

The Critical Reception of *Things Fall Apart* _____

Amy Sickels

Before *Things Fall Apart* was published, most novels about Africa had been written by Europeans, and they largely portrayed Africans as savages who needed to be enlightened by Europeans. For example, Joseph Conrad's classic tale *Heart of Darkness* (1899), one of the most celebrated novels of the early twentieth century, presents Africa as a wild, "dark," and uncivilized continent. In *Mister Johnson* (1939), which in 1952 *Time* called "the best novel ever written about Africa" ("Cheerful" para. 15), Irishman Joyce Cary's protagonist is a semi-educated, childish African who, on the whole, reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africans. In 1958, however, Chinua Achebe broke apart this dominant model with *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that portrays Igbo society with specificity and sympathy and examines the effects of European colonialism from an African perspective.

No one could have predicted that this novel, written by an unknown Nigerian, would one day sell nearly 11 million copies. Today *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most widely read books in Africa; it is typically assigned in schools and universities, and most critics consider it to be black Africa's most important novel to date. Further, the novel has been translated into more than fifty languages and shows up frequently on syllabi for literature, world history, and African studies courses across the globe. The first African novel to receive such powerful international critical acclaim, *Things Fall Apart* is considered by many to be the archetypal modern African novel.

Though Achebe went on to write numerous novels, short stories, poems, and essays, all of which have received critical attention, he is still best known as the author of *Things Fall Apart*. Of all of his works, it is the most widely read, and in the fifty years since its publication, the novel has generated a breadth of critical responses. *Things Fall Apart* has endured years of close examination through a variety of critical lenses as trends in literary criticism changed with the emergence of

new insights and ideas. The novel continues to be a popular subject for critical studies even as it has become an African classic and won a place in the international literary canon.

To understand the impact that *Things Fall Apart* had on both the African and international literary worlds, it is useful to briefly examine the novel's historical context. England took control of Nigeria in the late nineteenth century and imposed upon the country a British-run government and educational system. Achebe, born in 1930 in the village of Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria, grew up under colonial rule. He lived in a Christian household, though his grandparents still followed traditional tribal ways, a tension that, as he once remarked in an interview with *Conjunctions*, "created sparks in my imagination" (para. 47). He attended the prestigious University College, Ibadan, on scholarship, first as a medical student then as a literature major, during a time in which more and more Africans were questioning colonial rule and the European justification of it as a way to bring enlightenment to the "dark continent." In his literature classes, Achebe read William Shakespeare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, William Wordsworth, and, as he notes in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, "some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson*)" (123). Though Western critics had praised Cary for his sympathetic and convincing African protagonist, Mr. Johnson, Achebe and his classmates found the novel insulting and racist. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* would similarly repulse them; in an interview with *Conjunctions*, Achebe described it as a story about "Europeans wandering among savages," adding, "In the beginning it wasn't clear to me that I was one of those savages, but eventually it did become clear" (para. 102). It was these two novels in particular that convinced Achebe that "the story we [Africans] had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned" (*Morning* 123).

Achebe wanted his own story about Africa to show the complexity and sophistication of African society before European arrival and to re-