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The Themes and Style in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

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*This research work reveals the rich Africa's values of the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria being one of the three major races in the country. It also exposes corruption and oppression that was going on in the British controlled Nigeria in the mid-20th century as discussed in the novel, which prevailed all over the country at that time. The research work, furthermore, explores the themes and style used by the author in his novel *Things Fall Apart* as a way of bringing into fore the rich cultural values and traditions of the traditional Igbo society vis-a-vis the clash of cultural values through British imperialism as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in the novel.*

Keywords: cultural values; corruption; oppression; traditional element

Things Fall Apart is a traditional African fiction that mimics the events of history in an attempt to mobilize and concertize the masses in a bid to free the populace from physical and mental slavery. The novel exposed corruption and oppression that was going in the British controlled Nigeria in the mid-20th century.

The bulk of the novel takes place in Umuofia, a cluster of nine villages on the lower Nigeria. Umuofia is a powerful clan, skilled in war and with a great population, with proud traditions and advanced social institutions.



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Okonkwo has risen from nothing to a high position. Through hard work, he has become a great man among his people. He has taken three wives and his barn is full of yams, the staple crop. He rules his family with an iron fist.

One day, a neighboring clan commits an offense against Umuofia. To avoid war, the offending clan gives Umuofia one virgin and one young boy. The girl is to become the offended party's new wife. The boy, whose name is Ikemefuna, is to be sacrificed, but not immediately. He lives in Umuofia for three years, and during that time he lives under Okonkwo's roof. He becomes like a part of Okonkwo's family. In particular, Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son, loves Ikemefuna like a brother. But eventually the Oracle calls for the boy's death, and a group of men take Ikemefuna away to kill him in the forest. Okonkwo, fearful of being perceived as soft-hearted and weak, participates in the boy's death. He does so despite the advice of the clan elders. Nwoye is spiritually broken by the event.

Okonkwo is shaken as well, but he continues with his drive to become a lord of his clan. He is constantly disappointed by Nwoye, but he has great love for his daughter Ezinma, his child by his second wife Ekwefi. Ekwefi has born ten children, but only Ezinma has survived. She loves the girl fiercely. Ezinma is sickly, and sometimes Ekwefi fears that Ezinma, too, will die. Late one night, the powerful Oracle of Umuofia brings Ezinma with her for a spiritual encounter with the earth goddess. Terrified, Ekwefi follows the Oracle at a distance, fearing harm might come to her child. Okonkwo follows, too.

Later, during a funeral for one of the great men of the clan, Okonkwo's gun explodes, killing a boy. In accordance with Umuofia's law, Okonkwo and his family must be exiled for seven years.

Okonkwo bears the exile bitterly. Central to his beliefs is faith that a man masters his own destiny. But the accident and exile are proof that at times man cannot control his own fate, and Okonkwo is forced to start over again without the strength and energy of his youth. He flees with



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his family to Mbanto, his mother's homeland. There they are received by his mother's family, who treat them generously. His mother's family is headed by Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle, a generous and wise old man.

During Okonkwo's exile, the white man comes to both Umuofia and Mbanto. The missionaries arrive first, preaching a religion that seems mad to the Igbo people. They win converts, but generally the converts are men of low rank or outcasts. However, with time, the new religion gains momentum. Nwoye becomes a convert. When Okonkwo learns of Nwoye's conversion, he beats the boy. Nwoye leaves home.

Okonkwo returns to Umuofia to find the clan sadly changed. The church has won some converts, some of whom are fanatical and disrespectful of clan custom. Worse, the white man's government has come to Umuofia. The clan is no longer free to judge its own; a District Commissioner judges cases in ignorance. He is backed by armed power.

During a religious gathering, a convert unmasks one of the clan spirits. The offense is grave, and in response the clan decides that the church will no longer be allowed in Umuofia. They tear the building down. Soon afterward, the District Commissioner asks the leaders of the clan, Okonkwo among them, to come see him for a peaceful meeting. The leaders arrive, and are quickly seized. In prison, they are humiliated and beaten, and they are held until the clan pays a heavy fine.

After a release of the men, the clan calls a meeting to decide whether they will fight or try to live peacefully with the whites. Okonkwo wants war. During the meeting, court messengers come to order the men to break up their gathering. The clan meetings are the heart of Umuofia's government; all decisions are reached democratically, and an interference with this institution means the end of the last vestiges of Umuofia's independence. Enraged, Okonkwo kills the court messenger. The other court messengers escape, and because the other people of his clan did not seize them, Okonkwo knows that his people will not choose war. His act of resistance will not be



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followed by others. Embittered and grieving for the destruction of his people's independence, and fearing the humiliation of dying under white law, Okonkwo returns home and hangs himself.

Thus is the storyline with the tragic end of Okonkwo at a glance.

THE MAKING OF THE AUTHOR

Born Albert Chinualumogo Achebe, Chinua Achebe was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria. He received an early education in English, but grew up surrounded by a complex fusion of Igbo traditions and colonial legacy. He studied literature and medicine at the University of Ibadan; after graduating, he went to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos and later studied at the British Broadcasting Corporation staff school in London.

During this time, Achebe was developing work as a writer. Starting in the 1950s, he was central to a new Nigerian literary movement that drew on the oral traditions of Nigeria's indigenous tribes. Although Achebe wrote in English, he attempted to incorporate Igbo vocabulary and narratives through his effective use of native proverbs and idioms.

Things Fall Apart (1958) was his first novel, and remains his best-known work. It has been translated into at least forty-five languages, and has sold eight million copies worldwide. Other novels include: *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966).

Achebe left his career in radio in 1966, during the national unrest and violence that led to the Biafran War. He narrowly escaped harm at the hands of soldiers who believed that his novel, *A Man of the People*, implicated him in the country's first military coup.



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He began an academic career the next year, taking a position as a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nigeria. That same year, he co-founded a publishing company with Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. In 1971, he became an editor for *Okike*, a prestigious Nigerian literary magazine. In 1984, he founded *Iwa ndi Ibo*, a bilingual publication dedicated to Igbo cultural life.

Achebe's university career was extremely successful: he was made Emeritus Professor at the University of Nigeria in 1985; he taught at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut; and he received over twenty honorary doctorates from universities around the world. He also received Nigeria's highest honor for intellectual achievement, the Nigerian National Merit Award, in 1987. His novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was shortlisted for the Booker McConnell Prize that same year.

Achebe became active in Nigerian politics in the 1960s. Many of his novels dealt with the social and political problems facing his country, including the difficulties of the post-colonial legacy. When Biafra, an Eastern region in Nigeria, declared independence in 1967, Achebe put aside writing long fiction in order to spend thirty months travellingT Europe and the United States advocating for the new country. During this period, he produced several short stories dealing with the complex realities of the Nigerian Civil War; the best known of these stories is "Civil Peace". Several decades later, in 1994, Achebe was forced to flee Nigeria after the repressive regime threatened to imprison him for his political stances and activism.

Achebe was married and had four children. He last lived in the United States, where he held a teaching position at Bard College until 2009, when he joined Brown University as a professor of Africana Studies. In his later years, he also served as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund. He continued writing throughout his life, producing both fiction and non-fiction, and winning awards like the Man Booker International Prize in 2007. His final



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published work was the literary autobiography *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

Achebe died in 2013 at a US hospital in Boston after a protracted battle with what is considered to be a terminal illness.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the paper is delimited to examining the themes and styles of the novel.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are;

To examine the cultural conflict as portrayed by the writer.

To explode the corruption, oppression and themes as portrayed by the writer.

To analysis the literary styles employed in the novel.

THEMES AND STYLE OF THE AUTHOR

Customs and Traditions: The Ibo defines itself through the age-old traditions it practices in *Things Fall Apart* -Kola nut -Palm wine -The Feast of the new Yam: feasting, drumming, dancing, wrestling Tribal custom dictates every aspect of members' lives. - A man's worth: number of titles, number of wives, and number of yams. Without custom and tradition, the tribe does not exist.



The Achievers Journal

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Choices and Consequences: Okonkwo – respect through hard work - respect from tribe - honored as a great warrior - Chooses to kill Ikemefuna - breaks Week of Peace, tribe believes he has become too self-important, challenged his chi -Blames his exile on his chi -Okonkwo does not take responsibility for his exile

Alienation and Loneliness: - Okonkwo’s exile isolates him from everything he has ever known, he despairs - white man’s intrusion - Nwoye joins the missionaries -Okonkwo’s return goes practically unnoticed
Betrayal: Okonkwo: - personal chi (Nwoye, exile) - Nwoye - Clan – once strong. Now “woman-like”, beliefs and customs are being ignored

Change and Transformation: Ibo at the beginning – - warlike -looked to elders for guidance - sacrificed to gods for deliverance -solved conflicts through confrontation Ibo after Okonkwo’s exile – -pray to a god they cannot see -discuss matters among themselves -Do not immediately declare war when an egwu gwu is unmasked (killed)

Good and Evil: Things Fall Apart The white man is evil. Never before did: 1.Tribesman turn their backs on one another 2.Tribesman think to kill one another 3.Tribesman act in ways the ancestors would deplore
Culture Clash The arrival of the white man and his culture heralds the death of the Ibo culture. - The white man does not honor or respect Ibo customs. - Split the tribe and increase the ranks of the white man by encouraging tribesman to join the white religion.

Social disintegration

Towards the end of the novel, we witness the events by which Igbo society begins to fall apart. Religion is threatened, Umuofia loses its self-determination, and the very centers of tribal life are threatened. These events are all the more painful for the reader because so much time has been spent in sympathetic description of Igbo life; the reader realizes that he has been learning about a way of life that no longer exists.



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Greatness and Ambition

Okonkwo is determined to be a lord of his clan. He rises from humble beginnings to a position of leadership, and he is a wealthy man. He is driven and determined, but his greatness comes from the same traits that are the source of his weaknesses. He is often too harsh with his family, and he is haunted by a fear of failure.

Fate and free will

There is an Igbo saying that when a man says yes, his chi, or spirit, says yes also. The belief that he controls his own destiny is of central importance to Okonkwo. Later, several events occur to undermine this belief, and Okonkwo is embittered by the experience. As often happens with tragedy, the catastrophe comes through a complex mix of external forces and the character's choices.

Masculinity

Masculinity is one of Okonkwo's obsessions, and he defines masculinity quite narrowly. For him, any kind of tenderness is a sign of weakness and effeminacy. Male power lies in authority and brute force. But throughout the novel, we are shown men with more sophisticated understanding of masculinity. Okonkwo's harshness drives Nwoye away from the family and into the arms of the new religion.

Despair

For all of his desire to be strong, Okonkwo is haunted by fear. He is profoundly afraid of failure, and he is afraid of being considered weak. This fear drives him to rashness, and in the end contributes to his death.

Tribal belief



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Particularly since one of the threats to Igbo life is the coming of the new religion, tribal belief is a theme of some importance. Igbo religious beliefs explain and provide meaning to the world; the religion is also inextricable from social and political institutions. Achebe also shows that Igbo religious authorities, such as the Oracle, seem to possess uncanny insights. He approaches the matter of Igbo religion with a sense of wonder.

Justice

Justice is another powerful preoccupation of the novel. For the Igbo, justice and fairness are matters of great importance. They have complex social institutions that administer justice in fair and rational ways. But the coming of the British upsets that balance. Although the British claim that local laws are barbaric, and use this claim as an excuse to impose their own laws, we soon see that British law is hypocritical and inhumane. The final events leading up to Okonkwo's death concern the miscarriage of Justice under the British District Commissioner.

THE AUTHOR'S STYLE (USE OF LANGUAGE)

As evident from most of his writings, Achebe employs the use of simple language expressions that are deeply rooted with lots of proverbs and idioms that are purely African and linked to his native tradition. His narrative techniques are simpler and not complex as compared to other acclaimed literary figures within the continent. Achebe's drive on the use of language is to massively reach his audience that are considered to be rural and poorly educated. A few examples is given to explain this position

Style Tragedy: Tragedy is the downfall of a great individual which is caused by a tragic flaw in the person's character. Okonkwo's tragic flaw – unreasonable anger, unbalanced Ibo Culture's tragic flaw - turning away from their tribal gods
Setting Place: Umuofia Time: Late 1800's
Conflict Society vs. Society Man vs. God Man vs. Society Man vs. Himself Man vs. Man



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Narration Third-Person: -Uses “he” and “she” exposition (writing or speaking that explains) rather than having the characters tell it themselves -Often in past tense -Little use of character dialogue -Reads like an oral story

Achebe’s style in the use of traditional oral tale within the European novel form is provided by his limited use of dialogue and rich use of imagery through a mix of the English language, Ibo vocabulary, and proverbs. - Proverbs – a short popular saying expressing an obvious truth - Fables – a fictitious story, usually about animals, meant to teach a moral lesson - Legend – a story handed down for generations and popularly believed to have historical basis -Myths – traditional story serving to explain some phenomenon, custom, etc. - Metaphors -Similes

Point of View - The story begins from Okonkwo’s point of view. - Gradually becomes the clan’s story. -Ends from the District Commissioner’s point of view. -Why is this the progression? The Foil -A person or thing that sets off another by contrast -Okonkwo -Nwoye/ - Mr. Brown

Critical -Context. Achebe believes stories should serve a purpose: they should deliver a meaningful message to the people who hear and read them. *Things Fall Apart* – published in 1958, it is attempt to explain the beginnings of the turmoil Africans have been experiencing over the past century. - a description of the integrity of pre-colonial Nigeria - shows the effects of colonialism on tribal societies - reveals the immoral treatment that people in modern society are often made to suffer - man will always face change, and he who can **Digression** is one of Achebe's main tools. The novel is the story of Okonkwo's tragedy, but it is also a record of Igbo life before the coming of the white man. The novel documents what the white man destroyed. The reader learns much about Igbo customs and traditions; depicting this world is a central part of the novel.

CONCLUSION



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The novel exposes corruption and oppression that was going on in the British controlled Nigeria in the mid 20th century as discussed in the novel, which prevailed all over the country at that time. The research work, furthermore, explores the themes and style used by the author in his novel *Things Fall Apart* as a way of bringing into fore the rich cultural values and traditions of the traditional Igbo society vis-a-vis the clash of cultural values through British imperialism as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in the novel.

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The Achievers Journal

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