

ISRG Journal of Education, Humanities and Literature (ISRGJEHL)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Edu Humanit Lit

ISSN: 2584-2544 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjehl/>

Volume – II Issue – VI (November-December) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly



From Grace to Disgrace: Analysis of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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| Received: 19.11.2025 | Accepted: 25.11.2025 | Published: 30.11.2025

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Abstract

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." This African proverb suggests that while individual efforts might lead to quick results, the most meaningful and lasting achievements, in a society are often the result of shared efforts that bring people and ideas together. The current paper seeks to investigate the reasons why Okonkwo, who achieves glory and fame, fails at the end of the story. The purpose of the research is, de facto, to shed light on the values that Africans inherited in the past as reflected in *Things Fall Apart*. It seeks to explore, as well, how the imperfections in the Igbo culture are used or manipulated, by foreign cultures to help the hero of *Things Fall Apart* collapse. The findings reveal that the failure of Okonkwo translates the vulnerability of the whole Igbo community. Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, the researchers bring to surface the aesthetic message of Achebe that, as culture is dynamic, we should take time and investigate what is good and bad in our cultures and take action towards improvement. Otherwise, we will all end up like the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: postcolonial literature, *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo culture, downfall

I. Introduction

It is worthy to point out right from the onset that a writer's function in a society includes but is not limited to teaching, motivating, and amusing the public. The writer also serves as a cultural steward who protects legacy and molds stories. Acting, often, as a voice for the underprivileged, and/or else as a mirror reflecting society's good and bad features, writers can also educate by stimulating critical thinking and promoting social change. Interestingly, Ojaide (2009:18) remarks that "African literature will remain that literature that responds to the concerns and expresses the sensibility and aspirations and ideals of African people in a form and manner that they see as part of their living reality."

Achebe, as one of those writers that Ojaide celebrates, undoubtedly falls within the pioneering African scholars who have tackled issues pertaining to enlighten and heighten their people's conscience and cultural values. He takes time to examine and then aesthetically exposes, both the perfections and imperfections of his community's worldview, the African early encounter with European colonial administration on the pages of his novel *Things Fall Apart*. By acting so, Achebe aims at raising awareness so that the Igbo culture should be examined, in the course of time, and reject 'controversial societal norms' that may create misunderstanding or else disturb pacific coexistence within the community.

In fact, through *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brings to surface the conflict of culture that once opposed the Igbo culture to the British ones. The novel indisputably highlights the Ibo people's attachment to their culture. They examine life exactly as their ancestors and their perceptions are common. Their traditional government is based on wisdom. Obedience to cultural norms is perceived as obedience to their deities.

However, everything has been broken by the settlement of the British missionaries in the Iboland. British missionaries have developed a number of strategies in the process of domination. For instance, the ideology that the queen of England has unbelievable power around the world, the creation of schools, since they know that everything starts in the mind, the initiation of a political government to control people and deprive them of their self-realization etc... The omniscient narrator in *Things Fall Apart* informs the reader that "the arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta" (Achebe, 1958:101). *Things Fall Apart* works as not only a celebration of the then and untouched African culture but an attack on the Western imperial processes which disgrace and strive to annihilate the African ways of life.

The novel has brought its author continual worldwide attention, literary recognition and appraisal. Saif Al-Deen (2025:375) rationalizes that "with the 1958 publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe has been universally acknowledged as the progenitor of the African literary movement." Thus, over many years, topics such as the influence of western culture on the Igbos, the conflict between African ways of life and change to the colonizer's culture, the position of women in the Igbo community, etc...have been a matter of discussion among African writers and critics.

Moreover, the stated issues have generated endless debate over different fields such us, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and literature. Though *Things Fall Apart* has received worldwide attention from critics there are areas unexplored. there are some

areas that thematically remain unexplored Saif Al-Deen (2025:376) while summarizing Foley (2010) has this to say: "Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an open venue that is inundated with several issues, arguments, and themes that need further investigation. Among the arguments that remain unaddressed is the fate and downfall of the protagonist under the worldview of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." Ikenna (2017:2) rationalizes that: "...the debate on the novel [*Things Fall Apart*] can hardly be said to have been closed..."

It follows then from the above statements, that after approximately sixty-eight years of its publication, the novel does not only touch on contemporary issues but still has some unaddressed themes. At the heart of such preoccupations lies the question of why is it that Okonkwo who achieves glory finally fails? What imperfections, among the Igbo themselves, has contributed to the downfall?

Researchers who approached *Things Fall Apart* from the angle of culture, support that Achebe mainly writes the novel to react to the fallacious Eurocentric points of view that Africans are wild and uncivilized (Célestin & Frank, 2018, Dr. Mamta, 2025). Saif Al-Deen (2025:375) is of the view that among "a plethora of reasons stand behind Achebe's decision to write *Things Fall Apart*, positioning it among the classics of literature. Of these key reasons is his discontent with European representations of Africans." Andrew (2001:42) also supports that "...the primary motive cause for Okonkwo's destruction must be located in the fact of British colonisation of Iboland."

However, what constitutes the core rational behind the current research resides in Okonkwo's rise and downfall, in particular, and the Igbo community's rise and downfall, in general, are mostly not attributed to the power of the British missionaries; rather these events result from the imperfections that exist within the Igbo community itself. In other words, it is true that the British missionaries build houses, a school, a church, and they create shops. Notwithstanding, the imperfections of the Igbo community such as the killing of twins, the rejection of the Osu, the resistance for change, the apparently senseless decrees of the gods, the oracle, the societal privileging of the masculine and other internal vices that are responsible for the downfall of the Igbo Culture in the novel.

The current research would certainly help raise awareness that rather than accusing other factors as responsible for the demise of the Igbo Culture, we had better look for and examine Igbo culture, in particular, and African cultures, in general. Such endeavor would help find out and identify the imperfections that, unless dealt with correctly, may cause serious misunderstanding within the community members and thus contribute to its collapse. In terms of theoretical framework, the study relies on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism to examine the British missionaries' settlement in the Igbo land and Okonkwo's resistance to the new order.

II. Overview on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism

As we live in a society, there is certainly actions and reactions within the individuals of the society. The so-called actions and reactions are very often manipulated by traditional and cultural norms that regulate them. In other words, Individuals' actions and reactions are mostly based on societal rules and regulations (Bunge, 1974).. Society itself is the product of shared socio-cultural norms that guide human relations that are transmitted across generations. Social interaction is therefore the process by

which people act and react in relation to others and this is what the theory of Symbolic Interactionism is about.

In fact, the term Symbolic Interactionism was initially introduced by Herbert Blumer in the year 1937 in his book entitled *Social Psychology*. Though the term was first coined in the year 1937, the fundamental ideas that guide the perspective are said to be the ideas of Herbert Mead, who was the teacher of Herbert Blumer. (Syamsudin et al., p. 64). Symbolic Interactionism is a theory that focuses on how individuals create and interpret meaning through social interactions. It supports that our actions and reactions towards one another depend on the societal norms that dictate us how to perceive others (George, 2015).

Symbolic Interactionism theory explains that people mostly view individuals of their environments according to the subjective meanings that the society, they live in, attach to those individuals. The following diagram shows clearly how the theory interactively functions:

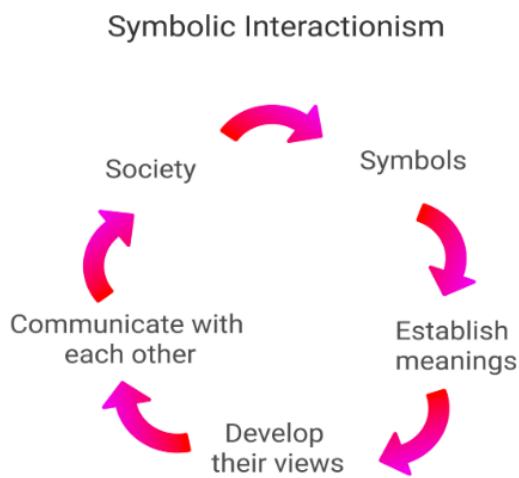


Diagram adapted from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/symbolic-interaction-theory.html>

Since the theory of Symbolic Interactionism sees society as the venue of individuals' everyday interactions, then the socio-cultural values could be modified through social interaction to allow people to share understanding. Thus, as researchers, we can rightly use the theory of Symbolic Interactionism to examine how characters and authors interpret situations and as well as how social and cultural norms function within a given narrative. Through interaction, individuals continuously create, negotiate, and modify norms. This dynamism of interactions with others and humans' ability to take others' perspectives into account is so vital to how we navigate social life. Overall, based on the above discussions, the theory of symbolic Interactionism will definitely help illuminate the complexities of power dynamics, social status, identity, and ideology present in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

III. The British missionaries' strategic encroachment in the Igbo land: Towards the dismantling of the African culture

When the British missionaries invaded Nigeria, they did not only dominate parts of the country's geography but also its history through the culture, tradition and customs of the indigenous people including their religion and personality. After the arrival of British

missionaries in the Igbo land, villagers decide to consult the oracle about their future with the new comers and the oracle warns them about the coming of other white men that can destroy everything done by their ancestors, "It is said that other white men were on their way" (Achebe, 1958:97).

The jolts clash starts at the time when three strangers arrive on horseback in Mbanta, a village close to Umuofia. Then, things start to change by their presence in the land. At first sight, villagers develop a feeling of distrust as they have different appearance compared to the villagers. But gradually, they begin to gain people's confidence; specially when they make friends with some great men and leaders of the clan like Ogbuehi Ugonna and Nnama (Achebe, 1958).

Their first strategies, to attract the native people, are to accept whatever Igbo people reject and condemn in the name of culture, tradition and custom. Even when the British missionaries ask Umuofians' a land where they can build their church, they were given a dark forest which, according to the Igbos, is full of evil spirits and abominations; but they have accepted the evil forest with gladness.

Then, the British missionaries welcome everything that is thrown away by the Igbos such as: the osu people, the outcasts, the twins, leprosy and smallpox people. Indeed, the strategy is to deprive Ibo people of all form of ability for self-realization. They are quite aware that everything starts in the mind. Thus, they create schools not mainly to develop Nigeria but to teach them how to communicate with them in other to fulfill their objectives. The new opportunity given to the outcasts has developed a negative view point on them about their ancestors' beliefs until they openly declare that "All the god were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines" (Achebe, 1958: 110).

For the sake of communication, the missionaries brainwash the natives that everything turns around the queen of England in terms of faith "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you, we shall come to your rescue." (Achebe, 1958:137). They use music in their church to exploit the tormented souls like the one of Nwoye that suffers from his father's temper due to the killing of Ikemefuna and the throwing away of twins in the evil forest on behalf of tradition. All the cited aspects have undeniably contributed to Nwoye's change of attitude.

Additionally, the missionaries give a meaningful space to the Igbo women, as women do not have positive image within the clan. Akweni, Amadi's wife, who from four birth gets twins that are successively thrown away in the dark forest is a practical example. The white man approaches her by telling her that she is a person and has the same role, right and aim as men. Then, Igbo women participate in all the activities of the church. They are able, for instance, to scrub the church for the Easter ceremony. They have finally gained back their once lost voices and identity.

The missionaries also create treading store in Umuofia by excluding everything that was preferred by citizen in terms of seasonal business except for palm oil. At the first time, from living memories, kernel becomes so important in Igbo communities' business field; "...palm-oil and kernel become things of great price, and much money flowed to Umuofia" (Achebe, 1958: 126). At the end they create conflicts to deviate the natives' regard from

their religion, culture, tradition and custom. This attitude, however, has pushed Okonkwo to react to the newly established order.

IV. Okonkwo's fierce and non-negotiable resistance to the new order

From his childhood to his manhood, Okonkwo's struggle is to be like his ancestors but not like his late father. He dislikes his father for his lack of ambition and his weakness. His mother, sisters and brothers have suffered enough in poverty because his father could not provide food for them.

Indeed, throughout all his life, Okonkwo avoids weaknesses. For that, he works hard to be the clan hero and a great wrestler. He has a good fortune of three wives and many children (Achebe, 1958). He also values his ancestors' tradition, culture, custom and religion in Umuofia. Okonkwo is happy to see that on the Eke market day, all strangers who enter the village are sons of their land whose mothers had been buried in the land.

Nevertheless, many people convert to the white men's religion, especially those who do not have any title, lazy men, and women, who see the church as a place of comfort. Nwoye is among them. For that, Okonkwo and his son are in conflict because he has embraced the new religion. Okonkwo beats his son until he moves to settle in the church and affirms that "He is not my father" (Achebe, 1958:101). Furthermore, Nwoye becomes the first native teacher in the white man's school. The first thing that Mr. Kiaga tells him was "Blessed is he who forsake his father and his mother for my sake" (Achebe, 1958:108).

Nwoye believes to convert his mother, sisters and brothers but Okonkwo gathers his family in his obi to prevent them to follow Nwoye in his foolishness since the latter is neither his son nor part of his family. For Okonkwo, it is Egonwanne, the best orator, who drives their clan to cowardliness. For him, he is a great obstacle "His sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash" (Achebe, 1958:141). Elders of the clan decide to make out the white men and their religion if the clansman decide to follow them. They must kill their brothers "We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil, we must root them out too. And we must do it now" (Achebe, 1958:144).

The Igbo community's world view is certainly in the move as it faces so many challenges both inside and outside. Achebe's aesthetic message does seem to recall the African proverb that says: "When the beating of the drum changes, dancers must change their style." As repetition is pedagogical, Achebe recalls it even in his novel *No Longer at Ease*.

In fact, in *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe depicts the impact of Western culture on Obi Okonkwo's character who has studied in England for nearly four years. Once back home, he looks down on his cultural values, tradition and custom. He goes far, in his obsession of western vision, in his plan to marry Clara, an osu (a traditionally untouchable caste). For Obi, it does not matter, just as it does not matter now that his father is a convert to Christianity (a conversion that was once quite scandalous).

Achebe is not just telling a story but rather, he is also evaluating a system that leads to endanger the social cohesion. Many would have said that Achebe's goal, in writing *Things Fall Apart*, is to right the many wrongs brought about by the misperceptions that Europeans once had and still have on Africans, but a critical

analysis, of the novel, would also suggest that misconceptions are within Africans themselves who, due to prejudices, were not able to create a more inclusive society.

In other words, other ways of looking at things are equally important, which is crucial for moving beyond prejudices and stereotypes and move positively toward a more inclusive global understanding. Samatar (2011:65) argues that "when things fall apart and Umuofia's independence is lost, it is due to cracks in its own structure; unhappy and outcast people whose desire for a different way of life allows Christianity, and with it the colonial project as a whole, to take root". Unless imperfections are corrected, the Igbos would not come up together and fight outside forces. When Okonkwo, himself, finds that adaptation to the new established order is quite unbearable, he kills himself at the end of the story.

V. Conclusion

A critical analysis of all the above circumstances gathered, by Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, from the beginning to the end, shows his capacity to understand the consciousness of Africans, in general, and the Igbo people in particular. As a result, since everything happens for a reason, Achebe, aesthetically, denounces the huge accusation of foreign values and *western* culture as the only destructor of the Igbo way of life or world view. Rather, Achebe underlines Africans' lack of discernment in rejecting everything foreign to them as long with the imperfections within Africans cultural norms which hinder a more inclusive global understanding among people of the same community.

By using Symbolic Interactionism as a theory, the researchers are able to depict how Achebe advises Africans, in general, and Ibo people, in particular to make a kind of retrospection on their socio-cultural background and traditional rites to correct imperfections to help create more social cohesion and understanding among Africans, in general, the Igbos, in particular. Should we recall that the masculine character of Okonkwo and the intolerability of the tradition are the main reasons for the conversion of Nwoye and many other Umuofians into Christianity and thus abandon most of the traditions and customs of his own tribe. Unless necessary measures are taken, many like Nwoye would turn their back to the tradition.

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