

# The issues of race and identity in "things fall apart" by chinua achebe

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



The issues of race and identity in *Things Fall Apart* stem from the Europeans' determination to impose their ideologies on the Ibo people. On one hand, the native tribes adhere to strict belief systems that dictate their social lives. Just as the men are superior to the women, the elders are in charge of dispensing justice and are the occupants of the highest ranks in society. On the other hand, the Europeans operate on laws enacted in their mother country. Rather than adapt to the ways of the Ibo people, the missionaries do not hesitate to impose the will of their reigning Queen and support the spread of a new religion in the colonized territories. Diana Rhoads and Sengova Joko support the presented claims in their respective works on the narrative. Apparently, the main threat that the Europeans posed to the Ibo culture entailed their disregard of the latter group's superstitions. For example, where the clans feared the Evil Forest, the Europeans were keen to build their church and court on the same land. Hence, for Okonkwo, a suicide was something akin to an escape route that allowed him to show his strength and bravery before the Europeans took over.

Central to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the dominant theme of cultural clashes. Subject to the arrival of European missionaries at the closing of the nineteenth century, the Nigerians that form the basis of the novel undergo a steady yet palpable transformation that threatens their traditions. Under the doctrines of Christianity and European laws, Achebe manages to capture the factors that went into play in the dismantling of Ibo culture under the onslaught of colonialism. Thus emerges the grounds on which this paper asserts that the chaos that defined the closing chapters of Achebe's work hinged on the arrival of white missionaries and the

subsequent disruption of Ibo ideologies. With interest in Okonkwo, the lead character, the mentioned changes beget an unfortunate sequence of events that led to his eventual destruction. Accordingly, Okonkwo's suicide in *Things Fall Apart* marked the man's attempt at protecting his identity amidst social changes that came with the Ibo people's encounter with the Europeans.

Foremost, on Okonkwo, the man's identity revolved around an intricate combination of male power and a sense of duty that defined masculinity among the Ibo. Apparently, as a reading of the narrative reveals, the males did not rely on the dictations of others to determine their place within the community. Far from it, each man had to be self-defined where evidence of physical agility and wealth went hand in hand with gaining respect. Consider the sections in which Chinua Achebe informs his readers of how "Okonkwo's fame rested on his solid personal achievements" and that he was "popularly called the 'Roaring Flame'". Such were the qualities that paved the way for Okonkwo's rise in the social hierarchy before going on to cement his position among the elders of Umuofia. While describing Okonkwo as "a physically strong male...with a stout heart," Joko Sengova affirms the character's appeal within the context of an African society stemmed from his strength. In that sense, traditions defined Achebe's protagonist and granted him honor as long as he remained among his peers. The next sections explain why the arrival of a new race meant the destruction of the same.

Notably, the concepts of individual and social identity among the Ibo encompassed a rigidly patriarchal society. In other words, where the men boasted strength and bravery, their female counterparts were weak and

timid. At least that is what Diana Rhoads (1993) observed while writing on gender relations in Achebe's text. In the author's words, the "strong and warlike" depiction of the men relied on the "tender and supportive" stance that the women assumed "in times of adversity". A perfect case in point is evident in the trial of Uzowulu. Accused of beating his wife, Uzowulu's case before "nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan" harbored the traces of a patriarchal society as men presided over the same while women "looked on from the fringe like outsiders". By that logic, the hierarchical nature of Ibo societies granted members their identities by determining the boundaries within which they were to live. The men not only had more liberties than the women did but also faced the pressure of proving their masculinity. The problem was the Europeans did not condone the use of superstitions to maintain the presented system.

Extensively, European laws and religion rendered Ibo ideologies baseless by undermining the people's traditions. Whereas there was "a single harmonious order" among the Nigerians, the arriving whites insisted on implementing Christianity and the Queen's monarchical rule on their targets. For example, while dubbing the abandonment of twins in the Evil Forest a crime law, the missionaries had no qualms about using scripture to defend the converts who opted to abandon their families religion. Naturally, as one racial group triumphed over the other, the presented conditions set the pace for the collapse of Ibo social norms and the identities that relied on the same. Again, where Okonkwo was concerned, being a fierce warrior did not denote a place of honor or the respect of the community. On the contrary,

Okonkwo's mannerisms placed him at odds with his clan and the colonial government as the former faction allowed the latter one to settle the Evil Forest.

With the given facts in mind, the presented analysis makes sense simply because of the reality that an individual's identity ties to his or her society. At a personal level, the notion of an identity hinges on social norms that include one's background. For instance, because the government enacts statutes to govern the people, I strive to be a law-abiding citizen. Similarly, since my parents expected me to become self-efficient, I have worked hard to be an independent woman and continue to do so every day. The presented descriptions become relevant once one realizes that the laws and familial duties would have been pointless if I resided on an island alone.

In conclusion, Okonkwo's suicide in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was indeed subject to the man's determination to protect his identity and pride as an African male. That was so as the triumph of the colonial powers went hand in hand with the dismantling of the traditions that protected Okonkwo's interests. In reality, outside Ibo culture, Achebe's protagonist was a simple man without any authority. After all, the Europeans' laws punished bravery while their religion welcomed all persons irrespective of their gender and titles within Ibo society. Consequently, and in what should have been an act of heroism, Okonkwo's decision to take up arms against the Europeans constituted a criminal act in the new system. Evidently, once colonialism took roots, everything Okonkwo worked for proved to be useless.