

Original Paper

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Seminal Novel in African Literature

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Abstract

Achebe's Things Fall Apart is an influential novel in African literature for three reasons. First, it is a novel meant to promote African culture; second, it is a narrative about where things went wrong with Africans; and third, it is a prose text which contributed to Achebe's worldwide recognition. It contains Achebe's rejection of the degrading representation of Africans by European writers, and fosters Africa's traditional values and humanism. The excesses of Igbo customs led the protagonist to flagrant misuse of power. The novel's scriptural innovations bring fame to Achebe who is considered as the "Asiwaju" (Leader) of African literature, the "founding father of African fiction", or again the "Eagle on Iroko".

Keywords

African humanism, African literature, "Asiwaju" (Leader), culture, fame, "founding father of African fiction", scriptural innovations, seminal novel

1. Introduction

Colonial literature has portrayed Africans as savage people whose customs are simple and not highly developed, not to say nonexistent. As an African and as an African writer, Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to take the opposite view. This novel has been written with a scriptural specificity, an African flavour, which imparts an intrinsic valuation to the work in African literature, where it is thought to be a seminal novel. This assumption gives rise to the following questions: To what extent can Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* be viewed as a seminal novel in African literature? Why can it be rated as a masterpiece?

The definitions of terms like "seminal novel" and "African literature" will help to better grasp the literary, social, cultural and political values of Achebe's first prose text. According to Anjali

Balachandran (2018), “a seminal work refers to a work that influenced the later development of other works in a similar field”. From Balachandran’s definition, it can be inferred that applied to the novel, the adjective “seminal” refers to its extreme importance and influence on the subsequent evolutions of alternative compositions in the field of literature. So “a seminal novel” is a creative, an original fiction which is valued as excellent and influential since it contains the seeds/beginnings of upcoming evolvment. Put differently, “a seminal novel” is “a classic [...] a book that has never finished what it wants to say” (Calvino, quoted in McCrum, 2013). Such a literary piece remains everlastingly topical because it encompasses “a certain eternal [...] freshness”. (Pound, quoted in McCrum, 2013) As a type of “literature [that] differs from French, Russian, and English literature” (Smithe, 2002, p. 1), “African literature” suggests creative writings published by African writers writing in Shakespeare’s language. The analysis will investigate the “seminality” of *Things Fall Apart*, that is, its “quality or state of being seminal” (*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*), or again the ways in which Achebe’s first prose stands out as a quintessential novel in African fiction.

Used as a critical criterion, the postcolonial theory will make it possible to broach the whys and wherefores of *Things Fall Apart*’s being deemed as a groundbreaking novel in African literature. The study falls into three parts. The first section shows that *Things Fall Apart* has been written to further African/Igbo culture; the second and third parts respectively demonstrate that *Things Fall Apart* is a narrative about the root cause of Africa’s/Nigeria’s problem of political leadership, and that it brought Achebe international renown.

2. A Novel for the Promotion African Culture

Things Fall Apart can be read as a novel promoting African culture. Through this prose text Achebe tries to persuade other people from the world about the value of African culture. The latter is made up of Africa’s customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization. The traditional culture of the Igbo people can be considered as a microcosm of African culture because it has all the features of Africa’s civilization. Traditional values such as customary marriage, hard work and manliness can be mentioned to illustrate that Achebe’s people have beliefs.

Unlike the civil marriage ceremony which is a private affair in the modern society, since it is an affair concerning the bride and the bridegroom only, in the Igbo customary society, traditional marriage ceremony is a communal affair. It is a business concerning the whole community. In the Igbo traditional society, which is fundamentally a communalist one, marriage brings two villages (the suitor’s village and the bride’s village (Note 1)) to get united and to interact. Not only is social interaction shown between different families and tribes, but also this is an occasion for the actors to discuss and contrast their different customs and traditions. Achebe writes:

As men ate and drank palm-wine they talked about the customs of their neighbours. “It was only this morning”, said Obierika, “that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta, where titled men

climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives [...]”. All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks; they haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or cow in the market. “That is very bad [...]”. “But what is good in one place is bad in another place” (Achebe, 1958, pp. 66-67).

As pointed out in the aforementioned excerpt, Obierika criticizes the way in which men from Abame and Aninta behave towards their wives. In fact, Obierika cannot understand the customs of these people who collect and cook food for their wives. And as for the dowry, they have their own way of doing things: they discuss the price as if they were buying a kid or cow in the marketplace. Since Umuofians conduct their marriage settlement in a different way, Obierika thinks that Abameans’ and Anintians’ dots are confusing because their customs do not lead them to do things in the right way. But the concluding words (“But what is good in one place is bad in another place”) are meaningful because, like tastes and colours, matters of customs should not be discussed. People should consider things in their contexts by showing a flexible opinion. When one gets married, one needs to work hard in order to nurture one’s family. Hard work appears as another prominent value in the customary society.

Hard work is praised in the Igbo traditional society where this virtue helps hard-working men like Okonkwo to move up the social ladder. Unlike his father, Unoka, who is lazy and indebted, Okonkwo is a hard-working individual. By hard work, he wins eminent titles which make him a very important personality, a celebrity for whom people feel great respect. Like hard-work, manliness is a traditional value which awards reverence.

Manliness, the quality of physical features expected in a man, grants admiration in the Igbo traditional society. Wrestling competitions organized among tribes are meant to exhibit men’s strength and powerfulness. The passage below shows a cultural exhibition about an inter-tribal wrestling contest:

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat (Achebe, 1958, p. 3).

In the above-mentioned quotation, Okonkwo is depicted as a great wrestler who defeated Amalinze the Cat. With his physical quality, Okonkwo also proves that he is a great farmer. He owns three barns full of yams with which he “could feed his family [...] from one harvest to another” (Achebe, 1958, p. 23).

In the Igbo old society, yam was so much valued that it was considered as “a man’s crop” (Achebe, 1958, p. 16). As such, it has become a symbol for manliness: “Yam stood for manliness” (Achebe, 1958, p. 23). On top of being a hard-working farmer, Okonkwo is admired for his manliness. Marked by his courage and his strength, Okonkwo’s manhood is an undeniable quality which allows him to become “a very great man” (Achebe, 1958, p. 23). Not only does *Things Fall Apart* promote African traditional values by exhibiting traditional principles like customary marriage, hard work and manliness, but also the novel gives an account of “Where the Rain Started to Beat (Note 2)”.

3. An Account of “Where the Rain Started to Beat”

Things Fall Apart reveals the root cause of Africa’s problem of leadership connected with blatant misuse of power and prerogative. Okonkwo embodies this evil. That is why Umelo Ojinmah takes him to task for irresponsibility in the era of colonialism. (Ojinmah, 1991, p. vi) In fact, faced with the advent of the colonizer, Okonkwo unilaterally decides to resist. His individualistic and reckless attitudes lead him to attempt to solve the problem alone without consulting his community about the new threat and the possible results of his actions. How can the protagonist’s recklessness be accounted for? Okonkwo takes a unilateral decision and action because he grants himself an exaggerated importance; he thinks that he is the centre of the universe. He behaves as if he were the only traditional authority threatened by the white man’s ways.

By trying to oppose the European forces alone, Okonkwo has misused his power. For Ojinmah, he is “guilty of gross abuse of power and privilege” (Ojinmah, 1991, p. vii). His downfall foretells the collapse of the traditional society. As a matter of fact, the failure of the protagonist is due to the pressure which the custom exerts on the people. The tradition’s demands of powerfulness, manliness and reverence can but bring leaders to excesses. These extreme behaviours that are unacceptable reveal that chiefs like Okonkwo cannot adapt to the new situation. Rulers’ unadaptability to the current circumstances marked by the presence of Western ways (Colonialism and Christianity), is the sole *raison d’être* of the leadership problem in the colonial era. This default of the traditional community is a factor of failure (Naumann, 2013, p. 67). Okonkwo has failed because he has not reconciled his personal assets (industriousness, manliness, celebrity) with moderation, restraint and prudence, which are values of the traditional community. Neil McEwan highlights Okonkwo’s waterloo: “Okonkwo aims to embody every virtue of his clan but he fails to achieve the balance and caution valued by his culture” (McEwan, 1983, p. 21). A close-up picture of the action of the protagonist shows several details about Okonkwo’s misrule.

The hero’s immoderate exhibition of masculinity, his annoyance, his irritability, his impatience with idle men, even with his own father Unoka (Note 3), and with those who bear no title in the tribe, his fearfulness to be like his father, and the dread to be viewed as “spineless” and “womanish”, lead him to immoderation. This abuse brings him to assassinate Ikemefuna, a hostage considered as a member of his family (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 18). Such an unrestrained deed is synonymous with power abuse, a theme which crosses Achebe’s oeuvre. Africa’s present-day leaders have inherited their misrule from Okonkwo, whom they have taken after. It is no wonder that Ojinmah believes that the post-colonial crises prevailing in African societies are caused by bad leadership (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 19).

As an influential personality in his tribe, Okonkwo does not pay heed to the saying which reads as follows: “all fingers are never equal”. What is being meant in this maxim is that not everybody in the society holds the same social status since the collectivity is made up of strong men as well as weak ones. This entails consideration and fair treatment for everybody, even for those who have not achieved

anything important. Thinking that he is all-powerful and invulnerable, Okonkwo rejects contradiction and despises the nonentities for whom he shows no respect. For instance, his lack of humility leads him to hurt Osugo's feelings, during a meeting, because the latter disagrees with him. The scene is described in the excerpt below:

Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at that man, Okonkwo had said: "This meeting is for men". The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit (Achebe, 1958, p. 24).

The text quoted above shows that Okonkwo has no consideration for men who hold no title at all. That is why he treats Osugo as a "woman", that is to say a nobody. What the protagonist means by this insult is that Osugo is an unimportant person. His utterance ("This meeting is for men") discloses his arrogance. Coupled with haughtiness, harshness and violence are other factors showing the main character's "abuse of power and privilege". Indeed, Okonkwo can be blamed for his heavy-handedness with people outside and inside his family. The following is a description about Okonkwo's violent attitude towards his clansmen and his family members:

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 out quickly enough, he would use his fists [...] Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children (Achebe, 1958, pp. 3-9).

As pointed out in the aforementioned extract, Okonkwo runs his family with unrestrained harshness. Because of Okonkwo's harsh behaviour, Ojinmah writes that the protagonist's heavy-handedness with Nwoye and with his younger spouse Ekwefi, has no limits (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 21). For example, Ekwefi's denigratory utterances about "guns that never shot", triggers off Okonkwo's wrath:

And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children (Achebe, 1958, p. 35).

The piece above depicts Okonkwo as a violent character who attempts to shoot his younger wife dead. He is quick-tempered and makes no effort to dominate over his impulsiveness. With such an impulsive nature, Okonkwo nearly fails to kill his spouse. On account of his violence, the protagonist is indicted of power abuse, since he is unable to control his brutality (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 22). Another illustration of Okonkwo's misrule appears in the scene in which the hero deliberately violates the Sacred Week, the Week of Peace. Actually, for the benefit of the clan, the priest of the earth goddess, Ezeani, orders clansmen to avoid anger, argument and conflict during the Sacred Week, irrespective of the

provocation:

You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow [...] Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her love on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her [...] The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish (Achebe, 1958, p. 28).

As shown in the above-mentioned passage, Okonkwo has abused his authority. He has deconsecrated the Week of Peace because he is not able to control his short-temper and heavy-handedness. As a consequence, he is to blame for flagrant misuse of “power and privilege”. The excessive use of authority leads Okonkwo to fail to look for a compromise. He seems not to be aware that in any relationship, you have to make compromises. If he had been humble, tolerant, flexible, and open-minded, maybe he would have understood that peaceful coexistence could be the best compromise between African tradition and European civilization. This could be a solution since both types of cultures could not exist together as they were. The two civilizations should change slightly so that they can exist together. Here again, adaptation, which is changing one’s behaviour to suit a new situation, is referred to as a solution.

The protagonist fails to understand that adaptation and compromise are inevitable parts of life. The failure of Okonkwo’s leadership prefigures the fiasco of the postcolonial rule of Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* (1966), Michael Obi in “Dead Men’s Path”, a short story from *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972), and Sam in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Like Okonkwo, these rulers/elites have all failed in their missions because of blatant misuse of “power and privilege”. Talking about Nigeria’s failed political leaders, Achebe writes that “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership [...]. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (Achebe, 1983, p. 1). Such a thought, as well as its location in Chapter 1 entitled “**Where the Problem Lies**” (Achebe, 1983, pp. 1-3), illustrates at best the genesis of Africa’s setback of political leadership. *Things Fall Apart*, which is a narrative fostering African culture and telling Africans where things went wrong with them, brought Achebe global fame. It stands for the crowning achievement of Achebe’s career.

4. The Crowning Achievement of Achebe’s Career

Things Fall Apart can be viewed as the crowning achievement of Achebe’s career. In 2004, Njabulo Ndebele, “Chairman of the Jury: Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th Century”, announced in Accra that among “the best 100 titles of African writing in the 20th century”, and above all among “the best

12 African books of the 20th century”, which have met criteria such as “assessment of quality, ability of a book to provide new information or new insight, continuing contribution to debate, extent to which a book breaks boundaries, and its impact through such matters as popularity, sales and public influence” (Smithe, 2002, pp. 15-16). Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* was ranked number 1. Indeed, as a nominated fiction, Achebe’s first novel, which has satisfied all the yardsticks, which boil down to qualitative, informative or insightful, discursive, universal, popular, commercial and public seminality, is rated thus: “This book has moved from its setting in a small Igbo village into universal prominence as Africa’s most widely read novel. Its portrayal of the impact of British colonization on the life of a settled African community makes it a classic on the clash of cultures” (Smithe, 2002, p. 16).

Things Fall Apart is a work in which Achebe experiments novelistic innovations by producing a particular form of writing. The experimentation appears in the fusion of oral tradition and European form of prose. The narrative encompasses Africa’s history of colonization/decolonization and African stories and proverbs which teach the Ancients’ wisdom. Being part and parcel of African lore, folktales and proverbs, which are integrated into the studied prose text, allow Achebe to Africanize the novel in such a successful way that it could be asserted that the Nigerian author has invented the “African Novel (Note 4)” as a field of study.

As a prototype of African novel, *Things Fall Apart* has made Achebe into a literary figure to be reckoned with in the field of Africa’s literature. Because such an Africanized fiction had not existed before the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Simon Gikandi writes that Achebe’s task in *Things Fall Apart* lays ground for the “invention of African literature (Note 5)” (Gikandi, 1991, p. 5). For his literary exploit, Achebe is compared with prominent writers on the continent. That is why Gikandi writes that Achebe is as good as a number of “‘important precursors on the African scenes’ in the mold of René Maran, Amos Tutuola, Paul Hazoumé, and Sol Plaatje” (Gikandi, quoted in Tembo, 2013, p. 24). What makes a difference is that Achebe has not imitated European form of writing. He has infused new life into the novel; he has refreshed it up by adding African flavour as a ploy meant to Africanize it. Achebe is not the inventor of the subject of “cultural clash” in *Things Fall Apart*. Before him, C. Jordan, in *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, had foreshadowed the topic of *Things Fall Apart* by almost two decennaries. What sets Achebe apart from his predecessor “is mainly Achebe’s attitude and stylistic innovation” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33). The Nigerian writer’s powerful seminality generated by the compositional peculiarity of *Things Fall Apart* leads a scholar such as Charles Nnolim to qualify novelists adopting the “specific genre, the novel of Igbo traditional life and the adaptation of English for African experience” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33), as the “sons [and daughters] of Achebe” (Nnolim, quoted in Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33). In this respect, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who authored *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, appears as “an inheritor rather than a disciple” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33), of Achebe, because of her “refreshing new talent” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33).

“Conceived and executed [...] [as] a textualized orality” (Irele, 2009, p. 2), *Things Fall Apart* is the

African Novel par excellence, the typical example of fiction by which the reader witnesses the birth of contemporary African literature brought into being by “orature (Note 6)”. The generated style is so marked by a focus on African culture that it could be posited that Achebe highlights Africa’s traditional philosophy in his prose text. Such an initiative is original. This originality awards him worldwide recognition of African culture and fiction based on the cultural specificities of Africa. The interest of the world of scholars and critics in African literature produced by African writers can be assessed, and the numerous research works carried out are proofs of this keen involvement. It is little wonder that Achebe is considered as “the person who invented African literature as an institutional practice [...] the person who invented African culture as is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation” (Gikandi, 1991, pp. 5-7). An eminent writer like Nadine Gordimer is not blind to Achebe’s achievement. She is in complete agreement with Gikandi when she says that “Achebe’s early work made him the father of modern African literature”, and that *Things Fall Apart* is “an integral part of the world literature”. What Gordimer is driving at is that the African cultural particularities of Achebe’s first novel made his work, as well as himself, become part and parcel of “The World Republic of Letters” (Casanova, 2004), that is to say the Universal Literature.

By and large, experts in literature are unanimous in acknowledging Achebe’s artistic contribution to the popularization of African prose all over the world. One only has to mention Elaine Showalter to realize the tremendous innovations which Achebe has initiated in *Things Fall Apart*. Like Gikandi and Gordimer, Showalter believes that “In *Things Fall Apart* and his other fiction [*Anthills of the Savannah*] set in Nigeria, Chinua Achebe inaugurated the modern African novel”, and that “He also illuminated the path for writers around the world seeking new words and forms for new realities and societies” (Showalter, quoted in *The New York Times*, 2017). What Showalter is highlighting is that Achebe has introduced an important change in novel writing in Africa. In other terms, Achebe has laid the foundation for a proper discipline, an area of knowledge, a subject that people learn or are taught in grammar schools and universities. Kenneth W. Harrow (2009, p. 156) underlines this exquisite handiwork. He pens the words below:

[Achebe is the unique novelist of utmost importance who] opened a space, like a forebear who indicated the paths to quintessentially African genres” [and that his] work mattered for more than his own oeuvre, his Nigerian imitators or for later stragglers. It was the sense that now [the world] had a field to study, to understand and teach.

Because the African Novel has become a full subject studied, comprehended and lectured, it can be sustained that Achebe has given again pride and dignity to an African area of knowledge. He has offered this field of study its nobleness letters. Achebe’s great contribution to the lecturing of the African Novel and African literature through the popularization carried out by the African Writers Series (AWS) is so indisputable that the following could be said about him:

Achebe has had a strong and enduring influence on the production, publishing, and reception of African

literature in English, especially on the teaching of the literature. Quite a few of the indigenous imprints were inspired by the success of the African Writers Series (Izevbaye, 2009, pp. 32-33).

Not only has Achebe been influential about the writing, the publication, and the reception of African literature, but also he has begotten a batch of African scribblers, whose favourite topic is the cultural clash (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33). By dealing with the culture conflict ensuing when Europe invaded Africa, a colonial invasion which results in the societal collapse and the political independence of African countries, *Things Fall Apart* seminalifies Achebe so much that it grants him the status of a prototypical postcolonial writer. As a novelist, the Nigerian writer has contributed to the growth of a new postcolonial awareness, notably because his publications came into being on the eve of Africa's independence. In a *Things Fall Apart*, which breaks the mould by an atypical Afro writing style, Achebe, who claims to be a postcolonial novelist, questions the colonial discourse, indicts bad leadership, and promotes African/Igbo customs and traditions, so much so that it is held that "It is in the novel form that Achebe has made his most enduring contribution as a postcolonial writer" (Izevbaye, 2009, pp. 33-34). Faced with colonialism and its corrosive aftermath on the traditional totality, Achebe can only resort to a "broken" or again "fallen apart" scriptural form since it is made impure or adulterate in order to expose his people's descent into hell, as shown in Okonkwo's and the Igbo culture's downfall. As a product of Nigeria's colonial history, *Things Fall Apart* is written with a proleptic and liminal poeticity, which is synonymous with its fragmented shape. Such a discursive configuration, which is generated by Nigeria's socio-historical situation, is encapsulated in the quote below:

The significance of his choice of this form has deep historical roots. For the novel form is both the product and medium of the historical process. It marks a historic stage in the evolution of human communication when the interaction of technology and social relations brought about a new consciousness and the need for a new form of literary expression, as has been argued in studies by historians of the effect of technology and changing social relations on human consciousness, literary production (such as George Lukacs, Ian Walt, Arnold Kettle, and the communication media (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 34).

Things Fall Apart's postcolonial seminality and what Pierre Zima terms "socio-linguistic situation" are correlated. Defined as a discursive structure which changes everlastingly insofar as the social divergences lead to linguistic innovations both at the lexical and semantic levels (Zima, 1988, pp. 18-19), the "socio-linguistic situation" refers to the idea that the social, political, cultural and economic changes happening in society make the literary language, as well as the author's mentality, to become dynamic (Zima, quoted in Kouï, 2018, p. 14). Here, Achebe proves that the English language used for writing *Things Fall Apart* should not be a neutral and static tongue; but rather a subjective, dynamic and adaptable tool, which must be brought to "Fall Apart", to be broken and transgressed, the same way as the Igbo customary society is fragmented and its mentor Okonkwo fallen. In other words, Achebe

has greatly influenced African fiction on account of “his contribution to the advancement of a new postcolonial consciousness, particularly as his fictions date from the eve of African independence, thus giving emphatic voice to the pan-African impulse that found political expression in African independence” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 33). With *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe lays the foundations of “a new postcolonial consciousness”, when you consider his aim as a scribbler. For Achebe, the role of “The [Postcolonial] Novelist as Teacher” is to teach the contemporary society its past heritage, its culture. By so doing, Achebe “help[s] [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (Achebe, 1975, p. 42). The Achebean literary postcoloniality suggests a decolonization of the mind of the African, who should rid himself/herself of racial inferiority complexes.

By this feat, Achebe becomes the last word in novel writing, the jewel of African literature. There is no doubt that Achebe is “the head of a tradition or genealogy of writing [who] [...] has become a dominant point of origin, a *hyper-precursor* one might say, in whose aftermath virtually every African author self-consciously writes” (Boehmer, 2009, p. 142, italics in the original). Used to measure the literary value of Achebe’s work, the expression “*hyper-precursor*”, means that the Nigerian writer is the forerunner of African fiction. Furthermore, it refers to the idea that Achebe has set “the canon that is now called African literature” (Tembo, 2013, p. 25). As a canonic prose, that is, a work of literature which is highly rated, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* makes “African literature” become a “canon”, a repertoire of works of art which are generally accepted as authentic fictions. As a result, *Things Fall Apart*’s author is canonized by the canonical form of the novel so that it is asserted that “Chinua Achebe achieved canonization with his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and [that] he has retained his top ranking in the African literary canon” (Izevbaye, quoted in Irele, 2009, p. 31).

What is being meant is that *Things Fall Apart* has become the unique prose text that has come before any similar narrative. It is a pioneer publication whose influence on the development of African writing is not questioned. *Things Fall Apart* has been penned to oppose the racist, humorous and humiliating representations of Africa and Africans in proses like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, J. Carey’s *Mister Johnson* and Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan* (Tembo, 2013, p. 19). By writing back, both in his fresh essay titled “The Empire Fights Back” (2001) (Achebe, 2003), and in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe voices a standpoint given by an African novelist working on an African subject matter. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* is said to be “a tale told ‘from the inside’ about the destructive impact of European Christianity on precolonial Igbo culture amid the scramble for Africa in the 1890s” (Jaggi, 2000). Put differently, *Things Fall Apart*, which is located in the past, teaches the reader that Africa’s “past—with all its imperfections – was not a long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe, 1975, pp. 44-45). What Achebe is putting forward is that true cultural, social, political, economic and spiritual values did exist in the Igbo customs and traditions, and that those should be regenerated and enhanced by the African writer playing the roles of a rescuer of society’s

past heritage, a commentator investigating its here and now, and a guide leading it on the road to its coming times (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 4).

Things Fall Apart has put Achebe on a pedestal. The literary world has so much admired Achebe's achievement in *Things Fall Apart* that women and men of letters have called him the "Asiwaju" (Leader) of Africa's fiction, "The Eagle on Iroko", and the "Father of African Literature". As a matter of fact, these praiseworthy qualifiers are used accordingly because *Things Fall Apart* has become a narrative exerting an extremely prominent influence on people's lives and history. It is an epoch-making prose, an « epochal novel » (Tembo, 2013, p. 20). As such, it has transformed Achebe into a literary icon of Africa's literature. That is why he is rightly called the "Asiwaju" (Leader) of African fiction (Tembo, 2013, p. 18). By Okonkwo's characterization, he has developed a theory of Africa's psyche, tradition and rule. For this accomplishment, he is considered as "the doyen of African literature" for his "theoretical reflections on the African personality, culture and politics [which] unquestionably form the most distinctive literary voice of African literature, both in its form and function" (Tembo, 2013, p. 18).

However, as a masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart* does not make Achebe into "the doyen of African literature" or "the founding father of African literature" on the historical level, but rather on the plan of the ways in which he created a form of African writing which is a fusion of oral tradition and European form of prose. Achebe's inventiveness of the archetypal African literary language, the Africanized English, is once more validated in the thought below:

[...] he virtually invented the fictive language and form that has become normative for the literature. He has come as close to defining what many would consider "the archetypal African novel", partly by demonstrating that it is possible to shape literary English into the language of an ethnic experience far removed from the English homeland. This achievement is underscored by his stylistic antecedent: he made acceptable what began as a utopian dream for the African writer and an anathema for English scholars (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 32).

The transgression of 16th century orthodox English "written clean and pure, unmixed and unmangled with borrowing of other tongues" (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 32), by merging it with Pidgin English, Igbo proverbs, songs, names, and legends, allows Achebe to come up with an Africanized/Igbophilized English, and prove that the Queen's English is not the language par excellence, and that it can be adopted and adapted to the Igbo outlook. Achebe's recourse to Igbo terminologies and lore makes him "do [utilitarian] violence to the English language", which is, thereby, appropriated in a successful way. Indeed, Achebe excels where Amos Tutuola, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gabriel Okara, and Wole Soyinka, attempt an uncommon literary style, respectively in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, *Sozaboy*, *The Voice*, and *The Interpreters*. Although these writers, as well as those who had preceded Achebe, initiated an atypical language in their works, they have not been as famous as Achebe, because their innovations did not spread; they did not work and were not accepted. It is even contended that "There had been

major stylistic experiments before and after Achebe, but these had not been successful for reasons of usage and acceptability” (Izevbaye, 2009, p. 32).

As a fruit of Achebe’s creative art, *Things Fall Apart* appears as an outstanding African novel which has allowed the Nigerian novelist to greatly contribute to the terrain of African fiction. The innovations initiated in *Things Fall Apart* account for the ground-breaking part of this first publication in the making of African literature. Thinkers in the literary field praise the influential features of Achebe’s prose text to deem him the “doyen of African literature”. It is believed worldwide that *Things Fall Apart* is the novelist’s magnum opus which reveals him to the whole world by making him become the “Eagle on Iroko”. One may wonder where such a eulogistic expression stems from.

The source of this laudatory phrase can be found in the heading of the 1990 conference celebrating Achebe’s 60th anniversary. During that celebration *Things Fall Apart* was undoubtedly the focus of scientific exchanges, the target of the debates, in which it was highly acclaimed, and its author eulogized as the African writer mainly read in the world (Tembo, 2013, p. 23). As a best-selling novel, one which is bought and read by a large number of people, *Things Fall Apart* makes of Achebe a light in the art world, and motivates the choice for the following title as the conference theme: “Eagle on Iroko: Chinua Achebe at 60”. This unforgettable wording is not fortuitous. It was purposefully selected to reveal that *Things Fall Apart* has canonized Achebe. Such a belief is confirmed by the contention that this memorable phrasing was meant to express the Nigerian novelist’s artistic greatness (Tembo, 2013, p. 23). The analysis will not be a thorough one if an explanation is not given about the metaphorical phrase “Eagle on Iroko”.

“Eagle on Iroko” is a vertiginous metaphor in which Achebe is compared with two important living beings (an Eagle and an Iroko). In point of fact, with *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe is called the “Eagle on Iroko”, because in the Western part of Africa the expression is “used [...] to refer to a person whose personality and works are [...] so outstanding that he is incomparable to any other in society” (Tembo, 2013, p. 23). In the dizzy metaphor of “Eagle on Iroko”, while the “Eagle” refers to the king of birds, the “Iroko”, which is a tall tree existing in West Africa, a tree living for many years, suggests the strongest and highest tree in the jargon of West Africa. Like the “Eagle”, the giant among birds, which flies very high in the sky in order to perch on the toughest and tallest tree, Achebe has risen literarily with the publication of *Things Fall Apart*. Like the “Iroko”, Achebe has become the greatest writer in Africa. He has the makings of a Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is little wonder that, in November 2000, at another international conference held a decade afterwards to commemorate his 70th birthday, Achebe was baptized “the founding father of the modern African novel in English” (Jaggi, 2000). All in all, with his magnum opus *Things Fall Apart*, the Nigerian novelist has succeeded in becoming a writer holding a cross-border and transcontinental celebrity.

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be said that *Things Fall Apart* has truly exercised a major influence on African fiction. Three essential reasons account for its enviable place on the African literary scene. Firstly, it has been penned to testify that Africans have a cultural identity about which they should be proud. Their dignity and pride of being black people stem from the valuation of their customs and traditions. Secondly, the narrative discloses the root cause of African misrule which is linked to excessive use of power. Thirdly, the innovative composition of *Things Fall Apart* led Achebe to international popularity. For his first attempt, Achebe has produced a masterpiece because *Things Fall Apart* has been “recognized as a work of genius” (Gaskin, 2013, p. 75) since its inception in 1958. This equates to saying that Achebe proved that he was already the jewel of African literature at the threshold of his career. That is why *Things Fall Apart* won him everlasting immortality. The Nobel Prize for Literature should be awarded to Achebe posthumously because of his achievement. Another recommendation which is worth mentioning is that any true African literate should (re)read *Things Fall Apart*, and take advantage of the moral Okonkwo’s story teaches the world: “**African humanism** (Note 7)” promotes cultural coexistence, which prevents “Things” from “Falling Apart”. The survival of the Global Village depends upon such an aboriginal philosophy.

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Notes

Note 1. "In Igbo culture it is taboo in most places for people of the same village to intermarry because of the descent pattern from which villages are derived. Most families within a village trace their origins to the same ancestor, hence most public addresses begin with the greetings: "Umunnem na Umunnam" meaning fellow descendants from the same ancestral mother and father" (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 112).

Note 2. This is a rainy metaphor by which Achebe locates the beginning of the troubles of Africans. For Achebe, the novelist is a teacher whose role is to teach his people "where [they] went wrong, where the rain began to beat [them]" (Achebe, 1975, p. 44).

Note 3. Unoka, Okonkwo's father was an extremely lazy man as well as an indebted person in the clan. Apart from these faults, Unoka was not a bad father, "per se" (Ojinmah, 1991, p. 19).

Note 4. The African Novel is a narrative essentially African on account of features connected with the African oral tradition, and also because the themes addressed are typically about Africa. On top of that, it is written by an African writer.

Note 5. The Kenyan scholar and critic Simon Gikandi praises Achebe as the writer who has invented African literature. He writes: "Achebe [...] invented African literature, because he was able to show [...] that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral tradition" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 5).

Note 6. As a preponderant characteristic of the "African Novel", the notion of "oral literature" or again "orature" is described thus: "The concept of orality (or "orature"), which serves as the theoretical and ethnographic foundation for the discussion of the intrinsic properties (character types, narrative functions and rhetorical devices, as well as the role of metaphor and symbolism) by which the traditional narratives are structured can also be applied to the African novel" (Irele, 2009, p. 2).

Note 7. The expression "African Humanism" is explained as follows: "[It] is the philosophy which naturally enables the coexistence of all humans, irrespective of their creed, culture, tribe, nation or race. Achebe exposed and x-rayed the displeasure in the breaking of this principle or philosophy with the intrusion and imposition of western way of life which defied the existence of the kind of tranquility that existed amongst Africans, thereby leading to all things breaking apart" (Edeh, 2015, p. 205).