

## ***Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe**

The focus of this presentation is to highlight some of the literary elements that a learner reading the novel needs to know.

### **1. The story**

*Things Fall Apart* is the story of Okonkwo who struggles to escape poverty and the fear of becoming like his father Unoka. Okonkwo is able to 'crack his own palm kernels' and becomes a famous wrestler, a prosperous farmer and respected leader in Umuofia. *Things Fall Apart* is also the tragedy of Okonkwo who is exiled from his tribe after his gun goes off and accidentally kills Ezeudu's young son. When Okonkwo returns from exile things in Umuofia have changed. The courage and violence of the tribe is no more with the coming of the white man. In a moment of rash courage against the white man, Okonkwo kills the white man's messenger and instead of joining him the men of Umuofia wonder why he did it. To escape, Okonkwo commits suicide a shameful death among the Ibo. He is buried in the evil forest. It is also the story of a community whose way of life is threatened by the coming of the whiteman (colonialism) and how this society responds to this threat.

### **2. Plot**

The novel is divided into three parts. **Part one** follows Okonkwo and his struggle to become a man of importance, his fear of becoming an *efulefu* like his father, his interaction with his family (which he rules with an iron hand) and community.

In this part *Ikemefuna* is introduced. He is brought to Umuofia as compensation for the killing of a daughter of Umuofia and is adopted by Okonkwo until the gods decide he should be killed. Okonkwo participates in the killing despite the warning from Ezeudu who reminds him that Ikemefuna calls Okonkwo father. Part one ends with the exile of Okonkwo after the accidental killing of Ezeudu's young son.

**Part two** focuses on Okonkwo in exile in Mbanta and the changes taking place in Ibo society like the coming of the whiteman and his religion. In this part Okonkwo faces another tragedy when Nwoye his son converts to Christianity and consequently Okonkwo disowns him.

**Part three** focuses on Okonkwo's return to Umuofia after seven years in exile. Umuofia has changed but Okonkwo hasn't changed. He is a man of action and believes the tribe should not act like women in dealing with the whiteman. There is confrontation between the men of Umuofia and the church. Enoch unmasks an *egwugu*, Umuofia retaliates by destroying the church, its leaders are arrested and suffer humiliation at the hands of the *kotma*. Okonkwo vows to avenge this humiliation. The men of Umuofia gather to discuss their response to the whiteman's presence. A court messenger arrives and orders the men to stop the meeting. Okonkwo kills the messenger and later commits suicide when he realises no one is ready to support him.

The story is interspersed with flashbacks.

### **4. Characters**

- *Okonkwo*: protagonist of the novel who is afraid of failing like his father. Okonkwo is depicted as:

hardworking/industrious, ambitious, brave, violent, short tempered, proud/arrogant, adamant, impatient, resilient and rash. etc He is the symbol of Ibo masculinity.

- *Unoka*: Okonkwo's father, loves music, lazy, irresponsible, miserly in a nutshell a failure.
- *Obierika*: Okonkwo's best friend. He is wealthy, powerful, trustworthy, responsible,

rational and wise. He is the voice of reason who understands the clan can never be the same with the coming of the white man and also questions some of the Ibo customs like Okonkwo's exile.

- *Ekwefi*: Okonkwo's second wife, runs away from her husband to become Okonkwo's wife after he becomes a famous wrestler. She is devoted, protective of her only child Ezinma, audacious/bold speaks back at Okonkwo
- *Nwoye*:

Okonkwo's first son. considered weak by his father, sensitive, gentle, courageous when he defies the father and converts to christianity.

- *Ezinma*: Okonkwo's beloved daughter. Sickly, resilient, mature, stubborn, bold-challenges and contradicts Okonkwo. No wonder he wishes she had been a boy.
- *Mr Brown*: a white missionary, kind, liberal and openminded, non confrontational in dealing with the religion of Umuofia, wise.
- *Reverend James Smith*: Mr Brown's successor. Confrontational, rigid, zealous and uncompromising. It is during his time that the conflict between the church and the tribe reaches boiling point.

## 5. Themes and ideas

*Things Fall Apart* examines the following issues:

- *Colonialism and its impact*: consider how the new religion has an impact on the way of life in Umuofia. Consider the new government which is brutal.
- *Tradition and custom*: Achebe presents a society with lots of traditions both good and bad. The customs are meant to ensure social cohesion. Some traditions however don't make sense like the throwing away of twins. These customs are threatened by the whiteman's religion that regards these customs as savage.
- *Change vs Tradition*: This battle between the old way and the new way is evident in part two and three of the novel. The climax of this conflict is when Enoch unmasks an *egwugwu* leading to the destruction of the church and arrest of the elders of Umuofia.
- *Freewill and Fate*: In the novel Achebe depicts the idea that a person can control his destiny. (role of one's *chi*) Consider the proverb 'When a man says yes his chi says yes also.' *Fate* however is shown as a more powerful force when we consider Okonkwo's end. Okonkwo is exiled for the accidental shooting of Ezeudu's son. The gun that has never shot a rat kills a man. Okonkwo fears ending up like his father but as fate would have it Okonkwo is buried in the evil forest after committing suicide thereby desecrating the land just like Unoka who dies of the swelling of the stomach and is left to die in the evil forest.
- Ambition, Masculinity, Justice (traditional justice & white man's justice), Betrayal etc

## 6. Setting

### *Time setting.*

The novel is set just before and after the coming of the whiteman and the impact this has on Ibo society. In part one the tribe is strong, powerful and united, held together by tradition. The arrival of the white man in part two and three threatens the unity leading to chaos.

### *Social setting*

The society in the novel is characterized by a number of traditions and norms that identify one as a member of society. In Ibo society for example a man is respected because of his achievements, his wealth and valour. Failure, laziness are frowned upon. There is also a strong belief in the supernatural seen in the respect for the gods and the spirit world.

### *Physical setting*

The action takes place primarily in Umuofia then Mbanta. References are however made of places like Mbaino and Abame.

## 7. Title

The title is drawn from a section of W.B Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'. The lines in the poem describe a world where things fall apart and anarchy is loosed on the world. In the novel this is seen in the disintegration that Umuofia as a society experiences and Okonkwo as an individual. The chaos stems from the invasion of the white man.

## 8. Relevance

The relevance of *Things Fall Apart* can be drawn from the events, the characters, the issues/themes, the lessons drawn. Help the learners discover this relevance.

## 9. Style/Literary Devices

Consider the use of Irony, symbolism, use of the omniscient narrator, use of orature (Ibo sayings and folktales), contrast, description etc

**Conclusion:** In teaching *Things Fall Apart* it is important to note that the experience in the novel is not alien given that most students are familiar with Nigerian life.

### Revision questions

1. What important lessons does the audience pick from the novel "Things Fall Apart."
2. Do you agree that Okonkwo deserves the fate that befalls him at the end of the play, "Things Fall Apart?" Give reasons to support your answer.
3. Identify more themes and identify character traits of major characters in the novel.