



The Falling Apart of Things in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Albert Chinualumogu Achebe (born 1930) in his novel Things Fall Apart depicts beautifully the falling apart of things once well settled or the demolishing of a well settled civilization of the Ibo (Igbo) clan of Nigeria, West Africa. The novel begins with the introduction and description of the protagonist – Okonkwo – who is “well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond”. He is a man of masculine power, courage and bravery. He is a self made farmer by profession and a successful wrestler by hobby. He is a hardworking man and shows no weakness – emotional or otherwise – to anyone. He is one of the leaders of his village Umuofia and his place in that society is ‘what he has striven for his entire life’. He is known and esteemed as a great warrior in all the nine villages including Umuofia, his own village. Umuofia is the most powerful village among all the nine neighboring villages of the region and can be considered as the capital or the representing village of the same. It has a well established civilization and the same exists in other villages too. The residents of these villages are the people from Ibo (Igbo) Clan, which is the ethnicity of the author himself.

It is not thoroughly according to W B Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” that things fall apart because the centre is unable to hold it. The centre of the Ibo clan is strong enough to hold its people and civilization but the mere anarchy which is loosed upon the world by the English

people affects it and forces it slacken its hold. The blood – dimmed tide loosed from England reaches up to Africa and drowns the innocent people of the Ibo clan. It is this ceremony of the drowning of the innocent Ibo civilization that the best of the civilization surrenders all its convictions before the passionate intensity of the worst. There is not any one thing that falls apart in this novel. The author has used the plural word ‘things’ which indicates more than one at a time. At the first glance it might seem that only one or two things fall in this novel apart viz. Okonkwo and his pride or the Ibo civilization or the both but on a minute speculation we realize that many things fall at once apart with the other. As in a storm many things are blown away at once in this novel many things demolish at once with the advent of the English people, their religion, and their civilization. The falling apart of things in the Things Fall Apart thus enlists the falling apart of several things at once. We can analyze the falling apart of all those things under the headings following below:

The Society:

Achebe depicts the Ibo as a people with great social institution including the wrestling match on a certain market day, various types of sacrifices made to please their chi or their personal god and their aversion for suicide. Their culture is heavy in traditions and laws that focus on fairness of the justice and the consent of the clan. The people are not ruled by any king or chief but by a kind of democracy, where the males meet and make decisions by consensus and in accordance with an “Oracle” that should be written down. It is a male dominated society or a patriarchal society, no doubt, where all the decisions are taken by men and women are expected to follow them. The society believes in polygamy and allows a man to marry more than one wife at a time. Okonkwo’s marrying three wives is an example of polygamy existing in the society. The female members of the clan are nevertheless considered to be inferior to the male members they have got their value in the clan and any suitor intending to marry a lady has to pay a bride price. But of course it is not considered as a sale of one’s daughter. Kinship and blood relations are very important among the Ibo people and it is not that once the groom’s party has paid the bride price

it has bought it for ever and the bride breaks all her relations from her family members. The maternal side of a child is equally important for him as is the paternal. When Okonkwo is expelled from Umuofia and is in exile he is given shelter in Mbanta, the village which his mother belonged to. His maternal uncle Uchendu helps him adequately and never lets him feel as if not in his father's home. Besides, the Ibo maintain a very strong fraternal relation like any developed society of the world. It is not the system of the clan to break all their relations when someone falls in a problem. When Okonkwo is in his rainy days destitute of money, land, crops and everything Obierika still helps him in all possible ways and never lets him feel away from his belongings. It is this depth of the relations and this bond of the blood that falls apart when the English people set foot on to it.

Monetary system is well developed among the Ibo people and they know how to make their transactions. They pay money to the bride's father but do not pay it as is paid while buying an animal in the market. The bride price is not a matter of bargain in the open. It is bargained counting broom – sticks which symbolizes the amount of the bride price. They give respect to every member of the clan equally. Old members of the clan are treated with special regard and reverence. They have a democratic type of governance in which every person of the clan is considered to have equal importance and the consent of everyone is a must for any decision. Everyone is free to give his personal opinion and there is no restriction to vote for or against any particular decision but it never means that a person can be slack in attending the meetings or disposing the duties assigned to him. Whenever an 'ogene' is heard crying 'gome, gome, gome, gome' every man of Umuofia becomes alert and whenever there is any call for a meeting the whole Umuofia is bound to gather at the market place on the prescribed schedule. They have a well developed trade which helps them get their requirements easily fulfilled. They do not have access to a watch but they know how to calculate time by counting and comparing any activity with the occurrences of the market days. The society is not a nomadic but is of an agrarian type and every family in the clan has an 'obi' or a hut separately for themselves and their cattle. Many families have provision for the guest room too where they can receive their guests. The society is

full of passionate hospitality for their guests. Like our Indian society they also treat their guests like gods “*Atithi Devo Bhava*”. They receive their guests with their whole hearted respect and love and provide them ‘kola’ to eat and to drink they give them the palm wine. Any guest is proud to visit his clansman and this is the pride of the Ibo society which falls apart when the English people betray their host.

Not only Umuofia but also the neighboring villages have a well established social system which works on the democratic form of governance. They calculate the benefits and losses of the war and can sacrifice a life or two easily if they have any option to escape it. Once when a person from the Mbaino village kills a girl of Umuofia knowingly or unknowingly for which the latter declares a war against the people of Mbaino but at the same time gives them an option to escape the war. Umuofia also considers the pros and cons of war so does not directly attack on to it but asks them to give a virgin and a young man as the compensation of their loss and the punishment of their misdeed. Mbaino considers the power of Umuofia and their expected defeat in the war and prefers to compromise than to go for war. (Had this system been existing we would not have experienced the two World Wars). Their judicial system is also well developed. It is this judiciousness of the judicial system of Mbaino that Ikemefuna, the son of the accused who had a hand in killing a ‘daughter of Umuofia’ is given to Okonkwo along with a virgin to do whatever they willed to do with them. The society understands that no one has got any right to kill the other or else there is a severe punishment for the accused. However there is no system which allows anyone to kill women or children even if sacrificed for the war or anything. Ikemefuna has been brought young in Umuofia and his death is also sure but he is not killed until he attains his maturity. For every crime there is a punishment in the democratic law of the clan and there is no one above it be it a common member or a leader or warrior like Okonkwo. All the crimes of the clansmen are divided into two types: “male and female”. A male crime is that which a clansman commits openly and bluntly while a female crime is one that is committed by mistake. The punishment for a male crime is decided based on the nature of the crime but for a female crime the punishment is to expel the accused from the clan for not less than a period of seven

years. Okonkwo, the most powerful and esteemed member of the clan and almost their ruler commits a crime of the feminine type. Once when Okonkwo is participating in the funeral ceremony of an oracle and is saluting him with his gun shots his gun “had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy’s heart”. Despite his power, esteem and importance he is punished by the clan and as his punishment he is expelled from Umuofia for a period of seven years. His house is destroyed and his animals are killed. All his plantations and crops are burnt away and all his wealth is taken by the clansmen. In any other society or civilization a person like Okonkwo must have escaped the punishment or would have been exempted of it. But in Umuofia the law is equal for every body and this is the greatness, uniqueness and fairness of the society of the Ibo clan which falls apart in this novel.

The Religion:

Achebe describes the religion of the Ibo Clan as polytheistic, with an emphasis on the spirit world and shamanism. It involves a detailed series of taboos including twins, outcastes, Evil Forest and powerful figures viz. the Chielo women and the fearsome egwugwu judges. Religion is the guiding principle for Ibo people and it influences all political and social decisions. The example, they “never went to war unless its case was clear”, which involves the religious advice. The Ibo gods are mostly manifestation of nature and its element, which makes sense because they are an agricultural society that depends upon the regularity of seasons and natural phenomena to survive. They worship the goddess of the Earth and are always careful to avoid committing sins against her for fear of vengeance that might wipe out the entire generation. The Ibo ancestors also take on a divine nature to some extent. Family plays such a central role in the Ibo life that the spirits of their ancestors are consulted for almost every decision and even serve as judges in legal trials (in the form of masked elders). The Ibo emphasize on numerous gods associated with nature and also on ancestors and somewhat divine contrasts sharply with the single God of Christianity which seems for less directly relevant to the Ibo lifestyle. Every

person in the Ibo Clan has his personal god or “Chi” who is responsible for all his success and failures of the life. But at the same time they also believe that “when a man says ‘yes’ his Chi says ‘yes’ too”. *Karma* or Duty seems to be very important for them. And to a great extent their religion can be understood in terms of the preaching of Lord Krishna in the *Bhagwadgita*.

Achebe has left no option untouched while acclaiming the greatness of the Ibo tradition and religion. They are shown as happy people before the arrival of the Christian Missionaries in Nigeria. They are happy in whatever condition they are – illiterate, ugly and superstitious – and they need no change political, social or religious. But the arrival of the Christian Missionaries has broken their spell and some of their clansmen join them and their religion. The Christian Missionaries are very optimistic and they win their converts with a great patience. They are shown in this novel as politically religious or religiously political people. First they go to a new place and establish their Church there with the proper permission of the local leaders, then they gradually try to win their converts from among them and at the end they captivate them and enslave them. The way the Christian Missionaries entreat the leaders of Umuofia for some piece of land to build a Church and the way the District Commissioner misbehaves with the same expose the slyness of their mechanism.

Achebe has presented the Ibo ancestors as simple hearted, hard working, god fearing and courageous people but the Christian Missionaries in contrast have been portrayed as sly, cunning, iconoclastic and cowardice people. Nevertheless the things once well established fall apart in this novel we know the things have been forced to fall. Okonkwo, the most important and brave person of the clan commits a heinous crime like committing suicide and his fast friend Obierika and others lament that his death is not abrupt but is ‘a secret of what the Christian converts did with him in the custody of the District Commissioner’. Achebe’s lament for the fallen things or the lost tradition, culture and civilization of the Ibo people is clearly vivid from the book. In a way it is the surrender of the conviction of the best before the passionate intensity

of the worst. All this happens with the Ibo people not because their centre cannot hold them for long but because the outside force is too powerful to let it do so. So it remains a vivid question whether really it is the centre that loses its hold to let its things fall apart or there is some other outside thing responsible in the falling apart of the same.

The Ibo Unity:

Once the Ibo people were so strongly united to one another that they would not think to do even a single thing without the permission of the clan and the suggestions of their people but after the arrival of the English people their unity breaks at once. They divide on the name of their religion and become enemy to their own people. Earlier whatever they did they did in accordance with their clan's rules and regulations but as they divide between the two religious camps they start abhorring their own customs and mores like anything. Family relations and the order of the old had a great importance in the Ibo clan but as the young generation joins the new religion begins to avoid the suggestions of their precursors. The new converts enjoy harassing the clansmen more than the outsiders. Those who had always abided by the instructions of the clan and had never thought to harm anybody of their race enjoy lynching them brutally under the camp of the new people. When Okonkwo and the other leaders of Umuofia are arrested in the District Commissioner's cell it is these new converts who torture them the most. The arrival of the new people does not only break the families but also breaks the unity of the whole village. Friends no longer remain friends and the family members no longer the family members. All this credit goes to the new people and their religion which succeeds in penetrating the hearts of the people and dividing it into parts.

Okonkwo and His Pride:

Okonkwo is a self-made, well-respected member of the Umuofia clan. Though outwardly stern and powerful, much of his life is dictated by internal fear. His greatest, overwhelming worry is that he will become like his father – lazy, unable to support his family, and cowardly. Okonkwo considers many of his father’s characteristics to be feminine. Much of Okonkwo’s behavior results from a reactionary desire to be completely unlike his father. This means that Okonkwo attempts to work hard, provide for his family materially, be brave, and be masculine in every possible way. As a result, Okonkwo becomes successful in many ways – he becomes very wealthy, holds a high-ranked position in the community, has three wives, and is known for his skill as a wrestler and warrior. But he also tends toward emotions that are extreme, and his fear motivates him to take actions which are often unnecessary and ultimately destructive. His fear of being feminine leads him to assist in the murder of Ikemefuna whom he loved, to beat his wives, be emotionally distant from his children, and to disown his oldest son Nwoye.

As ‘an uncompromising man is man’, Okonkwo’s relationship towards his family is one of complete dictatorship. His three wives are there to serve him his food and raise his children. By seeing them as his subjects, Okonkwo can justify his brutal behavior against them. He can beat his wives without guilt. He can threaten Ekwefi with a gun when she talks back. He can rebuke Nwoye for listening to old wives’ tales. This sense of ownership is exemplified when Okonkwo takes Ikemefuna’s life. Though he does have qualms about killing Ikemefuna, they are not qualms about whether or not he has the right to do it. Okonkwo feels complete ownership over his family.

There is, however, the problem of love and intimacy. Okonkwo rarely shows these aspects of himself since he considers emotion soft and feminine – but the emotions are there nonetheless. The fact that he lies to Ikemefuna to protect the boy from fear and later feels guilty about killing him are proof of that Okonkwo isn’t devoid of positive human emotions. But, whenever there is

a clash between showing true emotion and maintaining the show of his strength, Okonkwo will always go with the latter.

This doesn't mean that Okonkwo never admits he is wrong; more than anything, Okonkwo tries to follow the laws of the clan. Whenever he breaks them – either deliberately through a loss of temper or inadvertently as in shooting the boy – he never questions the punishments brought upon him. Okonkwo abides by his punishment whether or not he thinks they are fair. This is one way of maintaining his honor and reputation. He reads the laws literally, unlike his father who bent the rules and tried to circumvent certain aspects of the law.

Thus we come to one of the central conflicts in the novel: the divide between Okonkwo's personal pride and the actions forced on him by the external social laws of the Umuofia. His final act of suicide is the ultimate demonstration of things falling apart because it is the first and only time that Okonkwo purposefully and calculatedly breaks the clan laws. As a character, Okonkwo remains pretty consistent throughout the book. We see no sudden changes in behavior or mindset; in fact, that may be Okonkwo's problem – his inability to adapt or compromise his ethics to changing situations that call for more tolerance or compassion. Okonkwo, whose sense of pride and dignity continues until the end, chooses to live and die on his own terms rather than submit to the white man. For Okonkwo, giving in would be against so much of what he has stood for – courage, tradition, and manliness.



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