

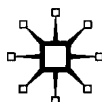
The Fiction of Chinua Achebe

JAGO MORRISON

Consultant editor: Nicholas Fredson



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Introduction

Since the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Chinua Achebe has acquired a reputation as the ‘Godfather’ of modern African writing. With combined book sales for his novels running to tens of millions of copies, his work has become a staple of the college and university curriculum throughout the English-speaking world. It is difficult to imagine a course on postcolonial writing, or on the post-war novel, which did not include one of Achebe’s novels, and the spread of criticism on his work is correspondingly vast and bewildering.

This book is intended to enable readers of Achebe’s work to navigate the field of Achebe criticism, setting out the key areas of critical debate, the most influential alternative approaches to his work and the controversies that have so often surrounded it. As Achebe’s most influential and widely studied text, *Things Fall Apart* provides an important focus of discussion. Chapter 1, ‘*Things Fall Apart*: Challenging the Canon’, explores the novel’s extraordinary international critical impact as a milestone in post-war fiction, whilst chapter 2, ‘*Things Fall Apart*: The Novel and Nigeria’, sets the novel against its West African historical background. Chapters 3 to 6 focus on the novels *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, respectively. In order to provide some discussion of the less often studied short fiction, a short section on the collection *Girls at War* is included in chapter 5, providing an interesting postscript to the troubled career of *A Man of the People*.

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was the fifth of six children born to a church catechist and his wife, Isaiah and Janet Achebe, in the Ibo village of Nneobi in 1930. His childhood was spent in his father’s ancestral village of Ogidi, where Ibo tradition and colonial culture rubbed shoulders. Achebe attended a school whose regime was based – to judge by the account of biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1958–2005)¹ – on a brutal enforcement of Christian values. As is

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suggested by his name, the school's headmaster, Mr Okongwu, may have provided one of the models for the figure of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*:

■ The strict nature of Okongwu and his adherence to discipline was immediately established when he addressed the teachers and pupils, enumerating a list of prohibitions which he stressed with the refrain, 'A raa eme ya eme!' – 'It is never done!' That phrase became the nickname of the new headmaster and one day, soon after the public address, as he was going to the Iyenu hospital to give the Europeans there some lessons in Igbo, some pupils began shouting, 'It is never done! It is never done!'

The next day Mr. Okongwu gathered the pupils after the morning service at the school. After locking the doors he produced some canes with which he proceeded to flog every child to punish the offenders that no one was willing to identify.²□

After an early education partly overshadowed by World War Two, Achebe attended a government college for his secondary education, and University College, Ibadan, a daughter college of the University of London, for his undergraduate studies. On graduation, his application for funding for postgraduate work at Trinity College, Cambridge, was unfortunately rejected, forcing Achebe to quit university and to start work as an English teacher at a school in Oba. Only a few months passed in this employment, however, before he was contacted by the controller of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS), with the offer of an interview in Lagos:

■ At the interview Achebe found out how his name had been forwarded to the Broadcasting Service. The Director of the NBS in Lagos, Tom Chalmers, who had been seconded from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), had made inquiries of James Welch at the University College, Ibadan. Chalmers wanted Welch to recommend somebody who would become their senior broadcasting officer in the Eastern Region. It was necessary to make such plans, in the opinion of the authorities at the NBS, since impending political independence held the implication that expatriates would make their exits soon after that event. It did not take James Welch long to come up with the name of the young Ogidi graduate he had earlier recommended to the University of Cambridge.³□

After Welch's recommendation, the job at the NBS gave Achebe direct access to the professional networks which would later enable

him to secure the publication of his first novel. As chapter 1 of this book describes, it was thanks to a work-experience trip to the BBC in London that Achebe made the specific editorial contacts which ultimately brought *Things Fall Apart* to Heinemann.

If his early career was blessed with both luck and the privilege of professional recommendation, the critical success of *Things Fall Apart* and its successors can by no means simply be ascribed to such advantages. As *West Africa* magazine reported in a 40-year retrospective,⁴ critic Donald MacRae, editorial adviser to Heinemann in 1957, was only the first to recognize that Achebe was an outstanding literary talent. On the basis of MacRae's assessment that Achebe's novel was 'The best first novel since the war',⁵ the publisher decided to take an unusual chance, printing a full run of 2,000 copies in hardback. *West Africa's* reporter Idowu Omoyele records that 'since then, over three million copies have been sold through the years. Translations of the novel can also be read in languages as diverse as French, Hungarian, Czech, Hebrew, Russian, Slovene, Spanish, Italian and German. Forty years on, *Things Fall Apart* is as historically significant as ever'.⁶

As Stephanie Newell observes in her recent study *West African Literatures* (2006),⁷ many critics have seen the publication of *Things Fall Apart* as a major watershed in African fiction, setting the tone for much later writing, especially in its handling of colonialism. Half a century after the novel's emergence, it remains the most canonical of African texts. In terms of the reception and understanding of West African literature, however, the enormous impact of Achebe's novel has had some negative as well as positive effects, Newell argues. Certainly, its status as the 'founding text' of modern African literature has tended to obscure the importance of his precursors. As she says, critics have tended to condense the decades *before* Achebe's emergence into an 'expectant, Achebe-shaped pause'.⁸ Similarly, the empire-writes-back model of *Things Fall Apart*, as well as its thematic emphases, has often been taken as a blueprint against which all other African writers should be judged. In fact, the African literary scene in the mid-twentieth century was far more varied and developed than many critics have assumed:

■ If elite authors in the empire were 'writing back' to the colonial centre at this time, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim [in *The Empire Writes*

Back (1989)] for 'first generation' authors such as Achebe, many other West African writers were also writing novels, poems and plays for their own local communities, not primarily for metropolitan markets. . . . [T]hese other 'first-generation' authors produced a great deal of literature for their own consumption, not designed for – nor acceptable to – European publishing houses. The Yoruba novelist, D. O. Fagunwa [1903–63], who gained fame among Yoruba Nigerians for his work in the 1930s and 1940s, exemplifies the *localism* of this literature. Fagunwa's style of writing in the 1930s and 1940s inspired later international novelists, including Amos Tutuola [1920–97], whose *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* [1952] drew many themes from Yoruba-language texts and tales. . . .

Many other West African authors in the late colonial period also defied the 'empire writes back' model. One immensely influential branch of West African literature that tends to be neglected by literary scholars is the booming local market in self-help pamphlets, popular fiction, and religious literature by African authors writing in French and English. . . . Unfortunately, however, the 'starter' status conferred on *Things Fall Apart* tends to obscure the literary contexts in which Achebe was situated when he started to write.⁹ □

As Newell suggests, the virtually incomparable literary status of *Things Fall Apart* has profoundly shaped the reception of Achebe's later works and those of other writers. Partly because of its relationship with the English literary canon and its more general intelligibility to an international audience, the novel has helped to define the ways in which outsiders approach African literature.

Newell's argument certainly raises questions about the wider implications of Achebe's positive critical reception, especially in the West. On the positive side, however, it must also be balanced by a recognition of his unique importance in promoting the work of many other African writers. As the publisher Alan Hill suggests in an interview with Kirsten Holst Petersen,¹⁰ Achebe's indirect, and later direct, role in getting the international book trade to pay attention to African literary production is undeniable. Stressing his own pivotal role as well as Achebe's, Hill recalls the circumstances under which Heinemann's legendary African Writers Series was established in the wake of *Things Fall Apart*:

■ Achebe could not be unique. I felt there must be other potential authors among the new university-educated generation in Nigeria. So the following year, 1959, I went to West Africa and I took the book around with me. . . . I then went on to travel round the whole of

sub-Saharan Africa, and when I got back it was clear I needed specialized help if we were to find and publish new African authors – a feat which none of the famous British publishers who were long-established in Africa had ever attempted.

Fortune favoured me. In 1960 Nelson's talented West African specialist Van Milne had a flaming row with his boss and resigned. I at once invited him to join me. Though he was only to stay two years, his contribution was crucial. We decided to make a really cheap paperback of *Things Fall Apart* – 25p in fact – and look for some other books to go with it so that we could put out a package. Achebe by now had written a second book, and Van picked up Kenneth Kaunda [born 1924; President of Zambia 1964–91] who was just out of prison and was writing a book about the independence struggle in Zambia. Van finally approached Cyprian Ekwensi [born 1921] who had made something of a name for himself by writing for Hutchinson, and he dug out a manuscript from his bottom drawer called *Burning Grass* [1962]. This made a group of four books, and by 1962 we were able to launch them as the first of 'The African Writers Series'.¹¹ □

Achebe himself became the editor of the series, a job he continued without pay for the following ten years. If, as Newell suggests, the success of *Things Fall Apart* was in some ways a distorting influence on African fiction, the author's role in bringing the continent's writers to international attention was nonetheless of immense importance. As Hill says, 'his name was the magnet that brought everything in, and his judgment was the decisive factor in what we published. And in addition to that, the fantastic sales of his own books . . . provided the economic basis for the rest of the series'.¹²

This book explores the critical reception of Achebe's fiction from *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 to *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987. As the following chapters will illustrate, the critical treatment of Achebe's work has been extraordinarily varied. Well over a hundred book-length studies devoted to Achebe have been published worldwide over the last 40 years, together with hundreds of shorter pieces. Responses to Achebe's work range from interventions by some of the most influential figures in contemporary literary studies, to lightweight and hagiographic commentary. Because of the broad and disparate array of critical material on Achebe, library holdings are unfortunately often patchy and idiosyncratic. Much of the most thought-provoking critical material, especially that by Nigerian academics, is out of print and hard to access, whilst the existing

'casebooks' are inevitably limited in scope. A few excellent studies, such as those by C. L. Innes and Simon Gikandi, circulate widely, but it is important to set such work against the wide range of other treatments and interpretations of Achebe's work that exist. In writing this book, I have attempted to provide readers with a sense of this range. Whilst, inevitably, the book proceeds by selection rather than blanket coverage, the bibliography which concludes it is intended to help readers to further explore the work of this important and complex writer.

CHAPTER ONE

Things Fall Apart (1958): Challenging the Canon

As we saw in the introduction, Achebe's first novel was written in the mid-1950s whilst he was working as a broadcaster for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). As Ezenwa-Ohaeto relates in his excellent biography,¹ in 1956 Achebe was sent to attend a radio production course run by the BBC in London, followed by a period working in one of the company's departments. Achebe was encouraged by a Nigerian colleague to show his manuscript – which at that stage was a lengthy novel consisting of both *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* – to the established English novelist Gilbert Phelps (1915–93), a tutor on the course. Back in Nigeria, he decided to prune back the text severely and eventually sent a much shorter manuscript to Phelps under the title *Things Fall Apart*.

According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, the manuscript was rejected by a string of London publishers. Even at Heinemann, with their well-developed West African markets, there was hesitancy about the sales potential of such an unusual offering. Eventually the book came to the attention of Alan Hill, one of the company's most innovative editors, who sent the text out to specialist readers. As we saw in the introduction, the terse verdict of one of Heinemann's educational advisers, Professor Donald MacRae, finally tipped the balance:

■ Heinemann's normal fiction reader read it and did a long report but the firm was still hesitating whether to accept it. Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There are no precedents. So the rather

doubting bunch at the top of Heinemann's thought of the educational department, who after all sold books to Africa and were supposed to know about Africans. So they showed it to one of our educational advisers, Professor Donald MacRae, who was just back from West Africa. He read it in the office and ended the debate with an eleven word report: 'This is the best novel I have read since the war'.² □

As Ezenwa-Ohaeto describes:

■ Thus *Things Fall Apart* was published in hardback on 17 June 1958 with a print run of 2,000 copies. The publishers did not 'touch a word of it' in order to correct it and 'it achieved instant acclaim in the British national press, with enthusiastic reviews by such critics as Walter Allen [1911–95] and Angus Wilson [1913–91]' . . . It changed the direction of Alan Hill's publishing life and added a new dimension to the list of books published by Heinemann.³ □

EARLY CRITICAL RESPONSES

In fact, initial responses to the novel in the London press combined praise for Achebe's vivid writing style with reservations about his handling of both traditional Ibo culture and the colonial encounter. According to the *Times Literary Supplement* on 20 June 1958, for example, the novel's conclusion was flawed by its 'confusion of attitude'. After his powerful depiction of African village life, the *TLS* reviewer maintains, Achebe loses his way when portraying the European missionaries: 'For Mr Achebe owes much to missionary education, and his sympathies are naturally more with the new than the old. His picture of the collapse of tribal custom is perhaps less than compassionate'.⁴

For Honor Tracy, reviewing for the BBC's own literary organ *The Listener* the following week, this initial sense of ambivalence towards *Things Fall Apart* is amplified, with admiration for the author's stylistic accomplishment tempered by an open, colonial disdain for his subject matter. Achebe's Iboland is, for Tracy, 'mindless, dominated by vague and preposterous terrors . . . incapable of advancement by itself'.⁵ Would 'Mr Chinua' and his professional friends prefer to abandon their careers in order to wear raffia skirts and tend yams, she asks? Or is this essentially a work of hypocrisy? Whilst the novel might be a refreshing change from the usual diet

of fiction, Tracy concludes, its portrait of the destructive effects of British colonialism is ultimately 'facile . . . mere sentimentality'.⁶

Amongst academic critics, Achebe met with a much more positive welcome. According to G. D. Killam, who first writes about the novel in the 1960s, *Things Fall Apart* is to be hailed as 'the first novel by a Nigerian writer to have serious claim to consideration as literature'.⁷ Killam's main aim with Achebe's work, in liberal humanist fashion, is to establish its literary credentials with reference to the standards of the Anglo-Irish English literary canon. Ultimately, he argues, the value of all Achebe's novels as works of art must be disassociated from their particular "'anthropological" or "sociological" biases',⁸ and judged instead on their 'universality' and fidelity in reflecting the 'human condition'.⁹ These are works which 'bring news of a strange part of the world and of the values and attitudes of a group of people who have only recently achieved prominence in world affairs'.¹⁰ Whilst the novels' meditations on themes of colonialism and cultural imperialism are likely to be of 'local' interest to Africans, what is far more important is to assess Achebe against the 'general' standards of the literary traditions of England. In Killam's analysis of *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, the overriding concern is to establish Achebe's technical proficiency and the soundness of his aesthetic judgement:

■ Achebe's prose has been described as 'leisurely' and 'stately' and a casual reading of the book, especially the first part, supports such judgment. Because Achebe refuses to take sides in the issues he describes and dramatizes, his presentation is disinterested and this quality is reflected in the writing. Yet, restrained as the pace may be, it moves the story forward with a sense of inevitability, the momentum gradually increasing, until the first climax is reached, Okonkwo's third sin against the Earth Goddess and his subsequent banishment. The casual approach and style quite belie the intensity of the life the novel evokes and from the outset Achebe's absolute certainty of approach is established.¹¹ □

Killam's commentary on characterization in the novel, similarly, is primarily motivated by a concern to identify the protagonist Okonkwo's 'universally' human qualities and to discuss him in terms of his 'representativeness' as a figure of his time:

■ Okonkwo was 'one of the greatest men of his time', the embodiment of Ibo values, the man who better than most symbolized his race. His

stature is presented as heroic. His story, as was mentioned above, is presented in terms which resemble those of Aristotelian tragedy – the working out in the life of a hero of industry, courage and eminence, of an insistent fatality (in this book symbolized by the *chi*, or personal god) which transcends his ability to fully understand or resist a fore-ordained sequence of events. Achebe suggests as well the flaw, or flaws in his nature – his inordinate ambition and his refusal to tolerate anything less than excellence, taken in conjunction with an impulsive rage to which he easily gives way and which produces irrational responses to situations.¹² □

Dealing with the nineteenth-century West African context of *Things Fall Apart*, once again, the movement of Killam's analysis is always from the particular to the general, and from the general to the 'universal'. Discussing the cultivation of yams, for instance, he is keen to stress the ways in which Achebe's representations of farming and cooking invoke a more abstract opposition of male and female principles in Umuofian life, and through them a sense of the larger ethical and spiritual structures within which the clan understands its existence. In the following extract, for example, Killam analyses a passage from the novel in which Okonkwo asks for seed yams from the senior clansman, Nwakibie:

■ The images again are chosen from nature and suggest the continuum of the natural world of which man is part and at the centre. There are several references in this passage which require further comment because they lead into a deeper consideration of the way in which Achebe uses environment not only to symbolize character and theme but also to define the moral and ethical principles on which Ibo society is based and which is his ultimate concern in the book.

The yam is king: a man's wealth, status and reputation depend upon his possession of yams. Yams are food, true, and 'he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed'. But as well, 'yams stood for manliness'. With yams, which are wealth, a man could take titles in the clan; that is, he could achieve power and influence the conduct of the affairs of the clan. Conversely a man without yams was not able to take titles: he is described as *agbala* a word which as we have seen denotes 'a woman' and a man without titles. The two concepts are linked: to possess a female disposition is undesirable if not wholly unacceptable. Yet in the opposition between the man who possesses yams and the one who does not a paradox is apparent. While a continuing emphasis on male activities – acquisition of wealth and wives, the production of children,

courage and resourcefulness in sport and war – informs the surface interest of the novel, all activity in *Things Fall Apart* is judged by what is or is not acceptable to 'Ani, the Earth Goddess and source of all fertility . . . ultimate judge of morality and conduct' in the clan. In other words a powerful 'female principle' pervades the whole society of Umuofia and sits in judgement of events in the community.¹³ □

For Killam, the ultimate tragedy of the novel is seen in terms of the interplay of these male and female principles. He is not unaware that the novel might in some way be concerned with the colonial encounter. The arrival of the white man in Umuofia, as he observes, signals the introduction of an alien religion and also a new system of trade. The importance of the latter, however, is that it brings out 'the male principle of acquisitiveness',¹⁴ upsetting its traditional equilibrium with the female principle of nurture and respect for the earth. In this context, the death of Okonkwo is less caused than fated. As a representative of Ibo society, his demise represents nothing less than Achebe's recognition of 'the inevitable, irrepressible forces which determine historical change'.¹⁵

G. D. Killam's analysis of *Things Fall Apart*, then, attempts to establish the novel's status as a work of art, through the trademark 'universalism' of liberal humanism. The project of other early critics such as Eustace Palmer and A. G. Stock, meanwhile, is to further confirm the text's literary credentials by tracing relationships of influence between Achebe and canonical figures from the Anglo-Irish canon.

In Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972)¹⁶ Achebe's relationship with Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), and especially with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), is the focus of attention. Like *Tess*, Palmer argues, *Things Fall Apart* is structured around the interaction between its individual protagonist on the one hand and the imposition of inexorable, external social forces on the other. Like Killam, Palmer is resistant to an 'anthropological' approach to the narrative, but for different reasons. One of the strengths of the novel, he argues, is its unsentimental representation of traditional Ibo culture, which resists co-option to anticolonial orthodoxy:

■ There is a school of social anthropologists who rhapsodize over traditional African society seeing it as a welcome antidote to the