

Block**4****CHINUA ACHEBE: *THINGS FALL APART***

UNIT 1**Africa: A Brief Historical Survey** **5**

UNIT 2**Chinua Achebe: Life, Works, Literature and
Society in Nigeria** **16**

UNIT 3***Things Fall Apart*: Detailed Analysis** **34**

UNIT 4**Specific Features of *Things Fall Apart*** **46**

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In the previous blocks we discussed an early Nineteenth Century Novel and or/ twentieth century Odia Novel in English Translation. This block will discuss a twentieth century African novel – **Chinua Achebe**'s *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, as you know, is a Nigerian novelist of international renown who has made a great contribution by putting African Literature on the literary map of the world. It is only in recent times that public attention has been drawn to African Literature and you may not find much material pertaining to it in your local bookshop or library.

Hence, we have given you a brief historical survey of Africa in **Unit 1** so as to provide you with some background information. In **Unit 2**, we introduce you to the life and works of Chinua Achebe, and to Literature and the society that gave rise to this Literature. In **Unit 3** we offer a detailed analysis of *Things Fall Apart* and finally in **Unit 4**, we examine the specific features of *Things Fall Apart*.

The novel itself is readily available in India these days so please purchase it and read it for a better understanding of the Novel.



ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 1 AFRICA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Pre-Colonial Africa
 - 1.2.1 Africa and the Ancient Egyptian Civilisation
 - 1.2.2 Africa after the End of the Egyptian Civilisation
- 1.3 African History: First Contacts with the Outside World
 - 1.3.1 Africa and Europe: Early Contacts
 - 1.3.2 Africa and the Slave Trade
 - 1.3.3 Africa and European Colonial Powers
- 1.4 Africa under Colonialism
 - 1.4.1 Africa: Two Models of Colonialism
 - 1.4.2 Africa and Foreign Settlers
 - 1.4.3 Black Africans as Bonded Labour
 - 1.4.4 Disruption of Social Life
 - 1.4.5 Colonising the African Mind
 - 1.4.6 European Languages and European Systems of Education in Africa
- 1.5 The Decolonising of Africa
 - 1.5.1 Africans and World War II
 - 1.5.2 Struggle for Freedom
 - 1.5.3 Asian and African Struggle for Independence
 - 1.5.4 Colonial Responses to African Struggles for Independence
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Hints to Check your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to trace, very briefly, the history of the African continent since pre-historic times. Special attention will be paid to life under colonialism and also the process of decolonisation. This will help us understand African literature in general and *Things Fall Apart* better because, as we know, there is a close relationship between literature and the society, which produces it.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In most books of history written by Europeans, the continent of Africa is referred to as 'the dark continent'. This expression - the dark continent - was most probably first used by travellers and missionaries who happened to visit the African continent much before political claims on its territory were made and it was colonised by various European powers. The term 'dark' has been used for describing the continent of Africa because, firstly, these early travellers as well as missionaries considered anything mysterious that they did not understand much

about. Secondly, and more importantly, these first visitors considered Africa to be inhabited by people who were primitive, uncivilised and savages. The colour of ignorance, as we know, is black. According to these early missionaries, the Africans believed in magic and other irrational rituals and customs. Once again, magic is associated with the colour black for example, the term 'black magic'. Finally, there was the most obvious reason for calling Africa the black continent its inhabitants had very dark skin. These opinions, particularly about the Africans being primitive and uncivilised were accepted blindly by most Europeans who entered the continent either for trade or for colonisation. In fact, the colonial administrations built upon this myth of primitivism of the Africans by stating that Africa had no history, no culture, hence, no past.

There was a sound reason behind accepting such an image of the Africans. The European powers used the excuse of 'civilising' these savages for entering Africa and for staying on for the economic and political exploitation of its people. However, as later researches into the history, political and social organisation and cultural achievements have shown, Africa was neither primitive nor uncivilised before the Europeans occupied it. Civilisation, as we know, is much more than technological progress and cannot be equated with the possession of fly-by-wire aircrafts, coloured television sets, personal computers/ laptops/tabs/ ipads, cordless mobile telephones, air-conditioned cars and microwave ovens. If this were so, people belonging to the most ancient civilisations like the Indian, the Chinese, the Egyptian and the South American, would all be primitive and uncivilised. Like these, ancient Africa also boasted of various centres of civilisation with well-organised social and political systems and significant achievements in the fields of fine arts like music and dance. Let us now look at the pre-colonial history of Africa in the next section.

1.2 PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

Africa and the Evolution of Man

By now enough *archeological* and *anthropological* evidence is available to show during the evolutionary process our ancestor – *Australopithecus Africans* or man-ape, as he was called - first emerged on the African continent. The Rift valley region in East Africa was the most probable place where it happened. Excavations at the Olduvai Gorge in what is now called Tanzania have produced ample evidence of being one of the oldest sites of world culture. Discovery of primitive tools of hunting like the hand axe in not only East Africa but also in the Congo Basin and Zimbabwe shows a parallel development of this culture. This also compares well with the developments in other similar centres in India, China and parts of Europe.

1.2.1 Africa and the Ancient Egyptian Civilisation

However, the most fascinating evidence about the cultural development in Africa is provided by a Senegalese scholar - **Cheikh Anta Diop** who claims that the ancient Egyptian civilisation was set up and nurtured by black Africans more than ten thousand years ago. Relying upon evidence from various sources including historical accounts, Cheikh Anta Diop convinces us that when the great Sahara started drying up about 7000 BCE, before which it was a huge lake, a section of Africans began to trek along the route of the river Nile. They finally

settled in the valley at the mouth of the Nile delta before it empties its water into the Mediterranean. Here they set up the great ancient Egyptian civilisation with unprecedented progress in speculative scientific research. This cycle of the civilisation progress lasted many thousands of years during the course of which these black Africans colonised neighbouring territories inhabited by the whites. The *Semitic* world of today is perhaps a result of a free crossbreeding between the two races.

1.2.2 Africa after the End of the Egyptian Civilisation

However, like many other ancient civilisations, this civilisation set up by black Africans in the valley of the Nile also ran out of steam. In the course of time it was overrun by the Persians. Then, came the Macedonians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Turks in that order. More recently, the French and the English occupied the territory. This prolonged colonisation resulted in the snapping of the links between the delta and original centres of civilisation back in Africa. These centres lost touch with not only the Egyptian part but with one another as well, surviving for some time as isolated pockets during which period they concentrated more on the social, political and moral organisation of their societies rather than on material development. In the meantime, Europe benefited from the ancient Egyptian civilisation via the Greeks and the Romans. Thus, while Africa lagged behind in technological progress, Europe marched ahead full steam. The great empires of Ghana, Mali and Ife in West Africa, Ethiopia in the East, Zimbabwe in the West and the Congo in the South West are a testimony to the great civilisation that the Africans built thousands of years ago.

Whether this hypothesis of Cheikh Anta Diop is wholly true or partially false is really not so important for us for the time being. What matters is the fact that it establishes, beyond any doubt, that Ancient Africa at that time was as much primitive or developed, as much barbaric or civilised as any other part of the world, including Europe. It, therefore, proves as false the opinion of the European powers that when they arrived in Africa they found its people to be primitive savages with no history, no culture, and no past. In the next section, we shall look at Africa's first contact with the outside world.

1.3 AFRICAN HISTORY: FIRST CONTACTS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

While there is evidence of the ancient Africans having trade links with India and China, more recent links with the outside world were established when during the 8th century the Arabs came to the east coast with the mission of spreading Islam. They, however, stayed on not only to trade, particularly in ivory and gold but they also occupied territories to set up their own political control over them. The Sultanate of Zanzibar on the Zanzibar Island near what is now Tanzania is an example of such an occupation of African territory by the Arabs.

1.3.1 Africa and Europe: Early Contacts

African contacts with Europe were made on its west coast during the 15th and 16th centuries. Countries like Holland, Spain and Portugal, which had, become strong naval powers launched big missions for discovering sea routes to the near and far eastern parts of the world. As we know through our own history, these

missions were launched for eventual control of the riches of India and China about which they had heard stories from the European and Arab travellers. Believing the earth to be round, such naval missions were launched in opposite directions of the Atlantic Ocean. One of these was to go along the west coast of Africa, go round what is now known as the Cape of Good Hope and come out in the Indian Ocean on the eastern side. We also know that it was on one such mission that **Vasco Da Gama** reached Calicut on the Southern coast of India. Since the primary aim of these missions was to reach the near and far east, no attempts were made to occupy African territories *en route*, except some small strips of land that were occupied on the coast to set up military garrisons. These were meant to provide replenishment of supplies to the ships and to provide recuperation facilities to the sailors and also ensure safe passage. Once again, the activities of these Europeans, like those of the Arabs on the east coast, were confined to areas close to the ocean and no major attempts were made to strike inland and occupy territories in the heart of the African continent.

1.3.2 Africa and the Slave Trade

However, things changed dramatically for Africa because of something, which happened thousands of miles away. At the other end of the Atlantic Ocean **Columbus** discovered America. It was feasible to annex the vast virgin lands from the American natives and develop them for large-scale economic gains. This, however, needed a very large input of labour. It was then decided by the kings of Spain, Portugal, etc. to take away, by force, people from Africa and use them for developing American lands. Thus, began one of the darkest phases in the history of not only Africa but the whole of humanity. Millions of black Africans were forcibly captured by the Arabs, the Spaniards, the British, the French and the Portuguese and sold as slaves to be taken away to America. Millions more died either resisting capture or braving extremely inhuman conditions of shipment.

1.3.3 Africa and European Colonial Powers

Africa therefore, suffered a colossal **decimation** of its population. This in turn led to weakening their resistance further, particularly when greedy traders, adventurers and religious missionaries swarmed the continent during the 18th and 19th centuries. Their stories of rich mineral wealth, huge hoards of game and miles of virgin fertile land whetted the commercial appetites of their mother governments back home. These also included the English and the French who had, in the meantime, supplanted the Spanish, the Dutch and the Portuguese as superior naval powers. The alibi of stopping the inhuman slave trade came in handy for making their entry into the continent. Rival political claims were made on various African territories by the English, the French, the Germans, the Dutch, the Portuguese and many other European powers. The French claimed northern parts of Africa, as also territories in equatorial and West Africa. The British preferred claims to parts of east, west and South Africa, while the Dutch confined themselves to the south only. The Germans claimed parts of east and South Africa while the Belgians rushed to the southwest parts of the Continent. This led to, at times, military clashes between these powers. For instance, the Dutch and the British fought a war for supremacy over South Africa. During all this time, none of these powers cared at all about the original inhabitants of the continent, namely the black Africans who were pushed out of these territories with the help of superior gun-power. The discovery of diamond and gold in the

last quarter of the 19th century in South Africa accelerated the pace of such interventions. In fact, the scramble for Africa began in right earnest after these discoveries were made.

Check Your progress1

Answer the following questions briefly on the basis of what you have read in the preceding sections of this unit.

- 1) Why is Africa referred to as 'the dark continent'?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What was the reason given by Europeans for 'entering' Africa?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Was ancient Africa 'primitive'? If not, what were the various centres of civilisation in ancient Africa?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) In what way did the discovery of America affect the fate of Africa?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.4 AFRICA UNDER COLONIALISM

Division of Africa

As stated in the previous section many European countries began to clash with each other in their scramble to grab as much African territory as possible. In order to put an end to this, a conference of the various contending powers was held in Berlin in 1884-85 where the continent of Africa was **apportioned** among them by earmarking the area of influence of each one of them. Once again, no attention was paid to the possible fate of black Africans as a result of this act of the Europeans.

1.4.1 Africa: Two Models of Colonialism

Once the division had taken place, two kinds of models were practiced for exploiting these territories. One was to take over the administration of these areas in the name of the mother country and governed through a colonial administration. The other was to invite people from abroad, primarily from the mother country to come and settle there. As an incentive they were promised, land for cultivation or for mining either free or for a very nominal sum of money. France, for instance, followed the first model in territories like Senegal and the British followed the latter model in Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa.

1.4.2 Africa and Foreign Settlers

The induction of foreign settlers created quite a complicated situation in countries where this model was followed. For skilled labour work they could not rely on the native Africans and so they imported **indentured** labour from another colony of theirs. In Kenya, for example, such labour was imported from the Indian sub-continent for constructing the railways. The Africans were, however, used for working on the farms or in the mines. But, first they were ousted from the areas which were most fertile or mineral rich and forcibly taken away to far flung semi-arid areas called 'reserves' or 'locations' where they were herded together in the most inhuman conditions. Blatantly discriminatory laws were passed to legalise such forcible removal of the Black Africans. In Kenya, for instance, the *Gikuyu* tribe was removed from the most fertile area called the Rift valley region and their land was 'appropriated' to the crown of England. They were removed from these areas where they had lived for thousands of years and taken away to arid areas up north. Since the *Gikuyu* are primarily agriculturists, their social organisation was completely disrupted: Similarly, the *Masai* tribe, who are primarily cattle breeders were also removed from Masailand, which was full of green pastures. Other tribes which suffered as a result of this policy in Kenya were the *Kamba* and the *Nandi* tribes. In South Africa, the **Native Areas Act of 1913**, disallowed the *Xhosa*, the *Zulu* and scores of other tribes from land rights anywhere in the country, leading to unprecedented misery for the black South Africans who at times had no land - literally - even to bury their dead.

1.4.3 Black Africans as Bonded Labour

However, the settlers needed large inputs of labour to work on their farms. Therefore, they pressurised their respective colonial administrations to force the Africans out of the 'reserves' or 'locations' and to work for them. As a result the

colonial administrations passed laws, levying all kinds of taxes on the black people of Africa for which they had to earn money and this money could be earned only by working for white settlers. Moreover, since such supply of labour had to be continuous and for a long period of time, additional primitive laws were enacted whereby monetary fines could be imposed on them on the most flimsy grounds and the Africans would have to earn their living by working on the farms or the mines. As if that were not enough, carrying an identity card and a certificate about the status of his/her employment duly signed by the employer was made compulsory for every black African. Since in most cases such certificates were not issued by the employers, most Africans were forced to stay on the farms and work, salary or no salary. In case they were found without such certificates, they were arrested on charges of running away illegally from employment. This was in effect nothing but bonded labour.

1.4.4 Disruption of Social Life

Long absences away from the family also caused complete disruption of family life in which each member had a certain social as well as economic role cut out for him or her. Women were forced to work on the family fields in place of their men as also able-bodied male members of the clan were forced to become wage-earners on farms or in factories and mines instead of remaining farmers or cattle-breeder. The subsistence-oriented barter as the major form of trade, was now changed into a market economy with money becoming the basis of trade. In due course of time, women too were made victims of the disruption of their system of social organisation when they too had to look for jobs.

1.4.5 Colonising the African Mind

The colonising forces of Europe were well aware that their hold on the people of the continent would not be complete without a hold over their minds. A slave can remain a slave perpetually only when his/her mind is enslaved, only when s/he acquires the mentality of a slave. In order to achieve this objective the colonising countries of Europe introduced into the African territories under their control, their own religion, a system of their own cultural traditions, their own language, and above all their own system of education. Christianity replaced the African's own religious practices which were generally called animism and condemned by the Europeans as barbaric, inferior forms of religion which could not save the souls of the people. All rituals, social customs and various kinds of ceremonies were similarly labeled as 'savage' and most of them were disallowed. The practice of polygamy, that is the practice of having more than one legal wife, a common practice among Africans, was disallowed by condemning it as inhuman. Similarly, circumcision of girls, which was a kind of initiation ceremony for girls at the onset of puberty, was condemned as savagery and was disallowed, which in hindsight was a good thing to disallow the mutilation of female genitalia which could put many lives at risk unnecessarily. In certain communities, the performance of certain types of dances and singing of certain kinds of songs was condemned as obscene and uncivilised and therefore, banned.

1.4.6 European Languages and European Systems of Education in Africa

Finally, the western system of education was introduced in place of the native system of education, which was quite different from the European system of

institutions. A policy of carrot and stick was used for popularising the western systems of education. That is to say, those with such education were preferred for petty jobs. Once it had been impressed upon the African's minds that western religion and the western system of education were better, those practicing African social customs like polygamy and circumcision of girls were denied access to either church or school. Above all, Africans were disallowed from speaking their own mother tongues in school situations and they were forced to speak the languages of their colonial masters, namely English, French or Portuguese, as the case may be. In the case of the French, the use of French language was made compulsory for pupils even outside the school situations and the black African students were encouraged to complain against one another for disobeying this rule. Thus, cultural imperialism, as this imposition of foreign European culture has been called, was enforced on the black African with the extreme intention of controlling their minds and perpetuating colonial rule on their territories. Such impositions resulted successfully in filling the minds of most Africans with an extreme form of inferiority complex about everything, which was African. It created the myth of the white man's superiority and invincibility in the minds of most Africans thereby making them skeptical about their being capable of managing even their own affairs. Colonialism to them appeared to be their only salvation. The African's misery under colonialism was thus, complete and there seemed to be no way out of it. Such was the situation of most African colonies towards the end of the twenties and early thirties of the 20th century. Their economic and political exploitation at the hands of the European powers was at their worst. The next section will now deal with the decolonising process of Africa.

1.5 THE DECOLONISING OF AFRICA

Early Resistance against Colonial Rule

Historical records bear testimony to the fact that Africans began resisting foreign attempts to occupy their lands as soon as such attempts were made. For instance, the *Xhosa*, the *Zulu* and the *Shona* in Southern Africa and the *Mazrui* in eastern Africa led violent resistance against the European powers. However, as stated earlier, these attempts failed primarily because of the military and technological superiority of the Europeans. Although such resistance was never given up completely, it definitely received serious setbacks as the grip of the colonising powers tightened over the various African territories.

1.5.1 Africans and World War II

In the twenties and the thirties as the atrocities on the Africans increased, such resistance began to gain strength. In the meantime great political upheavals were taking place in Europe and towards the end of the thirties - in 1939 to be precise - Europe plunged into a war of unprecedented intensity. **Hitler** together with Italy and some other friendly nations after overrunning neighbouring countries had declared war on Britain and France. Africa was once again drawn into World War II as Britain and France began to draw upon the African's resources - human as well as material - to support its war efforts. Africans were recruited in large numbers as combatants to fight in Europe, the near east and the far East to fight on behalf of their colonial masters. Thus, a lull occurred in the struggles by the Africans against their respective colonial regimes.

1.5.2 Struggle for Freedom

The end of World War II saw an unprecedented increase in the misery of the Africans. Large-scale **demobilisation** of Africans from the colonial armed forces led to large-scale unemployment, which was already rampant due to post-war recession in the world economy. As the war-ravaged European nations began to reconstruct their economies at the expense of their colonies by increasing the imports of food and agricultural products, the misery of Africans increased manifold due to scarcity of food items and steep price-rise. This fuelled further the simmering discontent among the people and the struggle by Africans now broke into full-fledged freedom struggle.

1.5.3 Asian and African Struggle for Independence

African combatants who had fought together with the soldiers from the colonising countries in various theatres of war brought back the impressions that their white masters were not invincible. Moreover, they had also seen for themselves similar struggles for national independence being waged in other parts of the world, particularly Asia. The success of the Indian struggle for independence soon after the end of World War II inspired similar struggles in Africa. As it is, the weakened European nations were finding it difficult to run the administration of the colonies. Intensified struggles compounded their problems further and put additional financial burdens on their fragile economies

1.5.4 Colonial Responses to African Struggle for Independence

These intensified struggles for independence in various parts of Africa immediately after World War II elicited two kinds of response from the colonial administrations. The first reason was that the administration cracked down on such movements resulting in struggles such as these becoming not only long drawn out but also more violent and bloody. This, for instance, was the case with Kenya, Zimbabwe, Algeria and Congo. Secondly, the administration, seeing the writing on the wall, initiated talks with the leaders of the movement leading their freedom with relative ease. This happened in the case of Ghana and Nigeria. The process of decolonisation of Africa began with the independence of Ghana in 1956. Soon more African countries became free. The sixties came to be known as the decade of decolonisation of Africa and by the early seventies most of Africa was free with the exception of Southern Africa. However, soon the people of Africa had to wage other struggles, this time against their governments, which denied them basic democratic rights and failed to provide them with the basic necessities of life like employment, food and shelter.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the two different ways in which Africa was colonised?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What were the two ways in which the colonial powers responded to the freedom struggle launched by Africans in various countries?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.6 LET US SUM UP

Contrary to the propaganda by Europeans, ancient Africa was a very vibrant society. It boasted of significant developments in the fields of socio-political organisations as well as culture. In fact, the ancient Egyptian civilisation was the gift of Africa to the world. However, African civilisation fell into a decline around the beginning of the Christian era. Building on its achievements, Europe progressed to a scientific and technologically superior society. As a result, most parts of Africa were colonised by a number of European powers between the 16th and 19th centuries and exploited for the economic development of Europe. The Europeans also tried to dominate the minds of Africans by imposing their own religion, their language, their systems of education and their culture. At the same time they filled the African's mind with an inferiority complex by condemning the African's religious and cultural practices as savage and barbaric. The real aim behind all this was to hold on to Africa forever and exploit it perpetually.

This exploitation was resisted by the Africans right from the beginning but organised resistance was offered after World War II. Such struggles soon became the struggle for national independence. In the early sixties (1960s), a number of African nations gained independence and by the end of the seventies most of Africa with the exception of Southern Africa was free. However, the African people had to once again wage struggle against their own governments for democratic rights and the basic needs life.

1.7 GLOSSARY

anthropological	pertaining to the science of man, especially the beginnings, development, customs and beliefs of mankind
apportioned	divided, distributed
archaeological	pertaining to the study of ancient things especially remains of prehistoric times e.g. tombs, buried cities
decimation	killing or destroying one-tenth or a larger part of
demobilising	release from military service
hypothesis	idea or suggestion put forward as a starting point for reasoning or explanation
indenture	agreement binding an apprentice to his/her master
recession	slackening of business or industrial activity

1.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Africa is referred to, as the dark continent because its people were considered to be primitive and uncivilised. Secondly, its socio-culture activities were considered to be related to irrationality and magic by early Europeans. Finally, its inhabitants have dark skins. Refer to section 1.1 in this unit.
- 2) They 'entered' Africa on the pretext or excuse of 'civilising' its people. The real reason, of course, was the economic exploitation of its human and material resources.
- 3) No. Contrary to the false stories spread deliberately by the Europeans, Africa is neither primitive nor savage. It had built not only the ancient Egyptian civilisation but also many other well-known centres of such development. The empires of Ghana, Mali, Ife and Zimbabwe are some of these. Refer to sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2.
- 4) After America was discovered by Europeans, Africans were taken there by millions as slaves for developing those virgin territories for economic exploitation by Europeans. This led to not only a very inhuman treatment of Africans but also the depopulation of the African continent, which made its subsequent conquest by Europeans easier.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The two distinct models of colonisation of Africa were one, by settling Europeans in the occupied territories as was done in the case of Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa and two, by administering the territories directly in the name of the mother country as was the case with Nigeria and Senegal.
- 2) In some countries the colonial powers-initiated negotiations for handing over power to the Africans as was done in the case of Ghana and Nigeria while in the case of some others the administrations cracked down on the freedom movements.

UNIT 2 CHINUA ACHEBE: LIFE, WORKS, LITERATURE & SOCIETY IN NIGERIA

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Nigeria: Socio- Political Development through the Ages

2.2.1 South West: The *Yorubas*

2.2.2 South East: The *Ibo* People

2.2.3 Nigeria: Independence and After

2.3 Early Nigerian Writings & The Nigerian Novel in English

2.3.1 Early Writings in *Yoruba*

2.3.2 Written Literature in *Hausa*

2.3.3 *Ibo* Literature

2.3.4 The Nigerian Novel in English

2.3.5 Amos Tutola

2.3.6 Cyprian Ekwensi

2.3.7 T M Aluko

2.3.8 Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa

2.3.9 John Munyone and Others

2.4 Chinua Achebe (1930-2015)

2.5 The Beginning: Ancestor Worshipper

2.5.1 *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

2.5.2 *No Longer at Ease* (1960)

2.5.3 *Arrow of God* (1964)

2.6 Later Novels: The Contemporary Scene

2.6.1 *A Man of the People* (1966)

2.6.2 *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

2.7 Other Writings

2.7.1 *Morning Yet On Creation Day*

2.8 Let Us Sum Up

2.9 Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The twin objectives of this unit are to survey briefly, the history and social organisation in Nigeria through the ages as also to look at the tradition of writing in Nigeria including the tradition of writing novels. The second objective is to familiarise you with major events in the life and the literary career of **Chinua Achebe**. This will help you understand him better as a writer. This unit will help you understand not only *Ibo* society in Nigeria about which Chinua Achebe writes in his novels, including *Things Fall Apart* but, it will also help you know more about other ethnic groups in Nigeria and the contribution these groups have made to the development of Nigerian literary writings, particularly the novel written in English. We shall also summarise briefly the themes of Achebe's writings,

which will help you in understanding his development as a writer. Finally, we shall examine his views about literature, society and the role of a writer as expressed in his book of essays called *Morning Yet On Creation Day*.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Federal Republic of Nigeria lies in the Gulf of Guinea on the West Coast of Africa, that is, to say on the Atlantic coast. In terms of population, Nigeria is the fourth largest African country with the *Hausa*, the *Fulani*, the *Yoruba* and the *Ibo* as its principal ethnic groups. Surrounded by two other famous seats of ancient civilisations, namely Ghana and Mali, Nigeria has been one of the oldest seats of human habitation where human organisation reached significant levels of social and technical development. Excavations at the Nok village in the Province of Zaria have shown that the Nigerians made good pottery and used baked clay for making figures of humans and animal. They also worked in iron and bronze and the world famous ‘The Bronzes’ and ‘Benin Heads’ are Nigeria’s gift to the sculptural world of today.

Since most of the Nigerian languages which number about three hundred were without a developed script, not much is known about the literary achievements of this ancient seat of civilisation. However, a fair guess about its developed state can be made from the folk literature, sayings and proverbs as also the customs and rituals which survive even today. Besides the various African languages, Nigeria today has two more languages in its linguistic profile. These are English which is its official language and pidgin which is a fascinating blend of English and some of the African languages. In the next section, we shall look at the socio-political development of Nigeria through the ages.

2.2 NIGERIA: SOCIO – POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE AGES

Map of Colonial Africa, (1913), Courtesy Wikipedia.org



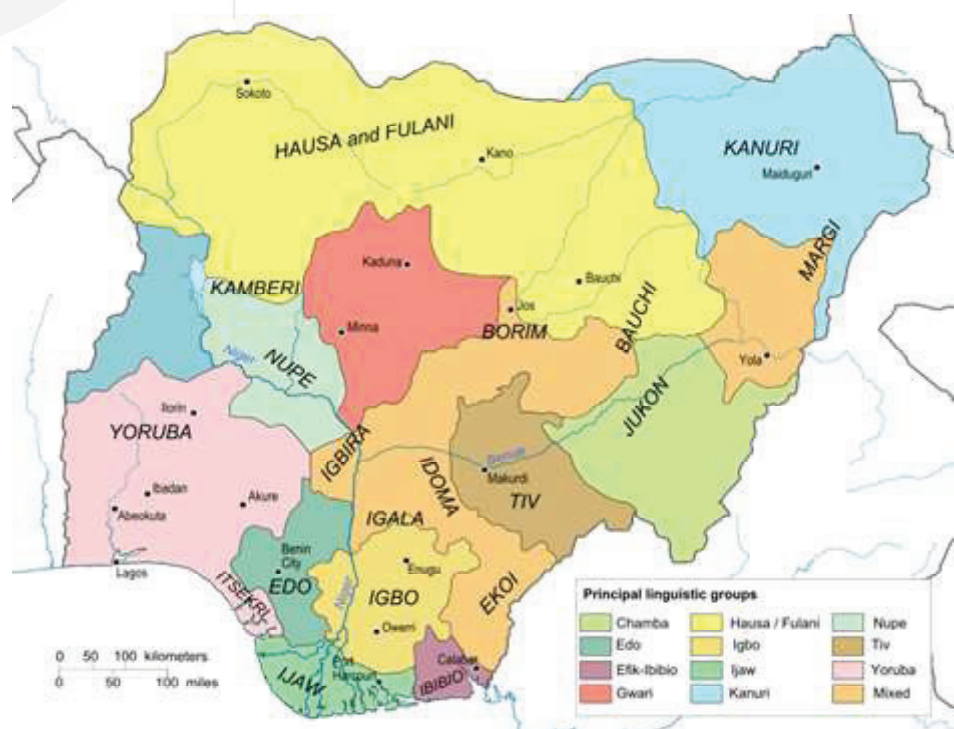


Map of Nigeria, Courtesy Wikipedia.org

The Northern part of Nigeria is very different from the south and the east and this difference is not due to geography and climatic condition alone. The people living in the northern parts of Nigeria were called the *Hausa* people and were primary farmers. They were conquered by the *Berber* people from further north around the eighth century ADE. As we have stated in Unit 1, it was around this time that people from the Middle East and northern Africa came into the continent, primarily with the aim of spreading Islam. Another group of *Berbers* came to the area a little later and completed the task of conquering the remaining states of northern Nigeria.

Around ADE 1000, these *Berbers* even ventured to the south, which is the land of the *Yorubas* and conquered part of it as well. However, they could impose on the *Yoruba* people neither their language nor their religion.

Linguistic Map of Nigeria, Courtesy wikipedia.org



In the early parts of the 19th century, the *Hausa* people in the north were overrun by the *Fulani* who waged a holy war against them in the name of a purer and truer Islam under the leadership of **Usman Dan Fodio** (1754 – 1817), who was a Fulani religious teacher, revolutionary, military leader, writer, and promoter of Sunni Islam and the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. The *Fulani* divided the area into small states called emirates and ruled over them through emirs. These emirs also conquered Ilorin in the south and began to trade in slaves towards the end of the 19th century, thereby providing the British who were present on the west coast with an excuse to intervene. By 1903, the northern part of Nigeria had been brought under the British protectorate and was ruled through the emirs without any interference in the social, cultural, religious and educational affairs of the *Hausa* people.

2.2.1 South West: The *Yorubas*

The southern part of Nigeria was inhabited by the *Yoruba* people who were primarily farmers by profession and pagan in terms of religion. The *Berbers* had conquered parts of their territory around the year 1000 ADE but they had failed to impose their religion or their language on the *Yoruba* people. Soon the *Fulani*, who had overrun the North also came down south and conquered Ilorin. They joined in the slave trade that had been operating from the west coast by capturing the *Yoruba* and selling them to the Europeans. Once again the British intervened and by 1861, the island state of Lagos had been annexed. Instead of trading in slaves, they introduced trading in palm oil. They, however, were scared of malaria, which was rampant in the region and had therefore no intention of setting up a permanent political structure. However, the presence of the French and the Dutch in the vicinity forced them to conclude treaties with many local chiefs and the *Yoruba* territory too had been annexed. The missionaries followed suit and soon the “pagan”, *Yoruba* had been converted into Christianity in very large numbers.

2.2.2 South East: The *Ibo* people

The East which was inhabited by the *Ibo* people has had a less advanced socio political organisation than the *Hausu* and the *Yoruba*. Lesser material progress could be a possible reason for this. In modern political jargon, *Ibo* socio-political organisation could be described as comprising ‘village democracies’ with the clan as the basic unit. Like the *Yoruba*, the *Ibos* too were pagan in their religious beliefs. We can learn more about the socio-cultural life of the *Ibo* people from our reading of *Things Fall Apart*, which is a novel, based on the life of the *Ibos*.

2.2.3 Nigeria: Independence and After

As stated in Unit 1, the end of World War II saw the rise of nationalism in various parts of Africa, including Nigeria, primarily due to increased economic hardships faced by the people in European colonies. Unemployment was rampant and inflation runaway. Three major political parties emerged on the political scene in Nigeria. These were the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) backed by the *Ibo* people and led by **Zik**, the NPC backed by the *Hausa* and the *Fulani* people and led by **Anubaker Tafawa Balewa** and the Action Group backed by the *Yorubu* and led by **Obafemi Awolowo**. Internal autonomy was granted to the Eastern and Western Regions in 1957 and to the Northern Region in 1959. A year later, that is on October 1, 1960, Nigeria attained independence and

Abubaker Tafawa Balewa became its first Prime Minister heading a coalition government. However, internal struggle started soon after for the control of power, since there were not only various ethnic groups but also there was a big difference between the developed south and the under developed north.

In 1966, the army intervened. **Tafawa Balewa** was killed and the power passed into the hands of the army. Simultaneously, large-scale killings of *Ibo* people at the hand of the *Hausa* people started, leading to the declaration of independence by the *Ibo* people calling their eastern land Biafra.

Biafra in Red (1967), Courtesy wikipedia.org



Biafra (1967), Courtesy wikipedia.org



The civil war, which ended only in 1970, claimed more than 150,000 lives. The Biafran cause was lost. Nigerian economy boomed with the soaring oil prices in the seventies and the early eighties but slumped later. Having survived various coups and military rule, as of 2019, **Muhammadu Buhari** who was re-elected for a second term in office is the 15th President of Nigeria. In the next section, we shall begin looking at the literary history of Nigeria.

2.3 EARLY NIGERIAN WRITINGS & THE NIGERIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

As has been stated in Unit 1, literary efforts in various Nigerian languages were oral because the languages lacked scripts or systems for writing them down. The tradition of written literature begins in the middle of the 19th century with the arrival of the missionaries who introduced the British system of education, which laid sufficient emphasis on learning with the help of books. The printing press was introduced and translations of the *Bible*, other religious books as well as some creative literature were introduced. **Bunyan's** *Pilgrim's Progress* was a

favourite prescribed text. The only exception to this paradigm was the northern region where Arabic had been introduced and some written literature in it had existed since the 14th century. The introduction of the British education system, Christianity, the market economy together with the development of towns led to the complete disruption of the homogeneous socio-cultural lives of Africans which favoured oral forms of literary compositions-stories, plays and poems. Let us begin by looking at the early writings that emerged from Nigeria before we begin to talk about the Nigerian novel in English.

2.3.1 Early Writings in Yoruba

Isaac Thomas's (1896-1961), *The Autobiography of Segilola: The Lady with the Delicate Eye Balls* was perhaps the first attempt at imaginative writing in Yoruba. It was written in the form of letters written by a prostitute to the editor of a newspaper, describing her plight in Lagos. Later, the book was to inspire **Cyprian Ekwensi** (1921-2007), to write about metropolitan life, particularly of Lagos, in his novels of which *Jagua Nana* is the most well known. **Ekwensi** writes in English.

D D Fagunwa (1903-63), is the most important Yoruba writer whose blend of reality and fantasy in *The Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Four Hundred Gods* and *The Forests of Oldumare* are adventure stories with heavy doses of morality. **Fagunwa** has inspired a number of writers to follow his style of mixing reality with fantasy. Among the better known of such writers is **Amos Tutuola** (1920-97), whose novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is equally well known. Didacticism is a distinctive feature of **Fagunwa's** writings.

2.3.2 Written Literature in Hausa

The Arabs had come to the land of the Hausa people in northern Nigeria around the 8th century. Arabic had established itself in the region and learned written texts appeared on government and religion. By the 17th century early attempts creating literature in Arabic were made and these were in the form of praise poems. **Wali Dan Marina, Muhammad B Muhammad** and Usman Dan Fodio were pioneers in this respect. Wali Dan Marina was a celebrated 17th to early 18th century scholar and saint christened **Muhammad Ibn Al-Sabbagh**. Among the prose writers in Hausa, who came much later, are Muhammadu Bello and Abubaker Bello. The first Prime Minister of Nigeria Abubaker Tafawa Balewa was also a prominent Hausa novelist.

2.3.3 Ibo Literature

In 1935, **Pita Nwana's** short novelette *Omenuko* was published after it had won a prize in a literary competition and it became the first Ibo literary effort in writing. The story of a slave trader who after various adventures and misfortunes finally repents for his sins, it is full of didacticism. The book was to inspire Chinua Achebe to write about the life of the Ibo people in English.

L B Gam's adventure story *Odumodu's Travels* is modelled on *Gulliver's Travels* and has allegorical implications. **D N Achara's** *Ala Bingo* is an allegory too. Let us look at the Nigerian Novel in English next.

2.3.4 The Nigerian Novel in English

The novel is a form alien to Africa. It is a literary import from Europe. However, being a form, which is a kind of hold “all, the novel is easily adaptable and thus, the Africans adopted it to serve their artistic needs”. Since the oral story was the dominant form of literary expression in Africa, a number of Nigerian novelists have very skillfully made use of that form while writing novels. Take the case of D D Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. Both of them bind together, very skillfully, a number of short narratives to create a longer tale. In fact, most Nigerian novelists in English, like their counterparts writing in other African regions, have continued to write short stories along with novels. The names of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and **Flora Nwapa** spring to one’s mind immediately.

2.3.5 Amos Tutuola

Amos Tutuola, as we have stated earlier, is the first major Nigerian novelist in English whose *The Palm Wine Drinkard* published in 1952 sent European critics into raptures. While they praised it sky-high for its novel use of English, particularly his deliberate ignoring of the regular structure of the language, Tutuola’s fellow Nigerian writers were embarrassed by his ‘incorrect’ use of English. However, Tutuola’s novel which is the story of the adventures of a palm-wine addict in search of his dead palm-wine tapper is a serious attempt to fuse folklore with modern life and Tutuola succeeds fully in doing so. In fact, therein lies, the intrinsic value and strength of his book and not in his ‘new’ use of English as had been made out by his European critics. Tutuola repeated his success in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*, *The Brave African Huntress*, and *Feather Woman of the Jungle*.

2.3.6 Cyprian Ekwensi

Cyprian Ekwensi began as a writer of cheap, love stories meant primarily for titillating the young. *When Love Whispers* belongs to this phase. Ekwensi soon graduated to the realm of serious novelists and specialised in exposing the seamy side of city life. *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana*, *The Drummer Boy* and *An African Night’s Entertainment* all deal with the theme of city life.

2.3.7 T M Aluko

T M Aluko (1918- 2010), unlike Chinua Achebe (1930-2015) whose work we shall be discussing later in this Unit, Aluko believes in debunking the tradition. He believes that all was not well with many traditional aspects of Nigerian life. *One Man, One Wife* and *One Man, One Matchet* are his well-known novels. To Aluko nothing is sacrosanct, nothing above criticism and in a typical style of African humour, Aluko satirises the whole gamut of African traditions and beliefs. *Kinsmen and Foremen* and *Chief the Honourable Minister* are his other novels.

2.3.8 Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa

Buchi Emecheta (1944 – 2017), and **Flora Nwapa** (1931-93), are among a host of women writers who enriched the Nigerian novel in English by highlighting the problems of women both in pre-independence and post-independence Nigeria. They also provided the necessary women’s perspective to various aspects of Nigerian social, political and cultural life. While *Destination Biafra*, *Joys of*

Motherhood, *Bride Price* and *Second Class Citizen* are well-known works of Buchi Emecheta who lived in London and publishes from there, *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is enough* are well-known novels by Flora Nwapa.

Chinua Achebe: Life, Works,
Literature and Society in
Nigeria

2.3.9 John Munyone and others

John Munyone's *Only Son* and *Obi* and **Nkem Nwanko's** *Danda* are powerful statements about the clash between the two cultures - European and African. **Ben Okri** (1959), who was awarded the *Booker Prize* for his *Famished Road*, uses the *Yoruba* myth of children who are unwilling to be born, to survey and critically evaluate the whole gamut of contemporary Nigerian life and its history. **Wole Soyinka** (1934), who won the *Nobel Prize* for Literature and who is primarily a poet and a playwright has also written a few novels.

Check Your Progress 1

Answer the following questions in your own words:

- 1) What are major ethnic groups in Nigeria and which parts of the country do they live in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What kind of socio-political organisation did the Ibos have? How was it different from the political organisation among the Hausa and the Yoruba people?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What factors helped in the development of the written form of literature in Nigeria?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) How is the novel as a literary form different from the other literary forms, which were prevalent in pre-European Africa's?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 5) Which literary form from the oral literary tradition helped Nigerians in writing and how?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.4 CHINUA ACHEBE (1930-2015)

Chinua Achebe is the best-known novelist not only from Nigeria but from the entire continent of Africa. He is perhaps the first African writer whose books have been prescribed as a part of the curriculum in Africa, although his earlier writings were definitely aimed at foreign audiences in Europe and America. As the first black novelist from Africa, not only has he got an appreciative global readership but also an acclaim which is richly deserved. He is now one of the most widely translated novelists in the world and also one of the most universally respected ones too. For example *Things Fall Apart* is an important part of the heritage of world literature and is considered a classic. Achebe was born in Ogidhi near Onitsha on the banks of the river Niger in 1930. His father was a missionary, one of the earliest *Ibos* to take to that profession. By the time Achebe went to school major changes had already taken place due to the intervention of colonialists in Nigeria and was a reality.

His school education was at Umuahia Govt. Secondary school. After having been selected for medicine and after spending a year in that course, Achebe strayed back at the University College of Ibadan to do a graduate degree in humanities. This brought him in close contact with European culture and particularly the European literary traditions. Simultaneously, his interest in the history of Nigeria grew and he started filling the gaps in his readings by asking questions about the pre-colonial society, although remnants of it were still around in the day-to-day lives of the people. However, when Achebe began to write in the latter part of the fifties, he was quite conscious of the fact that he was writing about a part of the world with which his foreign readers in Europe and America would be quite unfamiliar. While analysing the details of societies and assessing their cultural worth, which were strange to the modern world, Achebe evokes values, which go beyond the narrow confines of space and time. Like his other fellow African writer Achebe too finds himself in a unique situation as an

interpreter of a society whose traditions have been disrupted by the intervention of colonialism. His novels, therefore, reflect on the changes which have come about in *Ibo* society in particular and Nigerian life in general as a result of what he calls a 'chance encounter' between Europe and Africa during the colonial period.

Achebe's novels are unique and quite different from those written by his counterparts in England, although attempts have been made to fit them into the tradition of novel writing in England. While it is true that his formative years were saturated with the influence of Christianity as well as the English school system and he has acknowledged that a number of European writers, particularly **Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh**, have influenced his development as a writer. This is because Achebe, once again like other African novelists, has modified the novel form as a genre while adopting it for the specific needs of his society where the tradition of literature has been primarily oral and has been entrenched for hundreds of years. Honoured with scores of awards, medals, honorary degrees, fellowships and the editorship of a series of publications of African literature, Chinua Achebe passed away on 21st March, 2015.

2.5 THE BEGINNING: ANCESTOR WORSHIPPER

Once asked to describe himself, Achebe called himself an 'ancestor worshipper'. On another occasion he stated that, "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach the readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery." Chinua Achebe's first three novels - *Things Fall Apart*, (1958) *No Longer At Ease*, (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964) — may also be read as a trilogy of related themes, as all are about societies and persons which/who were divided between the past and the present, between the old world and the new and between Europe and Africa. All the three novels are about the people of the two worlds' who were bewildered by both the scale and the suddenness of these changes. While attempting to come to terms with them, they meet their tragic ends. Although Achebe was a child of colonialism who began to write when Nigeria was almost free, Achebe's veneration for the past is very transparent in all the three novels. However, Achebe's respect for the past is not uncritical. As he himself put it, "we cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolour idyll". In fact, in this lies the strength of Achebe as a novelist.

2.5.1 *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

Chinua Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958 and was an instant success with his readers. In fact, it was the first novel written by an African that put the literature from the continent immediately on the map of world literature. While we shall analyse the text in greater details in the next Unit, it will be sufficient to outline here that the novel is about *Iboland*, in the eastern region of present day Nigeria during the fifty odd years of the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. This was the period just prior to and after the arrival of white men in this part of West Africa. Expressed in the idiom of the *Ibo* villagers, which he translates into standard Nigerian English, the conflict highlighted through the fate of Okonkwo, the protagonist and other villagers, Umuofia and its neighbourhood who are out manoeuvred by white-men representing a

technologically superior European culture. Finally, *Ibo* society falls apart and is annihilated by European colonialism.

2.5.2 *No Longer at Ease* (1960)

No Longer at Ease is the sequel to *Things Fall Apart* in the sense that its protagonist Obi is the grandson of Okonkwo who was the hero of *Things Fall Apart*. He is the son of Nwoye who had converted to Christianity and had taken the name Isaac. The action takes place partly in the same village of Umuofia and partly in Lagos the big city, the likes of which had developed all across Nigeria since the days of Okonkwo. The theme of the novel is public corruption - a phenomenon, which like many other ills, is the direct offshoot of the introduction of colonialism in Nigeria. Obi Okonkwo has returned from England after obtaining a BA degree and is excitedly looking forward to some responsible position in the Civil Service. However, he is soon caught in a web of pressures of various kinds - from the people of his own village who had financed his trip to England and who now want special favours in return, from his girlfriend Clara who wants to legitimise their relationship through marriage, from his parents who refuse to permit him to marry outside the clan and finally from the people at large. Pressed from all sides, Obi succumbs to temptation and accepts a bribe. He is caught and is awaiting trial, public humiliation and punishment.

As we can see, once again Achebe is concerned with changes, which have been brought about in *Ibo* society after its encounter with colonialism. Once again, he highlights it through the havoc colonialism has wrought on the people's lives through bribery, graft and corruption. The major difference between the fate of Obi and Okonkwo, his grandfather in *Things Fall Apart*, is that while Okonkwo dies for his convictions however rigid and unreasonable those might be, Obi totally lacks the moral courage in sustaining whatever convictions he has. In fact, Achebe had hinted at the shape of things to come at the end of *Things Fall Apart* itself when he had shown the villagers of Umuofia, rich with money from the sale of palm-oil and kernels, refusing to support Okonkwo's killing of the District Commissioner's emissary who brings the message that their meeting had been disallowed by the District Commissioner. Moral rot has set in since then and has hollowed the society completely. Once again, Achebe's sense of the loss of a simple but morally vibrant *Ibo* society of pre-European days is quite evident throughout the novel.

2.5.3 *Arrow of God* (1964)

Arrow of God is Achebe's third novel of the series in which he explores further the 'encounter' theme at greater length since it is the most voluminous of the three books. In terms of time frame, it is located somewhere between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. It is a period when colonialism had become well established in Nigeria. The locale is Umuaro, which like Umuofia earlier, is a cluster of villages - this time six instead of the nine in the earlier book. While commenting on his repeated return to the past, Achebe had remarked that he felt that 'My first book is no longer adequate. I have learned a lot more about these particular people ... my ancestors or and something ... has to be done before I move on to the contemporary scene'. In *Arrow of God*, like in *Things Fall Apart* earlier, the forces of a primitive, self-sufficient society are pitted against the forces of colonialism - church, government and trade. Once again, the resultant

crisis destroys not only the protagonist but also the very roots of tribal life. The protagonist Ezeulu - is a more complex character. He is the chief priest of Ulu - a newly created god by the people of those six villages of Umuaro, Ezeulu has to fight simultaneously on two fronts - one, the internal strife represented by Nwake, a powerful chief and Ezidemili, chief priest of another god Idemili, and two, European culture and religion represented by Captain Winter Bottom, the head of the local colonial political administration. So Ezeulu loses at the end.

Achebe's Ezeulu, although similar to Okonkwo, is a more complex character. He thinks about the causes of various events and has an open mind. He is even ready to come to terms with Europeans, Christianity and colonialism but only up to a certain point so that his dignity and self-respect is not compromised. Pushed beyond that, he fights and meets the same tragic fate as Okonkwo did in *Things Fall Apart*. While dealing with this more complex situation, Achebe also invokes more complex details of tribal life - births, deaths, marriages, celebrations, and religious ceremonies. Customs and rituals which may, at times, appear to have been introduced for their own sake, but like the details in *Things Fall Apart* are an integral part of the life of the people which is what he intended to highlight through his protagonist. Achebe's first three novels, therefore, enliven very dramatically and powerfully both in personal and societal terms, the past of the Ibo people. However, the manner in which Achebe tells the tragic tale of those people raises it to a higher level, making it a part of the ebb and flow of human history, which, incidentally, is the real 'hero' of all the three novels.

2.6 LATER NOVELS THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

As stated by Achebe himself, he was ready to move over to the contemporary scene (of the time he wrote the novels), after writing *Arrow of God*, which was a kind of swan song tribute to the *Ibo* way of life that was.

2.6.1 *A Man of the People* (1966)

With the publication of *A Man of the People*, Achebe plunged into the contemporary way of life in Nigeria. Glossing over the period in which the freedom struggle was launched and independence achieved after quite an intricate interplay of conflicting ethnic sentiments egged on by the colonial and imperialist forces, Achebe made post-independence Nigeria the theme of *A Man of the People*. It is a Nigeria in which, like in many other newly independent nations in Africa and elsewhere, a nexus between politician and criminals had emerged and entrenched itself to loot the national wealth in collaboration with imperialist forces represented by powerful multinationals. And all this was done by befooling the people in the name of democracy, which in effect was only a facade for a coterie of vested interests. The media too played a major role in dividing the people in the name of ethnic loyalties and by diverting their attention from the real issues facing the people. The chief characters in the novel are Chief M A Nanga, who has risen from being a band - master in a school to a minister's position by jumping on to the political bandwagon at an appropriate time and Odili a young teacher who is full of idealism and is determined to expose the likes of Chief Nanga. Crowded with details of political intrigues within the ruling party and even the cabinet, the role of money and muscle power in elections including murders, political confrontations and compromises in the name of

ideology, exploitation of the ordinary people, particularly of women in the name of both tradition and modernity, the novel could be located in any other modern nation-state by merely changing the name of Nigeria, it could serve as predicting the shape of things to come. The ending of *A Man of the People* shows the military intervening in the sordid political affairs of the country - something which was unthinkable in Nigerian polity at that time. However, within a few months of the publication of this novel (1966), a military coup actually took place in Nigeria and political power had passed into the hands of the army with which it stayed more or less for a long period of time. In fact, between 1966 and 1999 the army held power in Nigeria without interruption apart from a short-lived return to democracy sometime between 1979 and 1983. In 1999 however, Nigeria adopted the constitution of the Fourth Republic and the former military ruler **Olusegun Obasanjo** was elected and sworn in as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Thereafter, **Umaru Yar'Adua** became President in 2007, till his death in 2010. **Goodluck Jonathan** became the third President (Interim) and later won the election the following year. **Muhammadu Buhari** became President on 28th March 2015, and is still in power having won a second term.

Let us look at his Achebe's next novel *Anthills of the Savannah* published nearly 20 years later.

2.6.2 *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

Achebe's next novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was published, after a gap of more than twenty years - twenty-one to be precise after the publication of *A Man of the People*. So much had happened in Nigeria during this time. Nigeria had gone through a very bloody civil war - the Biafran war - in which more than 150,000 people had been killed. The worst sufferers were the *Ibo* people - the ethnic community that Achebe also belonged to. Achebe himself had to suffer for allegedly aiding the secessionists. During this time, Nigeria had also seen the bubble of prosperity bloom and burst as oil prices rose and crashed in the international market. During this period, Nigeria had a brief brush with democracy before things went out of hand. Once again the military intervened. The novel *Anthills of the Savannah* is a result of the literary maturation of Chinua Achebe subsequent to all this.

The theme of the novel is the now familiar theme of a Nigeria plagued with inequality, poverty, social injustice, public betrayal and political and military intrigues, with repression, intimidation and calculated murder being the order of the day. Since violence begets violence, those trying to remedy the situation are also forced to resort to violence. So we have a military coup in order to get rid of a military coup. The locale this time is an imaginary Republic of Kangan and the dictator is President Sam. Pitted against him are Ikem, Chris and Beatrice. By showing a woman - Beatrice —take over the leadership, Achebe seems to be suggesting that women could perhaps prove to be better leaders and better managers of political affairs too. A look at some of his other writings will follow next.

2.7 OTHER WRITINGS

It has been mentioned in Unit 1 earlier that story telling was the forte of African literature before the arrival of the Europeans and their literate culture. It has also been mentioned that it came in very handy when African writers took to novel-writing which was a form of writing alien to Africa. The result was that most African novelists also continued to tell stories, this time in writing. Achebe too wrote and published stories through the ups and downs of Nigeria. Some of these works like *Chike and the River* (1966) are exclusively for children in the tradition of the father telling stories every evening to his children whom he called to his obi. There are others like *Girls at War* (1973), which portray both the traditional and the modern life. Chinua Achebe was a poet too. His collection *Beware Soul Brother* (1971) is a very moving portrayal of the tragedy of the Biafran war. Achebe has also written a book about the problems of Nigeria - *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984).

A large number of African writers like **Ngugi Wa Thiong'o** (1938), **Sengho** (1906-2001), **Wole Soyinka** (1934), **Alex La Guma** (1924-85), and **Nadine Gordimer** (1923-2014), have expressed their well-thought out views about the relationship between literature and society, the role of a writer in society, the choice of a particular language as the medium of creative writing and a host of other related matters. While Nadine Gordimer talks about the 'unshakable limits' imposed on a writer's creativity by the policy of *apartheid*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o pleads for *decolonising* the mind. While Senghor would like the superiority of the black African asserted through a concept like '*negritude*', Wole Soyinka would like to join issue with him by dubbing his concept of 'negritude' as racist. All these views and opinions are a part of another struggle being waged by African writers "to free African literary criticism or evaluation of African literature from the bondage of European theories of literary criticism". These writers would like African literary texts to be judged by a different set of criteria primarily because Europeans, having never been colonised, are simply incapable of evaluating adequately literary responses of societies where colonialism has been a fact of life for prolonged periods of time. In other words these writers are pleading for a different aesthetics - either an exclusive one for Africa or one which it shares with other former European colonies in Asia and Latin America. Chinua Achebe too has expressed his views about some of these very significant matters, some of which have been collected in his book of essay called *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, which we summarise below:

2.7.1 *Morning Yet On Creation Day*

Writing about the role of art - and this includes literature - in society, Achebe says that 'Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit'. Achebe believes that art is, as it has always been, 'in the service of man'. All myths, legends and stories have been created for 'a human purpose'. Artists - and that includes writers - created their works 'for the good of that society'. This is what Achebe writes in *Africa and her Writers*, a leading essay in the collection.

As for Europe, Achebe says that 'somewhere in the history of European civilisation the idea that art should be accountable to no one and needed to justify itself to nobody except itself, began to emerge'. On the other extreme, Achebe tells us, is yet another stream in Europe where 'a poet is not a poet until the

writers' Union tells him so'. Achebe pleads with African writers to look to their own sources for a definition of art. 'The making of art is not the exclusive concern of a particular caste or secret societies'. Art belongs to all and is a 'function' of the society.

We have stated in Unit 1 that Europeans condemned everything African as barbaric, savage and uncivilised. And this was not confined to their customs and rituals alone but applied as much to their dances and songs and attire. The result was that over the years Africans developed extreme inferiority complex. They were ashamed of everything that was African - even the African weather. Now Achebe thinks that as a novelist it is his duty and also of other fellow novelists, to 'educate' such Africans and restore their faith and confidence in themselves, their heritage and to help them 'decolonise' their minds. According to Chinua Achebe, therefore, a novelist is primarily a teacher.

A controversy has been raging among African writers for quite some time now, since 1962 to be precise, about the choice of language in which they should express themselves creatively. There are those who would have nothing to do with the languages of the former colonial masters. They are for shedding the legacy of colonialism completely and going back to their own 'tongues'. Then there are others who shout that language is not the private property of any single community or nation. Achebe defended his use of English by saying that for him it was a matter of pragmatism and not principle. 'A language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself.' 'I feel', said Achebe, 'that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Why does Achebe call himself an 'ancestor worshipper'?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Which major changes brought about by colonialism in traditional Ibo society are highlighted by Chinua Achebe in his novels?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Why had Achebe's *A Man of the People* suddenly catch the attention of people in Nigeria?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Why have most African writers including Chinua Achebe expressed their opinion about the relationship between literature and society?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2.8 LET US SUM UP

Nigeria has been the seat of a famous ancient civilisation. It is inhabited by four principal ethnic groups - the *Hausa*, the *Fulani*, the *Yoruba* and the *Ibo*. The *Hausa* and the *Fulani* are primarily Muslim by religious faith and live in the north while the *Yoruba* and the *Ibo* are Christian or pagan by religious faith and live in the southern and eastern parts of Nigeria respectively. Since the British missionaries first came to the south and the east and established schools there, the *Yoruba* and the *Ibo* cornered a greater share in development and occupied important positions in the administration, leaving the *Hausa* and the *Fulani* far behind. This led to inter-ethnic tensions in the post-independence era leading to a civil war – The Biafran war – from 1967 to 1970 in which over 150,000 people lost their lives.

Early Nigerian writing showed the influence of Christianity. Although novel writing was foreign to African literary traditions, Nigerians have adapted themselves well to this new form. Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, T M Aluko, Ben Okri, Wole Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa are well-known Nigerian novelists. Achebe's choice of writing about the pre-colonial *Ibo* society has been a deliberate one. His respect for the positive aspects of that society is reflected very clearly in his first three novels - *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. The tragic loss of that society occurred because of their encounter with a technologically superior society. Also there were some inherent weaknesses like rigidity in *Ibo* society. The themes of those novels based on the post-independence situation in Nigeria have been political intrigue and thuggery and the exploitation of the people through a nexus between the politician and the criminal. Since this is true of most newly liberated nations of the world, Achebe's novels have found an appeal, which goes much beyond the confines of Nigeria or Africa.

Achebe viewed the role of a writer in a society similar to that of a teacher. This is so because literature in Africa, unlike its counterpart in Europe, still affects people in their day-to-day life. It is still 'functional'. Achebe did not feel any pangs of guilt for using the English language as the medium for his literary activities instead of the use of his mother tongue because he felt that he had modified English sufficiently to serve his purpose.

2.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The Hausa, the Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo are the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Hausa and the Fulani live in the north, the Yoruba in the south and the Ibo in the east.
- 2) The socio-political organisation of the Ibos was village based and each unit was a small autonomous village democracy. Unlike them, the Yoruba, the Hausa and the Fulani had much larger socio-political units with a strong central authority.
- 3) The written form of literature developed primarily because of the introduction of the British education system in Nigeria. Conversion to Christianity and the introduction of the printing press facilitated the change over from oral to written form of literature. The process of urbanisation and the introduction of a market economy also played their role in it.
- 4) Stories, poems and plays were the prevalent literary forms in pre-European Nigeria and were all suited to the community-oriented cultural activities which were primarily oral. Novel, on the other hand, is more suitable to written form and does not need group participation.
- 5) Oral story is the form, which helped Nigerians in taking to novel writing. Early novels were a string of stories bound together skillfully. Tutuola and Fagunwa are well known examples of these kinds of writings.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Achebe calls himself an 'ancestor worshipper', because of his love and respect for the positive aspects of the pre-European Ibo society. This is quite evident from his first three novels.
- 2) Achebe highlights primarily the clash between Christianity and African religious practices, Ibo ways of socio-political organisation and the European manner of government and finally the Ibo system of economic organisation and the European concept of trade. Naturally these clashes also led to a clash *between* the socio-cultural values as well.
- 3) Achebe's *A Man of the People* caught the attention of the Nigerian people because of its prophetic prediction about Nigeria's first-ever military coup. It took place within a few months of the publication of the book.
- 4) Achebe, like many other African writers, believes that because of different socio-political circumstances between Europe and Africa, European criteria for evaluating African literary texts are grossly inadequate. The basic

difference of Europe having never been colonised makes all the differences. Hence these writers, including Chinua Achebe have expressed their opinions to highlight the need for a new aesthetics for Africa and other newly-liberated nations of Asia and Latin America.

**Chinua Achebe: Life, Works,
Literature and Society in
Nigeria**



ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 3 *THINGS FALL APART*: DETAILED ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *Things Fall Apart*: Detailed Analysis
 - 3.2.1 Part I
 - 3.2.2 Part II
 - 3.2.3 Part III
- 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.4 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this Unit is to analyse chronologically and in detail Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This is being done with the express aim of supplementing your reading of the novel and is not, in any way, a substitute for your reading of the novel. Additionally, an attempt will be made to highlight those aspects of the novel - events as well as characterisation - which are significant and will help us in evaluating the novel critically.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958 and it was this novel, which put African Writing in English on the map of world literatures in English. It inspired scores of writers across the continent of Africa who shed their differences and began to write in European languages in a big way. Since then Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been translated in about forty languages across the world and has sold millions of copies which is an adequate testimony to its significance not only as a great African novel but as part of the human heritage. Although Chinua Achebe wrote two more novels in continuation of *Things Fall Apart* to form a trilogy, yet *Things Fall Apart* remains a class apart. We begin with a detailed analysis of the novel next.

3.2 THINGS FALL APART: DETAILED ANALYSIS

Things Fall Apart which is divided into two parts and twenty-five chapters opens with a description of Okonkwo, a resident of a cluster of villages called Umuofia. Okonkwo, as we come to know on reading the novel, is the principal character around whom the whole plot of the novel is woven.

3.2.1 Part I

The author tells us in the first chapter that Okonkwo was a famous person, primarily because of his physical powers. He had defeated the strongest man - Amalinze in a wrestling contest when he was only eighteen. Now he is thirty-eight and he is still considered a very strong person. The author further reveals to us that Okonkwo was a man of short temper and very little patience. He had no

respect for people who were physically weak. His own father was one such person and therefore Okonkwo did not have much respect for his father Unoka.

The author draws a contrast between the father and the son, between Okonkwo and Unoka, by stating that not only was Unoka very weak but he was also lazy and managed his household affairs very badly. However, like his son, Unoka too was a famous person. While the son Okonkwo was known for his physical strength and power his father Unoka was well known for his musical qualities. Unoka was perpetually in debt to his neighbours and friends. And he was quite unashamed in acknowledging this. He was also a bad payee as the author shows us a conversation between Unoka and his friend Okoye who had lent Unoka some money. Unlike his father, Okonkwo was not only physically strong but he also managed his household affairs well, as a result of which he had become quite rich.

The first chapter gives us a good peep into the *Ibo* society of the times. It was a society in which people were respected and publicly honoured for physical strength. It was a society in which people judged a person on his or her own performance and not on the basis of the status of the parents. It was a society in which a person's wealth could be judged from the number of public titles he possessed or the number of wives he had because for acquiring both - a title as well as a wife - a person had to pay a substantial amount of money. Okonkwo had both - a number of titles as well as a number of wives. We also come to know that the *Ibo* were quite fond of speaking in proverbs, that is to say, they liked saying things indirectly by referring to anecdotes and stories. This is a sign of a culturally sophisticated society. Achebe ends the first chapter by referring to an ill-fated child named Ikemefuna who comes to stay with Okonkwo thereby, creating the necessary suspense and curiosity for what follows in the next chapter.

The second chapter opens with the crier informing the residents of Umuofia to gather at the market place the next day. Okonkwo discerns a distinct tragic note in the voice of the crier and wonders as to what could have happened. The next morning sees about ten thousand men gathered to listen to Ezeugo, who is a powerful narrator. Ezeugo soon informs the audience that a woman of Umuofia, the wife of Ogbuefi Udo, has been murdered by the residents of Mbaino, a neighbouring cluster of villages. As was the custom in such situations, it was decided to serve an ultimatum to Mbaino that they choose between a compensation of a virgin and a young man or the onslaught of a war. Since Umuofia had the reputation of being very strong both in terms of warriors as well as in casting magic spells, neighbours were afraid of going to war with it. Mbaino also decides to pay the compensation. The girl was to replace the murdered wife of Udo while the boy's fate would be decided by the residents of Umuofia later. This is how Ikemefuna, the ill-fated boy from Mbaino comes to live in Okonkwo's house during the interim period. It is once again emphasised that Okonkwo was a strong man who created a sense of fear even among his wives and children. Okonkwo hands over Ikemefuna to his second wife whose own son Nwoye is of the same age. Ikemefuna was completely clueless about the reasons for his being taken away from his parents and brought to a far-off strange place together with a girl whom he never sees again after reaching the new place.

Once again, we come to know more things about the *Ibo* people and their customs. Apart from the description of the manner in which public gatherings are held and households managed, we come to know that the society was very rigid and

cruel in many ways. Justice was based on the principle of revenge as is clear from the surrendering of a virgin girl and an innocent boy as a compensation for a murdered woman. An individual's life, therefore, was completely in the hands of the clan or the tribe. That is why an innocent Ikemefuna is surrendered to the residents of Umuofia although he had nothing to do with the murder of the woman personally.

Chapter three recalls the struggle Okonkwo had to go through to set himself up as an independent farmer even when his father Unoka was alive. Since Okonkwo did not have resources of his own, he went and borrowed 800 yam seeds from a wealthy farmer Nwakibie and four hundred more from another friend of his father's. As per the practice of share cropping prevalent in that society, Okonkwo would be entitled to only one third of the total crop. But he had no choice since his father had nothing to support him with, which makes Okonkwo quite angry. That year the crops fail badly since it does not rain at the right time. After Okonkwo had planted the first part of his seeds of yam, instead of rains, a scorching sun burns the seedlings. Half of his seeds were lost. When he planted the other half after clearing the fields once again, it was excessive rains that destroyed everything this time. Okonkwo was ruined. But he, being a die-hard optimist and an extremely hard-working young man said to himself that if he was able to survive that particular year, he would be able to survive subsequently because nothing could be worse than what had happened that year. The chapter also tells us more about the social organisation of the society: how to honour guests and how to please elders. It also tells us that the *Ibo* people believe in the spirit of the ancestors as well as in an almighty oracle or God whom they consult in times of need. Certain superstitions are also referred to. For instance, anyone struck with the disease of swelling of the stomach or other limbs is abandoned to die in the jungle. Unoka, Okonkwo's father had been struck with this disease and left to die like that. The chapter has a number of proverbs as manners of expression for certain specific situations.

Chapter four brings the story back to the present and shows how after initial resistance, Ikemefuna grew to accept Okonkwo's household as his home. Not only does he become quite friendly with Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, but he also earns the love of Okonkwo himself, although Okonkwo never shows emotions openly, as he considers that to be weakness in a man. Ikemefuna even calls Okonkwo his father. The chapter details how preparations are made for the sowing season of yam, which is a kind of plant species that forms tubers. The *Ibo* people observed a week of peace before the sowing started. This was done to be in the right frame of mind for the hard work. That year Okonkwo had disturbed the peace by beating one of his wives during the week and he had to appease god and the priest.

The next chapter describes the Feast of the New Yam in Umuofia, which is to be held just before the harvesting begins and it also coincides with the beginning of the New Year. It is held to honour Ani, the goddess of earth and fertility. There is a lot of feasting on this occasion. Okonkwo's household also celebrates the feast with a lot of pomp and show and the most excited is Ikemefuna. The second day of the celebration is reserved for wrestling which also generates a lot of enthusiasm. It is on one of these occasions that Okonkwo had defeated Amalinze, the Cat and had won the heart of Ekwefi, who had become his second wife, after deserting her husband. The chapter once again describes in great detail the

household chores as well as the manner in which various wives of a man manage their respective duties.

Chapter six gives an extensive account of the wrestling match and also a brief conversation between Ekwefi and another woman named Chielo who also doubles as the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle or the God.

Chapter seven is a very crucial section of the novel, which describes first, how Ikemefuna's stay in Okonkwo's home for three years has had a very positive influence on Nwoye. Nwoye whom Okonkwo had earlier considered to be lazy like his own father Unoka, is now quite enthused about undertaking difficult masculine tasks like splitting wood or pounding food. Okonkwo considers the change to be a result of Ikemefuna's company. He has grown quite fond of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo often called them to his obi-his hut " and told them the stories of the land". Since the harvest season is over, Okonkwo has enough time for this. During one of these days Ogbuezi Ezeudu comes to visit him and brings him the unhappy news that the clan has finally decided to kill Ikemefuna. He, however, warns Okonkwo not to have a hand in Ikemefuna's death since the boy loves him and even calls him father.

The next day it is all worked out by the elders in Okonkwo's house and Ikemefuna is informed that he will be taken home the following day. On the ill-fated morning, the men set out with Ikemefuna. Okonkwo is one of them. Ikemefuna is made to carry a pot of wine. At sunset they are in the midst of a jungle. Although apprehensive, Ikemefuna is oblivious of any harm because Okonkwo walks right behind him, Okonkwo whom he loves as his own father. He starts thinking of his mother and sister, as he has not seen his family since the last three years. He has very vague mental pictures of them. He is not sure if his mother is still alive. Suddenly a man draws Ikemefuna's attention by clearing his throat and as the child looks back, the man strikes him with his machete which is a kind of sword. As Ikemefuna cries and appeals to Okonkwo for help, Okonkwo himself strikes him down with his machete. This he does lest his fellowmen consider him to be 'weak'. This ends an important section of the novel.

Chapter eight begins with Okonkwo feeling completely disoriented for a couple of days after the killing of Ikemefuna and at his own role in the killing. Soon his friend Obierika comes to invite him as his daughter's suitor is coming to settle the bride price. In most African societies, it is customary for the young man to pay a mutually agreed price to his in-laws for asking a girl's hand in marriage. While they discuss the relative merits of their sons, Obierika tells Okonkwo that he has not done well by taking part in Ikemefuna's killing and the goddess of the earth might punish him for that. The chapter then describes in detail the custom of settling the bride price and feasting after it has been settled. This is done when the bride price for Akueka, Obierika's daughter is being settled. In the concluding conversation it is hinted that some white men have been seen passing through their area, particularly a man named Amadi. This appears to be the first contact the area has had with the people with the 'white skin'.

Chapter nine begins with his favourite daughter Ezinma suddenly becoming ill with shivers. Okonkwo goes out looking for some medicinal leaves, grass and barks of trees, which could cure this disease, which he calls iba, a kind of fever. While he is out looking for those herbs, the author gives us a background about the life of Ezinma and her mother Ekwefi. Ekwefi has lost nine of her children in

infancy. When a woman loses her children one after another, the *Ibo* people believe that it is the same wicked child entering its mother's womb again and again. The cure lies in the hands of a medicine man. A medicine man is like an astrologer or a Tantrik in Indian societies who finds a solution to a problem through various ritualistic practices. One such medicine man named Okogbue has cured the mother of the curse and the next child, Ezinma, has survived. Soon Okonkwo returns with the required leaves and barks which are boiled to a certain specific limit Ezinma is given a steam bath which cures her of the shivering and fever.

The next chapter tells us of the details of another ritual among the *Ibo*. It shows how disputes between the people of nine villages of Umuofia are resolved at the hands of a group of nine adjudicators who represent the spirits of the ancestors collectively and who are called egwugwu. The adjudicators are from amongst the people and are transformed into egwugwu after performing some rituals including the wearing of masks.

Chapter eleven describes yet another ritual - that of the Agbala, or the Oracle. Chielo a woman from the village who is Agbala's priestess who comes out on this particular night and goes to Okonkwo's hut saying that the Oracle wanted to see Ezinma, his daughter. She puts the child on her back and disappears in the dark of the night screaming the name of Agbala. Ekwefi, Ezinma's mother is scared to death about the well being of her child and she follows her till the mouth of the cave of the Oracle into which the Agbala's priestess has disappeared with the child. Ekwefi waits outside the cave and is pleasantly surprised to find Okonkwo coming there with his sword and both of them wait outside till Chielo comes out of the cave.

In chapter twelve which opens on the day after Ezinma's visit to the Oracle, Obierika, Okonkwo's friend is celebrating his daughter's Uri which is a kind of engagement ceremony, Okonkwo has been invited to Obierika's compound along with his entire family. A lot of cooking for the feast is going on. Soon the in-laws arrive with fifty pots full of palm-wine. The ceremony ends with a lot of eating, drinking and singing and also a dance by the bride.

Chapter thirteen which is the last in Part One, begins with the news that Ezeudu, a village elder universally respected has died. Since his was a warrior's funeral, guns are fired as the time for the burial draws near. Suddenly an accident happens: the dead man's sixteen year old son is killed by Okonkwo's gun going off accidentally. *Ibo* people believe that manslaughter is a major crime against the earth goddess and the man has to flee from his home and clan along with his entire family. Since Okonkwo's crime was inadvertent, he could return after seven years of exile. Okonkwo flees to Mbanta, a nearby village of his mother's kinsmen. His house is then ransacked and burnt as a part of the ritual of revenge for the earth goddess. We find Obierika musing over the fate of people suffering for doing something inadvertently. He recalls his having thrown away his twin newborn children for such was the custom in their society.

3.2.2 Part II

Chapter fourteen which is the first chapter in Part Two, opens with Okonkwo beginning his life afresh in Mbanta where he is given a piece of land for building his compound and another two or three pieces of land for farming. His uncle and

his cousins help him by giving him yam seeds. Okonkwo works hard but his heart is not in it. He hopes to become one of the lords of the clan and had worked towards it but this accident has shattered his hopes and has forced him to flee from his clan. His *chi* or personal god has not destined him to do great things. However, Okonkwo's mother's brother - Uchendu –comforts him and asks him to realise that his was not the greatest suffering in the world.

Chapter fifteen opens with Obierika, Okonkwo's friend paying him a visit at the end of the second year of his exile. He brings the shocking news that the village of Abame nearby has been wiped out by white men and some of the survivors have fled to Umuofia. He then goes on to narrate how a white man on an iron horse has come to Abame. Scared, the villagers of Abame had killed him and had tied his iron horse to a tree. In retaliation, three white men and some Africans who had come after many days had fired and killed most villagers on a market day. While they are all disturbed at the news, Obierika also tells them that he has heard the stories about the white men making very powerful guns and taking away Africans and selling them as slaves across the seas. About two years pass and the white missionaries were already in Umuofia. This is the news which Obierika brings on his next visit about which we read in chapter sixteen. There is already a church and also a few converts although these converts are not important people. Obierika remarks that Okonkwo's son Nwoye has been seen with the missionaries in Umuofia.

Soon we discover that a white man accompanied by some Africans had come to Mbanta and had persuaded the villagers to adopt his religion. He has appealed to them stating that the gods they believed in were all 'false gods'. While most villagers had made fun of the white man's views about their gods, there was one amongst them who had appeared to be impressed - not so much by the lecture of the white man as by the singing which had followed the lecture. That young man was Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son. While listening to the hymns, Nwoye had recalled the harrowing experience of Ikemefuna's killing as well as the throwing away of new born twins, both of which were a part of their religion (the African's religion). The hymns had given him a strange sense of relief and peace.

Chapter seventeen continues with the story of the preaching of the Christian gospel by the missionaries in Mbanta. When they asked the villagers for a piece of land for building their place of worship, the villagers had given them a piece in the 'evil forest', which was a place where no one lived because it was there that those who had died of dreadful diseases like leprosy and small pox were buried. The people believed that any one inhabiting such a place would himself be dead before long. However, when nothing happens to the missionaries after living there for many days, a whisper starts that perhaps the god of the white men is more powerful than that of the Africans. A couple of Africans also convert to the white man's religion. When Okonkwo discovers that Nwoye too has converted, he threatens him as a result of which Nwoye leaves home and goes to work in the missionary school for the converts at Umuofia. This is a big blow to Okonkwo and his male ego but he cannot do anything except sulk.

The next chapter opens with the news that the white man has brought not only their religion but also a government. They have built a place of judgement in Umuofia for protecting the converts to the religion of 'Jesu Kristi'. There is also the story that an African has been hanged for killing a missionary. In Mbanta a crisis arises when the converts from the village refuse to sit with Osu converts,

who are some kind of outcasts. As the missionary Mr Kiaga questions such beliefs he and the mission staff as well as the converts clash with the people.

Chapter nineteen opens with Okonkwo making preparations to leave Mbanta for Umuofia since his seven years of exile is coming to an end. He organises a big thanksgiving feast where after the feasting and expression of gratitude, one of the elders warns them against the impact of the new religion on their children and their lives. 'I fear for you; I fear for the clan;' is the warning he gives and as subsequent events show his words prove to be prophetic.

3.2.3 Part III

Chapter twenty which is the first chapter of Part Three opens with Okonkwo's return to Umuofia. He, however, is a sad man because he knows he has lost his chance of taking the highest title of the clan and also of leading his fellow men in the war against the new religion. He has been struck a major blow when his son Nwoye converted to the white man's religion. He also finds that the Umuofia he has returned to is a different place with a court of justice having been set up by the white man where a district commissioner judges cases of dispute. There is even a jail where African employees of the white man's government, Kotma, as they are called, beat people mercilessly irrespective of their status in the clan. People were punished for obeying their African customs and rituals. While Okonkwo advocates they fight back the white man and is confident that they would be able to defeat him, his friend Obierika is not so sure because they have been hopelessly divided. The clan does not act in unison any more since the converted people from the clan side with the white man. 'He has put a knife on things that held us together and we have fallen apart', Obierika says to Okonkwo and both fall silent.

Chapter twenty-two shows how the white man has gradually changed the entire way of life in Umuofia. Besides the religion and the government, there is also a trading store where palm oil and kernels could be sold for money. Umuofia has become rich. Mr Brown, the white missionary, has also exercised restraint upon his followers by asking them not to provoke those who had still not converted to Christianity. He has, therefore, come to be respected even by the clan. Clever as he is, he wants to win them indirectly and not through a frontal attack. So he has a hospital built in Umuofia and also had a school built for the children of the people. He also told them that if their children did not come to the school and learn to read and write, Africans from the outside would come and rule them by serving the District Commissioner like the Kotma who had come from Umuru on the banks of River Niger.

Mr. Brown had succeeded in bringing people and their children to his school. Thus, church and education went hand in hand in Umuofia and the neighbouring villages. However, Mr. Brown had failed to make a dent in Okonkwo's mind despite the fact that Okonkwo's son Nwoye, now called Isaac, had been sent to a training college for teachers in Umuru. Okonkwo had turned Mr. Brown out of his *obi* when Mr. Brown had come to see him. Soon Mr. Brown leaves Umuofia due to bad health. The chapter closes with Okonkwo feeling grieved not only for himself but 'for the clan which he saw breaking up and falling apart'. The next chapter shows Reverend James Smith, Mr. Brown's successor, condemning his policy of 'compromise and accommodation'. He believed in open confrontation between evil and good, between black and white. He encouraged overzealous

converts like Enoch who had once killed and eaten the python that the villagers considered sacred.

Enoch had unmasked an egwugwu during the annual ceremony in honour of the earth deity. He had ‘killed’ an ancestral spirit. Next day, the egwugwu from the entire area of nine villages had descended in Umuofia and destroyed the church. Okonkwo felt very happy at these developments. This is how chapter twenty-three begins. But his happiness is short-lived because soon the leaders - six of them - are summoned by the District Commissioner for discussion and are arrested. Okonkwo is one of them. They are ill treated and beaten in the lock-up by the African guards. The village is asked to pay a fine of 250 bags of cowries (small shells used as money in parts of Africa) to save them from hanging.

Chapter twenty-four finds them released since the village has paid the fine. However, the six men are sullen from the humiliation they have suffered while in the lock-up. Okonkwo is seething with anger for revenge. At the next day’s meeting the people of Umuofia are horrified to hear a group of messengers come and tell them to stop the meeting since it has been declared illegal by the District Commissioner. Okonkwo is furious and in a fit of anger he draws his matchet and beheads the messenger. There are murmurs among the people, asking: ‘Why did he do it’?

The last chapter shows the body of Okonkwo hanging from a tree when the District Commissioner comes to arrest him. Finding himself completely isolated from the villagers, Okonkwo commits suicide. However, his fellow villagers have refused to even touch his body since it is sinful to touch someone who has taken his own life. In fact, he cannot even be buried as per the normal customs and rituals. Thus, Okonkwo’s tragedy is complete: once an aspirant to the highest title, of the land, he has now died the death of a pariah dog. As his friend Obierika put it to the District Commissioner – ‘That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog...’

The District Commissioner, however, is busy thinking about his book on the *Ibos*. He decides to devote a whole chapter to the story of this man who had killed the messenger and then committed suicide.

Check Your Progress 1

Answer the following questions on the basis of your reading of the text of *Things Fall Apart* and this Unit.

1) What do the following expressions mean:

a) Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. (Chapter one)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

b) If a child washed his hands he could eat with the kings. (Chapter three)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

c) A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing. (Chapter four)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

e) Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. (Chapter four)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

f) When a man says yes, his chi says yes. (Chapter four)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Why was Okonkwo ashamed of his father Unoka?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Why did Ezeudu advise Okonkwo not to have a hand in the killing of Ikemefuna? Why did Okonkwo not heed his advice?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Who were the egwugwu? What was their specific function in *Ibo* society?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 5) In what way did the Christian missionaries confront the Africans in Mbanta?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 6) What were the consequences of the white man's arrival in Umuofia?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 7) List the major traits of Okonkwo's personality.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.3 LET US SUM UP

The first part of the novel describes how Okonkwo was able to move up in life through sheer hard work although his father had the reputation of being both physically weak and lazy. It also describes the circumstances under which a boy from one of the neighbouring villages comes to Umuofia and is assigned to stay in Okonkwo's house. It describes how Ikemefuna was finally killed by the villagers of Umuofia as revenge for one of their own women having been killed by a person from the village to which Ikemefuna belonged. The closing chapter of Part One describes how Okonkwo had to flee from his village and clan because he had killed a boy from the village accidentally.

Part two of the novel describes primarily Okonkwo's life in Mbanta during his exile for seven years. It also describes how during those years the white man - first the missionaries and later the administrators - had come and entrenched themselves in Umuofia and its neighbouring villages.

The last section of the novel describes how Okonkwo, disappointed at his not being able to earn the highest title of the land through a quirk of fate, decides to show his personal valour and courage by confronting the white man's administration. Finding himself isolated after he has killed the white man's messenger, Okonkwo commits suicide. In the *Ibo* code of ethics, committing suicide is so abominable a sin that he cannot get even a proper burial. Thus, ends the tragic tale of an individual who at one time was the most respected individual in Umuofia but who had been defeated by his temperament as well the changed circumstances. So was the *Ibo* society which too like Okonkwo had grown too rigid to recognise the need for adapting itself to changing circumstances. Both of them are swept away by the onslaught of a more powerful and cunning -the European - way of life.

3.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1)
 - a) Proverbs facilitate expression; they help us express things better and more effectively.
 - b) If one works hard and prepares himself/herself well, one can achieve the highest goal in life.
 - c) Unusual events arise because of significant reasons.
 - d) One should be grateful for one's good-luck.
 - e) God helps those who help themselves.
- 2) Because his father was a weak and lazy person and in the *Ibo* society only physically strong and hardworking people were respected.
- 3) Because Okonkwo had brought up the boy for three years and Ikemefuna looked up to Okonkwo as his own father. As per *Ibo* customs, this would be a crime against the earth goddess. Okonkwo did not heed the advice of his friend Ezeudu because he was afraid that others would consider him a coward.
- 4) The Egwugwus were the adjudicators representing the spirits of the ancestors of the clan. They were members of the clan itself in whom the spirits of the

ancestors were - believed to have entered after the performing of certain rituals. Their specific task was to dispense justice in cases of dispute among the members of the clan.

- 5) The Christian missionaries successfully challenged the superstitious beliefs of the *Ibo* traditional society thereby claiming a superiority for their own religion - Christianity-over the traditional religious practices of the *Ibos*.
- 6) The society was divided among the converts and the non-converts. Once the clan stopped speaking in a unified voice, the white man took over the function of the administrator of the society. The white man also introduced trade by way of monetary incentive, thereby further dividing the hitherto homogeneous *Ibo* society.
- 7) Okonkwo was physically very strong and hardworking. However, he was impatient and short tempered, often resorting to physical violence to assert his superiority. He was very conscious of his public image and did everything to guard it. Okonkwo was very rigid in his views and outlook and refused to adjust himself to the changed situations. While imposing his will and views upon others, he refused to grant them the freedom to have an independent opinion or outlook. As a result of this inflexibility in his character, Okonkwo failed to view and assess a situation realistically and this proved to be the primary reason of his isolation from fellow Umuofians and his tragic end.

UNIT 4 SPECIFIC FEATURES OF *THINGS FALL APART*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Simplicity
- 4.3 Universality
- 4.4 Man- Woman Relationships
- 4.5 Folk Material: Proverbs, Sayings and Metaphors
- 4.6 Language and Style
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.9 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this Unit is to highlight those specific aspects of *Things Fall Apart* which have made it a favourite text of not only readers all over the world, but also of critics, translators and teachers of literature.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's first novel - *Things Fall Apart* - remains the most favourite of his novel with his readers and critics, despite the fact that he himself considers *Arrow of God* as his most powerful work -his *tour de force*. Since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* more than sixty years ago, Achebe wrote four more novels, a book of short stories, a couple of story books for children, a book of poems and a book of essays. And yet his reputation as a writer rests most firmly on *Things Fall Apart*. It is one of the most widely discussed novels of our times. If one were to collect all the critical material published on *Things Fall Apart*, it would run into scores of volumes if not more, there would perhaps be hardly any expression from the book which would have been left without a comment. Such has been the impact of *Things Fall Apart* on the modern literary scene.

Things Fall Apart derives its mesmerising strength from a number of specific features which make it an ideal text. Achebe's sensitive perception of an ancient society at the crossroads of history, his artful mastery of telling a complex story quite simply and his effective blending of the techniques of oral narration with written discourse is the strength of the novel and makes it what it is a modern classic. Some of these features are: simplicity, universality and the language as well as the style of narration. Let us examine each one of these in detail.

4.2 SIMPLICITY

Things Fall Apart appears to be, on the face of it, a simple tale of the rise and fall of an obstinate man, Okonkwo, who was also impatient and short-tempered. His

insistence on participating in the killing of Ikemefuna whom he had treated like his own son for a number of years is an example of Okonkwo's obstinacy. Again, the author tells us in the very first chapter about Okonkwo's impatience with people who were physically weak. It is because of this that Okonkwo had no patience with his own father. A typical example of Okonkwo's short-temper is his beating his wife during the week of peace which the people of Umuofia observed immediately before the beginning of the sowing season for yams.

The novel appears to have no complexity by way of either depth of character portrayal or plot construction. These virtues have been considered essential for any novel of significance and have been extolled by almost all western critics of the novel art form, ranging from **Henry James** to **E M Forster**. It appears that the character of Okonkwo is portrayed by the author with the help of a few incidents like winning a wrestling match, killing Ikemefuna, beating one of his wives, killing his friend Obierika's son accidentally and beheading the white man's messenger. There is no attempt, it is suggested, to delve deep into the psyche of Okonkwo to find out if there are any hesitations and dilemmas, hopes and fears or regrets and elations about some of these acts of his. In short, the author appears to have provided no psychological dimension to the character of Okonkwo. As for the other characters, they are simply peripheral and they have not been provided with any major roles even in events and happenings. Finally, it has been suggested that at the level of style, *Things Fall Apart* is primarily told in simple structures and with very few words.

However, this quality of simplicity is quite deceptive in the case of *Things Fall Apart*. It is not, as has been made out to be, the story of the rise and fall of a single individual namely Okonkwo. It is, in fact, the story of a whole clan, a whole society, a whole way of life which meets its tragic end at the crossroads of history. The *Ibo* society on the eve of colonial takeover is 'the real hero' of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is because of this that Achebe has included a number of incidents which have no direct bearing on Okonkwo's character but which are very significant from the point of view of depicting the *Ibo* society at Umuofia.

We must, therefore, look for the depth of character in this 'real hero' rather than in Okonkwo or Obierika and others, although this is not to say that there is no depth of character in Okonkwo. The complex society that the pre-European *Ibo* world was, it is presented in its awe-inspiring glory through details of its various customs and rituals, its daily chores, its travails and jubulations, through its mourning and celebrations. In the first chapter itself we are told about the society and its norms "respecting those who have physical strength and pitying those who had none". The contrast between Okonkwo and his father Unoka has been presented to highlight the difference in character. While the father Unoka is lazy and physically weak, the son Okonkwo is strong both physically and mentally. The mental strength of Okonkwo is brought to light through an incident in which occurs the death of a woman of Umuofia at the hands of residents of Mbaino and the demand for a virgin and a young boy as compensation "the latter for killing" which has been described in details in the second chapter. This incident highlights yet another aspect of the *Ibo* society namely, blood for blood. It also highlights the plight of ordinary people who were in total control of their leaders. Thus, Ikemefuna has to pay with his life for a crime in which he had no hand. As the novel progresses we see Achebe describe in detail the manner in which justice

was publicly dispensed with the help of egwugwu masks, how fertility gods were propitiated by the observance of a peace week before the sowing season and how a man had to pay a very heavy price even for accidentally killing someone. Achebe gives us enough evidence of various other customs and rituals connected with marriage and death. (All these details have been provided by Achebe for that matter was not primitive but quite complex. It is this society rather than individuals like Okonkwo who are the focus of Achebe's study in *Things Fall Apart*.)

As for individual characters like Okonkwo, we have already listed in the last Unit the traits of his personality. He is strong, he is hardworking, he is impatient, he is short tempered, he is 'correct' in behaviour, he is conscious of his public image and he is rigid in his views. This makes him quite a complex character. However, Achebe follows a different technique in character building. Instead of dilating on the details of each of these qualities, Achebe reveals them through brief references to certain episodes. *Things Fall Apart* has, therefore, a deceptive aura of simplicity around itself, only half revealing a very complex text within, which is a major strength of the novel.

4.3 UNIVERSALITY

Achebe has stated in one of his essays titled "*Novelist as Teacher*" (included in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*) that one of the primary purpose of his novels is to educate his readers about the glory of their past, pre-colonial life. This he does with the intention of 'correcting' the distortions which were deliberately introduced by Europeans into the history and culture of Africa in order to create an inferiority complex in the minds of Africans. It is with this aim -in mind that they went on repeating the statement that Africa had no culture, no history, and no past. They justified their colonisation of Africa by stating that they had come to Africa to 'civilise' them. The frequent use of the expression 'white man's burden' for black Africans shows the same frame of mind of Whiteman's superiority as well as his philanthropic spirit. Obviously, this statement about African being without any history, or culture is blatantly false. In fact, this was a strategy to perpetuate their hold over the minds of the colonised people. In this respect, *Things Fall Apart* is a text about a specific society - the *Ibo* people - with a specific aim of restoring their self-confidence.

However, *Things Fall Apart* is more than that. It is, at another level, the story of individuals or societies who/which grow rigid in their outlook with the passage of time and refuse to recognise changes in their circumstances, let alone coming to terms with them. This in turn puts them out of tune with contemporary reality, leading to their tragic end. This is true not only of Okonkwo and the *Ibo* society of the late 19th century but also of any other society at any other time. This is, for instance, equally true of ancient Chinese, Indian, Greek and Egyptian civilisations. In this sense the novel is about the human predicament itself and is universal in character. It is not that Achebe is unaware of this dimension of his novel or that this universal element has 'crept' into the text unintentionally. Let us not forget that when it came to choosing a title for his book, Achebe chose it from a poem - *The Second Coming* - by the famous Irish poet **William Butler Yeats** which talks about the cyclic movement of human history in terms of order and anarchy. This shows quite clearly that the idea of creating a text that, although beginning with the story of a specific people but expanding to encompass mankind at large

was very much present in Achebe's mind from the very beginning. Let's quickly look at how man - woman relationships are discussed in the novel.

4.4 MAN- WOMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Achebe portrays man-woman relationship in *Ibo* society primarily through Okonkwo and his three wives. In the very beginning of the novel, we are told that Okonkwo

...ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did the little children. (p. 9)

We get a proof of this when Okonkwo berates Nwoye's mother:

"Do what you are told, woman", Okontwo thundered and stammered. And so, Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions. (pp 10-11)

This behaviour on the part of Okonkwo was because Okonkwo as a member of the *Ibo* social organisation, believed that –

No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man (p 37)

Okonkwo is portrayed by Achebe to be a man of short temper but he is particularly harsh with women. There is an episode in the novel in which he is preparing some herbal medicine for his daughter Ezinma. Ekwefi, his wife and Ezinma's mother gives him a pot full of water and pours some on the herbs and asks Okonkwo, "Is that enough?" He shouts at her.. "A little more...I said a *little*. Are you deaf?" (p.60). Apparently the shouting is absolutely unnecessary but is in keeping with Okonkwo's belief about 'ruling his household with a heavy hand'.

In fact, Okonkwo even resorts to beating his wives. He beats Ojiugo, his youngest wife during the Peace Week for failing to cook his afternoon meal on time. On another occasion, his second wife is beaten for killing a banana tree. This practice of wife beating however seems to be common among the *Ibos*.

While we may draw a conclusion from the above that man is the undisputed boss in the family, it may not be wholly correct to deduce that women were forced to submit completely to men in the *Ibo* societal organisation. For instance, women in most ethnic groups in Nigeria, including among the *Ibo*, did enjoy economic independence. Again, educated urban women could not be dominated as completely as their uneducated rural sisters. In the next section, we shall look at how folk material is used in the novel.

4.5 FOLK MATERIAL: PROVERBS, SAYINGS AND METAPHORS

One of the unique strengths of *Things Fall Apart* is the use of folk material employed by Achebe in his narration. As stated elsewhere in this block, *Ibos* were renowned for the extensive use of proverbs, sayings and metaphors in the

communication. In fact, communication had been fine tuned to be an art and there were contests held to choose outstanding communicators. The art of conversation itself is described with the help of the following proverb:

Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.

Achebe builds this into his own narrative by weaving these folk elements into the tapestry of his narrative. Among the *Ibo*, proverbs are used to describe a person's interaction and relations with others, focusing especially on his/her status or place in the society. Among them, for instance, they had a saying "*if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings*" meaning thereby that one could raise one's social status by one's behaviour. Okonkwo is shown to be such a person. Another proverb that fits Okonkwo is *-A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness*. Okonkwo's potential is recognised by his fellow villagers because you can *tell a ripe corn by its look*. While his father could not raise a loan because lending him was *full like pouring grains of corn into a bag of holes*, Okonkwo had no such difficulty when he went to borrow yams for planting.

When showing temper to an untitled person, Okonkwo is reminded by an Elder that, "*those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble*".

In another situation when Okonkwo is being dissuaded from participating in the killing of Ikemefuna, especially because the latter called him 'father', Okonkwo tries to allay the fears of those who were apprehensive that retributive Wrath would be on him, and says:

A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm. The implication is that it was only his societal obligations that he was fulfilling by participating in the killing of Ikemefuna.

Okonkwo is disappointed in his son Nwoye who does not show signs of aggressively pursuing the goals of life as he himself had done. He tells his friend Obierika, *A chick that can grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches.*

When the bride price for Akueke, Obierika's daughter is being settled, the suitor's brother uses the following expression:

As the dog says, 'If it fall down for you and you fall down for me, it's play.

The implication is that there should be a happy compromise in all such matters.

Given below are more such proverbs and sayings that Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart*.

A child cannot pay for its mother's milk.

Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.

An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.

A toad does not run in the day time for nothing.

Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching.

I have learnt that a man who makes troubles for other is also making trouble for himself, said the Tortoise.

The clan is like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.

Achebe makes clear that these proverbs and sayings are a part of the inherited wisdom of the *Ibos*, by preceding the proverbs of sayings by words such as “As our elders say”, “as the saying goes among our people”, etc.

To drive home the full import of the sayings, Achebe translates them directly in a very simple language. This way he is able to convey the linguistic prowess of his people. This is also one of the most powerful aspects of the narrative strategies employed in *Things Fall Apart*. We shall look at the use of language and comment of Achebe’s style next.

4.6 LANGUAGE AND STYLE

One of the strongest virtues of *Things Fall Apart* is its style and the use that Achebe makes of the English language to weave this apparently simple but highly sophisticated story of the passing away of a way of life.

The language is very simple and direct and so is the syntax. This is very much in keeping with firstly, the art of oral narration which was a significant feature of the society Achebe describes in the novel and secondly, with the ‘educational’ role that Achebe assigns to his novel.

However, as in the case of the story and the characterisation this simplicity at the level of style is also very deceptive. Look at the case with which Achebe builds a large number of *Ibo* words into his English language structures. While it is true that Achebe provides a glossary of such terms at the end of the novel, it is also true that in most cases a reader is able to ‘guess’ the meaning from the context. Let me take a couple of examples. In chapter one, the following sentence occurs:

He could hear in his minds ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the ekwe and the udu and the ogene and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them decorating them with colourfuland plaintive tune.

It is not difficult to guess as to what the *Ibo* words *ekwe*, *ude* and *ogene* stand for. They must be musical instruments. The ease with which we are able to make the guess is not only because of their being juxtaposed with words like ‘rhythm’ and ‘tune’ but also because of the naming of one of the instruments - flute - in English. Let us take another example, this time from chapter twelve:

On the following morning the entire neighbourhood wore a festive air because Okonkwo’s friend, Obierika, was celebrating his daughter’s uri. It was the day on which her suitor (having already paid the great part of her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only for her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive kinsmen called umunna.

We can immediately ‘guess’ that *uri* must refer to some kind of an engagement ceremony. However, as stated above in 4.5, the most important feature of Achebe’s style in *Things Fall Apart* is the use of *Ibo* proverbs. Even a cursory reading of the novel draws one’s attention to a very extensive use of proverbs by Achebe as an important stylistic device. First, their use lends authenticity to Achebe’s

portrayal of the *Ibo* society in which not only is the use of proverbs in day-to-day life quite popular but it is highly prized as well. Those who can use these proverbs frequently during a conversation are considered to be better speakers. This is also true of the *Yoruba* people in Nigeria itself and the *Ashante* people in Ghana. Secondly, the use of proverbs fits in well with Achebe's didactic function that he assigns to every novelist. Every proverb, as we know, has some kind of amoral or lesson to draw from. Finally, proverbs lend an element of precision to Achebe's style of writing. What may need paragraphs of elaboration may be put more easily and effectively through the use of a proverb. Here is an example: instead of saying that to coexist is a virtue and it is advisable to do so without coming into conflict with another person, an *Ibo* would simply say –'let the kite perch and let the eagle perch', or, signifying the importance of appropriate behaviour, the *Ibos* say. 'If a child washed his hands, he could eat with the kings.' Again, *Ibos* believe that circumstances are favourable to only those who try to do things themselves and this they say in the following manner: when a man says yes, his *chi* says yes. *Chi* incidentally is the personal god or spirit assigned to every *Ibo* individual at the time of his/her birth and is supposed to stay at his/her shoulder all the time.

Thus, Achebe's use of *Ibo* words, *Ibo* proverbs translated into English and the use of simple structures that are a characteristic of the oral style of narration make up the style of *Things Fall Apart*. Add to this his frequent use of irony and you have quite a formidable style of writing.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *Things Fall Apart* is both specific and universal in character. How?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Is it correct to call the style of *Things fall Apart* simple? If not, why?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4.7 LET US SUM UP

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been a favourite book with readers, critics and translators all over the world. It is sometimes suggested that the book is a very simplistic account of the life of a character that lacks depth of complexity. The impression of *Things Fall Apart* is enormous. The novel, in fact, is quite a

complex portrayal of a society that is in itself, quite complex. In fact, this society- the *Ibos* towards the end of nineteenth century - is the 'real subject' of the book.

Achebe also builds into his analysis of the society a universal element that sets the book free from fetters of time and place. The novel is about human predicament itself. This makes *Things Fall Apart* specific and universal at the same time.

It is also suggested that the style and the language of the book, like its structure and characterisation, is very simple. Once again, this is not true. Achebe has borrowed a large part of his technique from the oral art of narration which is quite common among the *Ibos* and which gives the impression of being simple but is not really so. Achebe makes use of *Ibo* words quite frequently, weaving them skillfully into his structures of English. Again, extensive use of proverbs which he translates from *Ibo*- sometimes literally, sometimes after modifying them significantly – also lends complexity to his style and the use of language.

It is because of these specific features that *Things Fall Apart* is considered a modern classic.

4.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- i) *Things Fall Apart* is both specific and universal because while dealing with specific characters in a specific society at a specific point of time, Achebe invokes the very predicament of man. The novel thus transcends barriers of time and place.
- ii) The style of *Things Fall Apart* is simple in appearance only. It is so because Achebe adopts the style of oral narration. However, on closer scrutiny we find many features of style and uses of language, which make it quite sophisticated. The use of *Ibo* words and proverbs is the most prominent of these features.

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

- 1) Achebe, Chinua, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Heinemann, London), 1975
- 2) Dathorne, O. R., *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Heinemann, London), 1975
- 3) Dheram, Prema Kumari., *Deprogramming through Cultural Nationalism: Achebe and Ellison*.
- 4) Killam, G.D., *Chinua Achebe* (Heinemann, London). 1969
- 5) Larson, Charles. R. *The Emergence of African Fiction-* (The Macmillan Press Ltd, London), 1978
- 6) Palmer, Eustace, *An Introduction to the African Novel* (Heinemann, London), 1972
- 7) Wright, Edgar, *The Critical Evaluation of African* (Heinemann, London), 1973.

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*

8) Roscoe, Adrian

Mother is Gold (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1971.

9) Wauthier, Claude,

The Literature & Thought of Modern Africa {Pall Mall Press, London), 1964

10) Yanksa, Kofi, E.

Chinua Achebe's Novels: Socio Linguistic Perspective, (Pacific Publishers: Nigeria), 1990



ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

