

## Things Fall Apart

-Chinua Achebe

### Chinua Achebe: Brief Biographical Notes

- Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on November 16, 1930 in Nigeria.
  - He was the fifth of six children of a Christian Churchman Isaiah Okafo and Janet N. Achebe.
  - His parents were some of the early converts to Christianity in their ancestral village of Ogidi.
  - Isaiah Achebe worked as a teacher of the Church Missionary Society. After retirement he returned to his ancestral village.
  - Ogidi was an Igbo Village near the river Niger and had served as a major base for the early Anglican Church Missionaries working in Eastern Nigeria under British Rule.
  - Isaiah Achebe, being a devout Christian, taught his children to look down upon their fellow tribe members who indulged in obscurantist practices of their traditional society.
  - Achebe, as a child, was fascinated by the traditions and customs of his own tribe and often sneaked out to attend the ceremonies and festivals of his tribesmen.
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- Achebe was bright child and eventually won a scholarship to study at the Government college at Umuahia, considered as one of the best government run secondary schools in West Africa.
- He excelled in his studies, especially in English.
- He even acquired the nickname 'dictionary', for his knowledge of English.
- In school he learned to appreciate British and European literature.
- He then moved to the University College at Ibadan from where he received a B.A. from London University in 1953.
- At Ibadan he was fascinated by the works of writers like D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad.
- Joseph Conrad's tales of adventure had a special fascination for Achebe.
- He went on to study broadcasting at the British Broadcasting Corporation in London in 1956.
- Before leaving for London, Achebe had already worked for a year as a school teacher.
- While at London he started working for the BBC. After his stint at the BBC, London, he came back and worked for Nigerian Broadcasting company as a producer in 1954
- He became the Director of Voice of Nigeria, the external broadcasting wing of the BBC, in 1961.
- His radio career was cut short by the countrywide persecution of the Igbo people in 1960.
- The coup by Igbo army officers in 1966 was met swiftly by a counter coup led by predominantly Muslim officers
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  - He was deeply involved in the resistance movement and put in a great deal of energy in seeking aid for the children of Biafra.
  - He established a publishing firm to further the cause of the new country.
  - The Biafran war which followed these political upheavals was disastrous for the Igbo people, who suffered much misery.
  - After the war Achebe moved to the University of Nigeria to work as a research fellow.
  - He was quite successful in his university career and quickly went on to become the Director of African studies at the University of Nigeria, Head of the English Department and finally Professor Emeritus in 1985.
  - At the University he edited Okika a Nigerian literary journal.
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- In 1986 he became the pro-chancellor of Anambra State University of Technology.
  - He also lectured at American Universities between 1971 and 1976 and again between 1987 and 1988.
  - He moved to United States in 1991.
  - He passed away on 23rd March, 2013 at Boston, USA

### Literary Career

- Born into a family which valued books and education a great deal, Achebe developed a healthy respect for books.
- At school he developed a liking for English Literature and language.
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- School was a great learning experience.
- He was greatly influenced by the Bible which, later on, had a major influence on his writing.
- Initially he was drawn to adventure tales like *Treasure Island*, *Oliver Twist*, *Gulliver's Travels* and other travel writings, engaging with the experience of the white-man's journeys to strange lands and stranger people in his quest for discovery and knowledge.
- Later he realized that, these journeys were actually not an innocent search for knowledge and adventure.
- Achebe journeyed on the white man's ships and boats thinking that he was discovering things along with the white man.
- When he went to college at Ibadan, he realized that these journeys actually excluded him altogether.
- He realized that he was the object of the white man's journey.
- He was the savage that the white man considered as his 'Other'.
- someone who needed to be civilized, controlled and exploited.
- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* had a profound influence on Achebe. Though he admired Conrad as a story teller and admired Conrad's language, it was while reading Conrad at the college, that he realized the hoax. Achebe says that he came to realize "that these writers had pulled a fast one on me! I was not on Marlowe's boat steaming up the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*. I was one of those strange beings jumping up and down on the river bank, making horrid faces."
- He realized that he must write to present his side of the story, his own story, the story of his people.



- He decided to write back to the European center. He started out by writing articles for his college newspaper.
- In 1958, he published his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, arguably his best to date.
- Began his literary journey which was remarkable in its range of concerns and in its commitment. Achebe has received numerous awards and honours from various parts of the world.
- In 1987 he received what could be termed as the most important award of his life, the **Nigerians National Merit Award**, the highest award in Nigeria for intellectual achievement.

## Colonialism

If colonialism is understood, as the 'conquest and control of other people's lands, goods and resources', then colonialism has been a recurrent and widespread phenomenon in human history.

Conquest and subjugation of native populations of other countries on a large scale begins, perhaps, with the Roman Empire in the second century AD. And it continued in various parts of the world including India right into the middle of the twentieth century. The colonial conquests till the fifteenth and sixteenth century were, by and large, scattered and barring a few, not very systematic.

However, the European expansions into Asia, Africa and the Americas, beginning in the 16th century was qualitatively different from all the other colonial expansions of the earlier times.

- Exploitation and appropriation of the goods and resources of a conquered people is the essential feature of any kind of colonialism, the earlier colonial powers, unlike the European powers, did not tamper with the economic structure of the conquered people.
- Plundering the wealth of the conquered people, altered their economies in a fundamental way.
- Altered the economic organization of these societies in such a way that they were drawn into a complex relationship with the economy of the 'Mother country'.

- Consequently, there was a continuous flow of human and natural resources both ways.
- Raw material, slaves and labourers were shifted to the 'Mother Countries' to manufacture goods for consumption in not only the 'Mother Countries' but also in the captive markets of the colonies.
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markets of the colonies.

- In India, cotton was transported to England for manufacturing cloth which was then sold back to the Indian people, ruining the, flourishing handloom sector. The moot point here is that in whatever direction materials and human beings were moved the profit always flowed back to the colonial powers. It was not just the colonized who were moved around all the time.
- The colonizers also moved as soldiers, administrators, merchants, teachers, missionaries, writers, settlers etc.
- More often than not colonial conquest was followed by religious and socio-cultural activities which helped the colonizers to penetrate deep into the society of the colonized people.
- The pattern of domination varied from place to place and the techniques adopted also varied significantly. Sometimes they just engaged at a superficial level and sometimes their engagement went much deeper. However, the one defining feature which cuts across all these differences was the fact that they created an economic imbalance which assisted the growth of capital and industry in the 'Mother Country'.
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that they created an economic imbalance which assisted the growth of capital and industry in the 'Mother Country'.

- The Oxford English dictionary describes colonialism as "a settlement in a new country .... A body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state;.....".
- New settlement in a new country would, of necessity, produce an encounter with the native population. And the process of forming a community must factor in the presence of an alien people with an alien culture. The encounter then

takes place on several planes -political, social, cultural, religious and others.

- This encounter is certainly not a happy one for the colonized people. It is rather traumatic and tension ridden because the colonial powers bring with them a new set of hierarchies and values which are presented as superior to the existing hierarchies and value systems of the colonised people.
- The colonial subjects experience a sense of inferiority which is forced upon them by the superior power.
- Their self-image is dented resulting in a crisis of identity.
- Their oppressed consciousness is forced to accept their economic, political, social and cultural inferiority and slowly they end up internalizing this inferiority and with this the