

Invitation to World Literature: Things Fall Apart Video Transcript

Damrosch:

Things Fall Apart was probably the most important novel ever to have emerged from Africa. In this novel, Chinua Achebe gives westerners a view of Africa they've never seen before.

Appiah:

It's a book that explores what happened when the reign began to beat us.

Onwueme:

I wasn't just reading about some distant place, I was reading about my own people.

Hammad:

Every era of the book's life is a struggle and it is a public conversation about where African Literature belongs.

Mike:

His work has placed the country on an international map.

GRAPHIC: THINGS FALL APART

Thometz:

I've read an awful lot as a book dealer for thirty-six years. In that time I can't think of another novel that I would say really changed my life.

Mike:

I first read Things Fall Apart back in 1976. Here was a story that I had not experienced before. Having grown up in America, the story of Africans in a very complex and real way; society at work, which we knew little about. I was blown away. Well we are in presence.

Harper:

Well I don't think there's another piece of literature that has made me think about African culture in the same way.

Hammad:

I first read Things Fall Apart at the age of 18 in Professor Kasamali's African Literature class, Hunter College, New York City. I am a Palestinian refugee. Born in a refugee camp, in Amman, Jordan. Achebe does set up this world for you that if you come from the Third World, if you're an immigrant, I think you can really relate to.

Gikandi:

Oh, I remember vividly the year, how old I was. I was twelve years old. I was growing up in Central Kenya and, and it was the first African novel I had ever come across.

Thometz:

Things Fall Apart came out in 1958. In 1960 there are only six novels by Africans published in the West.

Salie:

The publication of Things Fall Apart was kind of a watershed moment in African Literature and Achebe has been called the father of modern African writing because he sort of opened the door for Africans to reclaim their past and their traditions and tell their own story in their own way.

GRAPHIC: IN OUR OWN WAY

Hammad:

Reading Things Fall Apart in America as a young person, you're offered Africans not as slaves. They're not enslaved, they're not formerly enslaved, they're not born slaves, there isn't that conversation at all. So, the first thing is that you're offered people who are born free.

Gikandi:

It takes place among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria

GRAHPIC: UMUOFIA

Appiah:

Umuofia is a fictional place but it's very much like some real places.

(Reading): "Umofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old."

The action of the novel takes place basically at the beginning of the 20th century, end of the 19th. It's a book that explores what happened when colonial powers, first in the form of political power, but also in the form of the churches arrives.

Salie:

In this book things don't just fall apart, Achebe wrote it because things have fallen apart and been swept away as if they didn't matter, as if in a blink of an eye with the arrival of white Europeans and Christianity, everything that this ancient culture offered didn't matter, wasn't important, and was in some ways culturally judged as just wrong.

Hammad:

For Achebe, for a novelist, to even attempt to give you that story, he was already on the outside of something that had happened. In many ways he was recording his nation's history. And that must be a lot of responsibility.

Damrosch:

Before Achebe's novel appeared, most Europeans and Americans knew of Africa only as the Dark Continent. If you lived in New York and you wanted to learn about African culture, you would have to go to the Museum of Natural History, and there you would see exhibits about African villages right next to polar bears and leopards. A particular target of Achebe's own distress at the portrayal of Africa is Joseph Conrad's famous novella, *Heart of Darkness*. The portrayal of the Africans is not sympathetic. They seem again almost like animals themselves. As Marlow the narrator says at one point in *Heart of Darkness*, "These chaps had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint? I would just as soon expect restraint from a hyena prowling among the corpses of a battlefield." Achebe's novel is written precisely to overturn this image of Africa.

GRAPHIC: THE IGBO

Gikandi:

The Igbo are a particularly intriguing group in West Africa because they live in non centralized communities. They do not have monarchs. They do not have centralized political institutions.

Onwueme:

That first part of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* becomes where he introduces you to their world, to their medicine, to their religion, to their culture, the way that the political system was organized as well as the inner workings of the family and the larger community.

Appiah:

This is an agricultural society and the rhythms of life, the rhythms of the seasons, are the rhythms of farming, the rhythms of the yam crop and the cola crop.

Harper:

It took me away from my life in New York, which of course is quite hectic and just into these beautiful cultural community scenes with the cola nut and the alligator pepper. Oh, such detailed descriptive elements.

Damrosch:

Achebe's African village is a place of light, a place of music, a place of ordinary life. There are festivals and feasts. People get married, people give birth. This is really what he wants to show at the very outset of the book.

GRAPHIC: OKONKWO

Appiah:

Early on in the novel, we're being introduced to this main character Okonkwo.

Gikandi:

We meet Okonkwo, and Okonkwo beats his rival in a wrestling match which is described as the most memorable in history or at least as long as people can remember.

Salie:

His whole life's mission is to be the most important man in his clan. He works really hard, He acidulously achieve his goals. He grows the most yams in his village, he is a fabled wrestler.

Gikandi:

So in that sense one could say that Okonkwo is not presented to us just as a powerful individual but as an individual who's closely aligned with the forces that are important to his culture, its history, its traditions, its aspirations.

GRAPHIC: SON OF A FAILURE

Mike:

Unoka, his father, was a drunkard. He was considered weak. He was without courage. He had no title. He had no yams. He had no vision. He hadn't planned his future. All of these things were things which Okonkwo dreaded.

Onwueme:

He was always trying to prove, maybe not even to himself or to the world outside him, his society that he was not going to be a failure like his father. It's like he has an agenda to embody that masculine value that the Igbo man was respected for, to show those principals of manhood.

Mike:

(Reading): "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man but his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness."

Salie:

Okonkwo is like Tony Soprano, they're both ruled by their egos, they're violent, they do things that we find despicable. Okonkwo's got three wives he beats, Tony's got ya know one wife and countless mistresses. We want to root for them but it's so hard because they keep doing the same old thing .

GRAHPIC: ACHEBE

Damrosch:

Achebe was born in 1930 at the kind of high watermark of British Imperial involvement in Africa. He was raised in a Christian family, so connected to the British cultural scene that he was actually baptized Albert, in honor of the Prince of Wales.

Salie:

He was a phenomenal student and went to an elite secondary school and he said that when he read as a youth, Gulliver's Travels and Treasure Island and David Copperfield,

he found himself siding with the white people against the savages and it wasn't until he got to university that he felt like that cannon was really coming out of the author's cultural ignorance. Achebe wanted to learn about his own past through his own people. He wanted to reflect the stories of his people, without a white messenger.

Gikandi:

Achebe's generation, produced by colonial schools, quite privileged in many ways, perhaps the most privileged African generation, at the same time felt that there was something they had been missing in their lives. And what they were missing was that continuity, that connection to their past. I would say *Things Fall Apart* is part of a project to redeem the world which had been lost. We don't just give up everything you've had.

GRAHPIC: MY FATHER, THEY'VE KILLED ME!

Damrosch:

The tensions of traditional life come to head about a third of the way through the book when disease spreads in the village and an oracle decrees that someone is at fault and must be sacrificed. The choice falls upon a character named Ikemefuna, who is an adopted son within Okonkwo's own family.

Appiah:

Ikemefuna is interesting because he is the character through whom we among other things learn both that Okonkwo has the capacity for gentleness and love. And that because of his obsession with not being seen to have it, he does things that are manly but bad.

Mike:

Ikemefuna was, given to the village as the cause of a dispute which had happened between two villages. And he was under Okonkwo's care and Okonkwo became fond of him. And Okonkwo again having to prove that he's a man, accompanies him, and is the person who actually takes Ikemefuna's life.

Damrosch:

(Reading): "As a man who cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away, he heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand, he heard Ikemefuna cry, 'my father they've killed me', as he ran towards them. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down."

Appiah:

Other men in his own society thinks that's just going way too far. He has to accept, and they all accept, that this young person has to die. But they don't accept Okonkwo's decision that it has to be he that kills him because they understand that Okonkwo is like a father to him.

Salie:

It's just so frustrating for the reader because you're already like, Okay, Okonkwo, we get it. You're strong, you're powerful. Don't do this to your boy.

GRAPHIC: EXILE TO MOTHER'S LAND

Damrosch:

In one shocking scene Okonkwo accidentally kills someone just firing off a gun in celebration at a feast. And he's exiled for seven years.

Gikandi:

His property is destroyed. And he's sent back to his mother's land. And for Okonkwo that's not easy to take.

Damrosch:

He is received well by his kinsmen in new village. They give him some land. He starts over again. But it's profoundly disorienting for him. You can't actually make it to the top in the next village over, only in your own village. And Okonkwo can't handle this fact. He needs to be at the center.

Salie:

For someone like that to be exiled, it's almost worse than death.

Mike:

He's no longer a big man as we say in Nigeria, right. He's back with his mother.

Hammad:

Then there's the uncle, who tells the story of your mother's land and how you're in your father's land when the times are good and you're in your mother's land when the times are hard.

(Reading): "Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face, and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children, and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile. He paused for a long while. These are now your kinsmen; he waved at his sons and daughters."

GRAPHIC: THE INTRUSION

Damrosch:

Nigeria, like other West African countries, was a product of the colonial scramble for Africa. When the European powers came in and started drawing boundaries against each other as much as to bring together different groups in areas which they were controlling.

Gikandi:

Nigeria is an invention of the British. The very name itself was conjured up by the wife of the first and most important British Governor Lord, Lugard who was trying to figure what do we call this place where we have brought together by force different political entities?

Appiah:

Another important part of the context is that for rather longer, in West Africa, Christian missions from Europe had been coming in, in much of Igbo Land, they were predominantly Catholic missions. To build schools and churches, sometimes hospitals. To be a center for both conversion and also worship.

Damrosch:

Two thirds of the way through the book, a group of missionaries come to the village where Okonkwo is exiled. They're led by a white man who himself does not speak Igbo, so he has an interpreter speak for him.

(Reading): "When they've all gathered the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Igbo man. Though his dialect was different, and harsh to the ears of Mubanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying myself, he always said, my buttocks. But he was a man of commanding presence. And the clansmen listened to him. At the end of the missionary's speech Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm wine. But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It wasn't the mad logic of the trinity that captivated him. He didn't understand it; it was the poetry of the new religion. Something felt in the marrow."

Salie:

When Okonkwo returns to his own village, after seven years of exile, he's ready to pick up where he's left off, he's ready to re-assert his reputation and he finds it utterly changed because the white man has arrived with his church.

Mike:

He sees that people are being indoctrinated into the mores of Christianity. As a result he saw himself being pushed further and further onto the cusp of his own society.

Appiah:

The first time I talked to Chinua Achebe which was, I don't know, a quarter of a century ago or more. I remember one of the things that he said that struck me very much. He said, 'My ancestors would never have gone 5,000 miles in order to persuade somebody that they were wrong about the gods.' Right? That's just not how people were in these traditional places. For one thing, they lived in places where there were local gods. So people around the corner you knew had different gods. And you knew that there were these people to the north of you, who were Muslims. You knew that they were there, and you knew that they believed different things from what you believed. And you just sort of accepted it, as part of how the world was, that different people related to different spiritual agencies.

Mike:

You know faith governs a lot in a society. And the fact that this new faith has intruded and not only disrespects what's on ground but also asks you to abandon it.

Appiah:

This is not a novel about the badness of Christianity. It's a novel about the complexity of that situation. About the good things and the bad things. Clearly, in Igbo Land, when Christianity arrives, it improves the situation, of poor people. It improves the situation of women. And these are all things that obviously Achebe values.

Damrosch:

Part of the tragic progression of the novel that we see is that it's not that the Europeans come in full force with shock and awe. It's a little bit by little bit insinuating now this, now that, a little more a little more until it's too late to stop the tide.

Hammad:

What I remember from the book mostly is Umuofia at night. There seems to have been a different life, different habits of life, different expectations of life once the sun went down. And I imagine in a way, that, that is what colonialism felt like, to people, it felt like a night encroaching. And you did not know what the dawn was gonna bring.

GRAPHIC: WRITING FOR THE FUTURE

Appiah:

The novel appears just before Nigerian independence and just about the time of the first of the British independences, the independence of the British colonies. Ghana gets independence in 1957.

Thometz:

Ghana's been liberated, Nigeria's about to be liberated.

Appiah:

So this is a time of great excitement. They're all these jobs in the new world, running this huge country. It's the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of population.

Mike:

I think he was preparing the way for these people who had been under colonial rule to now run the political system, run the military system, run the educational system, and it was important to him that the cultural heritage ran right alongside this new wave of governance.

Gikandi:

Chinua Achebe's generation, they were asking themselves, how can we imagine African futures? We don't know about African pasts. So they set out to try and recover those

pasts, sometimes from textbooks, sometimes from going back and asking about old stories.

Appiah:

One of the things that Achebe has always said, is that part of what he thought the task of the novel was, was to create a usable past. Trying to give people a richly textured picture of what happened, not a sort of monotone bad Europeans, noble Africans, but a complicated picture in which mistakes are made on both sides. In which good things come out of colonialism as well as bad ones. Nigeria and Africa are very lucky that they had in Chinua Achebe a novelist who was willing to tell a complicated story rather than a kind of a simple triumphalist story, which would have been a temptation.

GRAPHIC: THINGS FALL APART TAKES ON THE WORLD

Damrosch:

As the book's fame spread it had a tremendous impact both in Africa and outside. Here was a literary masterpiece written by a black, African citizen, in the colonial language, reaching out. Achebe was very clear that the advantage of English was both that it could be read by people around Nigeria whatever their own local language was, and that it was an international language; a language that you could reach out to the whole world.

Onwueme:

The cultural nationalism which the African writers were in the forefront of through their work at the time was also meant as a way to talk back to the West.

Damrosch:

Within a few years after its publication in 1958, the novel became known in the United States in the '60's at the time of the rising of the Civil Rights Movement, of a lot of renewed interest in African roots and heritage on the part of African Americans, and a very general interest in African culture, in the United States.

Thometz:

It's the same time that we're going through our struggles in Birmingham and Selma and Montgomery and Jackson.

Mike:

It's the first work that will come out of that country that is the voice of an African speaking about his culture, you know, in a way which celebrates it to the world, right, and engages the world.

Gikandi:

Almost immediately the book is picked up, it's read. It's taught in schools in almost every place in the world. Nobody now goes to high school in almost any part of the world without encountering Things Fall Apart.

GRAPHIC: THE LEGACY

Hammad:

I grew up in New York City public schools where my teachers told me Palestinians didn't exist. I am the reader that would be hungry for a book that is a glimpse into the unraveling you know, of the world that I did come from, that I had no idea about.

Mike:

When we first did Things Fall Apart we toured. My objective and what I wanted to get out of showing that production to audiences both in this country and Europe and in Nigeria, even, too, was that there's not much of a difference between us as people. Humanity is a common thread between all of us and once we understand that, the world will be a better place.

Harper:

In 2008 there was a 50th anniversary celebration for Things Fall Apart and I was invited to bring my company and a piece that I had choreographed, to the evening. I ask a lot of my artists, I put them in an uncomfortable space. You kind of make them deal with their discomfort and they have to survive. Or they have to find a solution.

GRAPHIC: THE CHANGE WAS TOO MUCH FOR HIM

Gikandi:

Okonkwo spent most of his life trying to recuperate and celebrate old values, but the presence of the colonizer has transformed everything, from the nature of social relationships, to money, to wealth, it's no longer the same place.

Damrosch:

Slowly, calmly, inexorably, the book moves towards tragedy with devastating effect for Okonkwo himself.

Mike:

What colonialism brought in terms of status is far less than what he would have had. What was he gonna be in that set up that was coming through Christianity and through the British governed laws? Was he gonna be a clerk? What...what...where was his role? He didn't see it.

Thometz:

He's alienated, a very modern condition, right? He's coming from an oral world; mystical, spiritual, surreal. These values are worthless.

Salie:

Okonkwo stuck to the traditions of his people, he was in some way a martyr, and a symbol of an older tradition that must be kept at all cost.

Gikandi:

The people who triumph are not necessarily the good people. It's those people who are able to adapt to the process of change. Okonkwo cannot change and that in a sense is connected to his own personality.

Harper:

The changes that were happening were just too much for him.

Hammad:

You lead up to the final pages wondering how much more you can take. I mean, what can possibly happen now? And somehow it never fades away. Somehow the tension continues to build. You gotta go read the book.

GRAPHIC: THINGS FALL APART

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