

Indigenous Traditions in the Face of Western Influences: Exploring Ethical Conflict in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Aminu Suleiman

PhD Scholar, Department of Languages, Literature and Aesthetics, Pandit Deendayal
Energy University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India.
Lecturer: Department of English Language Education,
School of Continuing Education,
Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola, Nigeria.

Article Received: 25/03/2024

Article Accepted: 27/04/2024

Published Online: 29/04/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.4.153

Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), delves beyond mere storytelling as it offers a profound exploration of Indigenous traditions and ethical considerations within the context of Nigeria's Igbo and Western cultures, the latter encroaching through colonialism and missionary activities. This classic work of African literature serves as a powerful lens through which to understand the ethical or moral conflict that engulfs the characters, compelling them to make decisions amid competing moral considerations. This paper posits that the conflict arises from the disparities or tensions between what the traditional Igbo community, on one hand, and the colonialists, on the other, perceive as the right or morally acceptable course of events, all within the broader backdrop of the clash between traditionality and modernity. It examines how these ethical conflicts are depicted in the novel in the actions and experiences of the characters. The paper reveals that the confrontation between the ancestral traditions of the Igbo society and the Western belief and value systems, through colonial and missionary activities, as witnessed in the novel, underscores ethical tensions as characters navigate the intersection of traditionality and Westernization, amid other broader issues of justice, loyalty, freedom, and cultural preservation. Through meticulous textual analysis of decisive moments in the narrative, this study illustrates how characters grapple with ethical choices arising from the interaction of the two traditions.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Ethical Conflict, Indigenous Traditions, *Things Fall Apart*, Traditionality and Modernity

Introduction

Indigenous cultures worldwide have long grappled with the complexities of maintaining their traditional values and practices amidst the encroachment of Western influences. This tension between preservation and adaptation forms a central theme in Chinua Achebe's seminal work, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Through the lens of the Igbo community in Nigeria, Achebe vividly illustrates the ethical conflicts that arise when Indigenous traditions intersect with colonial forces. This paper delves into the intricate portrayal of this struggle in the novel, examining how the characters navigate the clash between their cultural heritage and the imposition of Western values and institutions, as well as the ethical or moral conflict that engulfs them, compelling them to make decisions amid competing moral considerations.

Achebe's masterful account not only gives a distinctive depiction of the intense clash between Igbo culture and Western encroachment, but also offers significant insights into the suppressed resilience of the natives in resisting the changes against their indigenous knowledge traditions and the subsequent falling apart of the society that clan no longer act as one. The main character, Okonkwo, stands as a poignant embodiment of both the resilience and the tragic consequences that stem from the clash between the Igbo culture and Western intrusion.

Since the publication of this novel in 1958, a substantial number of scholars have undertaken the task of analysing it through different lenses in attempts to unravel its multifaceted meanings. Themes of cultural imperialism, Indigenous values, identity crisis, the tragic consequences of colonialism and so on, which generally contribute to the grasp of the clash between African and Western traditions, have been explored.

However, amid this extensive body of research, there seems a gap, which is the nuanced ethical conflicts that simmer underneath the surface of what Ogbujah, (2014) in Gwunireama, (2021: 28) describes as "*the central theme of missionary incursion of Igboland*" that calls for closer examination.

This paper, therefore, attempts to reconstruct the ethical conflict by exploring how such instances are portrayed in the novel, casting spotlights on the ethical issues faced by the characters as they navigate the shifting grounds of tradition and modernity. These ethical conflicts, while embedded in the broader cultural clash, warrant individual scrutiny due to their profound implications for the characters' choices and the novel's moral landscape.

Literature Review: Previous Studies on *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart (1958), has continued to remain a major milestone in the realm of African literature. It is widely acclaimed and acknowledged as a pioneer work that played a crucial role in introducing African literature to the global audience,

“the novel is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, one of the first to receive global critical acclaim” (Roy, 2018, p. 29). “*Things Fall Apart* has caught the attention of such a wide range of African as well as non-African readers that it is no exaggeration in saying that this novel be counted as one of the most outstanding works of literature in modern time” (Ali and Bamshad, 2018, p. 19). The novel represents one of the earliest written reactions to the “colonialist literature and history which are replete with lots of misrepresentation about Africa as a continent and Africans as a people” (Agho, 2010: 170).

Islam and Shuchi (2019) argue that Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* serves as a cornerstone in the portrayal of the African experience, offering a unique narrative perspective while catalysing transformative change within the African milieu. They emphasize Achebe's dual objective of presenting an alternative discourse on the African experience and instigating a reimagining of the African world: "This book is also part of Achebe's efforts not only to present the African experience through a different order of discourse, but also to transform and re-invent the African world" (p. 11). This suggests that Achebe's literary ambitions extend beyond mere cultural representation to encompass active societal change. Furthermore, Achebe's narrative explicitly addresses the oppression faced by Indigenous peoples, with the colonial power portrayed as the primary oppressor: "In the later part of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe voices out for the oppressed natives, and identifies the colonial power as the oppressor" (p. 20). This stance underscores Achebe's commitment to advocating for the marginalized and condemning the injustices perpetrated by colonial forces.

Other scholars have focused their analysis on the portrayal of indigenous ethical values in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Gwunireama (2021) contends that in addition to highlighting colonial interference in the African context, Achebe aimed to showcase ethical principles within the narrative. He identifies several values, including "submission and obedience to the laws of the land, the preservation of life, the transient nature of circumstances, and the need for remorse and repentance," as exemplified in the novel (p. 32).

Uwah (2015), in analysing the film adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*, offers a compelling perspective that diverges from conventional interpretations. He posits that Okonkwo's death should not be interpreted solely as a defeat of African culture by colonialism, but rather as a testament to the community's unwavering struggle against injustice: "The death of Okonkwo therefore cannot be read as a defeat of African culture by colonialism, but as an unflinching statement on how serious his community's cultural struggle against injustice was" (p. 116). This viewpoint

challenges the prevailing notion surrounding Okonkwo's demise, suggesting that it signifies more than just the capitulation of African culture to colonial pressures.

Furthermore, Uwah asserts that Okonkwo's death serves as an ideological response to colonial ethnocentrism and advocates for a re-evaluation of identity construction from a grassroots perspective in Africa: "an ideological response to colonial ethnocentrism" and a call to "review identity construction from a bottom-up paradigm in Africa." This interpretation highlights the significance of Okonkwo's tragedy as a symbol of cultural resistance and the preservation of identity amidst the encroachment of colonialism.

This paper presents a unique perspective compared to prior studies which predominantly centred on themes like those mentioned earlier. It offers an innovative approach by highlighting ethical conflicts underlying the broader narrative of cultural clash. It explores the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters and analyses how these conflicts impact their ethical judgment and decision-making processes.

Father-Son Ethical Divide: Nwoye's Ethical Struggle

Achebe portrays the central character, Okonkwo, as someone intolerant of the perceived weakness he associates with women. This viewpoint reflects the patriarchal cultural norms of the Igbo ethnic group, which prioritize men over women. Okonkwo's stance is further intensified by the failure of his father to fulfill the expected role of a traditional Igbo man prior to his passing. Instead, his father's death left the family burdened with debts, a significant disgrace for Okonkwo. Consequently, Okonkwo harbors contempt for his father's values, including traits like gentleness and idleness. Achebe tells the reader that "*Okonkwo was ruled by one passion - to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness*" (p. 11). Okonkwo perceives similar traits in his son Nwoye, leading him to relentlessly scold and physically discipline him to distance himself from reminders of his father's perceived failings.

Okonkwo is resolute in his efforts to mould Nwoye into a strong and capable young man who can assume leadership of the family after Okonkwo's eventual passing and integration into the ancestral realm. He aspires for Nwoye to attain wealth, enabling him to provide abundant sustenance for the customary feeding of the ancestors, a significant tradition within their culture. This vision reflects Okonkwo's desire to ensure the family's prosperity and continuity even beyond his own lifetime.

Nonetheless, Okonkwo's authoritarian approach to parenting stifles Nwoye's authentic self-expression. Nwoye, who deviates from the conventional image of the traditional Igbo man envisioned by his father, feels restricted and incapable of openly conveying his thoughts and emotions. Consequently, when Christian missionaries

arrive in Mbanta, they introduce an alternative perspective that embraces Nwoye's innate nature more openly. The missionaries garner a few converts, particularly after their church withstands the perceived perils of the Evil Forest where it was constructed.

Nwoye has been covertly attending the missionaries' preaching sessions in either the open marketplace or the village playground. His moral dilemma is evident in his surreptitious participation in these sessions, where he wrestles with the conflicting pressures of tradition, familial expectations, and his personal quest for identity and truth. One morning, while passing by the church on his way from a neighbouring village, Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, spotted Nwoye among the Christians. As anticipated, he informed Okonkwo, resulting in Nwoye's punishment. Okonkwo vehemently opposes the spread of Christianity in his community, viewing it as a threat to the traditional Igbo way of life. Consequently, Nwoye's alignment with the Christians is perceived as a betrayal of his father's beliefs and customs. Given Okonkwo's staunch traditionalist stance, his punishment of Nwoye serves as a means to assert his authority and dissuade him from further involvement with the Christian missionaries.

To Nwoye, Christianity presents an alternative set of principles centred on love, forgiveness, and acceptance, which deeply resonate with him compared to the harshness and inflexibility he encounters from his father at home. In contrast to Okonkwo, who staunchly adheres to the stern deities and views empathy as a weakness to be suppressed, Nwoye possesses a gentle and empathetic nature. His tender spirit yearns for solace and understanding. This solace appears to have arrived with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Mbanta, the village where his family sought sanctuary after fleeing from Umuofia following his father's unintentional killing of a clansman. Nwoye's initial exploration of Christianity and his subsequent journey toward embracing this faith are encapsulated in this passage:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, 'Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul - the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (Achebe, 1958, p. 118).

This moment serves as a crucial turning point for Nwoye within the story's narrative. He finds himself unable to meet the lofty expectations set by Okonkwo, further compounded by societal norms such as the ritualistic abandonment of twins and the tragic execution of his close friend Ikemefuna, as decreed by the revered Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. These occurrences widen the gap between Nwoye's personal convictions and those upheld by the Igbo community. Nwoye's deep affection for Ikemefuna, resembling that of a brother, coupled with Okonkwo's paternal influence over the boy's life, magnifies the impact of these events. The clan's decision to sacrifice Ikemefuna, despite his integration into Umuofia's social fabric, deeply wounds Nwoye's spirit.

His conversion to Christianity is primarily driven by ethical considerations, as he seeks solace and moral guidance within the Christian faith, which he hopes will provide him with a sense of belonging and a way to escape the oppressive traditional norms haunting his young soul that his father represents: *the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed* (118). Through Christianity, Nwoye gains a new identity and the freedom to be himself. “Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith.” (122).

Ethical Dilemma of the Umuofia Converts

Achebe illustrates the ethical tension faced by the converts caught between their newly adopted Christian beliefs and their traditional Igbo customs. The conflict arises when the Christian women, having attended church on a Sunday, are unable to return home due to the annual worship of the earth goddess and the presence of the masked spirits, vital aspects of Igbo traditional spirituality. This situation forces them to navigate a delicate balance between their commitment to Christianity and the expectations of their society's ancestral traditions. The ethical dilemma depicted in this situation arises when, on one hand, the Christian women feel obligated to attend church services, aligning with their newfound faith, and are unable to return home due to the presence of the traditional Igbo egwugwu masked spirits, integral to their ancestral customs. On the other hand, their male counterparts, adhering to traditional practices, have gone to beg the egwugwu to temporarily withdraw, highlighting the tension between respecting their Christian convictions and upholding the traditions and beliefs of their community. This scenario is depicted here:

The annual worship of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday, and the masked spirits were abroad. The Christian women who had been to church could not therefore go home. Some of their men had gone out to beg the egwugwu to retire for a short while for the women to pass. They agreed and were already retiring, when Enoch boasted aloud that they would not dare to touch a

Christian. Whereupon they all came back and one of them gave Enoch a good stroke of the cane, which was always carried. (Achebe, 1958, pp. 148-149).

The ethical dilemma faced by the converts in this scenario revolves around the clash between their traditional beliefs and their newly adopted Christian faith. On one hand, they have grown up in a society deeply rooted in the worship of the earth goddess and the reverence for masked spirits, which are integral parts of their cultural and religious traditions. On the other hand, Christianity demands the abandonment of these traditional practices. The conflict arises when the annual worship of the earth goddess coincides with a Sunday, a day when Christians traditionally attend church. This scheduling conflict puts the Christian converts in a difficult position, as they are torn between fulfilling their religious obligations to attend church and adhering to the customs and rituals of their ancestral beliefs.

The Desire for Personal Gain: Ethical Motivation of a Social Convert

Achebe underscores the character of Ogbuefi Ugonna in *Things Fall Apart* as emblematic of a revered figure within Igbo society who yields to the external influences of colonialism and Christianity. Despite his esteemed position within Umuofia, his embrace of Christianity comes as a profound shock to the community. The advent of colonialism and the spread of Christianity posed a direct challenge to traditional power structures and allegiances. In adapting to these external forces, Ugonna perceived it to preserve his status and authority amidst a shifting landscape. Aligning himself with the new order may have appeared as a strategic move to maintain relevance and influence. The ethical motivation behind his conversion has indeed been proven because, according to Achebe, “*the white missionary was very proud of him and he was one of the first men in Umuofia to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, or Holy Feast as it was called in Igbo*”. (Achebe, 1958, p. 139). When Okonkwo finally returns to Umuofia from his exile in Mbanta, he discovers that the village has been greatly transformed by the arrival of the missionaries. Things have begun to fall apart, and the reality he confronts is encapsulated in the following:

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians. (Achebe, 1958, p. 139).

The colonial administration often offered economic incentives to those who converted to Christianity or cooperated with colonial authorities. This could include access to trade opportunities, education for their children, or employment in colonial

institutions. Ogbuefi Ugonna, like others, may have been swayed by the prospect of improving his economic situation through collaboration. Even though the Igbos consider the religion that the white man brought as ‘lunatic’, “*but he had also built a trading store and for the first-time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia*” (142).

Seeking Freedom from Oppressive Social Norms within Igbo Society

In the Igbo community depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, an *osu* represents a marginalized member devoted to a deity. *Osus* are prohibited from entering marriage with free-born individuals or being married by them, residing in a separate area close to the Great Shrine, and displaying signs of their prohibited status such as untidy hair. They are excluded from social gatherings, unable to provide refuge to free-born individuals, devoid of any clan distinctions, and laid to rest in the Evil Forest upon passing.

... a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart-a taboo for ever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. (Achebe, 1958, p. 125).

Despite their ostracization, some *osu* see the advent of Christianity as a potential avenue for acceptance and inclusion. When they witness the Christian church embracing twins, who are traditionally seen as a curse in Igbo culture, they perceive a glimmer of hope for their own acceptance. They notice that the new religion embraces inclusivity and hospitality more than their traditional Igbo beliefs. The acknowledgment that the new religion embraces others who are socially marginalized, such as twins, instils in them a sense of optimism that they too could be accepted and acknowledged as equals. This longing for acceptance symbolizes a liberation from the social stigma and discrimination they have endured:

These outcasts, or osu, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so, one Sunday two of them, went into the church. There was an immediate stir; but so great was the work the new religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came in. (Achebe, 1958, p. 125).

Two outcasts, after embracing the new faith and shaving off their hair, *the mark of his forbidden caste-long, tangled, and dirty hair* (126), tabooed from razor, become strong adherents of the new religion. Their motivation includes a deep desire for belonging and a sense of identity. By converting to the new faith and actively participating in its practices, they find a community that accepts them for who they

are, regardless of their *osu* status. This newfound sense of belonging and identity can be seen as a form of liberation from the isolation and discrimination they faced as outcasts.

The two outcasts shaved off their hair, and soon they were the strongest adherents of the new faith. And what was more, nearly all the osu in Mbanta followed their example. It was in fact one of them who in his zeal brought the church into serious conflict with the clan a year later by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water. The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as "Our Father," and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. (Achebe, 1958, p. 126).

The adoption of Christianity by the *osu* represents a shift in belief systems and ethical frameworks. The *osu* find acceptance and empowerment within the Christian community. Their zeal for their newfound faith leads them to take actions that challenge the traditional beliefs of their community. The killing of the sacred python represents a direct challenge to the established religious and cultural practices of the clan. The outcast's zeal in embracing the new religion and their actions can be seen as a form of resistance against the oppressive aspects of their traditional society. They are willing to confront and challenge deeply rooted traditions in their quest for freedom and acceptance within the new faith.

Escape from Cultural Rejection and the Need for Survival

Chinua Achebe hints that the missionaries and their nascent church in the village of Mbanta are starting to impact not just the religious beliefs and rituals of the community but also its fundamental social norms and traditions. One notable instance is their acceptance of the community's first female convert, who faces rejection due to having four sets of twins. The missionaries offer support and inclusion to her and other early converts who are ostracized by the clan for several reasons. By refusing to abandon newborn twins, the missionaries aim to demonstrate to the community that these children are just as natural as any others.

Nneka's motivation to convert to Christianity is driven by a deep desire for acceptance and redemption. In her traditional Igbo society, she was considered an outcast and a source of misfortune because she had borne twins on four previous occasions, which were seen as abominations. The twins were immediately discarded, and she faced social ostracism and criticism. By joining the Christians, she hopes to find a community that will accept her and her unborn child, offering her a chance at redemption and a fresh start.

Nneka's situation is dire within her own culture, where her husband and his family are extremely critical of her due to her history of bearing twins. Her decision to flee and join the Christians represents a form of escape from the cultural rejection and ostracism she faces. It is a way for her to break free from the oppressive norms and expectations of her traditional society.

Nneka's is heavily pregnant again this time as she joins the Christians. Unlike in her previous pregnancies, where her twins were discarded, she sees an opportunity to bring her child into a community that might value and accept them. Nneka is attracted to the Christian community, where she may have found a more compassionate and inclusive environment. Unlike her husband's family, who were glad to see her leave, the Christians may offer her a sense of belonging and support, which is a powerful motivator for going against her Igbo tradition and her subsequent conversion:

At last, the day came by which all the missionaries should have died. But they were still alive, building a new red-earth and thatch house for their teacher, Mr. Kiaga. That week they won a handful more converts. And for the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child. Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance. (Achebe, 1958, p. 121).

In Igbo culture, the birth of twins was once shrouded in superstition and fear, regarded as an abomination and an ominous harbinger of misfortune. Twins were deemed as malevolent beings, capable of ushering death and calamity into the community. Consequently, the practice of abandoning twins in the unforgiving confines of the bush or the foreboding precincts of the Evil Forest emerged as a drastic measure to shield the community from perceived maleficence. This deeply rooted tradition, driven by the collective anxiety to safeguard the greater good, highlighted the extent to which cultural beliefs and the relentless pursuit of communal well-being could lead to the heartbreaking abandonment of innocent lives, all in the name of preserving the social fabric and spiritual harmony of the Igbo society. This can be felt in the following as Obierika mourns his friend's calamities:

Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed

inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time, he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. (Achebe, 1958, p. 100).

Conclusion:

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a profound exploration of ethical conflict within the rich Igbo culture and the encroachment of Western influences. Through the lens of characters like Okonkwo and Nwoye, the clash between traditional Igbo values and the disruptive forces of colonialism and Christianity has been witnessed. This clash brings to the forefront a complex web of ethical dilemmas that challenge the characters' beliefs, choices, and allegiances. Achebe masterfully portrays the importance of ancestral spirits and Indigenous knowledge traditions in Igbo society, contrasting them with the monotheistic beliefs introduced by Christianity. This contrast highlights not only the clash of cultures but also the underlying ethical tensions that arise as individuals navigate the shifting grounds of tradition and modernity.

References:

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Agho, J. A. (2010). Towards a Remediation of Africa's Image: The Colonial Novel and African Reaction. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7(2), 170-178.
- Ali, S., & Bamshad, H. (2018). Things Fall Apart and Chinua Achebe's Postcolonial Discourse. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 6(3), 19-28.
doi:doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0603004>
- Gwunireama, I. U. (2021). Highlights of Ethical Values in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Hermeneutical Approach. *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity & Social Studies*, 1(5), 28-33.

Islam, A. S., & Shuchi, I. J. (2019). Challenging the Colonial Stereotypes or Conforming to Them: Investigating Achebe's Intent in Things Fall Apart. *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, 10(1), 9-26.

Roy, R. K. (2018). Things Fall Apart: An Exploration of Pre-and Post-Colonial Life in Late 19th Century Nigeria. In G. D, *Postcolonial English Literature* (pp. 29-38). New Delhi: Authorspress.

Uwah, I. E. (2015). Things Fall Apart on Screen: Re-thinking Closure in Achebe's Narrative. In J. Ogude (Ed.), *Chinua Achebe's Legacy: Illuminations from Africa* (pp. 106–117). Africa Institute of South Africa. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh8qzqxq.15>