

## Reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* from the Postcolonial Perspective

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### Abstract

Various factors lead Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart*, which has acquired the status of a classic; among them, the most noteworthy one is his indignation at European representations of Africans in fiction. One such European representation of Africans in fiction was Joyce Cary's novel *Mr. Johnson* which depicts exterior picture of Africa. Hence, *Things Fall Apart* is a counter discourse and the project Achebe adopts in it explains his position based on the interiority of original local contexts. Achebe has declared that he wrote *Things Fall Apart* "in order to reassert African identity and as part of the growth of Nigerian nationalism" (O'Reilly 2001: p. 61). The present study intends to analyze *Things Fall Apart* from the perspective of the various issues of a postcolonial text.

**Key words:** Colonialism, postcolonialism, discourse, representation, culture etc.

### Introduction

Chinua Achebe is the father of modern African literature. Since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, he has been credited with being the key progenitor of an African literary tradition. In his writings one of his passions is that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; ... their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty... they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (Ojaide 2013: 150). This conviction pervades all of his works and they purely reflect African dignity and value. Thus Achebe is, no doubt, an authentic writer whose writings reflect richly his own contextual realities. Gikandi (1996) notes that though this novel is not the first African novel, "it was probably the first work in which the author set out to represent the African experience in a narrative that sought, self-consciously, to be different from the colonial novel" (p. xvii b).

### Postcolonial discourse and *Things Fall Apart*

It is now popular to argue that the post-colonial literatures are primarily concerned with *writing back to the center*, by active engagement "in a process of questioning and travesty" colonial discourses (McLeod 2007: p. 25). According to O'Reilly (2001), when approaching a postcolonial text the writer has an awareness of some key issues that include: "the use of indigenous cultural traditions, the appropriation of English, and the impact (whether cultural, psychological or political) of colonialism and its aftermath" (p. 61). These three principal issues are scrupulously and efficiently dealt with by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. This novel illustrates the "cultural traditions" of the indigenous Igbo. It demonstrates cultural, psychological and political impacts of colonialism on the Igbo. And for making these two points of demonstration successful, Achebe resorts to the English language as the medium of expression.

Among the three major issues inherent in a postcolonial text stated by O'Reilly, the first one, indigenous cultural traditions, will get more importance since it is more related to the topic of this paper. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (2001) argues that "The [fabricated] Orient was a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (p. 01), and "Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative" (p. 02). Majumder (2007) refers to E. B. Tyler, an anthropologist, whose writing is thought to be objective. Tyler writes-

The tourists, after reaching the impassable countries [in Africa] and seeing no police system available in their own countries, come to the direct conclusion that the cannibals live there as their wishes. We think it is a wrong belief, because, in these 'uncivilized' countries there are severe rules and regulations in each stapes of life. (p. 137)

Frantz Fanon (2001), offers the same statement that "For colonialism, this vast continent [Africa] was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals- in short, the negro country" (p. 170). In this respect, Achebe has placed himself in line with Said. *Things Fall Apart* has become an anti-orientalist discourse because of the authentic depiction of the Igbo life. The life of the Igbo is romanticized and so distorted by the Europeans. But by presenting a view of pre-colonial Igbo society Achebe attempts to reclaim African history from an African

perspective” (O’Reilly 2001: p. 34). Achebe receives early education in English, but grows up surrounded by the complex fusion of Igbo traditions and the colonial legacy.

The invention of tradition and the narration of history are central to the nation. The nation has its own historical narrative that illustrates its origins and individual disposition. (McLeod 2007: p. 70). In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe attempts to assert his own historical narratives by adhering to the oral tradition. In his essay “Named for Victoria, Queen of England”, Achebe expresses his moral responsibility to reassert the past. He says that *Things Fall Apart* “was an act of atonement with my past, a ritual return and homage of a prodigal son” (1995: p. 103).

In his essay “The African writer and the English Language” (1964), Achebe states that African literature should be defined as having “the complexities of the African scene” in material time, otherwise it is “doomed to failure” (p. 75). Achebe presents to us an all-encompassing and meticulous depiction of the pre-colonial Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart*. One major purpose of his writing the novel is writing back to the Europeans or the colonizers who have long been misrepresented Africa through their fabricated stories about Africa’s long- practiced traditions and cultures. Fakrul Alam (2012) is of the same opinion: “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.”

Fanon (2001) maintains that “there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture.” (p. 169). This optimism is shared by Achebe who unearth the glorious past of Nigeria through the authentic picturing of the pre- colonial Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*. He champions the fact that “there was nothing to be ashamed of” in the pre-colonial past of the Igbo. Nwoye (2011) notes that “anthropological reports on the Igbo were accomplished during the hey-days of negative colonial practices when the perspectives of all African peoples were treated in great disdain...” (p. 304).

Now Achebe has recovered the perspective, which is exclusively a native perspective, through the characters possessing their own voice in the novel. The characters reflect on their own socio- cultural values that are crumbled down after the arrival of the Europeans in Igboland. They put forward their resourceful values that consist of both accuracy and flaws, before the readers who judge how cruelly that values have been crushed by colonialism. Corresponding to this issue, Okodo (2012) points to the relationship between the cultural performance and religion of the Igbo. He says-

If the dramatic performances of Greek classical culture originated from ritual performances in honour of gods, Dionysus and Applos, why would the ritual performances of Igbo gods, nay all the gods in Africa, be rejected. (p. 131)

*Things Fall Apart* “recreates an oral culture and a consciousness imbued with an agrarian way of life” and exhibits, as Achebe himself says, that African peoples did not hear of civilization for the first time from the Europeans. Simultaneously, he seeks to “avoid depicting pre-colonial Africa as a pastoral idyll, rejecting the nostalgic evocations of Léopold Senghor and the francophone negritude school of writing.” (Innes 2013).

To define itself post-colonial writing seizes the language of the center, the colonizer west. It then replaces the language in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized context. Appropriation is a process by which the colonizer’s language is taken and prepared to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience. The language is adopted as weapon and used to express different cultural experiences. (Ashcroft *et al* 2002: p. 37, 38).

To carry the native values Achebe uses the English language- a foreign and colonial language- in *Things Fall Apart*. The English language is able to bear the burden of Achebe’s cultural experiences, at least he thinks so. In his essay “The African writer and the English Language” (1964) Achebe feels that the English language will be able to carry the weight of his African experience: “But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.” (p. 84). The English language suits his purpose of writing back to the center. He makes the language fit for his project of telling the story about Igbo culture, and religion. He uses the English language in such a way that it is able to convey his message best without risking its value as a medium of international exchange. In the novel he makes a creative Africanization of the English language. In the course of writing counter-narratives to Euro-centric misrepresentations of Africa, he successfully harnesses the colonizer’s language to make it bear the burden of his native experience.

*Things Fall Apart* is a response to earlier colonial accounts of Africa. So Achebe’s choice of language is political. Some later African authors choose to revive native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture. But Achebe wants to achieve cultural revitalization through English. He is capable of capturing the rhythm of the Igbo language. Achebe uses Igbo proverbs, folktales and vocabulary in the novel. Igbo proverbs

are entirely native in character and use and they contain native wisdom and philosophy. Folktales are important parts of the Nigerian oral tradition which is deeply rooted in the daily lives of the Igbo. And lastly, Achebe uses many Igbo words in the novel to support his message to be conveyed. These original words demand special concentrations on them. By using these native contents Achebe makes the English language go through the process of appropriation.

Besides, unlike usually having the sophisticated nature, the English language of *Things Fall Apart* is lucid and straightforward. Through the transparency of the appropriated English Achebe sheds light on the life of the Igbo in a transparent manner that is well accepted by the readers. To put it briefly, by resorting to the appropriated English language, Achebe is entirely successful in presenting the picture of the pre-colonial Igbo society in a transparent and direct way. It helps him be authentic and unprejudiced in doing so.

Lastly, the novel immensely shows the third key issue in a post-colonial text, i.e., the impacts of colonialism, stated by O'Reilly. European colonialism has totally destroyed the culture and traditions of the Igbo people who in turn destroy their identity. Aime Cesaire in his revolutionary text *Discourse on Colonialism* (2010) elaborately exposes the nature and effects of colonialism. We can take his concepts about colonialism into consideration to illustrate the colonial effects shown in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Cesaire states that Bourgeois Europe has destroyed 'the root of diversity' (p. 76). Before the coming of colonialism African societies were culturally diverse. Colonialism has trampled the diversity under feet. He also maintains that the Negro world has been 'disqualified' and 'mighty voices stilled forever' (p.74) as a result of colonial oppression. About the effects of colonialism in Africa Cesaire says-

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out. (p. 43)

In *Things Fall Apart* we see that before the advent of the colonial power the people of Umuofia lived in communal agreement in an organic society of economic, cultural, political, familial and religious stability. But colonial rule turns the social stability into instability and disintegration. The title of the novel itself signifies this claim- things are no longer in order; colonialism has made them disordered. Prior to colonialism in Igboland we see that people performed various cultural issues without anxiety. But colonialism comes and imposes restrictions on those performances.

Colonialism makes the Igbo 'drained of' their 'essence'. Okonkwo symbolizes the essence of Umuofia; the suicide of Okonkwo, which is also a colonial effect, signifies the suicide of Umuofia's essence. Colonialism makes 'extraordinary possibilities' of the indigenous people 'wiped out'. Okonkwo stands for that extraordinary possibility which is wiped out through his suicide. Okonkwo symbolizes that 'mighty voices' which Cesaire claims is 'stilled forever' by the colonial power.

Christianity plays very strong role in starting and consolidating colonial rule. Cesaire notes that the principal perpetrator is "Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity=civilization, paganism=savagery* (p. 33). Christianity comes and "millions of men [were] torn from their gods" (p. 43). Christianity disagrees with the religious beliefs of the natives. It thinks that native religion is paganism and so it is nothing but savagery. In *Things Fall Apart* we frequently observe the colonizers' denial of native religion. Here is a conversation between a native man and a white man about their respective religion-

: If we leave our gods and follow your god...who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors? (Native)

: Your gods are not alive and cannot do any harm... They are pieces of wood and stone. (White) (p. 103)

Uchegbue (2010) upholds the view that with the coming of Christianity and European culture, many of the Igbo rites are "either lost, given up, forgotten or being increasingly neglected while some are being reinterpreted, partially preserved, and absorbed in or interpolated with Christianity" (p. 164). In his groundbreaking essay "An Image of Africa" (1978) Achebe says that "Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place" (p. 05). The tragedy of the Umuofians begins when the center of their culture and traditions leave their adapted place.

The colonial masters bring with them different ideologies and philosophies about human relations such as individualism and Marxism. In the African philosophy of relationship a person is fundamentally defined as 'being-with' or 'belonging to'. But Western philosophy puts emphasis on the condition of a human person as 'a being for itself'. (Ezenweke and Nwadiolor 2013: p. 61). The colonial ideology of individualism has caused shattering impacts on the communal Igbo and on their mutual relationship. For example, colonial Christianity affects even the father-son relationship as we see in Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Seeing Nwoye among the

missionaries in Umuofia Obierika asks him, “How is your father?” Nwoye replies, “I don’t know. He is not my father.” Then Obierika comes to Okonkwo who is not interested to talk about Nwoye. (p. 101).

In this respect, *Things Fall Apart* is a counter discourse against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Though *Heart of Darkness* is also considered as an anti- colonial text by some scholars, Achebe, along with many post- colonial writers and critics, thinks that this novel depicts the humiliating images of the Africans. In “An Image of Africa” Achebe says-

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. (P. 03).

Achebe accuses that Conrad portrays the African world “as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. (09).” Conrad does not resort to the original image of Africa. Rather, the images he uses belong to the stereotypical images produced by “Western imagination”. (P. 13).

### Conclusion

Achebe’s novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits about the native Africans. By unfolding the devastating effects of colonialism on the life of the Igbo people in *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe has successfully made a comprehensible demarcation between the pre-colonial and the colonial Igboland. By setting these two periods opposite to each other Achebe demonstrates the value and authenticity of the Igbo traditions in a more unambiguous manner. His strategy of differentiation between the pre-colonial and the colonial well suits his purpose of writing back by rewriting the history of the lost traditions and culture of the Igbo.

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