

Introduction: *Things Fall Apart* at Fifty

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On September 17, 2008 we organized a one-day symposium at Hart House, University of Toronto, to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the foundational text in African literature written in English. Two papers presented at that conference appear in this issue of *Postcolonial Text*.

In some ways, Achebe's novel has become too well known. It is taught in History, Anthropology, Political Science, and Literature courses. Students who encounter it in several contexts can be forgiven for thinking they think they completely understand it. But the mountains of criticism that have grown up around the novel continue to grow, and their rise suggests that the novel's meaning is not as exhaustible as students may believe. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* is one of the relatively few texts of any kind that are completely dwarfed by the criticism that surrounds them on the library shelf, and even now critics continue to produce new readings. Why is this so? At its heart the narrative seems quite straightforward. After reading it, we are neither puzzled nor bemused by some inexplicable absence. Instead, we feel that the novel is calibrated perfectly and feels rounded and whole. Yet a mysterious question seems to lurk in the heart of this perfection: Why have a flawed tragic hero to tell the story of the coming of colonialism? Why Okonkwo?

In coming to grips with this question, we begin to appreciate why *Things Fall Apart*, though widely read, remains, in some ways, not as well understood as it could be. Graduate students, in particular, are likely to miss the perfection and imagine the novel is too simple, or too concerned with ethnography, or flawed in its politics. It may be all those things, yet still be worth contemplating, not just for what it tells us about the Igbo past or about Achebe, but rather for what it tells us about the literary imagination, in Africa and elsewhere. Working without a local model or an already existing path to publishing and a literary career, Achebe, who in 1958 was in his late twenties, somehow knew that he was inaugurating a tradition of literary narrative in Africa, one capable of articulating local experiences in an English that, at the same time, was recognizably Igbo. What is remarkable even now is that, in doing this, he chose not to write about a young man of his own generation, the usual subject of African fiction then and since. Rather, he chose to write about a man of his father's age who grew up in his grandfather's time just as European missionaries were beginning to push inland into Igbo-speaking

communities. Is not this man, the patriarch Okonkwo who kills his adopted son Ikemefuna and loses the loyalty of his biological son Nwoye, the father of all the writers who came after?

There had been African narratives in English before Achebe, as he himself acknowledges in his critical homage to Amos Tutuola. There would have been an African literature without Achebe. But African literature would not have taken the shape it did without Achebe, something that cannot be said of any other writer with as much conviction. *Things Fall Apart* established what it would mean to write African literature: it opened the door and posed the problems that writers have had to face ever since. A half-century after its publications, the troubled relationship between parents and offspring remains one of those problems. It was to make our students reconsider the novel that they thought they knew or thought they did not have to know that we held the fiftieth-anniversary conference. That, and to celebrate a novel that has played so crucial a role in the self-understanding of generations of Africans, and in both of our lives.