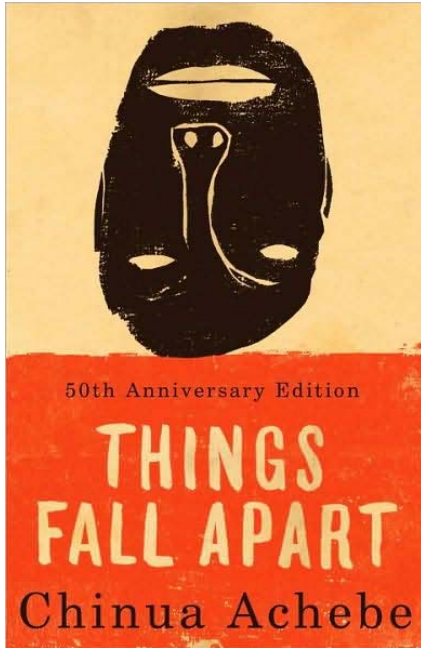


Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (1959)

Review by Stephen Carter



This is the story of Okonkwo, a stern, proud, ambitious man of the Ibo Tribe in Nigeria. It starts out at the time just prior to first contact with the missionaries and colonialists from England. The Ibo people have heard of white people, but they haven't seen any yet. Okonkwo is a purpose-driven, hardworking man because his father Unoka had been the exact opposite. Unoka had been improvident, and preferred a leisurely life drinking palm wine and playing his flute. He died leaving many unpaid debts.

Okonkwo achieves his ambitions early in life. He builds a fine compound with huts for three wives, a barn filled with his yam crops, and he is admired as a champion wrestler and warrior of the village. His fierce and inflexible disposition proves to be his undoing, however. What falls apart is his life and family. But, more than that, the entire fabric of Ibo tribal society also falls apart, as the encroaching pressures of European colonialism and the new Christian religion close in upon the community.

The title of this short novel, Things Fall Apart, has a way of sticking in your mind. Mr. Achebe quotes a poem of Yeats' on the title page,

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Okonkwo himself as a character does not inspire a great deal of sympathy. The real delight of the novel is the depiction of the traditional lifestyle, the folk customs, the feasting, and the communal institutions, such as a public trial taking place in the village plaza under the auspices of the Egwugwu mask society.

And then the egwugwu appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an egwugwu came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle. Even Mgbafo took to her heels and had to be restrained by her brothers.

Each of the nine egwugwu represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head. The nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Evil Forest represented the village of Umueru, or the children of Eru, who was the eldest of the nine sons.

*"Umuofia kwenu!" shouted the leading egwugwu, pushing the air with his raffia arms.
The elders of the clan replied, "Yaa!"
"Umuofia kwenu!"
"Yaa!"
Umuofia kwenu!"
"Yaa!"*

Evil Forest then thrust the pointed end of his rattling staff into the earth. And it began to shake and rattle, like something agitating with a metallic life. He took the first of the empty stools and the eight other egwugwu began to sit in order of seniority after him.

What follows very much resembles the deliberations of a trial jury. Achebe illustrates for us how a different society may fulfill a social function in a different manner, but the basic questions of humanity remain the same.

When the tribal society and the colonial society collide one of the egwugwu maskers says of the missionary,

"We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away."

Then they tear the church down. But it is a pyrrhic victory for Ibo Society. Everything still falls apart.