

## Things Fall Apart

<sup>1</sup>*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a novel about culture clash. Set in Nigeria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it describes how an African tribe “breaks up and falls apart” when the first white men arrive, in the form of Christian missionaries. It is thus a historical novel, but it is also the personal tragedy of a man who is a victim of his own character.

<sup>2</sup>The novel traces the life of Okonkwo, a brave warrior who rises from a poor background to become a rich and respected man in his village, with three wives and a large farm. But Okonkwo is a proud man, and his pride leads to his undoing. He agrees to take part in the sacrifice of his adopted son Ikemefuna, even though he is more fond of him than his own son, because he believes this is the will of the spirits of his ancestors, and not to take part in the sacrifice would be to show weakness.

<sup>3</sup>Later Okonkwo is exiled for seven years for killing another boy—this time by accident, when his gun goes off at a funeral. Okonkwo goes to live in the village of his mother’s relatives. When he returns things have changed. The Europeans have arrived, and the process of converting the tribespeople to Christianity has begun. Okonkwo is opposed to change, and angry when his son joins the group of Christians. When an over-enthusiastic convert insults the spirits, the angry villagers burn down the church, and the British administration arrest the ringleaders.

<sup>4</sup>The novel ends with the suicide of Okonkwo, bitterly opposed to the way in which the white men have changed forever a traditional way of life. In the final lines the British administrator looks at Okonkwo’s body hanging from a tree and thinks of writing a book about the matter, which he will call *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

<sup>5</sup>One of the strengths of the novel is that Achebe avoids a stereotypical portrayal of innocent natives and evil colonizers. Okonkwo’s character, for example, is complex, and one of the missionaries at least is a good man. Achebe chose to write in English (not his mother tongue), to ensure a wide audience, but also because he felt that English could “bear the weight” of his African experience. From the moment of publication in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was recognized a great “post-colonial” novel and a valuable portrayal of what happens when tradition and forces for change meet head on.