

# Things fall apart: outside vs. inside

Business



Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* tells the simple story of the life of a tribesman in Africa. It contains stories of war, banishment, and crimes, all of which are interesting to read about.

On first inspection, however, it seems odd that it should be exemplified as a great piece of literature rather than merely an adventure story with a moral mixed in. When, however, one considers the changes which take place within the characters, as well as how these transformations are mirrored and prompted by changes in society, it becomes clear why *Things Fall Apart* is a great piece of literature. The main character, an African native named Okonkwo, is the embodiment of all his culture's virtues. Early in his life, he gained the respect of his contemporaries through his triumphs in wrestling. Later, after he took up farming, he successfully raised yams which made him wealthy.

This wealth allowed him to take many titles, including some of the highest in the tribe, which added to his prestige. Moreover, he was triumphant in many inter-tribal battles, causing all to be indebted to him. He was truly the paragon of his tribe. Oddly enough, however, his many accomplishments caused him to be an outsider, rather than a beloved member of his tribe. He was admired by all, but because he commanded reverence, he could not truly be an ordinary member of his tribe; therefore, his accomplishments marked him as an outsider. As an outsider, he was never ostracized, indeed he was a fundamental part of the tribe; he gave law, protection, and order, not to mention live sustaining resources from his farm to enrich his people.

He knew intimately most of his fellow tribesmen's troubles, e. g. hunger, death, and fear. But because of his wealth and prestige, not to mention the fact that he denied feeling any emotion, he very rarely deeply felt the effects of these common tribulations, prompting him to misuse those he loved the most in the belief that he was improving them. As a result, he could not truly understand the day to day life of the rest of this tribe.

This is very similar to the plight of the colonials. They have never lived in Africa, or any place remotely like it. Because of this they cannot comprehend or sympathize with the life changing troubles experienced by the tribe. To the colonials, who are used to being served and to living in comparative luxury, minor domestic matters issues seem small, causing them to think the natives naive and foolish. As the book progresses, Okonkwo becomes more literally an outsider, banished from his tribe and unable to comprehend the changes taking place within it.

Despite being above the normal course of life in the tribe, Okonkwo could comprehend the fundamental mode of thinking of his contemporaries and used that knowledge to gain power. When the colonials came, everything about them, from the belief's and government they introduced to their very existence, challenged they way that the natives perceived the world. For example, upon first hearing the story of Abame, Okonkwo criticized the people there of being weak because he approached the colonials' arrival as something that could be beaten into submission, like every other obstacle he had previously encountered. In the end however, he is beaten by it, proving that it is truly not like anything he had ever imagined. Some like Nwoye openly adopted the changes, abandoning their old worldviews completely.

Even those who resisted, however, were influenced by the arrival of the colonials.

For the new ideas to be fought down, they had to be deeply pondered so that any apparent holes or contradictions could be picked out. The colonials brought new laws, concerning matters that no one had ever thought of before. Even if one did not accept or practice these laws, they had to think about them, questioning values which they had never considered. These, and many more examples, suggest why when Okonkwo returns, he is unable to regain his previous status. Okonkwo gained his power, in part, from understanding the mode of thinking of the people around him. The other factor which allowed him such total control over his contemporaries was his physical strength.

His prowess is introduced almost immediately: “(Okonkwo) had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out fast enough, he would use his fists.” (p. 4) While this trait was certainly not pleasant to anyone at whom his anger was directed at, it elevated and distinguished Okonkwo in the tribe. He was feared by all, but as he had high rank scarcely anyone could punish him for his actions. As a result, his word was law. As shown in the council scene, Okonkwo frequently made arbitrary decisions which benefited no one, but because of his high rank, they were never questioned.

(p. 90) While this led to undesirable events, such as the return of Mgbafo to her abusive husband, it did lead to some good, such as the perseveration of law, no matter how faulty, and order in the tribe. When the colonials arrived,

this was all changed. Their laws reduced the tribesmen to equals; yet their new status only made them equals in a low and undesirable situation, stripped of all power. When, in the end, Okonkwo stopped fighting against such actions, he died disgracefully.

Instead of dying in battle or amidst his riches as befits a great man, he chooses an ignoble suicide. So too, suggests Achebe, will the culture of Africa die an ignominious death when it ceases to resist forces beyond its capacity.