

Things Falling Apart: Societies in Irreversible Transition in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and St. Luke's Gospel

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ABSTRACT: A text interacts with and references other texts. Meaning is a dialogue between different works. No text, as such, exists in isolation. This study is a critical reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a representation of communities on the verge of irreversible transition. Achebe's novel is read as an imitation, though 'not quite,' of Judeo-Christian societies. The kernel of the argument in this study is that Achebe's story, in many ways, bears a close semblance to Judaic and Christian societies in St. Luke's Gospel. Using deconstructionist theory, I critique the novel as a composite of biblical contexts and sub-texts. These contexts and sub-texts lend the novel to multiple interpretations. The sub-texts run into biblical sub-texts. The novel, this study concludes, represents a society on the verge of a major transition. Colonialism irreversibly disrupts the Umuofian cultural order, things fall apart, opening room for a radical shift in the architecture of the looming dispensation.

KEYWORDS: Deconstructionism, Irreversibility, Judeo-Christian, Contexts, Sub-texts, Transition, multiplicity, Mosaic, Imitation, Disruption

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I argue that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a demonstration of the inevitability of change. I will attempt a deconstructionist reading of this novel to show that a literary text is porous; one text runs into another text. The literary text is not self-contained as suggested by formalists. Construction of meaning is a dialogic process. One text dialogues with another in a process Bakhtin regards as dialogism. Achebe's Umuofian society parallels Judeo-Christian societies as retold in St. Luke's Gospel and other related biblical stories. Umuofia is a society on the verge of transition. The idyllic traditional life of the Umuofians is on the verge of collapse. Achebe uses Okonkwo, the traditional diehard and the de facto leader of the Umuofian people, to demonstrate that change is irreversible. I argue that the Umuofian community as reflected in Achebe's novel is a blended juxtaposition of Judaic and Christian societies. The Judeo-Christian text continues to persist and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be read, using Critchley's words, as an iteration of this narrative:

A text can continue to be read after its author has disappeared or died - which is why Socrates condemns writing in the *Phaedrus*. Writing breaks with the context of communication, if by the latter one understands the intersubjective communication of conscious, co-present subjects. Writing also breaks with the limited concept of context, because the written sign always exceeds its context; for it must, by virtue of its iterability, perdure beyond the present moment of its inscription and even after the death of its author. Furthermore, a text can be quoted in other contexts, and enter into new contexts. (Critchley, 1999, pp. 33-4)

Literary texts have a perduring – long-lasting – impact on the reader's experience; they withstand the test of time. Achebe's writings are no exception. The continued existence of literary works makes them amenable to multiple contextual interpretations. Beyond the Umuofian or Ibo traditional society, which may be regarded as the primary context of Achebe's novel, it is possible to appropriate the narrative to suit other contexts. For purposes of this study, the *other* contexts are the Judeo-Christian societies. I intend to 'break with the limited concept of context.' In deconstructing Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, I will focus on the falling of socio-political and economic 'things.' These 'things' encompass the Ibo's cultural worldview. I will demonstrate how the disintegrating Umuofian community irreversibly impacts the lives of the Ibo people as represented in the novel. By primarily focusing on the protagonist, Okonkwo; I intend to argue that the 'falling of things' is expressed in many ways in this maiden novel.

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a re-imagination of a traditional African society on the brink of a major transition. When the story begins, Achebe presents what appears to be a pristine Umuofian cultural environment, uncorrupted by 'Other' civilisations. There is a traditional governance system, largely dominated by elders, priests and priestesses. Physical strength is celebrated and the absence of brawn is seemingly frowned upon. Display of physical prowess, exaggerated as it may appear in certain

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circumstances, is the main parameter for determining socio-economic and political power. Okonkwo is apparently the locus classicus of this traditional socialisation. His fame is predicated on rare physical feats; it goes beyond his village Umuofia and reverberates across the nine villages. He exudes an enigma, almost Christ-like, so to speak. At the age of eighteen, he brings honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat, a 'great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino' (Achebe, 1988, p. 3). His fame rests on 'solid personal achievements,' which are out of this world. Beating Amalinze is a rare accomplishment as it is paralleled to the fiercest physical confrontation between the founder of Umuofia and 'a spirit of the wild' which had taken 'seven days and seven nights' (p. 3). The number seven (7) symbolises completion and perfection in Luke's gospel. Jesus's family spent seven days, as opposed to the customary two, in Jerusalem to wait for the completion of the holy festival (Luk. 2:49). Okonkwo's landmark achievement was realised 'many years ago, twenty years or more' and since then Okonkwo's fame has 'grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan,' a similised comparison that relates to that of Jesus. Unlike his father who 'was tall but very thin ... had a slight stoop [and] wore a haggard and mournful look' (p. 4); Okonkwo's physique, which is described using local imageries, Achebe's penchant, is by far mysterious:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words quickly enough, he would use his fists. (Achebe, p. 3)

Okonkwo's otherworldly stature resembles that of Jesus. Besides, his inspiration is shrouded in mystery. Like Jesus (Luk. 2:43-51), he does not relate well with his father and, indeed, disowns him. Okonkwo's actions, therefore, are seemingly spiritually motivated. He has no patience with unsuccessful men like his father, Unoka for 'he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow ... a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts ... a coward [who] could not bear the sight of blood' (pp. 3-5). In spite of these weaknesses, he is painted, in flashback, as a good man: an exceptionally generous, diplomatic and social being who respects the sanctity of human life, a talented flutist and a lively man whose face beamed 'with blessedness and peace.' Like Jesus who surprised his loving and caring parents and insisted that the temple was his father's house, Okonkwo carves out a niche for himself where he is 'judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father' (p. 6). Like Jesus who earned the respect of his people at a young age, Okonkwo is revered for his achievements: a wealthy farmer who had two barns of yams and married three wives, he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars, he 'could eat with kings and elders' because he had 'washed his hands' (p. 6).

The introductory events in this maiden novel mirror a society that associates success almost exclusively with a manly or masculine display of physical strength, which is emblematic of Judeo-Christian societies. That this extreme display of manliness is hyperbolically described is not surprising. During the funeral of an Umuofian celebrity, Okonkwo drinks palm-wine from 'his first human head.' This incident is one the most exaggerated accounts of the protagonist's obsession with unemotional and baneful masculinity; he exhibits raw anger and thirst for the enemy's blood. His detestation of femininity emanates from his resentment of Unoka's failure and weakness. He recalls having suffered emotionally 'when his playmate told him that his father was agbala'; 'Agbala' was not only another name for a woman, but it also meant 'a man who had taken no title' (p. 10). Okonkwo's rulership is driven by one passion: to hate everything that his father had loved, which are 'gentleness and idleness.' The great anxiety that Nwoye's incipient laziness causes him can be understood in this context. This explains why the ill-fated lad who is sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbours to avoid war and bloodshed is placed under Okonkwo's custody. This gesture is symptomatic of Umuofia's confidence in his leadership abilities. It is also an acknowledgement of his contributions to the socio-political stability of the Umuofian nation. Yet Okonkwo's bane and emotionlessness extend beyond the battlefield; he rules his household with an iron fist: '[He] ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children' (p. 9). He does not seem to understand the impact of his unemotional stance on family matters; he corrects Nwoye's perceived sloth 'by constant nagging and beating' to the detriment of the young man's emotional growth.

Umuofia's overreliance on physical abilities or manliness – actions, wars and bloodshed – is not the only text that runs into Judeo-Christian texts. The Ibo society's high regard for its spiritual foundation is an emblem of Mosaic rulership. It is impossible to detach leadership from spirituality in Judeo-Christian societies. That Umuofian society derives its political strength from spirituality is Judaic. Magic, priests and medicine-men fortify Umuofian people against 'the fear of evil and capricious gods ... the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw' (p. 9). The fear of neighbouring clans emanates from their knowledge of this deep spiritual connection. Wars are sanctioned by the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves; disobeying the Oracle automatically culminates in defeat 'because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*' (p. 9). The narrator observes:

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine-men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement – the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine

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itself was called *agadi-nwayi*, or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umuofia, in a cleared spot. And if anybody was foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk he was sure to see the old woman hopping about. (Achebe, 1988, pp. 8-9)

Though disregarded by the protagonist; Unoka, like Ikemefuna, is perhaps one of the most significant characters in this novel. Like Unoka, who symbolises failure and femininity; Ikemefuna reminds the community of the gruesome murder of Ogbuefi Udo's wife, Ezeugo, in Mbaino Market. The sacrifice of this doomed lad only suppressed the anger of Umuofians. Their reluctance to initiate a retaliatory attack can be better understood in the context of the tribe's religiosity. Yet the 'doomed lad' represents the future envisioned by the desecrated image of Okonkwo's father, the possibility of alternative centres of power, alternative leadership, alternative governance systems and alternative deities. His introduction in the novel signals the beginning of a transformative transition in the Umuofian society. His sacrifice initiates the turning point of the novel. He opens new vistas for a traditional society that was initially hell-bent on war and bloodshed. His sacrifice projects a new social order, perhaps the one envisioned by Unoka. What is described as a 'contemptible life and shameful death' does not blind the reader to the positive social values he represents: diplomacy, generosity and respect for human life among others.

Okonkwo's soft underbelly is uncovered through his close interaction with Ikemefuna. He develops a genuine father-son relationship with him and begins to appreciate the role of a parent in nurturing a child. He becomes fond of the boy even though he does not openly admit to admiring him. This relationship enables him to acknowledge his failures as a father. As a father, he is responsible for the proper upbringing of his sons. They should grow into men who can responsibly chart their independent paths in the real world. He realises that how a child is raised significantly impacts their adulthood. His frosty relationship with his father blinds him to this important role. His deep-seated hatred for Unoka clouds his judgment to the extent that he is incapable of intimate family relationships. He loses the chance to nurture his eldest Nwoye into the kind of man he projects. He fails to inspire respect and admiration in him. Instead, he imparts fear, thereby driving the young man farther away from him. He does not give him the start in life which many men had, yet he hopes that Nwoye would begin to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. He ironically detests Nwoye's close relationship with his mother, yet this is a consequence of his actions. 'Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man [yet] he always found fault with [his] effort, and he said so with much threatening' (p. 23). Even when he knows that the boy is still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams, he constantly admonishes him for displaying unmanly traits.

The feelings Nwoye develops towards his father are reflections of the treatment accorded to him by Okonkwo. His unhealthy relationship with Okonkwo, like the animosity between Unoka and Okonkwo, compels him to chart his path to adulthood. Ikemefuna exudes more manly qualities than Nwoye. His industry endears him to Okonkwo. Unlike Nwoye who is unable to measure up to Okonkwo's expectations, Ikemefuna seems to know everything: 'He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which trees made the strongest bows' (p. 20); consequently, he wins Okonkwo's confidence. Although Nwoye is two years younger than Ikemefuna, he does not exhibit the traditionally desirable qualities of a man. Even when Obierika pleads for patience, imploring Okonkwo not to worry himself as the boy is 'still very young,' he retorts. According to Okonkwo, 'Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman' and in any case, 'A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches' (p. 46). Nwoye's preference for his mother's tales, as opposed to Okonkwo's manly stories of violence, further infuriates Okonkwo. Okonkwo considers Nwoye effeminate; he 'cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan' (p. 24). There is too much of his mother in him' and, in Obierika's view 'Too much of his grandfather' (p. 46). His relationship with Ikemefuna exhibits a sharp contrast:

... Okonkwo became very fond of the boy – inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else – with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father. (Achebe, 1988, p. 20)

Ikemefuna reveals Okonkwo's dammed-up emotions. He unveils Okonkwo's involvement in a battle of wills with a commitment to self-preservation and the need to acknowledge the potency of divine power. When Okonkwo is summoned by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess for beating up Ojiugo during the Week of Peace, he becomes 'inwardly' repentant. Whereas people thought he had no respect for the gods of the clan, he was sorry for his actions but 'he was not the man to go about telling his neighbours that he was in error' (p. 23). The gravity of the physical assault that he metes out on Ojiugo reflects a deepening battle of wills. He appreciates the repercussions of breaking the law during a sacred week, the fact that this evil could ruin the whole clan. He also finds it difficult to hide his love for his daughter, Enzima. Even though he shows his fondness for her on very rare occasions, the young girl reminds her of his wife, who was once a village beauty.

The 'doomed lad' also catalyses transition in the Umuofian community. Okonkwo's participates in his ritual killing against the will of Oracle and the elders of Umuofia. His obsession with raw masculinity blinds him to his role as a foster father. He treats the boy like a son and Ikemefuna calls him father, yet he decides to join the men of Umuofia in this mission because he does not associate with 'some effeminate men who had refused to come with them' (p. 41). When the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves pronounces Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo is warned against bearing a hand in the boy's death. According to the Ibo culture, a family member is

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not supposed to be involved because of emotional attachment. Participation of family members does not 'please the Earth'; [it] is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families' (p. 46). Yet when this ritual is eventually executed, Okonkwo, unable to bear the thought of being weak, 'draws his matchet and cuts him down' when Ikemefuna runs towards him for help (p. 43). The result of his cruelty is a hollow victory.

Okonkwo's irrational decision fuels animosity in his family. It marks the beginning of a series of tragedies in Okonkwo's household. It puts a strain on his relationship with Nwoye. The death of Ikemefuna devastates him. He finds it difficult to muffle his sorrow; he tries 'not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him' (p. 44). He does not taste any food for two days and finds it difficult to fall asleep. He downs himself in palm wine from morning to evening in a bid to submerge his grief, all to no avail. Ikemefuna's death creates a hollow in Okonkwo's heart; he becomes lonely as his son, Nwoye avoids him out of fear. He develops a strange yearning for male companionship. He, for instance, wishes that Enzima, the apple of her eye, were a boy. He admires Obierika's son, Maduka and cannot hide his longing for a *real* son: 'He will do great things,' he says, 'If I had a son like him I should be happy' (p. 46). Ikemefuna's killing, he realises, is in no way similar to the five men he had killed in battle. It casts doubt on his masculinity and physical prowess. It displays a dichotomy between a baneful show of manliness and parental responsibility. Although Okonkwo appears to downplay the moral and spiritual implications of his action, he finds it difficult to get over the boy's death. He adamantly refuses to admit to the ever-changing social dynamics; he does not want to regard fosterhood as a form of parenting.

The protagonist's anguish is understandably a consequence of his refusal to recognise that his destiny is intertwined with the spiritual realm of the Ibo. His reprieve from emotional distress is short-lived. When he begins to feel his old self again and falls asleep for the first time in three nights, a new emotional distress surfaces: Ezinma, Ekwefi's only child and the centre of her mother's world, falls ill. Okonkwo's second wife had suffered a great deal in her life. The birth of her children, which should have been her 'crowning glory, became for [her] mere physical agony devoid of promise' (p. 54). The naming ceremony, which often provided an opportunity for spiritual intervention, became an empty ritual. The self-defeating humour in the names Ekwefi had given to her nine children demonstrates what the narrator describes alliteratively as her 'deepening despair.' The birth of Ezinma, a tenth child borne after a series of deaths, had provided a ray of hope. Ezinma had broken the cycle of birth and death associated with an 'ogbanje,' 'one of those wicked children, who when they died, entered their mother's wombs to be born again' (p. 54). That her illness devastates both Ekwefi and Okonkwo can be understood in this context. As the apple of their eyes, her survival is a test of their love, faith, resilience. Okonkwo's spell does end with Ezinma's illness; a new disaster strikes him. This catastrophe marks the beginning of Okonkwo's journey towards an uncharted territory. It also marks the start of a new wind of change. During Ezeudu's burial ceremony, Okonkwo's gun accidentally explodes and the dead man's sixteen-year-old son drops dead. The result of this inadvertent action is a cataclysmically horrendous experience which is vividly described using grotesque images: 'delirious fury,' 'a cry of agony and shouts of horror,' 'a pool of blood' and 'a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart' (p. 86). The traditional order is ruptured, and a tumult of confusion, unparalleled in the tradition of Umuofia, ensues: 'Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened' (p. 87). Here again, Okonkwo commits a crime against men and gods:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (Achebe, 1988, p. 87)

Okonkwo, like Moses (Exod. 15-25), is put through a seven-year wilderness experience. Commission of this *female* crime reifies the falling of things in Umuofian society as it marks the beginning of a journey towards an irreversible change. His crime, unintentional as it is described, cannot be reversed, so is the mistral wind of change that sweeps the Ibo community. Okonkwo is forced to collect his most valuable belongings in headloads at night and flees to his motherland, a little village called Mbanta, just beyond the borders of Mbaino, before cockcrow. As a consequence of his poor choices, he puts the lives of his family members in danger. His wives and children are distraught, but they, like their father, have no choice. Like Moses, he loses touch with his people as a result of his exile. He also loses control over the Umuofian people. His absence from the community denies him the power to exert his authority as a clan leader. The obverse of his seven-year ban is a chance for redemption. He finds an opportunity to reflect on his experiences and redefine his purpose in life.

His mother's kinsmen in Mbanta receive him warmly. The people of Mbanta appreciate ancient traditional values that correspond with Umuofia's. One of these is oral artistry, the gift of the gab, particularly the use of proverbial sayings and idioms to embellish speech: 'Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten' (p. 5). Besides their appreciation of eloquent and fluent speech, they are diplomatic, peace-loving, silent and patient listeners. They understand that a child belongs to its father and his family and a man belongs to his fatherland and not motherland, but 'when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet, [but] when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland (p. 94). Uchendu, for instance, allows him to tell his full story. His mother's people empathise with him and assist him to rebuild his life. They revere the spirits of the dead and it is on this account that they feel dutybound to protect him. They plead with him not to 'allow sorrow to weigh him down and kill him [because

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his] wives and children will all die in exile' (p. 94). The future of his family is dependent on his sobriety; he should be able to see beyond his present circumstances.

Unfortunately, Okonkwo loses yet another golden opportunity. His ego blinds him to the goose's golden eggs. Obierika's visit, in his second year of exile does not make things any better for him. The white man has set foot in Umuofia and according to the Oracle, the stranger is in Ibo 'to break the clan and spread destruction among them' (p. 97). The killing of the first white man, who arrives in Umuofia (a 'harbinger sent to explore the terrain'), opens a new can of worms. As suggested in the prognostic imagery of 'locusts,' more white men arrive in the company of Ibo collaborators. Innocent people are murdered at Abame market. The white men have powerful weapons and they are already taking Umuofians as slaves. As usual, Okonkwo blames his tribesmen for failing to arm themselves with guns and matchets. Unlike Uchendu who is diplomatic and calls for exercise caution, Okonkwo regards his tribesmen as fools. His exile does not quell his raw Mosaic temper. He becomes even more aggressive. He is uncomfortable with their preference for diplomacy in resolving interclan conflicts. It is a display of unmanliness. This new environment does not impact positively on his personality.

The arrival of Christian missionaries in Umuofia further exacerbates its cultural and political disintegration. According to Obierika, who visits Okonkwo two years later, a church is built, a handful of converts won and evangelists are sent to the surrounding towns and villages in a bid to win more souls. Although many people initially believed that the strange faith and the white man's god would not last, the presence of missionaries 'was a great source of sorrow to the leaders of the clan.' Save for '*efulefu*, the imagery, in the language of the clan, for worthless, empty men, who sold their matchets and wore the sheathe to battle,' the missionaries fail to win titled converts at the beginning. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, describes the converts and the faith sarcastically as 'the excrement of the clan' and 'a mad dog that had come to eat it up' respectively (p. 101). What complicates the situation even further is that Okonkwo's eldest joins the missionary bandwagon and disowns his father. The failing of things is imminent as colonial administrators occupy more villages and Mbanta is no exception. To perpetuate foreign domination, as suggested by Cabral (1973), the coloniser is on a mission 'to paralyze [the Ibo] cultural life' (p. 49). The missionaries are important cogs in this destructive wheel. 'To be a colonial,' the imperialist understands, the Ibo has 'to live with an identity that is 'incomplete, partial and false' (Gikandi, 1992, p. 156; Cabral, 1973, p. 65). According to them 'all [Ibo] gods ... are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell [Ibos] to kill [their] fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky ... all of us' (Achebe, 1988, p. 103). As these changes sweep the Ibo villages, Okonkwo finds himself in a helpless situation, unable to do anything to mount a political resistance against the colonial intruder. Disengaged from communal activities and compelled to live in a village that prefers diplomacy to war, Okonkwo's anger continues to mount. Yet he hopes to recover from his political frustrations when he returns home.

The colonisers largely succeed in exercising political and religious dominance in the Ibo community in Okonkwo's absence. Seven years 'was a long time to be away from one clan' and 'a man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as [Okonkwo] left, someone else rose and filled it. The was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another' (p. 121). Nature abhors vacuums. Okonkwo himself understands the nature of Umuofian society, yet he does not go through a proper reintegration process. He develops a re-integration plan without consulting his former allies. He expects clansmen to forget his offences and accept him as the indisputable leader of Umuofia. He ignores the possibility of political realignments and starts to stamp his authority. This is one of the protagonist's Achilles' heel. The narrator says:

[He] knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan. But some of these losses were irreparable. He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. (Achebe, 1988, p. 121)

The return of Okonkwo, as expected, does not make things any better. His presumptuousness overshadows his sense of judgment. He immediately assumes his leadership role and regards himself as a titled man of Umuofia. He finds it difficult to contend with the British imperialist administrative and Christian missionary dominion. The white man has taken over the governance of the Umuofian community. Umuofia's rich cultural tradition faces an imminent threat of extermination. Thus, colonialism deals a near-fatal blow to Okonkwo. Colonial forces have invaded almost all facets of Umuofian life and things are falling apart for Okonkwo and his community. Mounting a significant resistance against colonial forces at this stage is a tall order. The Umuofians, like other Ibo clans, are no longer in control of their political destiny and alien cultures are gradually replacing their ancient cultural values. Okonkwo's seemingly insignificant social station dims his prospects of a rapturous welcome. His return to the village, as described in the narrator's unsparingly powerful words, is hardly noticed:

Okonkwo's return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished. It was true his two beautiful daughters aroused great interest among suitors and marriage negotiations were soon in progress, but, beyond that, Umuofia did not appear to have taken any special notice of the warrior's return. The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognisable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds. There

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were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return. (Achebe, 1988, p. 129)

Okonkwo cannot think of a better strategy to revivify his political ambition. His plan to initiate his two sons into the *ozo* society would have drawn the people's attention to his family, but this initiation rite is performed once in three years in Umuofia. This means he has to wait for about two years for the next round of ceremonies. Stripped of his chances of revival, Okonkwo is deeply grieved. His grief goes beyond the individual ambitions; he mourns for the clan, which is 'breaking up and falling apart, the warlike men of Umuofia who had so unaccountably become soft like women' (p. 129). As was his wont, Okonkwo spearheads a protest campaign. He rallies his troops, largely comprising his former allies, behind a new revolt against colonial oppression. The first mission is to destroy the local missionary church. This plan comes to fruition. Although they neither kill the missionary nor drive away the Christians, their successful mission is a substantially significant victory, at least before the District Commissioner returns from his tour. When he comes back, he summons Okonkwo and five other elders. As a tactful diplomat, he gives room for dialogue. For the first time, Okonkwo is introduced to the realities of colonial administration: Britain is under a monarchical administrative system and the administrators in her colonies must follow the judicial procedures in the dominion of the great queen. Besides hitting them with a heavy fine, the District Commissioner subjects them to humiliating experiences: the prisoner's barber shaves him off, and the court messengers ridicule their traditional regalia and subject them to other demeaning theatrics. In *Things Fall Apart*, like *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe invests heavily in the development of his characters to provide a daringly unbiased dichotomy of antiquity and contemporaneity. What is particularly appealing in Achebe's novel is his unjaundiced representation of cultural disruption and social disintegration. Ngara's observation is succinct in this regard:

In depicting the disintegration of Igbo culture in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe does not give us a partial or biased view of the historical epoch he is dealing with. He makes use of a wide variety of characters to represent different points of view and social groups ... Thus we are able to see how political, religious, tribal and personal factors all contribute to the crumbling of the traditional social structure. Although the encroachment of the white man's civilisation and political power features as the principal catalyst in this change, Achebe does not exonerate his ancestors from blame... The author consequently succeeds in presenting a truthful and balanced account of reality and is able to capture the mood of the epoch. His method is that of objective realism. (Ngara, 1985, pp. 111-2)

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* represents two conflicting cultures that intertwine religion and politics. Political issues are played out in a religious arena. Both African and Western societies depicted in the novel have instrumentalised religious institutions to sustain social order and peaceful coexistence. How these two societies weaponise religion is the point of divergence. Whereas religion is more of an end than a means to an end in the Umuofian society, it is a means towards an end in the white man's world. Political directions are sanctioned by deities in Umuofia. The gods control the socio-economic and political destinies of the Umuofian people. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, promotes Christianity, condemns traditional customs and encourages Umuofian children to join missionary schools. His approach is non-confrontational as he restrains 'his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan' (p. 126). Christianity gives refuge to Ibo outcasts and untitled men. Aside from solace, these recluses are offered positions. Conversion to this new faith is incentivised. Neutralising traditional African culture is a means of establishing colonial hegemony. Unlike Umuofia where punishments are sanctioned by the Oracle, the colonial government relies on legal procedures to administer justice. Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation neutralises the Ibo culture, which is rigid, Judaic and uncompromising.

The political ecosystem of the Ibo, as depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, is almost exclusively pegged on the directives of the gods. The power of the gods over human affairs is absolute; it cannot be questioned, unreasonable as it seems in certain circumstances. Perhaps Enock's excessive zeal can be understood in this context. His rigid religious stance is a transposition of the radical implementation Ibo faith-based laws. Enock, a man who had father's sacred python, becomes over-zealous and flourishes in full favour after Mr. Brown's departure. His devotion to the new faith seems so much greater than Mr. Brown's that he earns the name 'The Outsider who wept louder than the bereaved.' He aggressively challenges traditional order and, like Mr. Brown's successor, sees 'the world as a battlefield in which the children of light [are] locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness' (p. 130). Over-zealous converts like Enock accelerate the pace of cultural transition. Motivated by Mr. Smith's no-nonsense approach to Devilish stories that lead men astray, Enock fuels 'the great conflict between church and clan in Umuofia which had been gathering since Mr. Brown left' (p. 131). The intensity of the campaigns mounted by the enthusiastic converts amplifies the rift between the two factions.

Okonkwo's notion of an ideal warrior and a true member of the Ibo clan is Mosaic as it follows the scriptural dicta of the Ibo gods. He, like Moses and the Ten Commandments, does not give room for compromise. The law is superior to all else, including the welfare of the family. Even when it is clear that his radical traditionalism is disintegrating his family, he insists on playing by the Ibo script. In pursuit of his uncompromising ambitions, he disregards significant ethical boundaries. He is incapable of controlling his raw anger and raw ambitions. This obsession denies him the opportunity to appreciate diversity of opinions. Even when he returns to an Ibo community that has changed and is staring at further disunity, he sticks to his authoritarian stance. He refuses to give dialogue a chance even when it is the only suitable option. He does regard himself as the problem. That he is quick to judge the people of Abame is indicative of his irrational behaviour. The colonial administrator is using superior weapons, but he insists on

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mounting an attack on them the moment he returns to Umuofia. He is out of touch with emerging social realities, yet he hopes to rally everybody behind him.

Okonkwo does not seem to represent the totality of Umuofian ambitions. In many instances, he stands above everyone else and wields imaginary authority. He uses Umuofia as an outlet for his pent-up energies. One may be tempted to read Achebe's novel as a representation of tragic heroism that borders on exceptional violence and foolhardiness. He makes emotional and unreasonable decisions and ironically expects positive results. It is small wonder that he celebrates insignificant achievements in a complicated liberation struggle. His hubris blinds him to the evolutionary nature of cultures. He finds it difficult to transcend traditional notions of wars and victories. He fails to strike a balance between individual values and communal interests. He does not recognise the family as the foundation of political leadership. His involvement in the ritual killing of Ikemefuna is unforgivable as it is inexcusable, yet he passionately defends it. He is unwilling to accept his fears and inadequacies. Superficial display of courage becomes his scapegoat. That Umuofians hardly notice his return is a significant warning. Instead of taking practical steps to regain his social station, he resorts to more scapegoats.

The protagonist Okonkwo battles with the changes that emerge within the Ibo society. The arrival of Christian missionaries in Umuofia village is a major source of cultural disruption. Umuofian men and sons join the ranks of the stranger, legitimising his religion and his government. Umuofian men 'have taken the white man's religion' and are disregarding Ibo culture. In the absence of tribal unity, it is impossible to fight the white man: 'How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us?' (p. 124). Conversion of outcasts and weaklings does raise any alarm; however, when titled men also join the church, including Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, political tension mounts. As usual, Okonkwo is disappointed but dams up his emotions. He disowns Nwoye and warns him against coming to his home. He convenes an urgent meeting with his five sons and declares: 'You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people.' Nwoye's decision re-ignites his dictatorial rulership. He does not listen to his five sons' opinions; he believes they will follow him blindly. He does not realise that he is imparting fear in them. To stamp his authority as a father, he issues threats: 'If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck' (p. 122). His threats are terrifying. He gives the impression of a democratic leader by giving choices, yet he does not give any. They are damned if they do, damned if they don't.

Okonkwo's tragic fall is a natural and inevitable result of a series of actions, inadvertent but mostly advertent, in his life: his participation in the ritual murder of his adopted son, Ikemefuna; the shooting of Ezeudu's son; his unhealthy relationship with his eldest son, Nwoye, which leads to his conversion to Christianity and conversion to Christianity, his reluctance to borrow a leaf from his mother's people in Mbanta; his tactless destruction of the church in Umuofia and the killing of the District Commissioner's messenger. When it is evident that Umuofians do 'not feel as strongly as he does about the new dispensation,' he mounts an attack without making deliberate attempts to unite emerging factions. Respected elders of the clan are humiliated and ridiculed as a result of his rash decisions.

The transition envisioned in this novel is irreversible. Traditional display of physical strength is no longer the yardstick for determining a man's prowess. Mbanta, and Uchendu to be specific, signal this change. Mental might has, unlike Umuofia, gained traction here. Raw masculinity is not celebrated in Mbanta. His rigidity isolates from his relatives and detaches him from political realities. The traditional order has to be re-evaluated to determine its relevance to contemporary societies. In the colonial order, education is not the preserve of parents. Schools have been established and parents carry out complementary roles. Negotiation skills are necessary for successful leadership. Mr. Brown, for example, succeeds in his mission because he avoids confrontation in his evangelism. Like Moses, Okonkwo's obsession with the old blinds him to new opportunities for political reflection. To a large extent, the contexts and sub-texts in this novel place it in the Old Testament. Silverman contends:

...by marking off its relations to other texts, its contexts, its sub-texts. It means that deconstruction accounts for how a text's explicit formulations undermine its implicit or non-explicit aspects. It brings out what the text excludes by showing what it includes. It highlights what remains indecidable and what operates as an indecidable in the text itself. (Silverman, 2004, p. 4)

A deconstructionist reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* places Okonkwo in the biblical contexts and sub-texts relating to the life of Moses: his slow speech, heavy tongue and bad temper. Like Moses who fails to lead the Israelites to Canaan, Okonkwo fails to liberate his people from colonial oppression. He is unable to reclaim Umuofian pride. Blinded by raw ambitions, he fails to unite the Umuofians. His fortunes are reversed. His juvenile attack complicates an already worrying situation. In the end, the spirits of the young men of Umuofia are dampened by his actions. He loses the moral authority to steer the community to political victory. The news about his arrest demoralises his allies. 'Young men who were always abroad in the moonlight kept their huts that night. Their manly voices were not heard on the village paths as they went to visit their friends and lovers' (p. 139). Figuratively speaking, Umuofia turns into 'a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run' (p. 139). This imagery speaks of bleakness, a clan without a future. A clan, which was once known for its warring skills, is now a dancing ground for cowards. The colonial administrative strategy works in the long run. A political climate of fear is created. Okonkwo's compound, the residence of the tribe's hero, is 'like a deserted home' and his family members speak in whispers. That the villagers

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agree to raise 'two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to appease the white man' is the clearest indication of resignation. The white man manages to 'put a knife on the things that held [Umuofians] together and [they] have fallen apart' (p. 124).

The release of Okonkwo and his fellow prisoners does not renew the hopes of his clansmen. The humiliating experiences they go through in the hands of the colonial administration intimidate them. When they leave the court-house, they neither speak to anyone or themselves. The heavy and fearsome looks that they wear as they make their way to the village discourage children and women from speaking to them. Their release does not attract the rapturous attention one would expect of clan heroes. In fact, they are joined by 'little groups of men' who also walk so silently that the 'village was astir in a silent, suppressed way' (p. 140). This is an indication that this arrest does not improve his social station in any way. On the contrary, he scares the young men of Umuofia, dimming the clan's chances of a successful liberation campaign. Okonkwo loses his appetite and eats absent-mindedly to please Ezinma. The evidence of colonial brutality on Okonkwo's back is terrifying. Although they choose not to speak about it for obvious reasons, they notice 'the long stripes on Okonkwo's back where the warder's whip had cut into his flesh' (p. 140).

Unfortunately, Okonkwo's political maturity remains a pipedream. He expresses a 'child-like excitement' when members of the Umuofia community gather to draw a new political strategy. In child-like ignorance, he examines his head-gear and shield and regards them as satisfactory armour in a possible retaliatory attack. He swears to avenge himself on the white man for the treatment he had received in his court. He hopes that Umuofians will support his plan. In what looks like a glaring childish decision, he resolves to attack the colonial administration alone. He is ready to dissociate himself from cowards. He naively thinks about wars in the past and he hopes that his courage, like Okudo's voice, will turn every Umuofian man into a 'lion.' Ironically, he understands that the past is long gone, but he is determined to recreate it. 'Those days when men were men' are long gone, yet he expects Umuofians to fight like the men of those days against a modern enemy: '... he will tell them that [their] fathers never fought a war of blame. If they listen to him [he] shall leave them and plan [his] own revenge' (p. 141). During this meeting, Okonkwo, unable to control his temper, kills the white man's messenger. The meeting, which he ironically hopes to use as a launching pad for his revenge attack, stops abruptly. The tragic irony of this story is that the omniscient narrator, like God revealed to Moses that he would not reach Canaan, reveals that he 'knew that Umuofia would not go to war' (p. 144).

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* not only depicts the colonial brutality in Africa, but it also highlights the ethnic violence it generated. Whereas Achebe acknowledges the destructive nature of colonial dominion, he does not traditional African men. Okonkwo is responsible for the disruptions in Umuofian society. His actions cast aspersions on the credibility of claims that the colonisers are solely responsible for the chaos that was witnessed during this period and immediately after declaration of self-rule in African societies. That Okonkwo exposes the Ibo to foreign ridicule is not surprising. In the face of this tragic disaster, the District Commissioner regards his experiences in Ibo as useful fodder for a book entitled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. That the resolute administrator in the District Commissioner gives 'way to the student of primitive customs' at the sight of Okonkwo's body is an indication of his recognition of the failure of the colonial administration to restore order. This gives a glimmer of hope, but at the end of the day, neither Okonkwo nor his father achieves the higher title in the land; their deaths are abominable. Okonkwo's temper, as suggested by his stammer and springy walk, like Moses before him, leads to his tragic downfall: 'one of the greatest men in Umuofia ... now will be buried like a dog...'

CONCLUSION

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an imitation, though 'not quite,' of Judeo-Christian societies. In many ways, the story bears a close semblance to Judaic and Christian societies. The novel is a composite of biblical contexts and sub-texts. These contexts and sub-texts lend the novel to multiple interpretations. The sub-texts run into biblical sub-texts. A deconstructionist reading of this novel is, therefore, evidently fruitful. The novel represents a society on the verge of a major transition. As demonstrated in the foregoing discussions, Okonkwo, like Moses, is forced into a seven-year-old exile. He returns to Umuofia, like Moses's return to Egypt, to liberate Umuofians from colonial oppression. His slow speech and temper allude to Moses's. As shown in this paper, there are many aspects of the Umuofian society that are similar to Judeo-Christian societies. Umuofians' loss of confidence in Okonkwo reflects the Israelites' loss of faith in Moses. The Umuofians abandon their faith in traditional culture and embrace foreign cultural values in Okonkwo's absence. This exacerbates Okonkwo's anger. His rigid interpretation of Ibo traditions leads to his tragic downfall. He, like Moses, is unable to liberate his people fully from the yoke of colonial oppression

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