

Article

Reclaiming African Identity: Analyzing Issues of Postcolonialism in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"

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Abstract: Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" stands as a seminal work in postcolonial literature, exploring the intricate dynamics between colonizers and the colonized in the context of European colonization's impact on African societies. This abstract delves into the novel's portrayal of postcolonial themes, focusing on the disruption of traditional Igbo culture, power dynamics between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and the psychological and emotional repercussions of colonization. Achebe was motivated to write the novel as a response to European portrayals of Africans in literature, particularly influenced by Joyce Cary's shallow depiction of Africa in "Mr. Johnson." Achebe's use of language, particularly his appropriation of English to convey African experiences, challenges Eurocentric narratives and offers a counter-narrative that centres African perspectives. Through meticulous depiction of pre-colonial Igbo society, Achebe reclaims African history and cultural identity, countering colonial misrepresentations and emphasizing the resilience and dignity of indigenous cultures. Additionally, the abstract discusses Achebe's critique of colonial ideologies, particularly Christianity, which undermines native traditions and fractures communal bonds within Igbo society. By contrasting "Things Fall Apart" with Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," Achebe challenges demeaning depictions of Africans in Western literature and asserts the importance of authentic representation in postcolonial discourse. Overall, "Things Fall Apart" remains a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for cultural autonomy and identity in the postcolonial world. By using a postcolonial framework, the study aims to shed light on the socio-political implications of Achebe's work and highlight the importance of diverse narratives and marginalized voices.

Keywords: postcolonial, Things Fall Apart, African identity, cultural preservation

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1. Introduction

Colonialism is a complex and significant topic that has been explored in various forms of literature throughout history. Many authors have used literature as a means to examine and critique the impact of colonialism on both colonized and colonizing societies. These works often shed light on the power dynamics, cultural clashes, and social injustices that were inherent to the colonial experience. One of the earliest and most influential literary works that addresses colonialism is Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" a novel set in Nigeria during the late 19th century that depicts the destructive consequences of British colonial rule on Igbo society. It examines the clash between Igbo cultural traditions and European colonial values, highlighting the loss of identity and the disruption of social structures caused by colonization.

In the late 19th century, many European nations embarked on a migration to Africa and other regions, establishing settlements and imposing their religion and culture on the indigenous populations. Nigeria, like other African countries, experienced the arrival of these conquerors, who sought to dominate and change the Igbo culture of the Umuofia

people. This alteration had a profound impact, undermining the rich traditions and values of the Igbo.

The novel was written by Chinua Achebe primarily with the intention of highlighting the significance and worth of his African culture. The realistic depiction of Igbo civilisation in "Things Fall Apart" comes right before white missionaries invaded their homeland. Nearly every element of Igbo society, including politics, religion, culture, and the economy, is being altered by the colonising force. Igbo culture was mistreated and eroded in the post-colonial era, and Achebe blames white missionaries and their colonial laws responsible for this. The disintegration of social cohesiveness in the society is a clear indication of this mistreatment.

The majority of books on Africa and Africans produced before Achebe's contributions were by European authors, who frequently portrayed Africans as barbaric and primitive. For example, Joyce Cary's novel "Mister Johnson" perpetuated colonial preconceptions about Africa by portraying its protagonist as an ignorant and semi-literate African, while Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" presented Africa as a wild and dark continent. Achebe and other African writers came out to counter these representations by sharing their own narratives about Africa and its people.

Achebe's depiction of Africans in "*Things Fall Apart*" challenges the negative stereotypes perpetuated in European literature. In one of his lectures, Achebe argues that Europeans have viewed Africa as "the other world." This novel was written at a time when European-authored fiction about Africa dominated the literary landscape. Chinua Achebe is widely recognized as the pioneer of modern African literature, particularly due to his groundbreaking novel "*Things Fall Apart*," published in 1958. Achebe's writings passionately emphasize that African cultures had their own rich intellectual traditions, philosophies, values, and aesthetic beauty, challenging the notion that Africans were devoid of culture before European influence. This belief is evident throughout Achebe's works, which authentically depict the contextual realities of African societies.

While "*Things Fall Apart*" was not the first African novel, as noted by Gikandi (1996), it was one of the first works where the author consciously aimed to represent the African experience, setting it apart from preceding colonial novels. The novel embarked on a distinct and self-aware narrative journey, offering a portrayal of African realities that deviated from colonial narratives and became a significant work in African storytelling.

In the realm of postcolonial literature, there is a prevailing argument that these works primarily engage in questioning and subverting colonial discourses, aiming to challenge and distort colonial narratives. O'Reilly (2001) asserts that authors who work with postcolonial texts are conscious of issues including using native cultural practices, appropriated English, and the political, social, and psychological effects of colonialism and its aftermath.

All three of these problems are satisfactorily handled in "Things Fall Apart". With a focus on the negative consequences of colonialism on the culture, psychology, and politics of the indigenous Igbo people, the book eloquently depicts their traditional customs. These examples are conveyed by Achebe through deft use of the English language as a vehicle of communication.

2. Results and Discussion

Postcolonialism in Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*

The groundbreaking book "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe examines postcolonial themes and the effects of European colonisation on African communities. Published in 1958, the book chronicles the sad demise of Okonkwo, a revered warrior and chief in the Umuofia Igbo group, due to the incursion of British colonisation.

Postcolonialism refers to the period after the end of direct colonial rule when formerly colonized societies grapple with the legacies and effects of colonization. Achebe's novel examines the destructive consequences of colonialism on traditional African cultures, specifically the Igbo society. It portrays the clash of two worlds—the traditional African way of life and the intrusion of European colonialism—and the subsequent disintegration of the Igbo community.

One of the key aspects of Postcolonialism in "Things Fall Apart" is the portrayal of the destructive effects of European colonialism on Igbo society. The arrival of the British disrupts the existing social and cultural structures of the Igbo people. The imposition of European values, institutions, and religion challenges the traditional Igbo way of life and leads to a loss of cultural autonomy and identity.

Achebe highlights the power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized. The British colonial administration exerts control through political, economic, and religious means, imposing their own systems of governance, trade, and Christianity on the Igbo people. This power imbalance is represented through characters like Mr. Brown, the sympathetic missionary who initially tries to understand and accommodate Igbo culture, and Reverend James Smith, who takes a more zealous and intolerant approach.

Achebe portrays the clash of cultures between the Igbo people and the British colonialists. The novel illustrates the tension, misunderstandings, and conflicts that arise when two distinct cultural and belief systems collide. The Igbo society, with its rich traditions, customs, and religious practices, is contrasted with the imposition of European values, Christianity, and the disruption of traditional social structures. Achebe emphasizes the loss of cultural identity experienced by the Igbo people under colonial rule. The introduction of Western education and religion erodes traditional practices and beliefs, leading to a sense of disorientation and alienation. Many Igbo individuals, like Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, are drawn to the new ideas and opportunities presented by the colonizers, further complicating the preservation of traditional values. Achebe's use of language in the novel is significant in the context of Postcolonialism.

By writing "Things Fall Apart" in English, the language of the colonizers, Achebe reclaims the narrative and challenges the dominance of European literature. He demonstrates that African writers can use the tools of the colonizer to tell their own stories and assert their cultural perspectives. Achebe portrays the British colonial administration as a complex entity with various individuals and approaches. While some characters, like Mr. Brown, initially show a degree of respect and understanding towards the Igbo people, others, like Reverend James Smith and the District Commissioner, are more oppressive and dismissive of African culture. This diversity of perspectives reflects the multifaceted nature of colonial power and the ways in which it operates. Despite the challenges posed by colonialism, "Things Fall Apart" also highlights the resilience and resistance of the Igbo people. Okonkwo, for example, represents the fierce determination to protect and uphold traditional values, even though his rigid adherence to masculine ideals ultimately contributes to his downfall. The novel underscores the importance of cultural pride and resilience and the need to find ways to navigate the changing realities brought about by colonization. "Things Fall Apart" has had a profound impact on postcolonial discourse and literature. The novel challenged prevailing narratives that portrayed Africa and its people as inferior or savages.

Achebe's work helped shape a new generation of African writers who sought to reclaim their cultural heritage, challenge Eurocentric perspectives, and tell their own stories from their own perspectives. "Things Fall Apart" remains a significant work in postcolonial literature, not only for its exploration of the effects of colonization on African societies but also for its contribution to the broader discourse on identity, cultural preservation, and the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized.

The novel also explores the psychological and emotional impact of colonization on individuals and communities. Okonkwo, the protagonist, symbolizes the resistance and struggle against colonialism but ultimately succumbs to the destructive forces unleashed by the encounter between the two cultures. His tragic fate reflects the broader tragedy of African societies grappling with the immense challenges posed by colonialism.

Through "Things Fall Apart," Achebe challenges Eurocentric narratives and provides a counter-narrative that centers African perspectives. The novel gives voice to the experiences, traditions, and values of the Igbo people and underscores the importance of recognizing and preserving indigenous cultures in the face of external domination.

Overall, "Things Fall Apart" is a powerful exploration of postcolonial themes, shedding light on the profound impact of European colonialism on African societies and the complex dynamics between colonizers and the colonized. It continues to be widely regarded as a seminal work in postcolonial literature and a significant contribution to our understanding of the effects of colonialism on African cultures.

Of the three issues identified by O'Reilly, this paper primarily focuses on the indigenous cultural traditions as they closely relate to the topic at hand. Edward Said's "*Orientalism*" (2001) argues that the constructed idea of the Orient was a European invention, characterized by romanticized exoticism, captivating landscapes, and extraordinary experiences. Said further asserts that this vision of the Orient has real-world implications. Majumder (2007) references anthropologist E. B. Tyler, whose writing provides additional insights and is often regarded as objective.

In essence, the argument suggests that postcolonial literatures actively challenge and reshape colonial discourses. Achebe's "*Things Fall Apart*" successfully tackles significant issues such as indigenous cultural traditions, the use of the English language, and the consequences of colonialism. The novel serves as a compelling illustration of the act of writing in response to colonial powers, offering insights into the intricate dynamics between colonizers and indigenous cultures. Tyler, in his writings, contributes valuable perspectives on this matter.

"The visitors immediately conclude that the cannibals live there as per their wants after arriving in the unpassable areas [in Africa] and realising that their own governments lack a police force. We believe this to be false because there are strict laws and regulations in these so-called "uncivilised" nations that apply to every aspect of daily life." Page 137.

Frantz Fanon (2001) shares a similar viewpoint, asserting that colonialism perceived Africa as a continent inhabited by savages, steeped in superstitions and fanaticism, destined to be despised and burdened by God's curse, and depicted as a land of cannibals. Fanon's perspective aligns with Said's. Achebe's novel, as a result depicts Igbo life so accurately, "Things Fall Apart" can be viewed as an anti-orientalist work. Igbo society as it exists is romanticised and misrepresented by Europeans. Nevertheless, by offering an account of pre-colonial Igbo life, Achebe aims to recapture African history from their perspective. In addition to a sophisticated blending of Igbo customs and the colonial past, Achebe was raised with an English education. An important factor in forming a country's identity is the way traditions are constructed and history is told. The country has a unique history that highlights its beginnings and identity (McLeod 2007: p. 70).

In "Things Fall Apart," Achebe follows the oral tradition in an attempt to establish his own historical tales. In "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," one of Achebe's essays, he articulates his moral duty to recover the past. "An act of atonement with my past, a ritual return and homage of a prodigal son," is how he characterises "Things Fall Apart" (1995: p. 103). Achebe contends that African writing must take into account "the complexities of the African scene" in its historical context or it is "doomed to failure" in his 1964 article "The African Writer and the English Language" (p. 75). In "Things Fall Apart," Achebe gives a thorough and accurate account of Igbo civilisation prior to colonisation. Responding to Europeans or colonists who have long maligned Africa by fabricating tales

about its customs and cultures is one of the main goals of the book. According to Fakrul Alam (2012), "one of Chinua Achebe's goals in writing 'Things Fall Apart' was to correct a whole history of misrepresentations of his people and country in occidental discourse."

Reclaiming a national culture from the past helps validate the hope for a future national culture, according to Fanon (2001), who contends that the past should be a source of dignity, splendour, and solemnity rather than shame (p. 169). This hope is shared by Achebe, who in "Things Fall Apart" explores Nigeria's glorious past via an accurate depiction of pre-colonial Igbo culture. He promotes the notion that the pre-colonial past of the Igbo people is nothing to be embarrassed of. Anthropological reports on the Igbo were written at a period of harsh colonial practices, when all African peoples' opinions were seen with contempt, as noted by Nwoye (2011) (p. 304). Now that the characters in the book have their own voices, Achebe has solely recovered the local viewpoint. These characters consider how their own sociocultural norms disintegrated when Europeans arrived in Igboland. They expose their rich ideals—flaws and all—to the readers, allowing them to assess how brutally colonialism has suppressed these virtues. In reference to this matter, Okodo (2012) highlights the connection between Igbo culture and religion. "Why would the ritual performances of Igbo gods, nay all the gods in Africa, be rejected? If the dramatic performances of Greek classical culture originated from ritual performances in honour of gods, Dionysus and Applos," he asks. Page 131.

In "Things Fall Apart," Chinua Achebe skillfully reconstructs an oral culture deeply intertwined with agriculture, aiming to challenge the misconception that African peoples solely acquired civilization from Europeans. He rejects sentimental depictions of pre-colonial Africa found in the writings of authors like Léopold Senghor and the Negritude School, but he does not romanticise it as an idealised pastoral paradise. Rather, Achebe uses the English language—a tongue that is foreign and colonial—to effectively communicate his message and represent his cultural experiences.

Achebe believes that the English language can bear the weight of his African experience, but he endeavors to transform it into a new form that is adapted to the African context while maintaining a connection to its ancestral roots. He creatively Africanizes the English language in the novel, incorporating Igbo proverbs, folktales, and vocabulary to infuse native wisdom and philosophy. By integrating these indigenous elements, Achebe appropriates the English language, utilizing it as a medium for his counter-narratives against Euro-centric misrepresentations of Africa.

The choice of language in "*Things Fall Apart*" holds political significance for Achebe. While some later African authors opt to revive native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture, Achebe seeks to revitalize his culture through the medium of English. He captures the rhythm of the Igbo language and presents it through the transparency and simplicity of the appropriate English. This approach enables him to authentically and impartially depict pre-colonial Igbo society, shedding light on their lives and experiences in a manner that resonates with readers.

Furthermore, the novel portrays the devastating impacts of European colonialism on Igbo culture and traditions, resulting in the loss of their identity. Achebe's work aligns with Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, which exposes the nature and effects of colonial oppression. Cesaire argues that colonialism erodes cultural diversity and silences the voices of oppressed peoples. Achebe's portrayal of the colonial effects in Africa echoes Cesaire's ideas, underscoring the destructive impact of European colonialism on African societies. Cesaire says- "I refer to societies that have lost their soul, cultures that have been crushed underfoot, institutions that have been undermined, territories taken, faiths destroyed, wonderful works of art destroyed, and extraordinary possibilities eliminated." (p. 43).

In "Things Fall Apart," the novel vividly portrays how the arrival of colonial power disrupts the harmonious and well-structured communal life of the people in Umuofia. The

title itself suggests this disruption, as colonialism brings about disorder and instability. Prior to colonialism, the Igbo people lived without anxiety, freely participating in their diverse cultural practices. However, colonialism imposes restrictions on these practices, draining the essence of the Igbo people. The character Okonkwo symbolizes the essence of Umuofia, and his suicide, which is also a consequence of colonialism, represents the loss of Umuofia's essence. The remarkable potential of the indigenous people is extinguished, and Okonkwo embodies those possibilities that are eradicated through his tragic end. He represents the "mighty voices" silenced by the colonial power, as described by Césaire.

Christianity plays a significant role in initiating and solidifying colonial rule. Césaire points out that "Christian pedantry" is primarily responsible for this, equating Christianity with civilization and native religion with savagery. Christianity undermines the native religious beliefs, dismissing them as pagan and savage. Throughout "Things Fall Apart," we frequently witness the denial of the native religion by the colonizers. This is evident in a conversation between a native man and a white man regarding their respective religions.

"Who will shield us from our ancestors' and gods' wrath if we abandon our gods and worship yours?"

(Native): Your gods are made of stone and wood; they are not living beings capable of causing harm. (White) (page 103).

A number of Igbo rites have been lost, neglected, or misinterpreted as a result of the arrival of Christianity and European culture, while others have been retained in part or fully incorporated into Christianity, according to Uchegbue (2010). In his seminal essay "An Image of Africa" (1978), Achebe argues that tragedy happens when things stray from their normal course. When the foundation of the Umuofians' culture and customs is uprooted, their misery begins. The African ideology of community and belonging was in opposition to the various ideologies and philosophies that the colonial rulers brought with them, such as individualism and marxism. African philosophy places more emphasis on connection and belonging than does Western philosophy, which views the person as a self-contained entity.

Igbo communal society and interpersonal interactions have suffered greatly as a result of the individualistic philosophy of colonialism. Colonial Christianity, for example, has an impact on father-son relationships as well, as demonstrated by the bond between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Nwoye answers, "I don't know," when Obierika asks about his father, who has joined the missionaries. "I don't have him as my father." This exchange reveals the strained relationship between them, and Okonkwo displays no interest in discussing Nwoye. The colonial influence has disrupted the traditional bonds and connections within the community, resulting in fractured relationships and a loss of cultural continuity.

"Things Fall Apart" functions as a counter-narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in this sense. *Heart of Darkness* is regarded as an anti-colonial work by certain academics, although Achebe and many other post-colonial authors and critics contend that the book dehumanises African people. In his article "An Image of Africa," Achebe discusses his thoughts on the *Heart of Darkness* and claims that it upholds dehumanising stereotypes about Africans.

"Africa is portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and so of civilisation, a place where triumphant bestiality finally mocks the much-admired brilliance and refinement of man." (P. 03).

Achebe criticizes Conrad for presenting the African world as a metaphysical battleground devoid of any trace of humanity, a place where the wandering European ventures into at his own risk. Achebe argues that Conrad does not portray an authentic image of Africa but relies on stereotypical depictions that have been constructed by the Western imagination.

3. Conclusion

"Things Fall Apart" by Achebe highlights the detrimental effects of colonialism on the lives of the Igbo people and questions the clichéd European perceptions of native Africans. Achebe makes a clear distinction between Igboland's pre-colonial and colonial periods in his literary works, highlighting the importance and veracity of Igbo customs. Achebe effectively conveys his goal to reconstruct the story of the Igbo people's lost customs and culture by contrasting these two eras, emphasising the significance of their legacy. His approach to contrasting the pre-colonial and colonial periods aligns seamlessly with his objective of reclaiming and preserving the history of the Igbo people.

"Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe offers a powerful critique of colonialism and its effects on African societies. Through his vivid portrayal of the Igbo community and its encounter with British colonialism, Achebe highlights the complexities, resilience, and humanity of African cultures while exposing the destructive impact of colonization. The novel continues to be a significant contribution to postcolonial literature, shedding light on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for cultural identity and decolonization.

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