



READING CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AS A POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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Abstract

Postcolonial Literature is a body of literary writings that react to the discourse of colonization. It is written by natives of formerly colonized countries. Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is an African novel set in the precolonial past. It was written in the 1950s when the colonial rule in many African countries began to collapse. Through this novel Achebe intends to prepare the natives of colonized countries for self-rule by making them realize that Africans did not learn to be civilized from their colonizers, they had their way of life before everything was snatched away from them. This paper attempts to highlight the indigenous culture of the Igbo community before colonization as depicted in the novel and the effects of colonization on the people. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, we will look at the cultural aspects of the precolonial Igbo community, and in the second part, we will look at the beginning of colonization in Igboland and its adverse impacts on people.

Keywords: *Postcolonial; Colonization; African novel; Culture; Language; Decolonization.*



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After the Second World War, European countries no longer remained the power center, leading to the beginning of decolonization throughout Asia and Africa. Due to this sudden historical shift, people were anxious about how they would manage their country after the colonizers had left. Nigerians were colonized for more than a hundred years during which, like all other colonized people, they were conditioned that they were uncivilized and incapable of self-rule. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the debut novel of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, is an attempt to reassert African identity. According to Achebe, colonial rule over a century in Nigeria had destabilized indigenous culture to such an extent that people could no longer relate themselves to Igbo traditions and imitate the culture of Britain. Achebe was appalled at the indignation of Africans in colonial novels like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce

Cary's *Mister Johnson* and he writes *Things Fall Apart* as a counter-discourse to the colonial texts and also to subvert the image of Africans created by colonial writers. Achebe's father was one of the first persons who converted to Christianity and because of this Achebe and his siblings studied in a missionary school and received an English education. Later he realized that everything written about the natives by Europeans was biased and someone has to write a different story "it was out of this identification with the culture of colonialism – and his ultimate disillusionment with it – that Achebe became a writer." (Gikandi. p. xiv)

In the first part of the novel which also covers more than half of the novel, Achebe focuses on the culture and traditions of the Igbo community. He valorizes the indigenous culture of the Igbo community by giving a detailed description of religion, the institution of marriage, the system of justice, the social structure, and the economy. He does not focus on romanticizing the past but puts forward every aspect of the community including their superstitious beliefs and inhumane practices. The protagonist of the novel Okonkwo is depicted as a product of his culture which is responsible for making him an epitome of masculinity: something that his clan strongly advocates. He is flawed and inflexible and becomes so obsessed with masculinity that he goes two steps ahead of his clan in perpetuating patriarchy and shows his manliness by beating up his wife during the "Week of Peace", by being tough on his son Nwoye and despite being fond of Ikemefuna he kills him when he rushes to him for help so that his clan members do not consider him effeminate. "Okonkwo may have failed because of his weakness as an individual, but his failure was inevitable because the colonial rule had destabilized the values and institutions that sustained him." (Gikandi, p. x)

One of the main aspects of a postcolonial novel is the appropriation of colonial language in this case English. Achebe began writing back to the empire using their language but he gave it an African touch. Achebe gives an authentic picture of precolonial Igbo traditions that were misrepresented by colonizers in their one-sided stories. Achebe chooses to write in English but he uses it simply and Africanizes it by incorporating Igbo words and proverbs. In one of his essays, Achebe says that "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English...altered to suit its new African surroundings." (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*. p.84) Many words in the text like *obi*, *ogbanje*, *iyi-uwa*, *kwenu*, *ogene*, etc. are left unexplained for the readers to understand by relating them to the context. The proverbs and stories associated with them that occur many times in the novel stress that Igbo people had certain moral codes and age-old sayings that direct their

behavior. Through the use of language in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe was able to show “that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral traditions.” (Gikandi. p. xvii) Once you alienate people from their language it becomes easy to manipulate them and use them further something that the colonizers did so perfectly that even today people from the formerly colonized countries look up to them.

The proverbs or words of wisdom that occur in the text had some folk tales associated with them. The basic function of folk tales is to prepare children for the future and provide them with a sense of right and wrong. Children learn from these tales and try to keep up morally upright behavior throughout their lives. Like all other cultures of the world folk tales are an important part of oral tradition in Nigeria. They are connected to the daily life of Igbo people and also help them to keep a check on their behavior. Therefore, these stories are given an important place in the text. We get to read many folk tales throughout the text. Okonkwo’s wives narrate these folk tales to their children. Nwoye and Ezinma are very fond of these tales. Also, Ikemefuna brought with him “an endless stock of folk tales. Even those which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavor of a different clan.” (*Things Fall Apart*. p.25) It is possible that Achebe must have learned about Igbo traditions through these stories that he might have heard from his parents and relatives.

Village elders or “ndichie” are given a special place in their clan whose function was to guide the clan in the right direction. Ezeudu and Uchendu are seen giving the best advice to Okonkwo and their respective clans. Ezeudu asks Okonkwo to not have any hand in Ikemefuna’s killing and Uchendu helps and guides Okonkwo during his exile in Mbanta. Both of them are seen playing their role quite efficiently and guiding their respective clans as per the rules of the clan and the demands of the Oracle. They follow the Oracle but use their experience and knowledge to guide everyone and it is under their guidance that the members of the clan are able to uphold their cultural values which are considered to be the basis of one’s identity. “Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.” (Thiong’o. p.173) This can be seen in *Things Fall Apart* when missionaries attack the very base of the clan on which it had firmly stood till then. People are made to look down upon their culture and imitate the culture and the way of life of the colonizers. Ngugi wa Thiong’o has wisely pointed out that “It is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated

start singing its virtues.” (Thiong’o. p.177) When this happens the culture starts losing its essence and value that it had held for a long.

The second and third part of the novel focuses on the imposition of colonial rule and its effects. During colonization, the cultures of the countries subjugated to foreign rule were sidelined and suppressed to elevate the social and cultural preferences of the colonizers. Postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism. “When it comes to the case of Negro... He had no culture, no civilization, “no historical past”.” (Fanon. p.163) The Europeans portrayed themselves as superiors in all ways. They wanted the natives to idealize them and even succeeded in doing so by constructing a false narrative about their religion and that of the natives. In *Things Fall Apart* there is an entire chapter devoted to how missionaries forced the natives to look upon their culture and gods as inferior and follow Christianity and its beliefs.

“Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom. ‘We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die,’ he said.” (*Things Fall Apart*. p.102)

This is how missionaries terrorized the natives and captivated their minds in favor of Christianity. After this, they began their brutal economic exploitation of the land. Religion and commerce went on hand in hand and through peaceful preaching and singing hymns, they got into Igboland and colonized it.

“The hymn... seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his (*Nwoye’s*) young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul.” (*Things Fall Apart*. p.104. italics mine)

Achebe does not create an unsullied past in the novel but exposes every fault within the Igbo customs and practices. He also criticizes their inhumane treatment of “*osu*,” twins, lepers, and women. There are many instances in the novel where Achebe very carefully distances himself from the clan and disapprovingly looks at their customs. Even though he criticizes many things about precolonial Igbo customs and practices but we as readers should not forget that no society has ever been perfect.

During the short span of seven years in Okonkwo's exile, the colonizers were able to establish their authority and get a stronghold of Umuofia. In the conversation between Okonkwo and his friend Obierika, we get to know the damage that had already been done by the whites to the Igbo people. Christian missionaries adopted peaceful methods and changed the outlook of people towards their culture and religion after which people consensually converted to Christianity but soon it was accompanied by brutal force and coercion using which the colonial government managed to subjugate the institutions that were the base of Igbo culture and forced people to acknowledge the authority of the colonizers. Colonizers depicted their subjects as existing "outside of history" who are unable to progress or develop without their intervention or assistance. Hence, the "white man's burden" becomes a justification to colonize so that the natives of colonized countries can be educated and taught the correct way of living. In this way, they justified their actions including violence against those who resisted colonial rule. When a missionary was killed by the people of Abame in *Things Fall Apart*, the entire village was wiped out by colonizers to teach them a lesson. Even in Umuofia, after the destruction of the church, Okonkwo and a few others were arrested and tortured so that they don't rebel against colonial rule. Obierika sums up the advent of colonizers and the establishment of their authority in a few words:

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably 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." (*Things Fall Apart*. p.125)

We can refer to Antonio Gramsci's concept of civil society here. He made a distinction between civil society and political society and he gave more weightage to civil society in establishing domination over people. Culture and religion are a part of civil society where people are made to follow the rules by consent as they are influenced by other people and institutions. This can be done by influencing and brainwashing them and not by coercion because the result of imposing another religion could have been disastrous. Whereas in the case of political domination the colonizers later used coercion and were successful in dominating the territory and people. This is what exactly happens to the Igbo people in the novel and what Obierika manages to explain concisely in the above lines.

In the second part, there are many instances in the text where Achebe deliberately turns the gaze towards the whites when he describes whites through the natives. "He seemed to speak

through his nose.” (*Things Fall Apart*, p.98) Obierika said this about the white man who was killed by the people of Abame. Also, based on the color of his skin, the white man is equated with a leper as “the polite name for leprosy was ‘the white skin’.” (*Things Fall Apart*, p.52) Initially, the missionaries are considered harmless and objects of amusement by the natives. Later when the missionaries managed to convert some people to Christianity the natives passively resisted and were seen maintaining a certain distance from the converts and stopped considering them as one of them. They became anxious and focused on preserving their values. But in part three, the novel turns into a novel of colonial protest as Okonkwo along with some other members of the clan demolished the church to compensate for the damages that had been done by this new religion. But sadly, active protest and violent ways of resisting in the initial phase of colonization were not successful anywhere in the world and its consequences were drastic for the natives as we see in the case of Okonkwo who commits suicide after being humiliated and tortured by the police. His death becomes symbolic of the death of Igbo culture.

In simple words, colonization is a process of establishing control over a territory to gain profit by exploiting its resources and people. Postcolonial texts revisit history and narrate things from the perspective of the colonized. This novel celebrates the precolonial past of the Igbo community as a self-sufficient community by highlighting their cultural values, customs, agriculture, economy, the institution of marriage, etc. before the onset of colonization, and their resistance against the imposed rule. “*Things Fall Apart*...is also a work that seeks to address the crisis of culture generated by the collapse of colonial rule.” (Gikandi. p. xi) Though the colonized countries might have gained political independence the consequences of colonialism will not fade away soon and will continue to haunt the natives for many years to come. Through this novel, Achebe attempts to boost the morale of the natives to face the postcolonial crisis that they would be facing after independence.

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