

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Casebook. Isidore Okpewho, ed. Oxford: University Press, 2003. 275 pp.

The novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is central not only in African literature, but also in postcolonial literary and cultural discourses. The reason, according to Isidore Okpewho, is precisely “because it inaugurated a long and continuing tradition of inquiry into the problematic relations between the West and the nations of the Third World” (p.3). This justifies his new collection of essays, some of which are more than two decades old. In a splendid introduction, he poses a crucial question, which is perhaps more relevant to our age than it could have been for the people of Umuofia: What fell apart (p.36)? The essays explore this question using different approaches.

The first two essays establish the ethnographic and the lingua-politico backdrop against which the novel can be understood. In his essay, Achebe does not deny the “importance of the world language which history has forced down our throats” (60). And since Africans have found themselves in that framework, they have to make the best out of it. The result has, at best, a hybrid spirit, a postcolonial-postmodernist identity that exists in Homi Bhabha’s renowned “fissures.”

Exploring the “egalitarian and democratic” nature of the Igbo society, Clement Okafor highlights the importance of “destiny” in Igbo cosmology. The Igbo, nevertheless, believe in the human agency and “that hard work results in a better life” (68-71). Are we then better equipped to understand Okonkwo’s motivation?

Okonkwo’s character is a conundrum. What kinds of motivations were behind his actions? Why, in Goodness’ name, did he kill the boy who called him father? Damian Opata sees nothing wrong in Okonkwo’s killing of Ikemefuna. In his essay, he executes a tightly knit inner-textual analysis of the story to expose the cultural forces that prompted Okonkwo to act the way he did. “If Okonkwo is to be held guilty of any offense,” he concludes, “it is not that of killing Ikemefuna (i.e., carrying out the wish of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves) but that of taking an uncanny pride in his action” (93). Okonkwo therefore merely obeyed the law, and, if there is any problem it is to be sought in the system.

But Harold Scheub does not seem to find any problem with the system. Hence he believes that Okonkwo failed alone. Through analysis of Okonkwo’s character (which might find interesting corollaries in some African nations), Scheub concludes that there is no evidence of destruction of Igbo society; Okonkwo merely grabbed those elements in his society that will guarantee his prestige and ascendancy.

Perhaps neither Okonkwo nor his society fell apart, as Neil ten Kortenaar would argue. In his strictly structuralist take on the novel, he systematically deconstructs the layers of the story to arrive at how Achebe strove to create a “non-existent” African history, which is the problem with the story (132). Obviously you cannot use fiction to establish an area of non-fiction. That attempt would reduce the characters in the fiction to representative roles (139). Ten Kortenaar does not dismiss Africa in a Hegelian fashion; he rather believes that Achebe has achieved one thing: he inspired Africans to make history.

Clayton G. Mackenzie rereads the novel in a somewhat reader-response way and establishes that Christianity is responsible for weakening the bonds of the society, while Rhonda Cobham, interested in showing how the feminine was ignored, makes use of Jauss’ *Rezeptionsästhetik* – loosely understood as the history of reception – to draw attention to the fact that “Okonkwo and his creator are concerned with the construction of a [...] masculine, identity (169). Biodun Jeyifo would even conclude that this identity

was what fell apart in the world of Umuofia. He highlights that the very point when things began to fall apart was when Okonkwo ignored “the mother’s creative role in the formation of his personhood, his sensibility” (185).

Bu-Buakei Jabbi is more interested in the poetics of the novel than in its perceived ethno-cultural importance. For him, the recurrent use of a primal element, fire, underscores Achebe’s central theme of the inevitability of change, and how one man who refused to be changed “fell apart.” Also considering the novel as a literary text, Ato Quayson revisits the different ways it has been interpreted, noting that many critics were like hawks that would never appreciate the beauty of hens’ dances. Art is based on a skillful manipulation of reality as the novel has just done, thus every critique should pay attention both to the reality being manipulated and the technique used (232).

Isidore Okpewho has been particularly successful in the careful selection of these essays which make the novel as relevant as it ever has been. What is most satisfying is not only the high quality of most of the essays, but also their overall arrangement so that they seem to be in dialogue with one another. This creates a logical thread throughout the book, and it makes for an engaging read.

For this writer, the casebook would have lost nothing in beauty and logic if Achebe’s input had been left out. But one can understand the relevance of the interview at the end. College teachers and their students would love it. Otherwise the rest of the book throws a heavy task to scholars who are prepared not only to continue with the dialogue between the West and the Third World, but also to grapple with the existential challenges of the African continent. In regard to Okpewho’s question of what fell apart, the answer might even re-echo Achebe’s ideas expressed in his other book, *The Trouble With Nigeria*. There is no trouble with Nigerians; there are, however, quite a lot of troubles with opportunistic leaders who hide behind their ethnic groups to exploit the “rest of us,” and lead us to war. Okpewho’s question, I am sure, will define the new generation of African scholars.

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