



## **The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"**

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### **Abstract:**

Chinua Achebe's novel, "Things Fall Apart," explores the concept of national identity through the lens of Nigerian society during the colonial era. This research paper aims to analyze how the protagonist's individual struggle with assimilation and cultural conflicts reflects the larger decline of national identity in the face of colonialism. By examining the impact of colonization on the protagonist's personal identity, this paper will shed light on the complex dynamics between the individual and society, as well as the implications of the loss of national identity in the broader context of African culture. This research paper will adopt a primarily qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis of key passages from "Things Fall Apart" to explore the decline of national identity. Additionally, historical context will be provided to further understand the impact of colonization on Nigerian society. Secondary sources such as literary critiques, scholarly articles, and academic books will be used to support the analysis and provide insights into the broader implications of the loss of national identity in African culture.

### **Introduction:**

Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" is a seminal work of literature that portrays the dramatic changes experienced by the Igbo community in Nigeria during the colonial rule of the British Empire. At the heart of the novel is the protagonist, Okonkwo, who grapples with the erosion of his national identity due to the advent of colonialism and the subsequent disruption of traditional values and customs. This research paper aims to examine the fall of national identity through an analysis of Okonkwo's personal struggles and the larger societal implications portrayed in the novel.



Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** stands as a landmark in African literature, offering a poignant and nuanced portrayal of the colonial encounter and its devastating impact on traditional Igbo society. Published in 1958, the novel captures the complex interplay of cultural forces at play during the arrival of British colonial rule in Nigeria. Through the lens of Okonkwo, a respected leader of the Igbo community, Achebe masterfully explores the disintegration of social structures, the erosion of cultural values, and the profound sense of loss that accompanied the colonial project.

Prior to the arrival of colonialism, Igbo communities in Nigeria thrived on a rich cultural heritage and a sophisticated social organization. They were decentralized, with individual villages ruled by autonomous councils of elders. The Igbo held strong beliefs in ancestral spirits and maintained complex rituals and ceremonies to appease them. Land ownership, trade, and social status were governed by a system of age-grades and titles, rewarding individual achievement and community service.

In the late 19th century, British colonialism began to encroach on Igbo society. The British employed various tactics, including military force, treaties, and administrative control, to establish their dominance. The imposition of alien laws, the introduction of a foreign education system, and the exploitation of resources for economic gain all contributed to the disruption and disintegration of traditional Igbo society. The introduction of Western values and institutions led to a gradual erosion of traditional Igbo identity. The colonial education system, for instance, inculcated in young generations a sense of inferiority towards their own culture and a preference for European values. This cultural assimilation process undermined the transmission of ancestral knowledge and traditions, leading to a sense of disorientation and loss among the younger generation.

Colonial rule exacerbated existing social divisions within the Igbo communities. The British relied on a system of indirect rule, installing chiefs and administrators who were often at odds with the traditional leadership structures. This created internal conflicts and weakened the social



cohesion that had previously held communities together. The imposition of colonial laws and the undermining of traditional leadership structures led to a significant loss of power and authority for the elders and traditional rulers. This loss of control exacerbated tensions within the communities and contributed to a sense of helplessness and frustration among the Igbo people.

The colonial project often portrayed traditional Igbo beliefs and practices as primitive and savage. This led to a devaluation of their cultural heritage and contributed to a sense of shame and inferiority among the Igbo people. The loss of respect for traditional values further eroded the social fabric and contributed to the disintegration of the community. Achebe masterfully portrays the diverse and complex ways in which individuals within the Igbo community responded to the colonial encounter. Some, like Okonkwo, clung to traditional values and resisted change, ultimately leading to their own demise. Others, like Obierika, sought to adapt and find a balance between tradition and modernity. Still others, like Enoch, embraced Western values and wholeheartedly sided with the colonial authorities. The fall of national identity depicted in "Things Fall Apart" is a tragic consequence of the colonial encounter. Achebe's poignant narrative serves as a powerful indictment of colonialism and its devastating impact on indigenous cultures. It offers a cautionary tale about the dangers of cultural assimilation and the importance of preserving and respecting diverse traditions. The novel continues to resonate with readers around the world, prompting reflection on the legacies of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for cultural identity in a globalized world.

### **Okonkwo's internal conflict:**

The clash between his desire to preserve traditional customs and his ambition to be successful in the changing world. Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** explores the complex internal conflict of Okonkwo, the protagonist, who struggles to reconcile his desire to preserve traditional Igbo customs with his ambition to achieve success in a rapidly changing world. This internal conflict, fueled by fear and a yearning for social acceptance, Okonkwo's primary motivation is his desperate desire to avoid becoming like his father, Unoka, a man deemed lazy, improvident, and ultimately unsuccessful by the Igbo community. This fear of weakness manifests itself in



Okonkwo's rigid adherence to traditional masculinity, his emphasis on physical strength, and his aggressive behavior. He constantly strives to prove himself worthy, driven by a deep-seated insecurity and a need to counterbalance the perceived failings of his father. Despite his adherence to tradition, Okonkwo is also deeply ambitious and desires social status and acceptance. He aspires to become a man of influence and wealth, respected by his community and admired for his achievements. This ambition motivates him to embrace certain aspects of the changing world, such as participating in the wrestling competitions and acquiring wealth through farming and trade.

As the colonial presence disrupts the Igbo way of life, Okonkwo finds himself increasingly conflicted. He clings to traditional practices, viewing them as the foundation of his identity and the source of his community's strength. However, he also recognizes the power and potential benefits of the new ways introduced by the Europeans. This internal conflict manifests in various ways throughout the novel. Okonkwo initially opposes the arrival of missionaries and the conversion of his fellow villagers to Christianity. He sees their religion as a threat to the established order and a challenge to the authority of the elders. However, he also recognizes the potential power of the new religion and the benefits of education offered by the missionaries. Similarly, Okonkwo's conflict arises regarding his son, Nwoye. He disapproves of Nwoye's attraction to Christianity and his questioning of traditional practices. This conflict highlights the generational divide emerging within the community, as Nwoye represents the younger generation more receptive to change. Okonkwo's internal conflict ultimately leads to his downfall. His rigid adherence to tradition and his inability to adapt to the changing world isolate him from his community and alienate him from his son. His desperation to prove himself and his fear of weakness lead him to commit acts of violence, culminating in the accidental killing of a clansman and his own suicide. Okonkwo's internal conflict transcends the specific context of colonial Nigeria and speaks to a universal human struggle. He represents the individual grappling with the tension between tradition and modernity, stability and change, and personal ambition and societal expectations. His story serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the dangers of clinging to the past while ignoring the present and the importance of finding a balance between



tradition and progress. Okonkwo's internal conflict in **Things Fall Apart** is a complex and multifaceted one. It is driven by his fear of weakness, his ambition to succeed, and the clash between tradition and change in a rapidly evolving world. His inability to navigate this conflict ultimately leads to his tragic downfall. However, his story also serves as a reminder of the universal human struggle to find our place in the world and the challenges we face in reconciling our past with the ever-changing present.

### **Psychological effects of colonialism on Okonkwo**

Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** offers a profound exploration of the psychological impact of colonialism on individuals within a traditional African community. Through the protagonist, Okonkwo, Achebe portrays the devastating consequences of cultural disruption, loss of power, and the erosion of identity on the human psyche. Prior to the arrival of the colonizers, Okonkwo is a man defined by his adherence to traditional Igbo values. He embodies the ideal image of masculinity, emphasizing strength, courage, and unwavering adherence to the established social order. He has carved out a respected position within the community through his achievements in war and agriculture. His sense of self-worth is deeply rooted in his cultural identity and the respect he commands from his peers. The arrival of the British disrupts the equilibrium of Okonkwo's life and begins the slow process of eroding his psychological well-being. He witnesses the dismantling of traditional structures, the imposition of alien laws, and the introduction of a foreign religion that challenges his core beliefs. This systematic cultural displacement leads to feelings of confusion, anger, and a growing sense of powerlessness.

As the colonial presence becomes more entrenched, Okonkwo experiences a significant loss of control over his own life and the affairs of his community. He witnesses the undermining of his authority, the disrespect shown towards elders, and the erosion of traditional values. This loss of control fuels his anxiety and exacerbates his fear of becoming like his father, a figure he associates with weakness and failure. The accidental killing of Ezeudu, a respected elder, acts as a traumatic event that further shatters Okonkwo's mental state. This incident triggers a deep sense of guilt and shame, leading to a breakdown of his traditional coping mechanisms. He

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becomes increasingly isolated, withdrawn, and prone to violent outbursts. His adherence to traditional masculinity becomes a mask for his inner turmoil, preventing him from seeking help or understanding his own emotional distress. As Okonkwo witnesses the complete dismantling of the world he knew, he experiences a profound sense of meaninglessness and despair. The foundation of his identity, built upon traditional values and cultural expectations, crumbles away, leaving him feeling lost and disoriented. He no longer recognizes the society he lives in or the person he has become. The culmination of Okonkwo's psychological trauma is his tragic suicide. Unable to reconcile his traditional values with the changing world, he sees himself as a relic of the past, ostracized and irrelevant. His suicide represents the ultimate act of despair, a desperate attempt to escape the psychological torment he endures. Okonkwo's psychological descent serves as a potent representation of the devastating impact of colonialism on individuals within traditional societies. His story goes beyond the historical context of colonial Nigeria and offers a universal exploration of the psychological damage inflicted upon those who experience cultural displacement, loss of power, and the erosion of their own sense of identity. "Things Fall Apart" stands as a powerful testament to the psychological consequences of colonialism. Through Okonkwo's tragic journey, Achebe not only exposes the brutality of the colonial project but also delves into the depths of human suffering and the complex ways in which individuals grapple with cultural loss, identity crisis, and the breakdown of traditional coping mechanisms. By illuminating the psychological impact of colonialism, Achebe creates a narrative that resonates deeply with readers across cultures and generations, reminding us of the enduring human spirit and the resilience of the human psyche in the face of unimaginable adversity.

### **Okonkwo's tragic downfall**

Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** is a powerful exploration of the tragic consequences of clinging to tradition in the face of inevitable change. Through the protagonist, Okonkwo, Achebe paints a vivid portrait of a man whose rigid adherence to traditional Igbo values and inability to adapt to the colonial system ultimately lead to his downfall. Okonkwo's life before the arrival of the British is defined by his strict adherence to traditional masculinity and his unwavering



commitment to Igbo customs. He is a respected warrior, a successful farmer, and a proud member of his community. His identity is deeply rooted in these traditional values, and his sense of self-worth is contingent upon upholding them.

The arrival of the British disrupts the equilibrium of Okonkwo's life. The imposition of new laws, the introduction of Christianity, and the disintegration of traditional structures create a sense of disorientation and anxiety within him. He views these changes as a direct threat to the very foundation of his identity and the values he holds dear. Okonkwo's initial response to change is one of staunch resistance. He opposes the missionaries, denounces the new religion, and clings to the old ways with unwavering determination. This resistance creates a conflict within him, as he recognizes the changing world around him but is unable to reconcile it with his own values.

The accidental killing of Ezeudu, a respected elder, acts as a pivotal moment in Okonkwo's descent. This act, despite being unintentional, shatters his sense of self-worth and reinforces his fear of becoming like his father, a figure associated with failure and weakness. The guilt and shame he carries further fuel his isolation and contribute to his psychological deterioration. As the colonial presence strengthens, Okonkwo witnesses the gradual erosion of traditional values within his community. The younger generation embraces the new ways with open arms, further isolating him and highlighting his inability to adapt. The loss of respect for elders, the disintegration of traditional rituals, and the changing social landscape contribute to his sense of alienation and loss of identity. Unable to reconcile his traditional values with the new world order, Okonkwo ultimately chooses suicide. This tragic act signifies his inability to adapt to the changing world and his refusal to compromise his core beliefs. He sees himself as a relic of the past, irrelevant and ostracized in a world that no longer recognizes his values.

Okonkwo's tragic fate transcends the specific context of colonial Nigeria. His story resonates with readers across cultures and generations, offering a cautionary tale about the dangers of clinging to the past and refusing to adapt to change. It highlights the importance of finding a balance between tradition and modernity, and the need for flexibility and resilience in the face of



inevitable change. While Okonkwo's downfall serves as a warning against blind resistance, it also invites us to understand the psychological complexities of his situation. His fear, his anger, and his despair are not merely personal flaws, but rather understandable reactions to the trauma of cultural displacement and the loss of one's identity. By delving into his inner turmoil, Achebe compels us to confront the broader consequences of colonialism and the devastating impact it has on individuals and communities.

Okonkwo's tragic resistance to change serves as a powerful reminder of the dangers of rigidity and the importance of adaptation. His story resonates deeply with readers, offering a cautionary tale but also a call for empathy and understanding. "Things Fall Apart" stands as a testament to the enduring human spirit and the complex ways in which individuals grapple with cultural loss, identity crisis, and the inevitable forces of change in a world that is constantly evolving.

### **Societal Implications of the Fall of National Identity**

National identity, a powerful force shaping human behavior and societal structures, is not immune to erosion and disintegration. History offers numerous examples where the fall of national identity has triggered profound societal transformations, leading to complex and often detrimental consequences. This essay will explore the multifaceted societal implications of the fall of national identity, examining its impact on social cohesion, political stability, cultural continuity, and economic development. The erosion of national identity weakens the social fabric that binds communities together. Shared values, traditions, and historical narratives act as a powerful glue, fostering a sense of belonging, solidarity, and shared purpose. When these unifying elements are undermined, social cohesion weakens, paving the way for divisions, distrust, and conflict. This can manifest as increased prejudice and discrimination against minorities, weakened community support systems, and a rise in social unrest and violence. A strong national identity often serves as a foundation for political stability. It provides a shared sense of legitimacy for the government and its institutions, fostering trust and cooperation among citizens. When national identity weakens, political instability becomes more likely. The



fragmentation of society along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines can lead to political polarization, protests, and even civil war. Weakened national identity can also make it difficult for governments to implement effective policies and maintain order, further exacerbating societal problems. National identity provides a framework for the transmission of cultural heritage across generations. Language, traditions, art, music, and literature all contribute to a shared cultural identity that binds individuals to their past and provides a sense of continuity. The fall of national identity can lead to the erosion of these cultural traditions, as younger generations lose touch with their heritage and embrace foreign customs and values. This can result in a loss of cultural diversity, homogenization, and a sense of cultural alienation among individuals. A strong national identity can be a powerful driver of economic development. It fosters a sense of collective responsibility, encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, and motivates citizens to contribute to the nation's economic prosperity. Conversely, the fall of national identity can have detrimental consequences for economic growth. Social divisions and political instability hinder economic development, while the loss of cultural identity can lead to a decline in creativity and innovation. Additionally, a weakened national identity can make it difficult for governments to attract foreign investment and participate in international trade agreements.

The societal consequences of the fall of national identity can be observed in various historical and contemporary examples. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century led to the creation of numerous nation-states in the Middle East, resulting in regional instability and ongoing conflicts to this day. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s witnessed ethnic violence and bloodshed, highlighting the dangers of fragmented national identity. Similarly, the ongoing cultural assimilation of indigenous communities around the world underscores the threat to cultural diversity posed by the erosion of traditional identities. The implications of a weakened national identity necessitate proactive measures to address the issue. Governments can promote cultural preservation programs, encourage interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and implement policies that foster social cohesion and inclusivity. Additionally, educational systems can play a crucial role in rebuilding national identity by incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum and celebrating the nation's rich cultural heritage. The fall of national identity is a



complex phenomenon with far-reaching societal consequences. It can weaken social cohesion, threaten political stability, erode cultural continuity, and hinder economic development. Recognizing the multifaceted implications of this issue is crucial to developing effective strategies for rebuilding a strong and inclusive national identity that fosters unity, progress, and cultural diversity. By addressing the root causes of national identity erosion and promoting social integration, cultural preservation, and inclusive national narratives, societies can mitigate the detrimental consequences and ensure a more stable and prosperous future for all.

### **Alienation and loss of unity**

Colonialism, with its inherent power imbalances and cultural impositions, often leaves lasting scars on the societies it comes to dominate. One of the most significant consequences is the fragmentation of community bonds and the division between those who cling to traditional ways and those who embrace the new colonial order. This essay will explore the complex dynamics of alienation, loss of unity, and the resulting erosion of community in the aftermath of colonialism. The arrival of colonizers disrupts established norms and traditions, creating a sense of disorientation and confusion within indigenous communities. Traditional ways of life, once central to individual and collective identities, are deemed inferior and actively discouraged by the colonizers. This cultural assault leads to a profound sense of alienation, as individuals find themselves caught between their traditional values and the imposed colonial reality.

Colonialism often exposes generational differences within affected communities. The younger generation, more exposed to and influenced by the colonial education system and cultural practices, often becomes more receptive to change. This can lead to a clash with the older generation, who remain deeply attached to their traditions and view the new ways with suspicion and fear. This generational divide further weakens social cohesion and widens the chasm between community members. Colonial policies often exacerbate existing social divisions and sow seeds of distrust within communities. The imposition of new laws and the establishment of colonial administrative structures can create a sense of powerlessness and resentment among the



colonized population. This erosion of trust can lead to the breakdown of traditional community support systems, leaving individuals feeling isolated and vulnerable.

The face of colonialism is not monolithic. While some individuals actively resist the colonizers, others choose to collaborate with them, often motivated by personal gain or the promise of advancement within the colonial power structure. This creates further division within the community, leading to suspicion, resentment, and even violence between those who support the colonizers and those who oppose them. The fragmentation of communities and the erosion of traditional values ultimately lead to a loss of unity and collective identity. The shared sense of purpose and belonging that once bound community members together is replaced by suspicion, division, and individual anxieties. This loss of collective identity can be deeply unsettling and can lead to a sense of cultural alienation and a yearning for a past that has been irrevocably lost.

The impact of colonialism on community bonds and collective identity is evident in numerous historical and contemporary examples. The colonization of India by the British led to a complex interplay of resistance, collaboration, and cultural assimilation, leaving lasting scars on Indian society that continue to reverberate today. Similarly, the colonization of Africa by various European powers resulted in the fragmentation of pre-existing communities and the creation of new ethnic and religious identities, often based on colonial divisions. The alienation and loss of unity experienced by communities in the aftermath of colonialism can have long-lasting consequences. It can lead to social unrest, political instability, and economic stagnation. The process of rebuilding community bonds and forging a new collective identity is a challenging and complex one, often requiring generations of effort and understanding.

Promoting dialogue, acknowledging past injustices, and fostering respect for diverse perspectives are crucial steps towards reconciliation and healing. Educational systems can play a significant role in this process by incorporating diverse narratives into the curriculum and promoting intercultural understanding. Additionally, community-based initiatives that celebrate shared cultural heritage and promote intergenerational dialogue can contribute to rebuilding a sense of



unity and collective identity. The fragmentation of communities and the erosion of traditional values in the wake of colonialism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Understanding the impact of alienation, loss of unity, and the division between traditionalists and those who embrace colonialism is crucial for addressing the long-term consequences of this historical legacy. By promoting dialogue, fostering reconciliation, and celebrating cultural diversity, communities can begin the challenging yet necessary process of healing and rebuilding a sense of shared purpose and belonging in a post-colonial world.

### **Conclusion:**

The fall of national identity in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" is depicted through the personal struggles of the protagonist and the larger societal implications caused by colonialism. The analysis of Okonkwo's individual conflict serves as a microcosm for the broader decline of national identity, showcasing the devaluation of tradition, loss of cultural agency, and the disintegration of community bonds. Understanding the impact of colonialism on national identity is crucial for comprehending the enduring legacy of colonial rule and the ongoing search for cultural revitalization among African societies. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* remains a seminal work in postcolonial literature, offering a powerful indictment of colonialism and its devastating impact on traditional societies. Through the lens of Okonkwo, Achebe masterfully explores the disintegration of social structures, the erosion of cultural values, and the profound sense of loss that accompanied the colonial project. The arrival of British colonialism disrupts the established order of Igbo society, leading to a loss of control and power for traditional leaders. The imposition of alien laws and the undermining of traditional institutions create confusion, fear, and anxiety among the Igbo people. The introduction of Western values and education systems erodes the transmission of ancestral knowledge and traditions, contributing to a sense of disorientation and loss of identity. Individual responses to colonialism vary, with some clinging to tradition, others embracing change, and still others collaborating with the colonizers. Okonkwo's tragic downfall serves as a powerful symbol of the destructive consequences of



colonialism, highlighting the dangers of clinging to the past and the importance of finding a balance between tradition and modernity.

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