

Significance of the title of "Things Fall Apart"

The title of Achebe's debut novel "Things Fall Apart" is significant as it creates the counter discourse by contesting and subverting the discourses of colonialism. The title of the novel is taken from W. B. Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' (1921), which also provides the novel's epigraph. In an interview given to Paris Review in 1994-95, Achebe playfully contends that when he quoted W.B. Yeats's opening words from the Irish poet's "The Second Coming" in the epigraph and took his novel's title from there, he, Achebe, was merely "showing-off" his 1950s Nigerian colonial education in B.A. (General). Still, Achebe finds, in Yeats's "passionate" love of words and life, an admirable model! but the study of the text and the immediate context of its publication show that Achebe's later ambivalence towards Yeats and his poem notwithstanding, the title of his novel is both apt and just: it does show how things fell apart in Igboland in 1890s.

Since an epigraph is "an apposite quotation at the beginning of a book or chapter", Achebe would have most carefully chosen both the epigraph and the title (which comes from a line in the epigraph) for his first novel. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming", which comes from the Irish poet's 1921 collection of poems, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*,

runs:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,

Mere anarchy is loose.d upon the world... speaks of the break-down (entropy) of the "old" order and its (almost Darwinian) displacement by a "new" order that rouses mixed feelings of revulsion and fascination. Chinua Achebe's novel, too, is about a forcible break-up of an "older" and settled (albeit existing in isolated pockets, out of touch with the rest of the world) order. Although writing from a specifically Anglo-Irish perspective, Yeats employed the metaphor of the gyratory flight of an unleashed falcon to signify his notion of the cyclical movements of Western history, which are subject to periodic convulsions as one epoch ends and another begins. He saw the cycle of Graeco-Roman civilization as having been brought to a close by the rise of Christianity, and believed that the violent contemporary paroxysms of the First World War and the Russian Revolution signalled the end of the 2000-year cycle of European Christian civilization, which in turn would be replaced by a system antithetical to it. Achebe appropriates and subverts Yeats' Eurocentric vision of the cyclical motions of history by instead depicting an African civilization which became disintegrated due to some limitation in the old order itself and convulsed and overwhelmed, only this time by the arrival of European Christian colonizers. One can therefore claim that *Things Fall Apart* functions in two distinct ways: first, and most significantly, as a stridently nationalist expression of literary recuperation

and (re-)education that aimed to demonstrate to Nigerians that the past was assuredly not an 'antithesis of ... civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are ... mocked by triumphant bestiality'. Second, it can also be argued that *Things Fall Apart* was the first African novel to 'write back' to the European centre, expressly contesting and subverting the discourses of colonialism in a literary form (the Anglophone novel set in Africa), which Western writers had persistently employed to perpetuate the disparaging stereotyping of the continent, its people and cultures.

Another analogy of the title of the novel to the original poem would bring out a different perspective of the title of the novel. Yeats wrote his poem at a time when he evidently believed that contemporary events (the First World War and the Russian Revolution) were signalling the violent demise of the latest cycle of Western civilization: the poem therefore looks back to a previous rupture in European history (the end of Graeco-Roman civilization and the rise of Christianity) in order to divine the signs of a contemporary schism that would identify an approaching new epoch. It is similarly possible to postulate that, in focusing on a previous historical turning point, Achebe also perceived contemporary events in Nigeria as signalling the inevitable paroxysms that would accompany the end of colonial rule and the birth of the new nation. Moreover, The epigraph of *Things Fall Apart* quotes the first four lines of Yeats' poem, although his original stanza continues with an apocalyptic description of his own era: 'The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.' Achebe's novel was produced in a historical period that was witnessing both the optimism of an anti-colonial cultural nationalism and the coming into being of the schismatic forces that would rapidly lead to Nigeria's First Republic spiralling into the chaos of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967.

So, it is more than fortuitous that, at a time of epochal historical change, as the British were preparing to relinquish rule in Nigeria, Achebe produced a novel which looks back to the arrival of the British colonial power, and the irredeemable historical rupture that this event had brought to Igbo civilization, yet which seemingly exhibits an awareness of the cataclysmic changes that were about to be brought about by the end of direct colonial rule. It is this sense of Achebe's Janus-like 'double vision' that gives the title *Things Fall Apart* such a unique significance.

