

## Chinua Achebe's Use of Language in "The Theme of Change": The Case of *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract

The paper discusses the theme of change in *Things Fall Apart*, showing how Chinua Achebe has handled language to demonstrate the conflicts that occurred between the people of Umuofia and the white missionaries over the threat of change of the Igbo culture. The missionaries look at the Igbo culture despicably and want Igbo people to follow Christian religion. It is shown through some characters like Okonkwo who is portrayed as strongly resisting change from his culture to the white man's religion, and his son Nwoye who epitomises some of the Igbo people who give up their culture and follow the white man's religion. The paper shows how Okonkwo's refusal to give up some aspects of his culture and adopt the white man's religion finally destroys him as he ends up committing suicide. The message that is communicated here is the importance of considering other people's cultures for purposes of growth and development. In the process of preservation of one's culture, one should learn to accommodate other people's cultures and adapt some aspects that are of use for them.

**Keywords:** theme; change; conflict; Igbo tradition; missionaries; Nigeria

### Introduction

The paper examines the theme of change in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Change refers to a situation in which something becomes different in some way. It might be for good or bad. It is something that everyone is bound to encounter in his or her lifetime, thus making it part of the natural process. A pre-Socratic Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus has been cited as saying 'change is the only consistent thing in this world because it can be seen everywhere' (Great fixer2022). Indeed, change occurs in all aspects of life. It can embrace every human being throughout his or her evolution, sometimes induced by circumstances. Change is considered important in this paper as it occurs throughout the novel in all forms, especially when its perpetrators do it at the expense of the tradition that had woven the Igbo people together. Each time the need for change arises, it poses a question of whether it should be given priority over the Igbo tradition or not.

There is a struggle between change and Igbo tradition as time and again the villagers are caught between either resisting or embracing change. In the process, some Igbo people give up some of their cultural values and change to the Christian religion, while others are adamant and want to stick to their culture and not change. Subsequently, change is largely embraced, and thus brings about the destruction in Igbo culture. This renders the protagonist, Okonkwo, and a staunch believer of the Igbo culture, a victim of his own circumstances. He refuses to accept change to the point of self-destruction. Cesar Chavez once said: "Preservation of one's culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures" (Chavez 2022:87). This shows the importance of adapting change where appropriate, especially that it is bound to occur with time. It shows that no matter the ambition an individual has, he or she must take into consideration the aspirations of other people. Achebe has braced himself with the changes as time went by. In the novel, as time goes on, strange people with a different religion bring changes amongst Igbo people, and he makes his characters to react in either

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a positive or negative way. The methodology used here is that of closely reading the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which is the object of study and reading critiques of the novel. The paper appeals to the theory of social change which gives a provision and rationale for reasons of change.

Since the paper is on the theme of change in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the novel was read and analysed paying attention to numerous conflicts sparked by resistance or acceptance to change which is imposed on the Igbo people in Nigeria by the white missionaries. Other aspects of novel that were deemed as worthy of consideration were figurative language, imagery as well as aesthetic qualities. Qualitative method was used to calculate the relative reference of qualitative features (Abrams 1981). This assessment partly draws upon the work of Achebe critics such as Innes (1990).

### Literature

Although in some cases, change can be sought after and be embraced and accepted when it comes, in *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Umuofia and the neighbouring villages do not have the choice to accept or reject the changes. Instead, change is forced upon the Igbo people by the white missionaries who have come to inhabit their villages. Achebe uses proverbs like other contemporary literary African writers to exploit the Igbo oral tradition which is the means through which he communicates the message, 'Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten'. He portrays events that happen regularly and bind members of the community together, (Laurence 2001). He draws a clear picture of the Igbo tradition and how his culture changes to modern Christian civilisation. He portrays how the Igbo people educate their children through storytelling and Igbo creation myths, such as birds and tortoise story. However, this proves to be such a tussle between the Igbo people and the white missionaries, as the story is characterised by a series of shocks and conflicts, where either of the parties were not agreeing with the other (Allen 2010).

Achebe takes advantage of the knowledge of his culture as a traditional Nigerian. He is so original in his creation of the fictitious story which is in tune with real things in each space and time, hence an illusion of reality. His novel was so impressive that it opened a chance for him to be invited to Britain to train and sharpen his writing skills, especially that at that time, he, and many other writers, wrote their literary works in local dialects. According to Innes (1990), when Queen Elizabeth II of England visited Nigeria 1956, Achebe was invited by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for training in Britain.

Critics view Achebe as sometimes being chauvinistic as he resorts to gender discrimination, where only men are to make important decisions, Women have their feelings and views suppressed. The female characters in *Things Fall Apart* are portrayed as passive and naive in the sense that they are not responsive to critical events unfolding around them. Women are not at any time portrayed as resisting change imposed on them by the white man, rather they convert to Christianity without questioning why they have to change. The only time their services are appreciated is when they paint the Egwugwu's houses, or when they are recognised for their seniority in the polygamous marriages (Achebe 1958:84). For instance, younger wives cannot drink before the elder wife as a sign of respect to her as it happens with Anasi Nwakibie's first wife. Imeka-Amadi's wife converts to the new religion. Nneka who has had four pregnancies giving birth to twins and has them thrown away in the bush had to flee to join the white man's Christianity quietly, and she like Imeka, does not question what they were going into.

Furthermore, critics draw a parallel between Okonkwo and other tragic literary heroes such as, 'Hamlet' and 'Oedipus', going by Aristotle's view of tragedy that, a tragic hero is a character

who is of high status and famous at the start and has a flaw in him that lends him in trouble, and thus brings him down. Okonkwo is one such a character in *Things Fall Apart*. He has risen to the level of recognition in Umuofia despite coming from a poor background. He is well known as a champion of wrestling in all the nine villages around Umuofia. He has many titles and wives, which are the signs of recognition in Igbo culture. Because of his poor background, he has vowed to do the opposite of what led to their family being poor, his father's laziness. Therefore, in his endeavour to gain recognition as a hero, he becomes impulsive and always hastens to strike first. He ends up committing serious crimes such as a series of murders. He kills Ikemefuna, despite the warning from Ezeudu, a village elder that he should not kill the boy as he regarded him as his father. He shoots to death a clan's man who is Ekwudu's son during the dance in his father's funeral and ends up being exiled from Umuofia to his mother land, Mbata, for seven years. He kills the messenger who is sent by the white man to stop his meeting. Okonkwo is adamant and does not want to accept change brought by the white missionaries. All these tragic episodes cause him great misery where he ends up committing suicide.

### **Background of the Novel**

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel published in 1958. The setting of the story is in Nigeria in the nineteenth-century. This was a time when Africa was undergoing drastic changes due to the advent of white missionaries with their religion during European colonisation of Africa. The western missionaries gradually introduce new thoughts and beliefs into the Igbo society with time. The changes that are brought into the Igbo culture, eventually, lead to the destruction of the Igbo culture. The fictitious story based in Nigeria can be treated as a macrocosm of what was experienced by most of the Africans in African countries resulting from either resisting change or initiating it. Some people in Africa were forced to go into exile as outcasts. In South Africa, for instance, many blacks, including school children, had to flee the country because of the disagreement between them and the white minority rulers who had come to settle amongst them many years ago. The African people through their struggle, did not want apartheid where African people were discriminated against by people of European descent. Also, they wanted change from Bantu Education and the use of Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction imposed on them by the minority White regime.

Abame village in *Things Fall Apart* is reported to be 'no more' after the Igbo people got massacred by the white missionaries at the market. The attack is motivated by the killing of the white men by the Igbo people who think that their culture is being threatened.

*Things Fall Apart*, as the title suggests, shows the disintegration of the norms and values, that had held the Igbo tribe together, at the hands of the white man's arrival in Umuofia along with his religion. Many of the Igbo people succumb to the white man's religion and thus accept change while some of them, like Okonkwo, resist change. The Igbo people have a big market in Abame on every other "Afo" day, the whole clan usually gathers there. On this fateful day, the market is so full. The enemy advances in large numbers together with other black men, surrounds the market and starts shooting. Everybody is killed except the old and sick who have not come to the market. Great evil befalls them as the Oracle warned.

### **Theory of Social Change**

The theory of social change has been viewed as relevant in the analysis of change in *Things fall apart* because of its advocacy for the inevitability and importance social change. The theory views change as the law of nature and as being bound to occur to any society for purposes of social development.

In this theory, change is seen as sometimes caused by nature or from being initiated deliberately. Another view sees social change as a modification which can take place in the life patterns of people in any community (Boudon 1986). Earlier sociologists viewed ways of life of other primitive people as static and thus not capable of changing. However, with the advent of anthropologists, it was agreed that primitive cultures are bound to undergo changes. Hence, modern sociologists all agreed on naturalness and inevitability of social change in every human society (Ray 1999). Social change, therefore, means observable difference in any social set up over any period.

Auguste Comte, the French sociologist, who coined the word sociology believed sociology had the potential to improve society and direct human activity, and that society developed in stages (Jones 2011) Other great thinkers of the nineteenth-century such as Herbert Spencer held similar views regarding inevitability of social change in any community. Yet another group of classical theorists of sociology such as, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto and Marx Weber, who happen to specialise in other fields, but interested in sociology, have attempted to explain the changes that a society can go through, (Dillan 2014).

Therefore, the views held by all these theorists of social change that change is bound to occur in any society, have relevance in what happens to the people of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*. The Igbo people undergo change from their culture to the Whiteman's religion and education. The theorists' views of change imply that the people of Umuofia and the neighbouring villages had to change out of their interaction with the white missionaries. So, change was inevitable for the Igbo people.

### **Igbo Men and Missionaries**

In the novel change is imposed on the Igbo people by the white missionaries who ultimately inhabit Umuofia. But it is not an easy walk as different characters resist change brought by the missionaries in numerous situations. So, change in this paper is pitted against tradition, as experienced by a variety of characters in the novel.

Some of the Igbo people such as Chielo, the priestess of Agbala despise the missionaries and see them as “excrements of the clan”, especially that none of them is a man of title. As far as he is concerned, they are mostly “Efulufus” (a man who sold his matchet and has nothing to fight with), and empty men of no value. Another elderly man poses a question “if this God of theirs is The goddess of the earth, The God of the sky and Amadiora of the thunderbolt or what” (Achebe, 1958: 83). Other Gods that were mentioned were Ani, Idemili and Egwugwu. The white man's response is that all the Gods they name are not Gods at all, and that there is only one true God. Yet another old man who resists change to the white man's God and religion asks a question as to “who would protect them from the anger of their neglected Gods and ancestors” (Achebe, 1958: 85). The response from the side of the missionaries is that “their Gods are not alive and but pieces of woods which could not do them any harm”. The missionaries further speak about Jesu Kristi. Still, the elderly people of Umuofia are not convinced. They wonder why they can be told of only one God and another person as his son.

Okonkwo, the main character, and his son, robustly, demonstrate the struggle between change and tradition in different ways as the story unfolds. Okonkwo is a typical Igbo man, who is known as a wrestling champion throughout the nine villages in Umuofia. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo's ego is motivated by the fear of being thought weak like his father Unoka. The spirit of not being thought weak makes him impulsive and thus vulnerable to serious mistakes that often lead him to tragedy. For instance, at the funeral of one of the elders, Ezeudu, Okonkwo kills the son

of the deceased by mistake. “His gun exploded and pierced the boy’s heart” (Achebe, 1958: 91). He is seen by members of the community as having committed “a crime that is without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia”. “It is a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clan’s” (Achebe, 1958: 93). Therefore, he faces punishment of exile from his village for seven years. The act of killing Ezeudu’s son led Okonkwo to a complete change of his life as he has to leave all the wealth that he has amassed and take refuge in his mother land in exile in Mbata. Changes are also encroaching as the missionaries are also there busy introducing their religion.

Okonkwo gets tried through his son Nwoye who converts as he believes in the missionaries’ stories. The church in Mbata is growing gradually and becoming stronger. The missionaries are spreading the word of God and the Holy Trinity. The young man, Nwoye, is completely captivated and convinced by word of God. The clan is worried but not much because they think they would die in a short period of time, but, unfortunately, that does not happen.

Nwoye’s father makes him feel like an outsider in his own family. Infact, leaving his father and going to Christianity school would make him so happy. He is seriously contemplating joining the missionaries’ religion as he is deeply haunted by the evil things that the members of his clan do, such as throwing into Evil Forest a man who dies during the week of peace, the throwing away of the twins in the Evil Forest, and the killing of Ikemefuna, which his father Okonkwo directly participated in. Nwoye never recovered from the sadness of the loss of Ikemefuna as he is already used to him and took him like his brother. Nwoye completely revolts and continues to go to the missionary’s church, although his father, Okonkwo is totally against him attending the missionaries’ church. At one point he physically attacks Nwoye. Uchendu’s, Okonkwo’s uncle, scolded Okonkwo for attacking Nwoye for going to the missionaries’ church, suggesting that he should let him go if he so wishes to join the white man’s religion. This is an indication that even in Mbata, Okonkwo’s motherland, some of the elderly people are gradually giving up to the missionaries’ religion.

Nwoye returns to Umuofia to join the other missionaries’ church, which is headed by one of the Igbo men, Mr Kiaga. Upon hearing that Nwoye wants to go to the Christian school where they teach the young ones to read and write, Mr Kiaga responded by saying “Blessed is he who forsakes his father and mother for my sake’. Nwoye even has a good mind of coming back to convert his mother, brother and sisters. The move by Nwoye to go back to Umuofia to join the white man’s church humiliates Okonkwo in the eyes of his clan’s men. Amikwu, his cousin, always reports to him that they always see Nwoye there. As for Nwoye, abandoning his Igbo culture for the western missionaries’ religion, filled him with joy that he is changing for better in the sense that he condemns the killing of innocent people, which is seen as immoral and unethical by the neighbouring villages. He feels comforted when he hears the hymns from the missionaries. Nwoye’s shallow mind is greatly puzzled. Moreover, he is relieved of the burden of these evil deeds that have been haunting him. According to Nwoye, the missionaries gave him a safe haven where he would be free to express his emotions. The missionaries’ arrival energised everyone in the village, thus bringing changes which could be both beneficial and harmful.

The events surrounding Okonkwo are centred on the Igbo’s cultural values. Okonkwo is a staunch believer of the Igbo cultural values. For instance, he strongly resists the new religious orders as he thinks they are worthless. And that they are not worth associating with. His status is guided by cultural standards by which society measures him. This is clearly shown when the community which he is part of gets divided by the missionaries. He stands out alone and does not want to change and prefers self-destruction if he fails to convince his people. Whilst Okonkwo resists change, Nwoye does the opposite by embracing it. Some changes are for the better in the sense that the people of

Umuofia refrain from such as merciless killings of innocent people. Some of the Igbo people are excited about the good new opportunities that are brought by the missionaries such as education. To demonstrate the theme of change through the Igbo culture, Achebe communicates the customs and superstitions of an Igbo culture through the elderly men and women such as Ezeudu and Chielo, who pass stories believed to be the custom to young people. For example. He says, “if a man dies during the week of peace, he is not buried but thrown into Evil Forest, resulting in the clan full of evil spirits of the unburied dead”. Often formal language and Igbo is used through proverbs, folktales (as in the story of Mother Kite, which warns against people who go quiet when provoked); that there is something ominous about the silence, Ochendu warns “Never kill a man who says nothing”, wondering why the people of Abame killed the white man who does not say anything to them, also a snake not being called by its name at night for fear of bad luck, and the story of the tortoise, and wedding songs such as

“if I hold her hand, she says don’t touch; if I hold her foot she says don’t touch! If I hold her waist beads, she pretends not to know”(Achebe 1958:87).

Images are used as well. After Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna, Achebe’s narrator says, “His eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor” (Achebe 1958:46). Therefore, language is a very important tool in the novel as it communicates the message clearly.

### **Interrelationships between Characters**

Through-out the novel, there is a series of conflicts between characters on whether to change or stick to Igbo tradition. The conflicts are centred around relationships between man and his conscience, as in Okonkwo and his conscience after he kills a clans’ man, he says to himself: ‘when did you become a shivering woman’, ‘you are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war’. Also, the fact that he commits suicide is a clear indication that he must have had deep thoughts as to whether he should take his life for the disintegration of his culture or not. There is also a conflict between man and man. The most outstanding is a strenuous relationship between Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye. The two constantly have conflicting views about Nwoye’s attendance of the missionaries’ church.

A conflict between man and his people points towards Okonkwo and his clans’ men and the elderly men of Umuofia. He, hardly, ever takes advice from them. This is shown when he hastens to kill Ikemefuna despite having been advised by an elderly person such as Ogbuefu Ezeudu not to kill Ikemefuna as he regards him as his father. “That boy calls you father, do not bear a hand in his death”, said Ogbuefu Ezeudu (Achebe1958:41). According to Ezeudu, the Oracle of the hills and the Caves has already made a pronouncement that the boy be killed as is the custom. Okonkwo makes it a point that he kills Ikemefuna, as he was afraid to be thought weak (Achebe1958:44). Ikemefuna cries “My father they have killed me”. “Okonkwo draws his machet and cut him down” and Okonkwo does not taste food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drinks palm wine from morning till night.

Okonkwo also has conflicts with the missionaries. He is adamant and does not want to give up his culture and accommodate any changes brought about by the missionaries. All these conflicting views occurred to resist change in the cultural norms that they believe in, that define the Igbo people and hold them together. Ultimately, Okonkwo changes for worse as a person because of adamantly resisting change of his Igbo beliefs for the missionary religion. He fights, unsuccessfully, against

changes that counteract his Igbo cultural beliefs. He cannot come to terms with the fact that his son Nwoye abandons him and runs away with the white man. Okonkwo believes he is cursed by his personal god 'Chi' as he does not protect him in all his misfortunes, such as his exile and his son, Nwoye refusing to obey him. He cannot imagine his son or even children praying to the white man and not their gods. His cup of patience runs over, and he gets so disillusioned. Because of this strong resistance, and obsession, he reaches a breaking point and commits suicide. Okonkwo's body is found dangling from a tree (Achebe 1958:127) by the clan men, the DC and his men. This happens because Okonkwo realises that everything is changing around him and that his Igbo culture is crumbling.

Achebe portrays characters that resist change when the white man comes to their village. Because the white man looks different from them in terms of colour, Okonkwo calls him an albino, which is the only colour they are familiar with. Also, because they are used to riding in a horse, a bicycle is likened with a horse. They also observed that the white man is speaking through his nose. In this predicament, they consult their Oracle who warns them that the white man is a harbinger and that other white men are on their way to destroy their clan. Achebe, through his character, the Oracle uses an image of *locusts* to suggest that other white men are on their way coming to attack them in large numbers. In order to pre-empt the coming of the white man, they kill the white man and tie his bicycle to a secret silk cotton tree as it might 'run away' to call the white man's friends.

When Okonkwo gets back to Umuofia after seven years, he finds that the new religion has infiltrated and taken over their culture. Some of the people of Umuofia have already changed and thus given the missionaries land to build their church. Okonkwo realises that the mood for change to the missionary's religion has almost engulfed everyone. They have already sent some of them as Evangelists to the surrounding villages to lure more converts. They tell their fellow Igbo people that that they worship "false Gods of wood and stone" (Achebe 1958: 72) and that they should leave those wicked false gods and turn to true god to be saved. They tell them that there is only one true God that should be worshipped and that the true men who worship the true God will live forever in his happy kingdom. Some of the Igbo people, including the elderly, have joined the new religion and are beginning to question their way of life. His people seem to be faced with the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has discussed the theme of change in *Things Fall Apart*, showing that each time change occurs it is against the backdrop of culture for the Igbo people in Umuofia. It has been demonstrated how different individuals and the Igbo express feelings by refusing to change either for better or worse.

Okonkwo is adamant and does not want to have his Igbo culture changed by the white man. Nwoye is convinced and gets converted by the white man. Subsequently, all the Umuofia communities are engulfed by the white man's religion. Some of them appreciate the religion and the changes that have been introduced by the white man such as education. Some young Igbo men and women are taken to church schools to learn how to read and write.

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