

T H I N G S F A L L A P A R T



I N T R O D U C T I O N

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W.B. Yeats, from *The Second Coming*

Things Fall Apart may well be Africa's best-loved novel. It is read widely in Nigeria, where it was written, and in the rest of Africa, where it is a staple in secondary-school English classes and at the university; but it is read and studied widely, too, in Europe and North America; and in India or Australia if an educated person could name only one African novel, this would probably be it.

There are, no doubt, many reasons why Chinua Achebe's first book has achieved its status as the archetypal modern African novel in English. But it is not simply a matter of having arrived first on the scene. For when it appeared in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was by no means the first novel about Africa by an African published in English; it was not even the first to receive broad notice, since Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was widely discussed when it appeared some five years earlier (garnering an influential and highly laudatory review from Dylan Thomas). Why, then, has Achebe's novel so captured the literary imagination both at home, in Nigeria, and in the rest of the world?

First of all, as with any great novel, Achebe's achievement is rooted in a mastery of form and of language. This is already a considerable achievement in a second language: Achebe only began to learn English in school at the age of about eight. It is all the more remarkable when we reflect that the choices he had to make in every dimension of literary craft – of diction, of

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narrative form, of plot – were almost entirely unprecedented. Tutuola's 'novel' was written in a form of Nigerian English and its structure was the episodic structure of an extended oral narrative. Grammatically at least, Achebe chose to write in what was then called 'standard English', an English taught in schools in the United Kingdom and her colonies. He had, therefore, to face the question of how he should represent in translation the diction of Ibo speakers. And in choosing to write a novel, he was opting for a form whose structure was different from that of the Ibo tales with which he grew up.

Along with the tales told at home (especially by his mother and his sister) the literary models available to Achebe in his background included parts of *Pilgrim's Progress*, translated into Ibo, the Bible, the Hymn Book, and the Book of Common Prayer: all of them important in the intensely Christian household in which Achebe was raised. And, by the time he finished college, he had read the works on the British university English syllabus of the nineteen-fifties. Achebe was educated, in short, in a world of reading permeated by a whole range of English literary diction – in the Bible, in the range of verse-forms in the hymnal, in the plays of Shakespeare, and in the twentieth-century novel – yet also surrounded with an oral culture of tales and family histories.

And so he did not simply pour Ibo life into the form of the European novels and short stories he had studied at University College, Ibadan, the university from which he graduated with a BA in English literature in 1953. Achebe's studies certainly presented him with writing in English about Africa: Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, for example, a novel about the process of Nigerian colonization, written by a British colonial officer; and, in shorter fiction, Ernest Hemingway's *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But to Achebe, each of these proved in some way unsatisfactory as a model. When, in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe writes that he 'read some appalling novels about Africa' when he was in college, Cary's novel is one of those he has in mind. While Cary was a fine writer, his story, Achebe once said, 'is not my story. It's not the story I would have written.' *Heart of Darkness*, which only 'worried' him in college, he came later to

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think of as racist. And though he *liked* the Hemingway story, it was about an Africa in which Africans were simply part of the scenery. It would not do either.

Instead, Achebe melds together elements of the tradition of the novel with narrative ideas from Ibo oral culture, adding, as well, creations of his own, to produce a new kind of writing. If it has precursors in European literature, they are to be found in the historical novel. The reason for this illuminates the second source of Achebe's power as a writer.

And that, quite simply, is the fact that Achebe's governing ambitions as a writer are deeply moral. Like most contemporary African writers, he is guided by what the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has called the 'social vision'. Whenever Achebe is asked about his purposes in writing, he begins with a deep sense of the responsibility of the writer to his community. As he once said:

Once you realize how the world is organized, you must then, as a writer, ask: What am I doing writing stories in this kind of situation? Who is going to read them? What use is all this going to be?

Achebe's answer to this last question has always been that his writing should serve the purpose of helping his fellow Ibos, his fellow Nigerians, and his fellow Africans to come to terms with their history; to escape from those many problems in contemporary African life whose roots can be traced back to the 'moment when we lost our initiative to other people, to colonizers'; and to recognize both what was strong and what was weak in the African past.

Writing with these ambitions exists for the purposes of nation building; it aims to contribute towards the development of a modern national consciousness. And this was one of the aims, too, of the historical novels of such earlier writers as Walter Scott. Scott wrote in the preface to his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* that he intended to 'contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally'. Scott's native country was Scotland, of course. But in a novel such as *Ivanhoe*, which explores the creation of an English tradition out of Anglo-

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Saxon and Norman heritages, he performed the same function for England.

It is the *theme* of his historical fiction that provides the third basis of Achebe's appeal. For in exploring the moment at which European culture and military power began to take over the world of his own ancestors, Achebe is examining a crucial moment in modern human history, a moment whose importance is particularly compelling for readers in the post-colonial worlds of Africa and Asia. Yet all of us, wherever we live, can share the fascination of watching a culture very different from that of the modern West respond in its local way to the global processes through which all human cultures have become increasingly interconnected. We may come to this story from different directions, depending on where we live, but the novel belongs to all of its readers equally. We should remember T.S. Eliot's wise words: 'although it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being universal, I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local too'.

Not only does Achebe draw a compelling picture of life in one part of Iboland before the arrival of Christianity and colonialism; he manages to convey to all of us, Ibo or not, both the tragedy of the loss of that world and the possibilities created by the new situation. Achebe's rigorous accounting includes columns both for profit and for loss.

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It is one measure of Chinua Achebe's craft that even the title of this first novel evokes a rich network of literary allusion. Yeats' poem of 1921 is, of course, extremely familiar, and its first stanza has seemed to many, in the seventy years or so since it was written, an apt characterization of our times. But Yeats' talk of a second coming was meant more than metaphorically: for Yeats history came in cycles, a 'widening gyre' like the rising and widening circles of the falcon's flight, in which each great cycle of ages gave birth to another that was, in some way, its antithesis. In the second stanza Yeats speaks of 'twenty centuries of stony sleep', the two millennia of the Christian cycle that had followed the Roman Empire, and he

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saw in the terrible destruction of the first decades of the century signs that this Christian cycle was coming to an end. Whatever was to follow – whatever

... rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born

– the principles of the new cycle would be radically at odds with the old Christian principles.

Naturally, there are ironies and reversals in Achebe's appropriation of Yeats' imagery: for the cycle that is ending is, for Achebe, an age of autonomy in his Ibo homeland; and the cycle that will follow will be a Christian cycle, the cycle that for Yeats is coming to an end. Because he was writing in the late fifties, Achebe's audience could be presumed to have had a sense of the new age that had been brought with Christianity to Iboland. His preliminary task, therefore, was to establish a plausible version of the old cycle, the cycle of the pre-colonial culture of his homeland.

It is to this end that the novel's evocation of late-nineteenth-century Ibo life begins with the patient pace of fable. 'Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.' In a few paragraphs of a supple and uncomplicated prose, whose style we recognize from familiar transcriptions of folk tale, Achebe locates us in a world shaped by traditions of oral tale-telling, the world of Umuofia and the nine villages. We learn of the centrality of wrestling in establishing a man's honor; we learn that his honor brings honor to his village. And we learn that the wrestling match that established the reputation of Okonkwo, our protagonist, is still remembered now, twenty years later, when he is a mature elder of his village who has gone on to take two titles and has distinguished himself in war. All of these ingredients place us in a heroic age: they are the materials of epic.

Soon we learn also that Okonkwo's character – strong, starkly masculine, defined by strength and aggression and impatience – is the opposite of his father's. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, loves not wrestling but music, not hard work but good times. And because of this, Okonkwo despises his father: he is

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agbala, a woman. One of the central features of *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's balancing of principles through the metaphor of masculine and feminine, a metaphor that seems to derive from deep within Ibo thought. Thus, the god who, above all others, regulates life in Umuofia is Ani, the earth goddess. And it is a reflection of Okonkwo's failure to seek balance between the manly virtues and the womanly virtues as understood in Umuofia, that each of the disasters that afflicts him can be seen as a crime against the earth. One is tempted to say that this is Okonkwo's tragic flaw: he is a man who lives in a culture that requires a balance between 'masculine' and 'feminine' that he does not acknowledge (in part because he is ashamed of his father who has failed to be a 'real man'). And it is through this flaw that he is destroyed. A mark of Achebe's mastery is that he manages to communicate this ideal of balance, by using the metaphorical opposition of masculine and feminine, even while describing a culture that will strike many modern readers as overwhelmingly – even oppressively – dominated by men.

Yet at the same time as we are introduced to Okonkwo and his family history, we are introduced to the decorous patterns of Ibo social life. In the exchange between Unoka and his neighbor Okoye, who has come to claim back some money (in the form of cowrie shells) that he has loaned Unoka, we see how formal behavior is even among those who know each other well. The custom of breaking a kola nut to share; the polite disagreement over who shall have the honor of breaking it; Okoye's painting of his toe with chalk to indicate that he is an *ozo*, someone who has taken the title that makes him one of the elders of the community; the prayers for protection from the ancestors; the discussion of music, of the *ekwe* and *udu* drums, one of wood, the other of clay, and the *ogene* gong; and the elaborate exchange of proverbs, which are 'the palm-oil with which words are eaten' – all of these quickly sketched elements combine to draw us into a world we do not know.

It is this masterful combination of the social narrative of Ibo life – and its dissolution and reformation under the impact of colonialism – with the individual tragedy of Okonkwo – whose stern sense of self seems to place him in opposition both to old

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and to new cultures – that gives Achebe's novel its distinctive character.

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It is a fair question to ask how faithful an account of the colonization of Iboland Achebe's novel offers. As it happens, it is remarkably true to the historical record, even though Achebe was describing a mode of life very different from the one within which he himself grew up. The action takes place in one of the towns and villages west of Onitsha, on the east bank of the Niger, around the turn of the twentieth century. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Christian missionary activity began in the area around Achebe's birthplace in Ogidi, the Ibo-speaking peoples lived together in groups of villages, associated through common history and rituals, each village fiercely independent and regulated not by kingship but by the senior men – those who had 'taken titles' and could speak for the ancestors – and by the gods, who made their wishes known through priests and priestesses. While the people of Onitsha, a little to the west of Ogidi, had adopted kingship, these other Ibo-speaking people did not care to join together into a single state, and they had no interest in conquering the territories of others. They farmed, bore children, honored the gods and the ancestors and shared their lives in a host of public ceremonies: at betrothal and marriage, at death and burial, at planting and at harvest. The system of titles was particularly important in maintaining this social order. Every man who could afford it took the *ozo* title as soon as he could in order to become one of the *ndichie*, the male elders who represented and regulated the community. If a man had accumulated the resources and respect needed to take a higher title, he did so. Since taking a title involved a huge amount of expense, with sacrifices, and great feasts for all the community, the result was that no one ever accumulated the wealth and power to dominate individually.

The *ndichie* acted for the ancestors: in deciding cases (like the marital dispute in chapter ten) they would appear in the *egwugwu* masks, representing ancestral spirits. When, in

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the novel, they greet the assembled company with the cry '*Umuofia kwenu*', they are addressing, as the ancestors of the community, 'Umuofia unified'.

When the British arrived and 'pacified' this region in the early decades of the twentieth century, they did so with a great deal of brutality. The practice of communal punishment, described in chapter fifteen in the story of Abame, in which communities were attacked and people slaughtered as reprisal for offenses, really occurred: as did the business of inviting elders to a meeting and then arresting or executing them. The British appointed Africans from other parts of the country to carry out their orders – these are the *kotma* (which is an Ibo abbreviation of the English 'court messenger') – and they were often able to abuse their position as intermediaries, as they do in this novel.

It is also true that some of the European newcomers, among them missionaries like Mr Brown in chapter twenty-one, 'came to be respected by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith'. Achebe, as I said, includes columns both for profit and for loss.

Within forty years of the first mission at Ogidi, by the time Chinua Achebe was born there in November 1930, there were church missionary schools, Ibo catechists of the Church Missionary Society, like Achebe's own father, and a British colonial administration. Achebe's father, Isaiah, was among the first to be converted in Ogidi, sometime around the turn of the century. Isaiah Achebe was an orphan. (We can therefore be sure that Nwoye, who joins the church because he is alienated from his father, is not based on him.) In fact, Isaiah Achebe was raised by his maternal grandfather, Udo Osinyi, one of the last to take all the Ibo titles save the highest. Udo Osinyi, far from deploring the conversion of his grandchild, allowed his Christian marriage to be celebrated in his compound.

Achebe's great-grandfather represented the old Ibo ideal of the man who is both productive and generous, which was reflected in his name: 'Osinyi' means someone who cooks more than the whole town can eat. Achebe remembers hearing stories, as a child, of how the old man set up cooking places all

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along the road for two miles when he took the third highest title.

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Of course, no one should read this novel simply to learn Ibo history. This is, first and foremost, a work of literature – which is not to say that a literary perspective should sever a work from the contexts it evokes. ‘Literature,’ Achebe once said, ‘opens up magic casements.’ A novel invites us to be guided by our imaginations into a place we did not know, or shows us new vistas of a place we did not know well enough. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe opens a casement on Umuofia, revealing to us the compelling tragedy of Okonkwo, a hero who, perhaps like most heroes, we cannot claim to like; but who also, like all heroes, embodies ideals – of independence, of self-respect, of honor – that we cannot fail to admire. In the story of Umuofia, Achebe weaves together this individual tragedy and the narrative of a community. He gives us a rich picture of an individual character at the same time as exploring the texture of a past form of human life.

The skills of a great writer are measured by their effects: it is not merely that our understanding of the possibilities of human culture are enlarged, but that our passions are engaged. Achebe teaches us that the novel, a form invented in Western Europe, can be shaped by the creative intelligence and the local vision of a great writer outside of Europe into a medium of continuing universal significance. Perhaps this, above all, is the reason that for so many readers around the world, it is Chinua Achebe who opened the magic casements of African fiction.

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