

Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe · Language: EN

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Overview

Things Fall Apart, first published in 1958, is a foundational work of modern African literature. Set in the late 19th century in the Igbo village of Umuofia, it tells the story of Okonkwo, a proud and fiercely masculine warrior who is determined to rise above his father's legacy of weakness and debt. The novel is divided into three parts: the first depicts Okonkwo's life and status in his community, including his exile after accidentally killing a clansman; the second follows his seven years of exile in his mother's village, during which European missionaries arrive and begin to convert the Igbo people; the third shows his return to a Umuofia that has been irrevocably changed by colonialism, leading to his tragic downfall.

The novel is not merely a personal tragedy but a profound exploration of the collision between African tradition and European colonialism. Achebe presents the Igbo society with depth and nuance, showing its rituals, justice systems, and social structures, while also revealing its internal flaws, such as the treatment of outcasts and women. The arrival of the white man is depicted not as a heroic civilizing mission but as a disruptive and often violent force that exploits divisions within the community. Okonkwo's inability to adapt to change, his fear of appearing weak, and his rigid adherence to a masculine ideal ultimately lead to his suicide, a final act that he sees as an abomination but which symbolizes the destruction of his world.

Things Fall Apart matters because it was one of the first novels to present an African perspective on colonialism, challenging Western narratives that portrayed Africans as primitive or in need of salvation. It has been translated into over fifty languages and is read worldwide as a classic of postcolonial literature. Its themes of identity, change, and the clash of cultures remain deeply relevant, and it continues to be a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of cultural encounter and the human cost of imperialism.

Key Takeaways

- Okonkwo's tragic flaw is his fear of being perceived as weak, which drives him to reject any emotion or action that might resemble his father's gentleness, leading to his downfall.
- The novel shows that Igbo society before colonialism was complex, with its own legal systems, religious beliefs, and social hierarchies, not a primitive or simple culture.
- Colonialism and Christian missionaries exploited existing divisions within Igbo society, such as the treatment of outcasts and the marginalized, to gain converts and undermine traditional authority.

- Change is inevitable, and those who cling too rigidly to tradition, like Okonkwo, may be crushed by it; adaptation and flexibility are necessary for survival.
- The novel challenges the colonial narrative by presenting the arrival of the British as a destructive force that disrupts a functioning, albeit imperfect, society.
- Okonkwo's suicide is a final act of defiance and despair, but it also reflects his inability to accept a world where his values no longer hold sway.
- The role of women in Igbo society is complex: they are often subjugated, yet they hold significant power in certain rituals and as priestesses, and the novel highlights the importance of balance between masculine and feminine principles.

Chapter Summaries

Part One: Chapters 1-13

The first part introduces Okonkwo, a respected warrior and farmer in Umuofia, who is driven by a fear of being like his father, Unoka, a lazy and debt-ridden man. Okonkwo earns fame by defeating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match. He is harsh to his wives and children, especially his eldest son Nwoye, whom he sees as weak. He takes in Ikemefuna, a boy from a neighboring village, as a peace settlement. Over three years, Okonkwo grows fond of Ikemefuna, but when the oracle demands the boy's death, Okonkwo participates in the killing to avoid appearing weak, an act that haunts him. Later, during a funeral ceremony, Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman, and he is exiled to his mother's village for seven years.

Part Two: Chapters 14-19

Okonkwo and his family live in exile in Mbanta, his mother's village. He is received by his maternal uncle, Uchendu, who teaches him about the importance of the motherland and the need to accept his fate. During this time, Christian missionaries arrive in the region. They establish a church in Mbanta and begin converting the Igbo, including outcasts and those who are discontent with traditional society. Okonkwo is disgusted by the new religion and sees it as a threat to his culture. His son Nwoye, who has been troubled by the killing of Ikemefuna and the abandonment of twins, converts to Christianity, which deeply wounds Okonkwo. The missionaries gain a foothold, and Okonkwo's frustration grows as he sees his people divided.

Part Three: Chapters 20-25

Okonkwo returns to Umuofia after his exile, but he finds that the village has changed. The missionaries have built a church and a school, and some villagers have converted, causing a breakdown in traditional authority. Okonkwo is determined to fight against the new order, but he is isolated. The District Commissioner, a British colonial official, summons the leaders of Umuofia to a meeting, where they are humiliated and imprisoned. After they are released, a crowd gathers, and Okonkwo, in a moment of rage, kills a court messenger who tries to break up the meeting. Realizing that his people will not go to war, Okonkwo hangs himself. The District

Commissioner, who sees the event as a curiosity, plans to write about it in a book, reducing Okonkwo's tragedy to a mere paragraph.

Themes

- Tradition vs. change
- Masculinity and fear
- Colonialism and its impact
- Identity and exile
- Religion and conversion
- Family and generational conflict

Notable Quotes

- "Turning and turning in the widening gyre The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;" — These lines are from W.B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming', which Achebe uses as an epigraph for the novel, setting the tone for the theme of disintegration.
- "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond." — Opening of the novel, establishing Okonkwo's reputation as a great warrior and leader.
- "He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists." — Describing Okonkwo's physical response to frustration, highlighting his violent nature.
- "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." — Spoken by Obierika to Okonkwo after the arrival of the missionaries, explaining the divisive impact of colonialism.
- "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." — Part of Obierika's lament, a key line that echoes the novel's title and theme.
- "I am one of them now. I am one of them now." — Nwoye's response when asked about his conversion, showing his embrace of the new religion and his separation from his father.
- "He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger." — The final lines of the novel, revealing the District Commissioner's dismissive and colonial perspective on the events.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Things Fall Apart about?

Things Fall Apart is about the life of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo warrior in Nigeria, and the impact of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on his community. It explores his personal struggles with masculinity and fear, and the tragic consequences of his inability to adapt to change, leading to his downfall.

Is Things Fall Apart worth reading?

Yes, it is a classic of world literature and a foundational text of African literature. It offers a powerful and nuanced perspective on colonialism, culture, and identity. Its themes are universal and its storytelling is compelling, making it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in history, literature, or human nature.

How does Things Fall Apart end?

Spoiler: Okonkwo, after killing a court messenger in a moment of rage, realizes his people will not go to war against the British. He hangs himself, an act considered an abomination in Igbo culture. The District Commissioner, who sees the event as a curiosity, plans to write about it in a book, reducing Okonkwo's tragedy to a mere paragraph.

Who should read Things Fall Apart?

Anyone interested in African history, postcolonial literature, or classic novels. It is also a great choice for students and readers who want to understand the effects of colonialism from a non-Western perspective. Its themes of tradition, change, and identity are relevant to all readers.

How long does it take to read Things Fall Apart?

The book is relatively short, around 209 pages. At an average reading speed of about 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 4 to 5 hours to read. Most readers can finish it in a few sittings.