

My Favourite Book

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Books are a source of power, full of information and knowledge. They are friends who never leave your side. Among the many books I have read and loved, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has a special place in my heart. I first read the novel as a fourteen-year-old at school in Sierra Leone and suddenly African history came alive. It was the first book I read set in Africa and written by an African, and it made me realise that we too have stories to tell.

Things fall Apart, Achebe's first novel, was published two years before Nigeria's independence from Great Britain in 1960, at a time when 'African novel' meant European accounts of 'native' life. Achebe was an Igbo from Eastern Nigeria and his novel, set in the 1890s, was concerned with traditional Igbo life impacted by the arrival of white missionaries and

colonial government into that society. Even at fourteen, I saw the novel as an extended metaphor for the exploitation of Africa, its life and politics.

The novel centres around Okonkwo, the protagonist, and deals with his rise and fall. He is not born a great man, but achieves success through hard work. Okonkwo rejects his lazy father, fearing to become a failure like him, who plays his flute rather than tending his soil. He associates masculinity with aggression, and his fear of showing any of his father's weakness leads to his downfall when he slays Ikemefuna, his ward, then unintentionally kills a clansman. Okonkwo is banished from his village for seven years. When he returns, he finds that, in his absence, the white missionaries have arrived and are converting the tribesmen, including Okonkwo's son, to Christianity. When a missionary convert unmasks the traditional *egwugwu*, masked elders representing the ancestral spirits of the village, Okonkwo and the angry villagers burn down the church. A furious Okonkwo beheads one of the District Commissioner's men sent to intervene. With no support for this action from his tribesman, Okonkwo's world falls apart, and he hangs himself.

I am interested in the fact that *Things Fall Apart* deals with both the prospect and the reality of change as it affects various characters, and that it was written at a time when Achebe's Nigeria too was on the verge of change. I admire the way Achebe deals simultaneously with the end of Okonkwo as an individual and of the village of Umuofia as a cultural community. The novel's title and epigraph, taken from W.B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming' (1919), foretells the story about to unfold. It is not just Okonkwo who falls apart but the unity of the tribe. Achebe's inclusion of Igbo proverbs, folktales and songs captures and conveys the rhythms, structures and cadences of the Igbo language, articulating its own experience and illustrating that the continent of Africa is not silent, nor is it unintelligible, despite books such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) turning a deaf ear.

This novel awakened my imagination, and it has influenced my writing. It has taught me to be proud of my traditions and culture, and to open dialogue about our similarities and differences to tell a great story that stays with the reader long after the book is closed.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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