

The destructive clash of cultures

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In their respective works *Things Fall Apart* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, both Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta depict the effects of colonialism on Igbo society.

While Achebe demonstrates the gradual process of colonial imposition, Buchi Emecheta examines its aftermath. Nonetheless, Nnu Ego and Okonkwo endure a parallel struggle with the conflicting cultures of Igbo tradition and colonial society. The gradual downfall of Okonkwo and the eventual solitude of Nnu Ego are byproducts of these clashing attitudes. Essentially, they both are enslaved by their inherent devotion to tradition. For Okonkwo, the colonial imposition undermines every value and influence that has shaped his existence. In an analogous way, Nnu Ego attempts to fulfill her traditional goals of motherhood amidst the modern and colonized city of Lagos. Both characters inevitably fail as the discord between the cultures proves to be insurmountable.

Although colonialism is the main focus of Chinua Achebe's novel, a significant portion of the book is devoted to establishing Igbo culture, untouched by western influences. In his description, he attempts to be an objective historian as he relates all aspects of the culture, even those that seem outrageous. For example, twins were viewed as an abomination in Igbo society and, accordingly, would be abandoned and killed. However, unlike a common historian or textbook, Achebe incorporates a personal aspect to his accounts; he not only describes the actions, but also details the reasoning and values which support them. In effect, the reader is immersed into the society rather than simply informed of it. Although it may be difficult to empathize with such radical traditions, one can nevertheless sympathize

with them after thoroughly understanding their foundations. Achebe's emphasis on the values and beliefs of Igbo society is essential to recognizing why things fall apart. Okonkwo's character embodies these traditions. Thus, his gradual downfall parallels the breakdown and dissolution of Igbo culture. Achebe realizes that understanding the culture itself presupposes the understanding of its collapse.

After firmly establishing the fabric of the society, Achebe describes its encroaching colonization. The primary step of imposition is changing the fundamental Igbo mentality. In order to affect this deep-rooted state of mind, the Christian missionaries attack the foundation of their entire way of life, which is essentially based on their spiritual beliefs. By making them doubt what they have accepted as spiritual conviction, the missionaries gradually gain validity and support among the clansmen. For instance, when the Christian church survives the notorious Evil Forest, many long held superstitions and beliefs are called into doubt. Thus, things begin to fall apart as more people convert to Christianity. In other words, everything Okonkwo deems important and true in life is threatened especially with the conversion of his own son. After Christianity is established as a religious influence, other western institutions such as government are also introduced. Each additional institution brings with it more restrictions and further demeans Igbo tradition. Attempts to resist such imposition, like the burning of the church, begin to have legal ramifications according to white law. Soon after, the clansmen were even denied the right to assembly. Ultimately, resistance proves to be futile. Despite his devotion to tradition, Okonkwo lacks the necessary support of his peers to adequately counter white

subjugation. His suicide represents the death of a culture; his decision to take his life parallels his realization that Igbo society is beyond salvation.

A similar conflict with tradition can be seen when examining Nnu Ego's circumstances in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Her mentality reflects the traditional Igbo sense of a woman's role. Initially, she assumes the role of a good daughter, complying with her father's desires and aspirations. As a result, what her father expects of her translates into what she expects of herself: becoming a good wife and mothering many children are deemed top priorities. The fulfillment of these priorities is the standard by which society judges a woman's worth. For example, male children are a measure of greater wealth and status than daughters. Because Nnu Ego values these traditional views with the utmost conviction, her happiness is contingent upon their fulfillment. Accordingly, she attempts to kill herself after the death of her first son. Emecheta thus establishes the significant relationship between Nnu Ego's personal happiness and her children. She justifies her complete devotion to the role of a caretaker by appealing to its rewards: her children are expected to reciprocate such care in her old age. No matter how much pain she endures, Nnu Ego continually reminds herself of the future benefits. Thus, these rewards are the driving motivation for her self-enslavement to this role.

A conflict arises when Nnu Ego attempts to transfer these traditional beliefs into the opposing culture of the colonized Lagos. Fundamentally, the need for money, which is nonexistent in Iboza, poses a problem. This need requires Nnu Ego to step outside of the traditional woman's role in order to

contribute financial support. Thus, yet another responsibility is added to an already long list of duties. Such a monetary need also causes a conflict with the traditionally-valued notion of bearing many children. In its practical and economic application, more children entail greater burden within an urban context. Such an urban setting also has a significant effect on the attitudes of the children themselves. Education, for example, possesses greater weight in Lagos than in the more traditional Ibuza: the aspirations of Nnu Ego's children intrinsically incorporate education for the sake of itself. Although Nnu Ego also adopts this value of education, she does not fully comprehend the process in its entirety. She works hard to provide for this education, understanding its benefits for the future of her children; however, she does so always with the traditional and ultimate hope of reciprocated caretaking. In the end, what she had always expected to be the joys of motherhood are unfulfilled; her attempts to achieve the goals of the traditional Ibuza mentality in a colonized urban environment fall short.

Nnu Ego's incomplete assimilation effected her heartbreaking tribulations. For the sake of survival, she is able to somewhat adapt to the Lagos way of life; however, she fails to overcome the conflicting disparity between her firmly embedded traditional values and the colonized urban society. With both sons pursuing further education abroad, Nnu Ego never receives the comfort they were intended to provide. Facing a similar clash of cultures, Okonkwo exhibits obstinate resistance to the white invasion which preceded his tragic demise. His tale deserves merely a paragraph in the Commissioner' book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This reduction corresponds to the British imperialists ignorance of Igbo

culture that Achebe strived to demonstrate. Essentially, Achebe's novel serves as an opposing alternative to colonial history books describing African societies that naively classify them as primitive tribes.