Things Fall Apart- The Meaning Behind The Title Essay, Research Paper

Why the Book is Entitled Things Fall Apart

I believe that the title Things Fall Apart refers to the fact that without proper balance, things do fall apart. The notion of balance in the novel is an important theme throughout the book. Beginning with the excerpt from Yeats’ poem, The Second Coming, the concept of balance is stressed as important; for without balance, order is lost. In the novel, there is a system of balance, which the Ibo culture seems to depend upon. It is when this system is upset that “things fall apart.” Okonkwo, the Ibo religion, and ultimately, the Ibos’ autonomy were brought to their demise by an extreme imbalance between their male and female aspects. These male and female aspects can be generally described as the external, physical strength of the male, and the internal, passive and nurturing strength of the female. It was an imbalance toward the male side that led to the destruction of the people and their culture.

Okonkwo, the main character in the book, was the son of Unoka, who was a loafer. Unoka was too lazy to go out and plant crops on new, fertile land, preferring to stay at home playing his flute, drinking palm wine, and making merry with the neighbors. He had to borrow money in order to maintain this lifestyle, and was never able to pay it back. Okonkwo perceived this trait as an imbalance toward the female side in his father’s character; staying at home and not using one’s strength to provide for the family is what a woman does. In reaction, Okonkwo completely rejected his father, and also his own feminine side. It was this deep-rooted antipathy toward anything considered weak or feminine that played a key role in his eventual downfall. He became a great wrestler and warrior in his tribe, and began providing for his family at a very young age, while at the same time starting new farms and beginning to amass wealth. He was very successful, soon becoming one of the leaders of his tribe, with many wives and children. His big ambition was to become one of the powerful elders of the tribe, for what could be manlier than that?

Unfortunately, everything was not perfect. His son, Nwoye, seemed to not be showing the characteristics of a real man. He preferred to stay with his mother, listening to women’s stories, rather than to listen to his father’s tales of battle and victory. Later, when missionaries came to the tribe, Nwoye was attracted to their Christian religion because of its unconditional acceptance of everyone, much like a mother’s unconditional love. Of this, Okonkwo reflects that “fire begets ashes”; where fire is the powerful, destructive, male force, and ashes the inert, weak, female force. Okonkwo is ultimately defeated when he realizes that his physical strength alone is not powerful enough to overcome the white man’s influence, and, unable to accept this, he hangs himself.

The Ibo religion falls in much the same way. This religion is centered on the worship of male gods and ancestors. The female deity among these is the Earth goddess, but Okonkwo even offends her several times in the story to save his masculine image: once when he beats his wife during the week of peace, another time (possibly) when he strikes down his adopted son, and again when he accidentally causes the death of a young kinsman. The gods’ functions are mainly to help in war, and to aid the yearly yam crop, which is considered a man’s crop. The primary influence women have in this religion is in the role of the priestess of Agbala, who is a woman, although she embodies a male god. It is the women, also, who practice magic, which is greatly feared in the tribes, but is still a passive force with only intangible connections to any physical effects.

When the Christian religion is introduced, preaching universal acceptance, many members of the clan who are dissatisfied with the Ibo religion are drawn toward it. Some of the untitled men in the tribe, whom Okonkwo refers to as “women,” are immediately drawn to it. Nwoye, who questions the practice of “throwing away” twin babies in the woods, and who felt that killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo’s adopted son, on the advice of the Oracle was wrong, was drawn to the new religion because it preached that killing the innocent was immoral. This acceptance of all embodies what Okonkwo’s maternal uncle, Uchendu, said about the nature of the mother; that she is where one goes when one is in trouble and needs comfort, and that she can always be depended upon to give her unconditional acceptance. These ideas filled a gap for many tribesmen that the Ibo religion couldn’t fill, since it was so unbalanced toward masculinity. The Ibo religion thereafter grew less powerful, and the tribesmen’s attempts to reverse this by killing and burning only made things worse.

Some of the wise elders said that Umuofia was getting weaker because the tribes were ceasing to intermingle the way they once had, and were actually competing with one another instead. Very few people understood the importance of the saying ‘mother is supreme’, and would therefore lose connection with their motherland. When Okonkwo’s daughter came of age to marry, Okonkwo thought it best not to have her marry one of the many suitors in his motherland, but rather someone in his fatherland, in order to gain a better position there. Even within Umuofia, the tribes had become so unfamiliar with one another as to think that each other’s customs were quite strange. All of these factors served to drive the tribes of Umuofia apart and make them vulnerable, so that when the foreign influence of the white man was introduced, they were unable to help each other.

It might even be argued that the night belongs to the female, and the day belongs to the male. In the book, it is during the day that the males conduct their business. In the evening, they return home to the comfort of their wives’ cooking and their beds. In contrast, it is at night that the priestess of Agbala is most active. The men fear the night and all of the unknown things that dwell there, but in the night the priestess fearlessly walks the woods, practicing her profession.

This book is aptly named, as I cannot think of a more appropriate title for it than Things Fall Apart. The author definitely suggests that there is a balance to all things, and that when that balance is lost, the system is reduced to chaos. The balance in the case of the Ibo society was one between masculine and feminine forces, with an imbalance on the masculine side eventually turning order to entropy. For Okonkwo, things literally fell apart: his hopes and dreams, his family, his culture, and his life.