (*Things Fall Apart* 33). Equally important is the use of proverbs, which function as rhetorical tools for diplomacy, wisdom and moral instruction. Achebe emphasizes that proverbs are the "palm-oil with which words are eaten", indicating their centrality in Igbo communication. Characters frequently rely on symbolic expressions such as "Let the kite perch and the eagle perch too" to demonstrate courtesy and subtly convey meaning during negotiations.

The kola-nut ritual stands as a powerful symbol of hospitality and social cohesion. "As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies" (*Things Fall Apart* 3). Before discussing serious matters, hosts present kola nuts to their guests, accompanied by prayers and breaking of the nut to invoke blessings. This ceremonial exchange appears not only in *Things Fall Apart* but also in *Arrow of God*, where Ezeulu insists that kola must be offered before any village deliberation. These practices reveal that Igbo culture is deeply rooted in etiquette, respect and communal participation. Food and drink also carry spiritual significance. Palm wine is shared during family gatherings, judicial discussion and community celebrations.

I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who prays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a Favor. But let us drink the wine first. (*Things Fall Apart* 16)

In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu receives palm wine from the carver of a door, it reflects both friendship and religious symbolism. Such portraits demonstrate Achebe's emphasis on the interconnectedness of material life, spirituality and social relationships within Igbo society.

Colonial religion and the Disruption of Indigenous Belief Systems

The arrival of Christian missionaries marks a turning point in the disintegration of Igbo culture. The missionaries introduce monotheistic doctrine that labels Igbo deities as “false gods”, directly attacking the foundation of the indigenous worldview. Initially the new religion attracts marginal groups outcasts, people without titles, women who bore twins, and individuals previously dismissed by society. Christianity promises spiritual equality and social inclusion, offering them a novel sense of dignity absent in the traditional hierarchy. The missionaries gain further credibility when the church survives in the Evil forest, a location believed to be spiritually dangerous. “Let us give them a portion of the Evil forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory” (*Things Fall Apart* 131). Its survival is perceived by some as a sign of the impotence of traditional deities. This triggers a wave of conversions that gradually weakness the authority of ancestral religion.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe similarly illustrates how missionary influence challenges the role of Ezeulu, who struggles to preserve the sacred rituals associated with yam harvests. The erosion of faith in traditional priests parallels the diminishing role of egwugwu in *Things Fall Apart*, reinforcing the notion that colonial religion functions as an instrument of cultural destabilization.

Western education and Economic Transformation

Western education emerges as another powerful tool of cultural infiltration. Under Mr. Brown’s missionary approach, schools begin attracting children, adults and titled men seeking to understand the new system. “One of the great men in that village was called Akunna and he had given one of his sons to be taught the white man’s knowledge in Mr. Brown’s school” (*Things Fall Apart* 156). Literacy becomes a gateway to employment as clerks, teachers, interpreters or court messengers. The prestige associated with such positions shifts respect from traditional institutions toward colonial ones. European education also introduces unfamiliar material culture. Items such as singlets, towels and books serve as incentives, symbolizing both modernity and western superiority. The desire for these goods strengthens the missionaries influence, attracting more converts.

Cultural Themes in *Arrow of God*: Continuity and Disruption

Arrow of God reinforces themes introduced in *Things Fall Apart*. Both novels both novels present detailed accounts of Igbo rituals, agricultural cycles, kinship structures and spiritual obligations. Ezeulu’s role as chief priest of Ulu mirrors the authority shapes economic life. However, colonial forces infiltrate the cultural core. Missionaries appeal to marginalized groups, offering schooling and employment. British administrators impose legal and political structures that challenge the autonomy of traditional leaders. Ezeulu’s eventual loss of influence parallels Okonkwo’s downfall, illustrating how indigenous authority collapses under combined pressure of internal conflicts and external domination. The parallel between both novels reinforces Achebe’s central argument: colonial invasion did not merely introduce new institutions but actively dismantled the spiritual, political and cultural coherence of Igbo society.

Okonkwo’s Tragic Downfall as a Symbol of Cultural Collapse

Okonkwo’s character is shaped by an intense fear of weakness, largely due to the shame brought by his father’s failure. This fear drives him toward hypermasculinity, emotional suppression and violence. His inability to adapt to change becomes a central factor in his downfall. Okonkwo’s tragedy unfolds in distinct stages. His failed yam harvest humiliates him, reinforcing his fear of inadequacy. His participation in Ikemefuna’s killing fractures his moral identity and alienates Nowye. “He heard Ikemefuna cry, my father, they have killed me! as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and chut him down” (*Things Fall Apart* 53). His accidental killing of a clansman result in exile, during which colonial influence spreads rapidly. By the time transformed, Christianity, education and colonial courts have changed the clan’s structure, making resistance nearly impossible. When Okonkwo attempts to rouse his people to rebellion, he discovered that the clan no longer shares his values or courage. His suicide, an fact forbidden in Igbo culture, signifies both personal defeat and symbolic cultural disintegration. “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog... (*Things Fall Apart* 201).

His trajectory parallels Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, both are initially strong leaders whose personal flaws compound external pressures, leading to inevitable tragedy. In this sense, Okonkwo embodies the downfall of an entire cultural system, not merely an individual fate.

Hegemony, Resistance and Communal Fragmentation

Achebe highlights a colonial intrusion. Some individuals like Okonkwo, Obireika, Uchendu seek to preserve traditional values and resist foreign influence. Others readily convert or collaborate, motivated by opportunity, frustration or disillusionment with Igbo customs. "Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government" (*Things Fall Apart* 153). The division between resisters and collaborators weakens communal unity hastening cultural breakdown. The destruction of Abame, the rise of Christianity, the spread of education and the establishment of colonial law collectively reveal the strategic methods used to dismantle indigenous systems. By exploiting social inequalities and internal tensions, colonial power accelerates fragmentation. The community that once operated through collective harmony becomes divided, disoriented and vulnerable.

The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and woman came out to see the white man. Stories about these strange men had grown since one of them had been killed in Abame and his iron horse tied to the sacred silk-cotton tree. (*Things Fall Apart* 126).

Conclusion

The analysis of *Things Fall Apart* shows that colonial invasion deeply disrupts Igbo society, leading to the breakdown of traditional beliefs, leadership and social unity. Achebe illustrates how the arrival of missionaries and colonial rule creates tension, confusion and cultural loss, especially for individuals like Okonkwo who struggle to adapt. Overall, this research conveys that colonialism causes serious socio-political turmoil and permanent disintegration of indigenous life.

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