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## **Conflict of Value Systems in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Perspective for Understanding and Addressing Contemporary Global Crises**

**Aminu Suleiman**

PhD Scholar,

Department of Languages, Literature and Aesthetics,

Pandit Deendayal Energy University,

Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India.

&

Lecturer,

Department of English Language Education,

School of Continuing Education,

Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola, Nigeria.

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### **Abstract:**

The global society faces an array of alarming crises, spanning wars, pandemics, climate change, socioeconomic challenges, political conflicts, and communal unrest. These crises often arise from deep-seated tensions rooted in cultural, spiritual, or ideological differences. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) offers a profound exploration of the clash between traditional African and European colonial values. This clash serves as a lens through which the 21st-century global crises stemming from such differences can be understood and resolved. The study aims to explore how the novel resonates with contemporary global crises and assess how its narrative can offer insights and wisdom to inform human responses to these complex challenges. The study primarily utilizes textual analysis as its methodology, conducting a comprehensive analysis of the text to examine the clash of values and its portrayed results, reminiscent of present-day crises. This analysis forms the basis for exploring the relevance of cultural diversity in addressing global crises. The findings reveal that the novel's depiction of cultural upheaval, the impact of external forces, and the quest for identity and community cohesion deeply resonates with today's global challenges. It demonstrates that understanding and respecting diverse belief systems, customs, and traditions is an indispensable path toward alleviating the current global crises. The study holds a profound significance as it underscores the relevance of intercultural understanding in promoting global peace and cooperation.

**Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Conflict of Values, Global Crises, Things Fall Apart.**

## **Introduction**

In the postcolonial literary domain, Chinua Achebe's piece, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), stands as a classic work that offers a profound and insightful exploration of the clash between traditional African and modern Western systems. The novel is set against the backdrop of traditional Igbo society in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, highlighting the tensions that emerged as Britain colonized Nigeria from the late 19th century to October 1960. The novel is structured into main three parts or sections. The first section covers Okonkwo's rise and fall within the fictional village of Umuofia; the second focuses on his exile and the arrival of European missionaries in the area, and the last section deals with his return to Umuofia and the conflict with the Europeans (Cohan, 2021). This classic work effectively underscores how the introduction of Western values and Christianity, facilitated by colonialism and missionary efforts, challenges the intricate traditions, customs, and practices of the Indigenous Igbo community. Through its portrayal of the conflicts at the intersection of these two worlds, the novel provides a valuable lens through which to understand and address contemporary global crises.

## **Thematic Overview of Things Fall Apart**

*Things Fall Apart* describes the breakdown of a united clan that shared common thoughts, language, awareness, and actions. According to Rhoads (1993), This cohesion is fractured with the arrival of the white man, who represents colonial forces. The novel explores how colonialism influences the Igbo community, breaking down the cohesion that once held the clan together. The intrusion of external influences introduces new ideas, causing internal conflicts and leading to the collapse of the community's culture, creating chaos and disorder within the social bonds. The novel provides an interesting narrative that delves into the challenges and far-reaching consequences when external forces challenge and reshape the foundations of a closely-knit society.

“The novel chronicles the life of Okonkwo, the leader of an Igbo community, from the events leading up to his banishment from the community for accidentally killing a clansman, through the seven years of his exile, to his return, and it addresses a particular problem of emergent Africa - the intrusion in the 1890s of white missionaries and colonial government into tribal Igbo society” (Britannica, 2023).

During his exile, the intrusion of white missionaries introduced the Christian religion, gaining converts who began to oppose the traditional worship of gods in the Igbo communities of Umuofia, Abame, and Mbanta. Upon Okonkwo's return, he faces the ironies of changed circumstances; his aspirations clash with the transformed beliefs, leading to tragic events, including his clash with the new religion, the murder of a messenger, and his suicide. This tragic turn of events signifies the triumph of the 'Whiteman's' religion and government in the community (Gwunireama, 2021).

### **Lessons from the Past**

Advocates of multiculturalism often emphasize the significance of appreciating the diversity inherent in distinct cultures. Nevertheless, historical examples such as those in Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as highlighted by Rhoads (1993), serve as alarming instances where the promotion of cultural differences resulted in adverse outcomes. While acknowledging that recognizing differences is crucial for a nation's self-assurance, Rhoads warns about the potential downside. On one hand, recognizing diversity is vital for a country's self-assurance, yet on the other hand, it can provoke detrimental tribal or nationalistic pride. Both Somalia and Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced significant conflicts marked by violence, ethnic tensions, and humanitarian crises in the 1990s.

While exploring the factors that underlie historical, cultural, and environmental determinants of the civil war in Somalia during the early 1990s, Kusow (1994) points out that despite the widely held belief that the Somali people are homogeneous, there have been long-standing cultural, social, and economical differences among the major clans in the nation. Prior to 1960, these clan groups were not subject to the governance of a unified political authority. Kusow further describes the collaborative efforts of religious leaders in the late nineteenth century and contemporary political figures in shaping the origin and identity of the Somali people while simultaneously attempting to suppress their inherent differences. Ironically, these endeavours inadvertently introduced a more divisive element into Somali culture, culminating in a division based on affiliations with southern Arabia. Despite repeated attempts by leaders to unite the Somali populace under the banner of Islam, persistent clan disparities have thwarted such efforts. Kusow suggests that the suppression of the existing clan divisions within Somali society directly contributed to the intensity of the conflict in the early 1990s.

Similarly, in his examination of the historical background of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Chidiebere (2016) argues that the roots of the war can be linked to the British

amalgamation of territories, motivated not by the unity of the people but by economic interests. He argues that British policies and public statements were employed to sow division among the Nigerian populace. As an illustration, he references a statement attributed to Hugh Clifford, the Governor-General of Nigeria (1920-1931), who purportedly remarked to the Nigerian Council, "Nigeria is a collection of independent native states, separated by great distances, differing in history, tradition, ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social, and religious divisions." Chidiebere employs the quotation from Hugh Clifford to support his argument that the British colonial authorities deliberately fostered divisions among the Nigerian populace. By highlighting Clifford's characterization of Nigeria as a collection of independent native states with significant divisions in history, tradition, ethnicity, race, tribe, politics, and religion, the author implies that such statements exemplify the deliberate strategy of creating and exacerbating divisions within Nigeria. This substantiates his argument that British policies and actions were directed towards retaining control and advancing their economic interests, rather than fostering unity and harmony among Nigeria's diverse population.

### ***Things Fall Apart*: Resonance with Global Crises**

*Things Fall Apart* resonates with humanitarian challenges experienced in parts of the world today. Achebe underscores this point by providing a thorough depiction of the refugee and migration crisis experienced by Abame, one of the nine fictional villages of the Igbo clan in the novel, as it was decimated by the white invaders. This narrative mirrors the historical and ongoing struggles of societies torn between local or traditional and foreign values, ideologies, and moral frameworks, resulting in conflict, destruction, and the erosion of traditional ways of life. Obierika, on a visit to his exiled friend, Okonkwo, narrates the incident:

*"Abame has been wiped out," said Obierika. "It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed. Was it not on an Eke day that they fled into Umuofia?" he asked his two companions, and they nodded their heads.*

*"Three moons ago," said Obierika, "on an Eke market day, a little band of fugitives came into our town. Most of them were sons of our land whose mothers had been buried with us. But there were some too who came because they had friends in our town, and others who could think of nowhere else open to escape. And so, they fled into Umuofia with a woeful story." He drank his palm wine, and Okonkwo filled his horn again. He continued: "During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan."...*

*"The elders consulted their Oracle, and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." ... "And so, they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends. I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and the first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so, they killed him" (Achebe, 2001, pp. 129-130).*

Chinua Achebe portrays that colonialism caused problems among the Igbo people by bringing in a new religion and government. This created conflicts within their community, and their cultural unity started falling apart. Achebe talks about how the arrival of the white man and the influence of Igbo people who adopted the new religion and criticized their traditions led to a split in their clan and the loss of their cultural cohesion. In his words:

*The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.' (Achebe, 2001, p. 166).*

At the heart of this novel is Okonkwo, a complex and conflicted individual, whose impulsive and violent actions reflect a clash of values within the context of the Igbo society. A dramatic encounter between Okonkwo and the white man's messenger serves as a stark illustration of the consequences that can arise when deeply ingrained cultural values collide with external influences, leading to tragic outcomes. This drastic action is clearly illustrated in the following:

*In a flash, Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice, and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body. (Achebe, 2001, p. 194).*

### **Insights for Addressing Global Crises**

The clash portrayed in the novel emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity and understanding in today's interconnected world. Appreciation for diverse perspectives and respect for diverse cultural values are crucial for promoting peace and cooperation. This is subtly demonstrated in the interaction between the missionary, Mr. Smith, and the elders of Umuofia. The leader and spokesperson of the representatives of the ancestors from the nine

villages, known as *egwugwu*, approached Mr. Smith. These representatives are responsible for administering justice within the clan. The spokesperson then said:

*"You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great, but we have held it down so that we can talk to you."* (Achebe, 2001, P. 180).

At the height of the confrontation, the white missionary stood his ground and said to his interpreter:

*"Tell them to go away from here. This is the house of God, and I will not live to see it desecrated."* (P. 180).

We later learned that Mr. Smith:

*...could not save his church. When the egwugwu went away the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was a pile of earth and ashes. And for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified.* (Achebe, 2001, P. 181).

*Things Fall Apart* illustrates the vital importance of understanding and respecting diverse belief systems, customs, and traditions as essential steps toward addressing the crises afflicting the world today. As Achebe aptly states:

*There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first-time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.*

*And even in the matter of religion, there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness.*

*This growing feeling was due to Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who was very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan. One member was difficult to restrain. His name was Enoch, and his father was the priest of the snake cult. The story went around that Enoch had killed and eaten the sacred python, and that his father had cursed him.*

*Mr. Brown preached against such excess of zeal. Everything was possible, he told his energetic flock, but everything was not expedient. And so, Mr. Brown came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith. He made friends with some of the great men of the clan and on one of his frequent visits to the neighbouring villages he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity and rank. One of the great men in that village was called Akunna and he had given one of his sons to be taught the white man's knowledge in Mr. Brown's school. Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village, he spent long hours with Akunna in his obi talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs. (Achebe, 2001, PP. 168-169).*

In the excerpt provided above, Chinua Achebe illuminates the changing dynamics of cultural comprehension within the Umuofia community. Initially resistant to the intrusion of the white man and his unfamiliar religious practices, some members of Umuofia, like the main character, Okonkwo, harboured strong reservations. However, Achebe subtly introduces a nuanced perspective through the character of Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who takes a more measured and respectful approach. Mr. Brown's acknowledgment of the economic advantages resulting from trade and his skillful handling of the community's religious convictions contribute to a gradual change in perspective.

The transformation in cultural understanding is illustrated in Mr. Brown's interactions with Akunna, one of the village's great men. Despite their differing religious convictions, Mr. Brown and Akunna engage in lengthy conversations through an interpreter, illustrating a mutual respect for their two different religious beliefs. This exchange indicates an emerging recognition within the community that beyond the surface of apparent cultural conflicts, there may exist shared values and a common humanity. Achebe's narrative suggests that meaningful cultural understanding is not achieved through forceful imposition but rather through open dialogue, respect for diverse beliefs, and a willingness to learn from one another. This portrayal encourages readers to consider the complexity of cultural interactions and the potential for mutual understanding even in the face of initially divergent worldviews.

## **Conclusion**

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* encapsulates a timeless exploration of the clash between differing value systems. The narrative's examination of these conflicts yields valuable insights that transcend its specific cultural context, providing a profound lens through which to

analyze contemporary global crises. By delving into the intricacies of value conflicts depicted in the novel, readers can glean wisdom applicable to addressing the multifaceted challenges of the modern world.

The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of respecting diverse values. In an increasingly interconnected world, where diverse cultures and belief systems coexist, acknowledging and understanding these differences becomes paramount. Achebe's work suggests that fostering mutual respect and appreciation for diverse perspectives is not only ethically imperative but also instrumental in building bridges and fostering cooperation on a global scale.

*Things Fall Apart* transcends its specific cultural setting to offer profound lessons applicable to the challenges of the contemporary world. Through an examination of conflicts between value systems, the novel offers guidance for devising approaches to tackle global crises. Respecting diverse values, navigating the delicate balance between tradition and progress, and establishing robust institutions all emerge as crucial pillars for creating a more just and equitable world. Achebe's work serves as a timeless beacon, guiding us towards a future where cultural understanding, adaptability, and robust institutions form the bedrock of a harmonious global society.

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