

## Foregrounding Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Postcolonial Study

### ETUDE POSTCOLONIAL: EN METTANT A L'AVANT LES CHOSES D'ACHEBE FALL

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#### Abstract

Chinua Achebe (1930-) took to the writing of novels and short stories in order to instill socio-cultural and historical awareness among his readers which had a subtle under-pattern of great validity in changing the life condition and outlook of men and women with a modicum of consciousness and sensibility. He was very much concerned about the fate of a society moving inexorably toward thoroughgoing denigration and the self abasement, which accompanied it. It is in this context that Achebe cautioned his native readers to note that the restricted colonial livelihood was not enough. He held that urgent need was some form of Negritude among the colonized Africa. With this perspective in mind, in this article the treatment of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as a literary preserver of the African social-cultural and historical values, is undertaken to be examined. This article also argues that through this novel Achebe extrapolates the pride in the cultural and religious aspects of the African postcolonial heritage.

**Key words:** Africa; Achebe; Negritude; Identity; Colonizers

#### Résumé

Chinua Achebe (1930 -) a pris à l'écriture de romans et nouvelles dans le but d'inculquer la sensibilisation socio-culturel et historique parmi ses lecteurs qui avaient un subtil sous-modèle d'une grande valeur en changeant la condition de vie et les perspectives des hommes et les femmes avec un minimum de conscience et de

sensibilité. Il était très préoccupé par le sort d'une société en mouvement inexorablement vers le dénigrement en profondeur et l'abaissement de soi, qui l'accompagnait. C'est dans ce contexte que Achebe en garde ses lecteurs natif de noter que les moyens de subsistance limitée coloniale n'était pas suffisant. Il a jugé que besoin urgent a été une certaine forme de négritude parmi les colonisés en Afrique. Avec cette perspective en tête, dans cet article le traitement des Choses Achebe Fall Apart, comme une bouée de la littérature des valeurs africaines sociaux-culturels et historiques, est engagé à être examinés. Cet article affirme également que grâce à ce roman d'Achebe extrapole la fierté dans les aspects culturels et religieux de l'héritage africain postcolonial.

**Mots clés:** Afrique; Achebe; Négritude; Identité; colonisateurs

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#### INTRODUCTION

The study starts with a brief introduction of postcolonialism and postcolonial literature, a succinct look at the African Novel, which is followed by a close analysis of the socio-cultural and historical values of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in postcolonial bedrock, and ultimately it unfolds the hemiplegic aftermath of the colonized atmosphere in the Achebian World.

#### Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Literature

Post-colonialism is born at the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the speech of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. The postcolonial literature shows the upshot of Colonialism. It reveals the nostalgic

*self* of the colonized. A colonized is bound to put up with the different disconcerting situations. He has to have high resistance and fortitude against lots of uncalled-for and inevitable conflicts. The postcolonial writers bring into light the suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures beneath the weight of imperial control. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2003, p.2) pertinently assert:

All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem. The development of new élites within independent societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invaser societies—all these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction.

In the context of a heterogeneous society, where the colonized often live with their former colonizers, postcolonial writers try to reassign new ethnic and cultural meanings to marginalized groups. Its literature attempts to construct new identities against these outwardly imposed borders.

Postcolonial literature knocks on the door of the colonized intending to commune with them. It aims at entering their inner sanctum and bringing into picture their cries of loss and their proclamations of birth. It is not a literature to show the colonized as the victims, but it shows their confused sense of belonging. They find themselves in cultural, racial and historical hybridity, which make them oscillate between present and past. This oscillation can lead to poor meaningful communication.

Through the colonial discourse colonial violence is understood as including as 'epistemic' aspect, i.e. an attack on the culture, ideas and value systems of the colonial peoples. Colonial discourse indicates a new way of thinking in which cultural, intellectual, economic or political processes are seen to work together in the formation, perpetuation and dismantling colonialism. Since Africa has also been the focal point of the colonizing super powers under different pretexts, it has, with the passage of time, created a sense of disintegration and fragmentation within the African community and consequently given birth to a number of rebellious critical writers.

Among the African writers Chinua Achebe's novels and essays have played crucial roles in the growth of postcolonial theory and indigenous knowledge systems. But these essays are primarily by-products of his creative practice which expressed itself in the novel form. It is a tribute to Achebe's art that the studies of his novels, as well as his own essays, are among the landmarks of the scholarship on African literature. As Irele (2010, p.33) asserts:

perhaps Achebe's most important influence given his goal as a writer, is his contribution to the advancement of a new postcolonial consciousness, particularly as his fictions date from

the eve of African independence, thus giving emphatic voice to the pan-African impulse that found political expression in African independence. It is in the novel form that Achebe has made his most enduring contribution as a postcolonial writer. The significance of his choice of this form has deep historical roots. For the novel form is both the product and medium of the historical process. It marks a historic stage in the evolution of human communication when the interaction of technology and social relations brought about a new consciousness and the need for a new form of literary expression, as has been argued in studies by historians of the effect of technology and changing social relations on human consciousness, literary production (such as Georg Lukács, Ian Watt, Arnold Kettle), and the communication media (Marshall McLuhan).

### **African Novel**

As a part of its cultural heritage, Africa has rich literary traditions, although the other genres with touches of literariness had existed in an oral form till the spread of literacy, but not the novel. As Dathrone (1975, p.21) has pointed out "the novel is the only literary kind that has been totally imported and imposed over the indigenous tradition". This is because African literature has its origins in performance and poetic verse, which are parts of community life and associated with ceremonial, festive and social occasions. Hence, such narrative art is strange to Africa, it is found in traditional oral story telling and epic sagas to honor the memory of dead heroes, leaders, kings, gods, good harvest, hunters and ancestors, and victory over the enemies (Clarke, 2004). Hence, the modern African fiction written in English has been hybridized of the interaction between indigenous forms of oral story telling and the European literary culture whose locus was framed by the European novel; however, a dehybridization occurred through the genre novel, and its result was a focus on the birth of a sense of postcolonial Négritude among the colonized Africa.

Most of the prominent African novelists have found in the art of novel writing a fit and useful medium to portray their world-view, life and culture to bring their oral and rustic tradition to a point of culmination and fruition in a universally accessible form. One of the highly outstanding and forerunner of this holistic tradition was Chinua Achebe. He stepped into this literary scene of Africa, when the African society was on the vertex of a crucial phase of history, the unflinching colonial influence on all the phases of life; shattering of traditional customs, social values, conventions, culture, liturgical beliefs and historical identity of the natives. They were treated as semi-literate marginalized blacks. The colonizers had only imperialistic purposes, and just tried to flourish their own culture, history, ideas, and beliefs in order to have an invincible domination over their economy and as well as their national resources.

It is significant that African novel came into its own at a time when the social, cultural and political situation demanded a reassessment of the African History. Majority of the African novelists and more specially Achebe tried to inject into their works the pivotal aspects of African

history to counter the paramount question that the Africans had no history. At the same time, writers in the French colonized Africa led a movement of 'Negritude', and formed a black aesthetics. That involved a heightened awareness of the greatness of the African past and African traditional culture. As it developed in protest against the colonial influence, it is a - toothache-groan-anti colonial. The testimony here can be shown in one of the most prominent and outstanding articles, "The Novelist as a Teacher", published after his celebrity novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, in this article, declared to be a committed and dedicated artist, whose pivotal responsibility as a black writer at that movement in Africa's evolution was, to save the African society from degradation and the hemiplegic attack on its social-cultural and historical values, he further claims that:

The writer's duty is to explore in depth the human condition; African people must know and value their heritage, understand their history, and possess a strong ethical code that condemns injustice and corruption wherever they occur. In African case, therefore, novel and history are the same - the novel is history, it is a record of the history as Africans have seen and lived it (Achebe, 1965, p.24).

Chinua Achebe is not only a conscious voice but something more than that, who understands the duty of a writer in African society, a society which was going under a natural decline, affected by various influences of colonial past, a society which tries to stick to its religious beliefs and rituals in order not to fall apart.

## DISCUSSION

Into this new African world of literariness comes Chinua Achebe, a conscious artist, who as a native of Africa, penetrates through the root cause of the problems of his native fellow beings. The major themes in his novels are the conflict between past and present, the changes wrought by European imperialism and the erosion of traditions, tribes and religion. Conflict between old and new socio-economic values, traditional and new order of life, political corruption and opportunism. It is in this context that Achebe builds the past history of his country, and discerns its people to focus upon the present in the new historical realities.

Achebe's novel is set in the Nigerian Ibo village of Umuofia during the late 1800. The first half of *Things Fall Apart* portrays traditional village life and customs before British colonization. The Ibo's ancient rites are presented as parts of a viable, well-ordered culture which is destroyed by the coming of the British missionaries. The central character, Okonkwo, is a respected leader whose inability to resist against the cultural, social and historical changes enforced by the white man brings about his tragedy. Okonkwo's troubles begin when he accidentally kills a young member of his tribe. The punishment for this is exile from the clan for seven years. When he returns

to his village, he discovers that the British missionaries have already begun to change the people. Okonkwo and a few other older members of the tribe resist the changes the white men try to enforce and are sent to jail. After their release, Okonkwo strikes out in anger and kills a messenger from British authorities. Okonkwo then commits suicide, a crime in Ibo culture, and ends the novel in a tragedy (Harris, 1990, p.1).

*Things Fall Apart*, is a story told in dismay. Achebe presents a world, which is shedding nostalgic tears of the lost identity, a world which finds itself on the verge of getting sealed in the dusted files of a forgotten history. The novel records a sensitive phase of the history, because Achebe picks up the situations from a transitional phase of the history. At the same time, the two-thirds of the novel is covered by the traditional cultural rhythms of social set-up, which is mostly based on,

simple mirth of distributing Kola, Yams, or giving up one's debt, by simply leaving a chalk mark on the borrowers hut wall, or accepting a new born baby for the compensation of one's loss, keeping the twins, osu and leprotic outcasts in the Black Forest and participating in the peace and Yam festivals (TFA, 2068, p.70).

It is a society which,

do not ask for wealth because it has children, and do not pray to have money but to have kinsman. It is better than animals. An animal rubs its itching flank against tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch it (TFA, p.2136).

However, these social and cultural identities are invaded by missionaries and are the means of destroying Ibo society's acceptance of racial and cultural inferiority. Indeed, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe takes pains to present a coherent picture of an organic society with a unique identity, a society with a collectively shared vision of life that is reinforced by accumulation of wisdom and experience.

*Things Fall Apart* also shows Achebe's responsibility to revive the original history of Africa as a historical thinker that had been maligned by the foreign writers who attempted to write on this continent or these nations. He tries to prove, the fact, that Africans have their own traditional and historical background and cultural identity. That is why; their literary existence is also, to large extent, their own and worth mentioning. One can freely learn and adopt a language like English, but not the tradition. Thus, African heroes and characters are representatives of their own land, people, culture and tradition and each individual is a paradigm of the society. Okonkwo is the hero of the story whose fame

is rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight (TFA, p. 2065).

This is how Achebe reminds his readers of their past-

with all its heroic deeds and imperfections. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, is a true representative of his people and society. He is a man of action and a vigorous rebel. When the white man objected to the

Ibo's false gods, and its replacement with the true God and his son Christ. Oknokwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the white man out of the village said: You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then (TFA, pp. 2127-8).

Okonkwo fights ironically against colonial influences, and changed modes and codes of religious and socio-historic values that are transformed from their original and traditional meaning within passage of time under the colonial influence and new order of life dominated in the wake of science and technology, and his death is a suicidal fragmentation of the whole Ibo society. Hence, the fall of Okonkwo is about all loss of identity in the historical situation and primordial past.

*Things Fall Apart* clearly depicts the conflict between individual and society on two levels: internal and external, that individual's own relations to his surroundings that are undergoing socio-economic change and his reactions against external influence that affect his society. These also destroy old order and create new values and meanings for each and every custom and convention. That is the real tragedy of Okonkwo, says Brown, "Okonkwo's death dramatizes the dominant impulses of his life: it is the culmination of a self destructive pride, but it is also demoralizing effects of the new-order" (1988, p.22). Not only this but the disappearance of the old order and emergence of the new one is based on socio-economic profits, and this is not only the tragedy of an individual but of the whole civilization.

*Things Fall Apart*, says Lawrence, "is the best novel written deeply out of the West African dilemma, the battle between the old and the new gods" (1965, p.36). That is between the Church missionaries and the native gods like, "the sacred Python, the dangerous Ani and Amadiora and above all the most blessing Idemili and Ogwugwa"(TFA, p.2128).

*Things Fall Apart* and African literature in general has universal concern and appeal, because it is all about human conditions in different socio-historical situations and in the chain of events in a universal order. While Achebe is going to depict the Ibo society and culture as a microcosm of African culture in general, he is also of the idea that socio-historic relations are based on economic system of society that is now undergoing changes - its shape and way of functioning - that while the traditional culture, history was of feudalistic nature. The colonialism, Okonkwo asserts,

Came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (TFA, p.2139).

The new system imposed on the African greatly influenced their values, codes of conduct, system of production and all this influenced the human-relationships, which are rooted in the historic conditions and their way of living. Thus one can say that, the material ties between the nations are decisive and highly influential in the ideological give and take in terms of politics, education and religion, and these can further mould the fabrication of a society as a whole (Apresysan, 1984).

Achebe's pivotal motive in his art is the presentation of a truthful and detailed picture of Ibo-society and culture. Achebe takes on the task of revealing its various dimensions and showing that Nigerian tribal-culture also like any other culture is rich and diverse, it involves a complex interweaving of religious ritualistic, social and economic features. *Things Fall Apart* is a brief and comprehensive account of the life in the village of Umuofia particularly of Okonkwo and his family that have undergone different changes within the passage of time. Before the intrusion of the Europeans, the Ibo society was untied to share the joys and sorrows of one another. In cold seasons they used to sit around log-fire warming up their bodies, dancing, laughing and singing. They had faith in the oracles of the hills and the caves. They had the fear of their tribal gods, magic and of the forces of the nature. People used to come from far and near to consult Agabala. At harvest or while feasting they used to propitiate the ancestors or the gods, offering them their best vocations and worshipping them in their characteristically placid and delightful way. They were very hospitable to any visiting guest and offered him/her Kola nuts, which were ceremoniously broken and shattered prior to any conversation. A part of African unique culture is demonstrated in the following extract of the *Things Fall Apart*:

One day a neighbor called Okoye came to see Unoka (Okonkwo's father). He immediately rose and shook hands with him. Very soon he brought a wooden disk containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a hump of white chalk. As he broke the kola nut, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies (TFA, p.2067).

Practically, any social transaction or interaction involves certain conventions such as the use of impersonal creation of emotions, or defamiliarizing objects in speech. Nothing is said directly among the Ibo, and the art of conversation in *Things Fall Apart* is regarded very highly, and the, "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Ibid). In the same manner, Achebe describes how taking a title, possessing several barns full of yams and ability in war are all marks of high social status. The announcement of meeting by *ogene* or the town crier and style of elders taking decisions are fully described.

*Things Fall Apart* foregrounds Achebe's sense of Africanization in a postcolonial clash of European and African cultures – with African struggling to empower itself superior to that of its counterpart. Much of Achebe's

novel is given to the description of religious beliefs and practices, not only because these are so significant a part of community life, but also because it is these beliefs that are later to be shown as being challenging and breaking down.

All is upset now in Umuofia with missionaries. They built Church on the Evil Forest. The Evil Forest had a particular meaning for the Ibo people. They considered it as the evil forest; a place imbued with their superstitions, the twin-born and the 'osu' or the outcasts were ostracized from the class and buried in the Evil Forest (TFA, pp. 2128-31).

In fact, the evil or traditionally forbidden forest of the novel was previously inhabitable but as the missionaries built a Church on it and made it habitable, it loses all its symbolic appeal. Similarly, the missionaries succeed in crushing many taboos and symbols of the people. Furthermore, one of the converts unmask the Ibo's supreme god, "One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immoral prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated" (TFA, p.2134). This is another nasty insult into the very body of the African culture. However, there was superstitious that the white men will not survive there long, as they are now cursed by a power fragmented every where in that forest. However, things did fall apart and this convinced the Ibo native that there is a special power in the white man's religion.

This shook the beliefs of the local people and made them ideologically more fluctuating. The tact, the craft, the music, and the literature of the missionaries craked the foundations of the faith and religion of the native. The uptakes of the pagan African beliefs were replaced with the missionaries' concept of Hell and Heaven; it was however mixed with a thoroughgoing sense of secularism and the materialism which accompanies it. The whites used the weapon enlightenment and allurements to astray the natives from their birth rights and beliefs. However, the impact of colonialism was quick and can be seen from the warning of an old man to the local people in the novel. One can say that the old man is the symbol a teacher warning his student of an impending doom that is colonialism and its aftermath:

I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan (TFA, p.2137).

Against all this a defensive resistance comes from a brave person, Okonkwo, who is a man of action, complete to Nigerian social sense. He was deeply hurt over his son's conversion, which was a sign of cowardice for him. When a convert kills the sacred Python, Okonkwo burst out in revenge.

If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what I

do? Do I shut my eyes? No I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and the cowards say, we should pretend not to see (TFA, p.2133).

But traditional society was weak, there were decisive forces, and when a missionary is murdered the entire village of Ibo is exterminated in reprisal. The aching fact is that the white men were the harbingers of the new policy and ultimately colonialism. Achebe describes the inroads into the Ibo life. A Mr. Brown of the novel, the white missionary, started a school and a hospital. As Achebe asserts "The white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. They had court messengers who brought men for trial. Many of these messengers came from Ibo's tribes" (TFA, p.2138).

In addition to all this, court messengers and clerks were employed to serve the whites. Chain of trading shops of different nations, precisely Indians (brought by Whites) came into being, and it totally changed the traditional face of Umuofia. A court had been built, and the white created the whole bureaucratic structure for their own benefits. They arrested, beat and tortured the natives. However, the blacks had to resist the fictitious culture imposed on them, and at the same time they had to justify the shortcomings of their own political institutions. Such scientifically ablazed and haphazard condition which has occurred frequently not only in Africa but also in the Middle East countries like Libya, Afghanistan and even Pakistan is transparently highlighted in the words of Marx:

The birth of the modern industry heralded the great slaughter of the innocents. It was the direct result of the a accumulation of wealth which inevitably resulted in the accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation in the exploited people (p.709).

Thus, Achebe's novel examines how the traditional society undergoes a process of disintegration and new type of historical epoch. *Things Fall Apart*, demonstrates the predicament that befalls Africa. Going through the main text of the novel, the reader is made aware of the social practices and customs, and feels that these customs were good and preserved harmony and order in the society. When Okonkwo beats his second wife in the Peace Feast, he has to "bring to the shrine of Ani one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries" (TFA, p.2078). Such was the traditional trail in Ibo's clan for punishing a guilty man, and not the superimposed rules of the missionaries. The earth in the Umuofia clan is visualized as feminine, and as such, it is feminine power that controls the agricultural society of the Ibo. The violation of the sanctity of the Earth Goddess Ani, who is the source of all fertility, is the most fundamental kind of sacrilege and has an ethical and moral basic, which in turn rooted in the agricultural life of the clan.

This is how the traditional African society, in *Things Fall Apart* shifts from freedom to slavery, peace, to

anarchy, integration to disharmony, and self-respect to self-denigration under the missionary's pressure. The aim of the missionaries was to destroy the native's cost, religion, ethics, culture and socio-economic identity; and to destroy their originality, a source to fix themselves and ultimately to subjugate the blacks for socio-economic, as well as political and ethnic purposes, and to turn them into their own property. Although, they did something positive to Africa, yet their real aim was not based on the general progress of the blacks. However, the natives of Ibo were unaware of the intentions of outsiders, and ultimately could not resist under the devilish pretext of the missionaries. In chapter 21 of the novel, when Okonkwo pleads to the natives to fight and drive the missionaries out of the land, Obierika mournfully tells Okonkwo:

It is already too late. Our men and our sons have joined the ranks of the strangers. They have joined his religion; they help to uphold his government. How can we fight when our own brothers have turned against us? (TFA, p.2139).

However, to challenge these forces the unification of people is a must, for which, Okonkwo becomes a symbolic force to keep the natives united. The moral turning point in *Things Fall Apart* is demonstrated in two scenes. The first is the one in which the Umuofia elders come together to discuss the haphazard signs of the missionaries among them. The missionaries, the elders said, "has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (TFA, p.2139). And the second is the scene in which Obierika, the village wise man, describes Okonkwo's suicide to the British officers. With Okonkwo's remains hanging on the tree, the wise man turns to the District Commissioner and says, accusatorily, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself" (TFA, p.2153). Though, a critic like (Clayton, 1996, p.126) claims that in *Things Fall Apart*, "Ibo society come to accept the supremacy of the missionary as they once had in their own theatre of gods, and this resilience ensures that the center holds, even if things fall apart". But, ironically this is a self deceiving notion, looking at it in more humanistic way; the death of Okonkwo becomes metonymic. So is the socio-cultural and historical world of Africa around him (Eze, 2007). Achebe believes that the African people must know and value their heritage, understand their history, and possess a strong ethical code that condemns injustice and corruption wherever they occur. Thus, in a literary style that is direct and clear, his *Things Fall Apart* depicts the changing nature of Nigerian society from a dehybridization of falling apart to a hybridization of things becoming more and more united.

## CONCLUSION

*Things Fall Apart*, is the story of Okonkwo's sacrifice at the alter of his society. He is typical Ibo, representative of

their ethics, morality, socio-cultural set up, and traditional society, who fights against all the unjust forces, which were breaking down his society, culture and history. It is in this way that *Things Fall Apart* becomes a strong response to the assertion that Africa has no history. It is as if in it, Achebe returns to the African a humanity which the supposed European Enlightenment had denied her. It has indeed become common sense to suppose that Okonkwo, eponymously, is the representative and typical of his fictive Igbo clan, a clan that in turn, is symbolic of African in the world community. Thus, metonymically, Okonkwo stands as Africa, and his tale becomes Africa's history. Hence, through Okonkwo's death, Achebe points out the idea that 'this suicide is collective suicide of Umuofia'.

Consequently, we can find in the final stage that the performance and skill Achebe showed in depicting the social-cultural and historical values of the Ibo society, in a very clearer way, with a diligent detail that it characterizes the work of a social-anthropologist. He documented the social codes, traditions, conventions and customs in a very sharp and minute detail and their hemiplegic transformation crossing a phase of history in colonial set up that gave it the element of uniqueness and universality.

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