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“THINGS FALL APART”:
THE FICTION AND THE FACTS,
THE POETRY AND THE PROSE

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These remarks were originally written as part of the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Chinua Achebe's classical novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Part of the celebration was held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC in 2006.

There are at least three genres of literature within which *Things Fall Apart* may be located. One school is the literature of postcoloniality. Although the book was published two years before Nigeria's own independence, it is a work which evaluates colonialism by describing what kind of Africa the imperialists encountered on their first arrival.

Achebe himself has often spoken of *Things Fall Apart* as a response to the white racism imbedded in such works as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Another genre to which the novel might be placed is a school of what has more recently been designated as the genre of clash of civilizations. It overlaps with the literature of imperialism and post-coloniality — but imperialism was only one illustration of civilizations in conflict.

Joseph Conrad's book *Heart of Darkness* was one such overlap between the literature of imperialism and the literature of clash of civilizations.

Chinua Achebe has himself held very strong views about Conrad, especially on the issue of race. More recent examples of clash of civilizations concern the escalating conflict between Islam and the Western world, especially between the United States and such radical Islamic movements as Al-Qaeda.

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is of course a defender of his own civilization against the encroachment of British colonization.

Is *Things Falls Apart* a celebration of traditional Igbo culture? Or is it *de facto* an apology for westernization? Is westernization an answer to such Igbo flaws as the caste system?

There are Igbo traditions portrayed in the novel which the author knew were repugnant to Western sensibilities, such as Igbo mutilation of a dead child to deny the child's spirit a re-entry back into this life. And was the killing of Ikemefuma by Okonkwo "the father" whom he trusted an act of barbarism? Or was Okonkwo playing "God the father" facilitating the "crucifixion" of his own son? Was Ikemefuma's last thought after being stabbed by Okonkwo "Father, father, why have you forsaken me?"

Did the dying child look at his Dad in a shocked state of incomprehension?

Does *Things Fall Apart* have more in common with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* than Chinua Achebe has been prepared to acknowledge?

Achebe's Chancellor's Lecture at Amherst in February 1975 condemned Conrad as "a thorough going racist." Achebe accused Conrad's novel *The Congo of Negrophobia*, and of dehumanizing Africans.

Others have defended Conrad's novel about the Congo as being anti-imperialist rather than racist. Would *Things Fall Apart* have been accused of racism had it been written by a white man? Does *Things Fall Apart* share with *Heart of Darkness* the quality of ambivalence between viewing the white man as intrusive and viewing the Black man as primitive?

A novel portraying a *religion* negatively is sometimes more offensive to believers if the novelist originally belonged to that religion. On the other hand, a novel portraying a *race* negatively is often *less* offensive if the novelist is of the race he or she criticizes.

The Satanic Verses was written by someone who was brought up a Muslim. The novel was therefore much more offensive to Muslims than if Salman Rushdie had been a Hindu. Among South Asians negative writings by Hindus about Islam were commonplace. But a blasphemous diatribe by a Muslim against Islam verges on *cultural treason*. It was because Salman Rushdie was once a Muslim which made *The Satanic Verses* so profoundly offensive to Muslims worldwide.

With regard to a novel about ethnicity or race, a reverse phenomenon is often true. A novel by an *African* which portrays a seriously flawed African culture is far less offensive than a novel about such an African culture written by a white man.

A major reason why the whole world has saluted *Things Fall Apart* as a work of total cultural integrity is partly because the gifted author is an Igbo who was ready to write about his own people's mores, principles, scars and all.

We have saluted Chinua Achebe not because the Igbo did not leave newly born twins to cry themselves to death in the forest, or did not mutilate the body of a child who had just died a natural death at home, but because pre-Christianized Igbo did do precisely those things.

We are appalled in *Things Fall Apart* about domestic violence and spouse abuse, about an oracle that demands the death of a child and is granted the sacrifice.

Of course, Chinua Achebe tells us about those negative things concerning his people with understanding and empathy. But what saves the novel from being denounced as racist is that it is a view from within — both ethnically and racially. *Things Fall Apart* is a work of ethnic and racial candour and honesty. But had it been written by a white man, it

would probably have been widely condemned, and would never have been accepted as a great contribution to world literature.

Such a situation is of course not the fault of the real author, Chinua Achebe, nor does it detract from the singular brilliance of *Things Fall Apart*. The situation is a consequence of the history of racism and of the long record of negative portrayal of Africa and Black people in so much of European and Caucasian literature across the centuries.

In reality Achebe's first novel is less about issues of race, even of culture conflict, and more about the passing of traditional society. The relevant analogues in English literature is not Joseph Conrad, but more the eighteenth century English poets who lamented the demise of the traditional English village in the wake of first the agrarian revolution and later the industrial revolution. *Things Fall Apart* is about the pains of systemic change and the agonies of paradigm shifts in society.

In his first novel Chinua Achebe is more concerned with the arrival of Christianity in Igboland than with the arrival of capitalism — although in reality colonialism was much more inspired by the lure of wealth than the quest for salvation. On the other hand, eighteenth century English and Irish poets attributed the passing of traditional society in their own country to the new preoccupation with the pursuit of riches.

Achebe's lament for the passing of traditional society lies somewhere between Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) and George Crabbe's *The Village* (1783). But while Chinua Achebe is minimally sentimental about what precolonial Igbo culture was like, Oliver Goldsmith seems deeply pained by the disappearance of the English village in the wake of agrarian and industrial change.

Achebe is resigned to the Christian penetration of Igboland, while Goldsmith is disturbed by the relentless pursuit of wealth in the new English society. Goldsmith's lamentation is most famously captured in the following lines:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath has made.
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroy'd, can never be supplied.

Imagine Okonkwo's grandson from the novel *No Longer at Ease*, becoming a product of the English village of Auburn instead of the Igbo village of Umuofia, going to a more urban civilization, and then returning to a desolate Umuofia. Would Okonkwo's grandson have lamented the disappearance of the old Umuofia in terms like the following?

Remembrance wakes with all her busy train
Swells at my breast, and turns the past to pain
In all my wond'ring round this world of care,
In all my griefs — and God has give my share
I still had hopes, my latest hours to crown,
Amidst these humble bowers to lay my down;
To husband out life's taper at the close,
And keep the flame from wasting my repose.

I still had hopes, for pride attends us still
Amidst the swains to show my book-learn'd skill;
Around my fire an evening group to draw
And tell of all I felt and all I saw
And as a hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
Pants to the place from whence at first she flew,
I still had hope, my long vexations passed,
Here to return, Umofia, and die at home at last.

In fact such sentimentality about Umuofia would have been totally alien to Obi, the protagonist in *No Longer at Ease* and grandson of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*.

Indeed, Chinua Achebe himself is far less sentimental about the past than Oliver Goldsmith was. Achebe is much closer to that other British poet of rural life, George Crabbe (1754–1832). Just as Achebe has been prepared to confront some of the great imperfections of Igbo rural life in the nineteenth century, George Crabbe in 1783 explicitly rejected Goldsmith's idealization of English village life.

I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms
For him that grazes or for him that farms,
But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace
The poor laborious natives of the place,
And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,
On their bare heads and dewy temples play;
While some with feebler heads and fainter hearts,
Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts,
Then shall I dare these real ills to hide
In tinsel trappings of poetic bride?