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RECLAIMING VOICE AND CULTURE: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a seminal postcolonial work that reclaims African voices and confronts colonial misrepresentations. By depicting precolonial Igbo society with nuance and dignity, Achebe opposes the dehumanising tropes found in European literature, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This study investigates colonialism's psychological, cultural, and ideological consequences using postcolonial theories from Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. It demonstrates how tools like religion and education facilitated internal division and cultural degradation. Achebe's use of Igbo proverbs, oral storytelling, and symbolic language challenges colonial conventions while asserting narrative sovereignty. Achebe's hybrid linguistic method generates a "third space" for discourse and meaning. The novel eventually functions as both a critique of imperialism and an act of creative resistance, returning agency and voice to people silenced by colonial oppression.

Keywords: *Chinua Achebe, Colonialism, Cultural Identity, Things Fall Apart*

1. INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart (1958) by Chinua Achebe is still regarded as a fundamental response to colonial narratives, challenging Western misrepresentations of Africa and giving local experiences voice. Set in precolonial and colonial Nigeria, the novel follows Okonkwo, an Igbo leader whose personal downfall mirrors the cultural breakdown caused by British colonialism in Africa. Achebe's writing depicts Igbo life in a dignified light while highlighting how colonisation undermines identity, tradition, and communal cohesion.

In contrast to European portrayals such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which Achebe widely criticised for dehumanising Africans, *Things Fall Apart* portrays Africa from within, reclaiming what F. Abiola Irele refers to as the "crisis of cultural memory." Scholars such as Daniel M. Mengara trace colonial stages - exploration, expropriation, appropriation, and justification - through the novel's plot. Others, including A. Yusuf and Mahfuza Rahat Oishy,

emphasise Achebe's critique of ideological tools like religion, education, and law that undermine indigenous authority.

This article uses postcolonial theory to investigate colonialism's cultural, psychological, and ideological impact on the novel. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," Fanon's theory of psychological trauma, Bhabha's notions of hybridity and ambivalence, and Spivak's concept of subaltern silence, it investigates how Achebe chronicles both resistance and collapse. The study examines Achebe's narrative tactics, including Igbo proverbs, oral storytelling, and symbolic language, to demonstrate how *Things Fall Apart* reclaims the right to reclaim African reality on its own terms.

2. COLONIAL DISRUPTION AND CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN *THINGS FALL APART*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a nuanced and fair account of Igbo society, emphasising its own governance, spirituality, and justice. Unlike the primitivistic representations found in colonial literature, Achebe's Umuofia is a society rich in customs, communal laws, and symbolic rites. The novel serves as a literary counter-narrative to colonial perspective dismissing African traditions as chaotic or formless. For Achebe, the arrival of British colonialism heralds' disintegration rather than civilisation.

Colonial disruption begins subtly with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Mbanta. Initially considered as harmless, they quickly gain traction by appealing to socially marginalised people, such as the "osu." This echoes Frantz Fanon's idea that colonialism splits communities from within, utilising division as a means of control. Okonkwo's son Nwoye's conversion highlights this rupture, as he turns away from the "harshness of his father's world" in favour of a new religious order. Okonkwo says, *Now he is no longer my son or your brother* (Achebe, p. 172), indicating both a familial and cultural rupture.

As British institutions such as the church and colonial court establish themselves, Igbo customs begin to erode. Edward Said's concept of the "textual attitude" shows how the West justifies intervention by portraying colonised people as irrational and in need of rehabilitation. This mentality is mirrored in the novel's depiction of missionaries dismissing local conventions and gradually replacing indigenous authority with imported norms. While appearing beneficent, characters such as Mr. Brown reflect what Homi Bhabha refers to as "colonial mimicry" - the subtle, intentional imposition of foreign values that encourages partial assimilation and destroys indigenous identity.

Achebe sees colonialism as both an external imposition and an internal corrosion. *The white man is extremely 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 as one (Achebe, p. 176), says an elder, expressing the intellectual seduction that precedes power. This intellectual revolution is just as destructive as physical conquest, leaving communities like Umuofia fractured and confused.

Okonkwo's eventual suicide, a cultural abomination, demonstrates the extent of cultural and psychological breakdown. As Fanon implies, colonisation alienates people from both tradition and the emerging order, leaving figures like Okonkwo caught between two worlds, unable to belong to either.

3. LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE FORM, AND RESISTANCE IN *THINGS FALL APART*

Achebe's use of language in *Things Fall Apart* is crucial to his postcolonial intervention. Writing in English - the coloniser's language - he reclaims narrative power by incorporating Igbo idioms, proverbs, and oral storytelling. This method resists colonial prejudices and literary traditions, allowing Achebe to address both African and global audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity.

This language hybridity reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity," in which meaning develops from the liminal zone of colonial encounters. Despite writing in English, Achebe's narrator adopts an internal, culturally grounded voice, which Bhabha refers to as the "third space." This breaks down the binary distinctions of coloniser and colonised, allowing Achebe to narrate from within Igbo society while staying intelligible to outsiders.

Proverbs in the narrative function as carriers of local knowledge. They are not ornamental, but rather essential to the story's epistemology. One example is: *When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk* (Achebe, p. 10), which demonstrates the symbolic complexity of Igbo expression. These proverbs highlight the philosophical and intellectual richness of a culture that colonial rhetoric attempted to eradicate.

Achebe also opposes colonial narrative structure by rejecting the linear, progress-driven narratives common in imperialist literature. Instead, *Things Fall Apart* has a cyclical and episodic rhythm that mirroring agricultural cycles, rituals, and oral memory. This formal choice aligns with Edward Said's critique in *Culture and Imperialism*, which contends that imperial narratives frequently universalise European history as the norm. Achebe's structure frees time and history from colonial constraints.

Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is indirectly answered by Achebe's narrative. While Spivak criticises how elite discourse filters subaltern voices, Achebe raises them

through storytelling, myth, and proverbs, rather than argument or protest. Achebe gives voice to elders, outcasts, women, and spiritual traditions, allowing the silent to speak in their own words.

Things Fall Apart is more than just a critique of colonialism when it employs these techniques; it is a reclamation of narrative sovereignty. Achebe claims that African societies have always had the ability to express their own stories, even when colonial systems attempted to suppress them. In doing so, he not only responds to imperialism, but also reshapes the narrative terrain itself.

4. CONCLUSION

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is still regarded as a classic of postcolonial literature because of its potent portrayal of how colonialism destroys African indigenous identity, institutions, and worldviews. Achebe presents a rich, nuanced image of a society upended by foreign dominance, challenging Eurocentric depictions of Africa as primitive or voiceless through the story of Okonkwo and the breakdown of Igbo society.

The novel shows how colonialism works by causing internal division on an ideological, psychological, and spiritual level in addition to exterior oppression. The tragic death of Okonkwo exemplifies the uprooting experienced by people torn between a dying culture and an alien system that was imposed from outside. Edward Said's *Orientalism* defines the colonial inclination to portray the non-West as illogical and inferior, while Frantz Fanon's notion of "colonial alienation" aids in explaining this identity crisis.

Achebe's resistance goes beyond form and theme. In order to establish narrative authority over his own culture, he writes in English while incorporating Igbo idioms, proverbs, and storytelling techniques. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space," where meaning arises from the interplay of coloniser and colonised, is consistent with this act of linguistic hybridity. Achebe regains the power to accurately portray Africa through this area.

Additionally, Achebe answers Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by using culturally based narrative techniques to provide voice to individuals who have previously been silenced, such as elders, outcasts, and traditional figures. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* transforms into a literary act of resistance and reclamation in addition to being a tale of colonial disruption.

Lastly, Achebe's novel restores African history and voice while exposing the pernicious repercussions of colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* is both a critique of imperialism and a key work in the decolonisation of literature because it reaffirms the value of sharing one's own story.

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