

## An Analysis of Adaptability in Select Novels of Chinua Achebe

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### Abstracts:

Adaptability is a key and complex issue throughout Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*. It is examined through the hardships of numerous people, Igbo society's reaction to colonialism and Achebe's unique use of language to create an authentic African voice. The present article investigates how different people and civilizations thrive or fail to adapt to a changing world, with catastrophic implications for those who refuse or are unable to develop.

**Key words:** adaptability, symbol, language, dominance, civilizations

### Introduction

*Things Fall Apart*'s protagonist, Okonkwo, shows the inability to adapt. His entire identity is based on a rigid and hyper-masculine worldview that he utilizes to distinguish himself from his effeminate father. In *No Longer at Ease*, Okonkwo's grandson, Obi, exhibits a different type of inability to adjust. Obi, who was raised in a modern, Western-educated environment yet is nevertheless bound by traditional family and clan expectations, strives to reconcile these two opposing cultures. Ezeulu, Ulu's top priest, demonstrates a resistance to adapt that echoes Okonkwo's, but from a different perspective. His personal battle with his adversary, along with his desire to re-establish his dominance after being humiliated by the white man, drives him to violate his god's command and refuse to summon the New Yam Festival in *Arrow of God*. "Adaptability is the ability to adjust behaviour in changing or uncertain situations. It involves learning, combining experience and modifying responses to cope with changes in both internal and external factors. It is considered a skill for maintaining essential processes while acclimatising to new conditions for continuous development" ([oecd.org > topicsP](http://oecd.org/topicsP)).

## Objective

The objective of the present paper is adaptability, the Englishman's adaptability, symbol of adaptability, adaptability in the use of language and other themes in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of, No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*.

## Significance of the study

The study of Chinua Achebe's novels is important for understanding the impact of colonialism on African culture and identity, challenging Eurocentric ideas on Africa and delving into subjects such as social transformation, corruption and the intricacies of traditional African civilisations. Achebe's work is critical to African literature because it provides a powerful counter-narrative to colonial writing while also arguing for Africa's rich cultural legacy. The theme of adaptability in Chinua Achebe's novels is critical to comprehend colonialism's catastrophic effects and the complex dynamics of African communities in transition. Rather than presenting a simple confrontation between good and evil, Achebe delves into the various capabilities for change and the devastating repercussions for those who fail to adjust to new circumstances, both individually and as communities.

## Review of literature

Adagogo Brown points out that Truly, Achebe has been skirting the topic of his preferred order for his novels. Rather, he chooses to evaluate them based on their unique and distinct features. This strategy allows him to avoid rating and ranking his works. Despite everything mentioned about Achebe and his creative approach in his works, the perception that has primarily been established is that African persons and events are presented to the world in a terrible and unfavorable light.

Anuradha Basu observes that Gandhian resistance to colonialism was only feasible after this level of adaptation and Achebe's protest is comparable in that it demonstrates adaptation as a process before articulating resistance. Achebe's works are broadly resistant, but he must have sensed the need for adaptation during the colonial process, which he subtly reveals as he unravels his novels. Postcolonialism should not be viewed solely as a violent form of repression and resistance.

Prasobh Madhavan states that Achebe's novels illustrate the individual's inability to escape a societal identity. In a hybrid society, individuals are presented with two sets of morality, values and practices. In a pluralistic culture, individuals' ethnographic identities change throughout time. Upholding exclusively traditional values isolates a person from his social circle; two contrasting cultures inevitably proceed in opposite directions, preventing a healthy space for individual evolution in society. The Nigerian people are no exception; they find it difficult to resist ethnographic identity in hybrid culture, much like digging a well in the desert.

## Methodology

The methodology for analyzing Chinua Achebe's works is looking at his realistic, socially conscious style, which use narrative techniques such as oral tradition and folk stories to explore cultural conflicts, adaptability and the impact of colonialism. Other techniques include a stylistic analysis of his language, which focusses on Igbo proverbs and prose structure, as well as a theme analysis that examines universal issues like corruption, generational differences and the psychological repercussions of colonial manipulation.

## Discussion on Adaptability

Achebe's novels demonstrate, through the example of his own race, the Igbo, that Nigeria accepted many of the conditions imposed by the British, somewhat willingly, condoning Gramsci's concept of 'consent' and adapting many colonial masters' practices, including religious conversion, allowing the British to gradually establish their political stronghold on Africa.

In *Arrow of God*, Ogbuefi Ezeulu's closest friend, Akuebue, is around Ezeulu's age. Akuebue is one of the few guys in Umuaro whose comments reach Ezeulu's ears. But even he says: "I am your friend and I can talk to you as I like, but that does not mean I forget that one half of you is man and the other half spirit" (133).

This expresses Ezeulu's odd position in his community. However, his disrespect for other people's viewpoints is evident on several instances. When the messengers deliver Winterbottom's summons, a heated quarrel and consultations commence. However, Ezeulu merely declares his refusal to follow and withdraws from the group in complete disinterest. When he eventually arrives at Okperi and is placed in the guard room, Obika intends to ask his father what he felt about the previous occurrences. But he restrains himself because he knows it would be pointless to ask him questions in his current state; even at his best, Ezeulu only spoke when he wanted to, not when others asked him.

Ezeulu values his isolation as a necessary component of the priesthood. When Akuebue warns him about the perils of sending Oduche to the Christian church, he responds haughtily: "As for being alone, don't you think it should be as familiar to me as dead bodies are to the earth? (134) But when he alienates the whole clan by refusing to declare the New Year, he is worried by his isolation. He is accustomed to loneliness. As Chief Priest, he frequently walks alone in front of Umuaro. But without turning behind, he can always hear their flute and song, which rock the earth with a chorus of voices and the stamping of innumerable feet. There were times when the opinions are divided, such as during the land conflict with Okperi. But he has never imagined they will go extinct. He feels the profound sorrow of a sensitive man when he is isolated from individuals whose interests he truly cares about, despite appearances. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Obika's unexpected death marks the beginning of the dementia.

The clan interprets Obika's death as a sign of Ulu's anger with his ambitious Chief Priest, but the situation is far from straightforward. The novel's final pages highlight a basic reality that runs throughout the story: the white man and his ways are opposed to Ulu and the clan's customary cohesion. *Arrow of God*, on a deeper level, returns to the idea of *Things Fall Apart*. Ezeulu is attempting the impossible by trying to match Ulu's aspirations for the clan while also equipping the clan to face the white man's threat. He is attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable. To use Ofoka's words, he is like the proverbial puppy who has tried to answer two calls at once and fractured its jaw.

Even when Ezeulu sends Oduche to the mission school and the white man's religion, he does not perceive it as a threat to Ulu's status in the tribe. When any of his family or friends criticise his decision, he silences them, claiming that it was his will. However, he has reservations. When Oduche's son Nwafo reports that the church bell says, "Leave your yam, leave your cocoyam and come to church" (AOG 42), Oduche responds calmly: "Then is it singing the song of extermination" (43).

Ezeulu is furious when the sacred serpent is discovered in Oduche's box. When his third wife, Ugoye, complains that Oduche should no longer attend church, he silences her, saying, he has declared that he will go there and he will go. If anyone does not like it, he can come and jump on my back. The incident, however, is not a typical boy's prank. It, like the unmasking of the Egwuwu in *Things Fall Apart*, exposes the flaws in the traditional way of life. As Ezeulu reflects:

Every Umuaro child knows that if a man kills the python inadvertently he must placate Idemili by arranging a funeral for the snake almost as elaborate as a man's funeral. But there was nothing in the custom of Umuaro for the man who puts the snake in to a box (AOG 60).

Thus, while the clan's norms and prescriptions are highly adaptable, they cannot tolerate the kind of abrupt change required by the new ways presented by the arrival of the white man. Thus, one of the key concerns in both *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* is adaptability, both as an individual and as a nation. Both's survival depends on their ability to adapt to changing conditions and shed attitudes and beliefs that are no longer relevant in the current setting. It is tragic for both Okonkwo and Ezeulu that they fail in this regard.

Okonkwo's outlook is fully limited by conventional ideas. Within these boundaries, he craves for honour and respect, fame and fortune for himself and his family. His unintended killing of a clansman and the dire consequences that followed, including a swift flight from his community and a protracted exile in his mother's clan, strip him of his self-confidence. The hurried speed of the narrative in this portion contrasts with the contemplation of the previous parts. This depicts Okonkwo's restless mentality and lack of full involvement in the events of the area where he was forced to reside. He simply waits for the opportunity to return to Umuofia and continue the process of establishing his family as one of the leading ones. When he returns, he is pained by the new circumstances, but he does not realize how fundamental and irreversible the process is. He is certainly aware of the change:

Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart and he mourned for the warlike man of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women. (TFA 165)

However, his lack of insight is demonstrated by his concern over petty matters such as the clan's lack of interest in his return and the delay in integrating his two kids in to Ozo culture. The clan, too, is unaware of the gravity of the white man's threat; the new religion, government and trading stores draw the people's attention. As a result, when Enoch, an overzealous convert, unmasks one of the egwugwu or ancestral spirits, the other egwugwus destroy the church. They assume that this is the end of the affair and notify Okeke, the Rev. James Smith's interpreter.

We cannot leave the matter in his [smith's] hands because he does not understand but customers, 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. (TFA 172)

However, Mr. Smith brings the complaint to the District Commissioner, who arrests the Umuofia leaders under the guise of organizing a party. The native court messengers mistreat, degrade and humiliate the leaders in violation of the District Commissioner's orders. These messengers levy a fine on the clan, which they exaggerate to line their own wallets. When the leaders are released, Umuofia convenes to examine the humiliating occurrence. Okika instructs the clan to eliminate evil in the land, even if it means shedding the blood of clansmen who sided with the white man. He says: "Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done" (TFA 183). But, despite his suggestion that the clan adopt new strategies to handle the new challenge, this is never implemented. When court messengers arrive to end the assembly, Okonkwo murders their leaders, but the clan is now too agitated to follow him.

Ezeulu is more aware of the need to change than Okonkwo, although his society differs significantly from Okonkwo's. As Obiechina remarks:

The open attack on Ezeulu's authority, which would have been unthinkable in Okonkwo's Umofia, becomes possible in Umuaro because under the combined pressure of the new colonial administration, the Christian church and the new economic forces, the oracles and the priests are beginning to lose their hold on the people. (175)

Ezeulu's character is also responsible for his inadequate response. According to Obiechina, in *Arrow of God*, the cracks in the old order that had already formed in *Things Fall Apart* became chasms. However, much of the action revolves around the principal character's attempt to build a bridge across the increasing chasm. Ezeulu fails because his understanding of the circumstance is weak and hence he is frequently startled.

Individuals and communities respond differently to this need for adaptation, resulting in divergent outcomes. Okonkwo and Ezeulu's unwavering commitment to their ideas cost them both their lives and their sanity. The clan's final verdict is not positive. Okonkwo's suicide is an evil that necessitates elaborate purifying rituals. Ezeulu's sorrow is viewed as punishment. But each of them has maintained his integrity in the face of overwhelming odds. In contrast, the community appears to have stayed robust and capable of absorbing the shock of the new blow. But on a deeper level, it loses its integrity and distinct personality. Umofia becomes another feather in the district commissioner's cap, while Umuaro converts in significant numbers to the new religion.

### The Englishman's Adaptability

This condition may also apply to the Englishman who appears in the literature. Their response to Africa's climate, the native mentality and the necessity of imposing their rule on an alien race demonstrates their flexibility. The only Englishmen depicted in *Things Fall Apart* as complete are the two men who, one after the other, take over the church in Umofia. Mr. Brown is naturally cautious and controls the enthusiasm of the new converts, which could enrage the clan. The outcome is that people who initially tolerates him since the white man has brought a lunatic religion. But he has also created a trade store and for the first time, palm oil and kernel have become valuable commodities and much money flowed in to Umofia. They begin to believe that the new religion may have some merit. Mr. Brown earns the clan's esteem and the friendship of some leaders.

Mr. Brown understands that a frontal approach would fail and urges people to send their children to his school. At first, they simply send slaves or indolent children. However, when they see how rapidly this schooling might lead to a position as a court messenger or clerk, they become more enthusiastic. This technique allows the Christian religion to make significant progress.

Mr. Brown can modify his approach to local conditions, but his body cannot. His health has deteriorated and he is obliged to return to England. Mr. Smith takes over the church and begins to alienate everyone around him with his fanatical zeal. He supports the excesses of extremists like Enoch. This earns him and his church resentment and, eventually, contempt from the clan, culminating in the tragic conflict that ends with Okonkwo's suicide. Thus, in these little sketches, two opposing responses and their effects are plainly demonstrated. In *Arrow of God*, the reactions of John Goodcountry and Moses Unachukwu, two native converts in the Umuaro church, provide a comparable contrast. Amechi Nicholas Akwanya points out: "Mr Goodcountry has adapted his language so that it reflects the old relationships in which fear of a vengeful god is maintained as motivation for action. Here the leaders of the Christian church plan their strategy for widening participation in their harvest thanksgiving with a view to maximizing their profit" (41).

The main focus of *Arrow of God* is on Captain T.K Winterbottom, one of the numerous British government representatives at Okperi. Strangely enough, Winterbottom's career parallels that of Ezeulu. He is highly earnest and conscientious about his profession, yet he has lost possibilities for advancement "by too frequently speaking his mind" (AOG 58). He is not even a senior District Officer, whereas others who joined the Nigerian service alongside him have become Residents. He consoles himself and his assistants by saying, "Any fool can be promoted... provided he does nothing but try; those of us who have a job have no time to try" (55).

Winterbottom is well-versed in native customs and understands both their strengths and their odd harshness and perversion. However, he is often forced to reflect:

The great tragedy of British colonial administration was that the man on the spot who knew his African and knew what he was talking about found himself being constantly overruled by starry eyed fellows at headquarters. (AOG 56)

In addition, he must contend with the stifling heat, the ever-present possibility of illness and the other rigours of Africa. But he does not give up, as he is now a "hardened coaster" with a "strong belief in the value of the British mission in Africa" (AOG 30). Thus, like Ezeulu, his attempts to behave in accordance with his interpretation of the circumstance are thwarted by uninformed or self-serving concerns. However, unlike Ezeulu, he lacks the authority to carry out his choices because he is a lower-ranking official. As a result, he may continue to be an effective administrator with the ability to survive, rather than a tragic hero.

In this regard, both Ezeulu and Okonkwo can be compared to Captain Winterbottom's steward, John Nwodika. He demonstrates extraordinary adaptability, the ability to make his way through the world regardless of his circumstances. His clansmen mock him because of the mundane nature of his profession, but he does not let this distract him from his goal. He does, however, exude a certain quaint dignity. He informs Ezeulu and the others.

I know some people at home have been spreading the story that I cook for the white man. Your brother does not see even the smoke from his fire; I just put things in order in his house.... But I can tell you that I do not aim to die a servant. My eyes is on starting a small trade in tobacco as soon as I have collected a little money. (AOG 170)

Nwodika's impersonal attitude is the only one that will allow a man to survive in this situation. Nwodika quotes his friend Ekemezie. He says:

... of sense does not go on hunting little bush rodents when his age mates are after big game. He told me to leave dancing and join in the race for the white man's money (which) would not wait till... we were ready to join, if the rat could not run fast enough it must make way for the tortoise. (AOG 169)

Nwodika is not completely selfish. He wants his clan to partake in the benefits of the white man's advent. But he does not regard himself as a leader or social reformer. In this regard, his most significant contribution to the clan's welfare is to accompany the court messenger to Ezeulu's compound. He tells himself, "This is our chance to bring our clan in front of the white man" (170). To his dismay, this leads to Ezeulu's arrest, but he makes his enforcers' stay more bearable by offering every comfort imaginable. However, his own survival ability is demonstrated when it is revealed at the end of the novel that he has quit Winterbottom's employment to establish a modest tobacco business.

## Symbol of Adaptability

With adaptability being a key requirement in both stories, the saying about the bird Eneke takes on considerable thematic significance. The bird becomes a symbol of flexibility and many personalities try to replicate it to differing degrees of success. It is mentioned several times throughout both novels. In *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo first starts farming, he asks a wealthy clansman named Nwakibie for assistance. Nwakibie agrees, but cautions Okonkwo that he would not do the same for a less bright young man. "Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing he has learnt to fly without perching. I have learnt to be stingy with my yams" (TFA 20).

Throughout the novel, men are constantly reminded of the bird eneke. At the end of the clan's meeting following the imprisonment and humiliation of its leaders, Okika refers to the bird when he encourages the people to cleanse the land of corruption, even if it involves their own clan members. Okonkwo's failure to accept the wisdom contained in this adage leads to his demise.

In *Arrow of God*, when Ezeulu decides to transfer Oduche to the Christian church, he informs him: ".... I am like the bird enekenti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching" (AOG 45). According to the Igbo, "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which the words are eaten". However, with the arrival of white man's religion and law, traditional knowledge is no longer capable of dealing with the challenges.

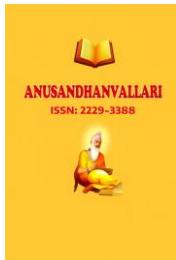
## Adaptability in the Use of Language

It is thus intriguing to contrast the language of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* on the one hand, with *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* on the other. The elders and village leaders' majestic, dignified language in the first two stories stands in stark contrast to the pidgin spoken by the natives who aid the white guy. They use "the white man's language" in front of their simpler countrymen, who listen with open mouths in wonder. In the two novels set later in time, Pidgin becomes the primary mode of communication, a sorrowful commentary on the clan's loss of dignity and organic connection, portraying the individual and societal anguish in the new way of life.

Achebe, a product of the interaction between old tribal life and modern civilised life, shares his personal experience in *Things Fall Apart*. The work addresses the tension between tribal life and Christianity, with the tragic consequence of the African encounter with Europe as the central issue. It addresses social and psychological tension caused by the white man's cultural entrance in to the exquisite realm of African society. It emphasizes the disparities between the learnt and illiterate, the civilized and primal. The most notable aspect is that it paints a detailed and compassionate portrayal of Africa's traditional, ethnic, self-contained village cultures. S. Abenaya and Ms. Soumya Susan Jhon says: "...literature's role in cultural resistance and selfdetermination, encouraging further research on identity formation in postcolonial societies" (h513).

## Conclusion

The African novel, despite its youth, reflects the author's surroundings. African writers have written about the continent's growth and challenges at various stages. Africa, like any other society, is subject to change (see above). Societies' ability to confront and overcome obstacles is a key factor driving progress. Before colonialism, African communities are developing, but the traumatic and disruptive nature of colonialism has overshadowed prior socioeconomic changes, resulting in colonial themes in books.



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