



Postcolonial Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart* is an important story in postcolonial literature. It tells about the life of a Nigerian man named Okonkwo. It shows how his traditional African community changes when European colonizers arrive. The book helps people to understand the effects of colonization on African culture and history. It offers a profound exploration of African identity and cultural collision during the colonial era. This paper examines the theme of postcolonial identity in Achebe's narrative. It focuses on how the protagonist, Okonkwo, navigates the changing socio-cultural landscape imposed by British colonialism in Nigeria. This study examines important parts of the text and uses critical analysis to explore how Okonkwo resists colonial control, deals with his inner conflicts about mixing cultures, and what this means for the Igbo community as a whole. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Achebe's narrative techniques, the paper discusses how *Things Fall Apart* challenges Western stereotypes and reclaims indigenous perspectives, asserting the resilience and complexity of African identities amidst colonial oppression. By contextualizing the novel within historical and literary frameworks, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of postcolonial literature and the construction of identity in a colonized society.

Keywords: Postcolonial identity, colonialism, cultural hybridity, Igbo society, resistance, decolonization

Introduction:

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) serves as a powerful exploration of postcolonial identity and cultural resilience amidst British colonialism in Nigeria. His narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Igbo society. It portrays the protagonist Okonkwo's struggles amidst the encroachment of Western influences. According to Simon Gikandi, Achebe's novel "exposes the contradictions of colonial discourse and the resilience of African culture" (76). This paper examines how postcolonial identity is shaped in *Things Fall Apart*, focusing on how Chinua Achebe portrays the challenges of Igbo culture under colonial rule. By studying into Okonkwo's individual and community struggles, this study investigates the clash between traditional values and modern changes, the effects of colonialism on native societies, and the strength of



cultural identities despite outside influences. Drawing on postcolonial theory and literary analysis, this research contributes to understanding how Chinua Achebe's work challenges Western narratives and reclaims African perspectives. It makes a significant contribution to the discourse on postcolonial literature and identity.

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* examines the challenges of postcolonial identity within the Igbo society of Nigeria in the late 1800s. By following characters such as Okonkwo and the people of Umuofia, he shows how British colonialism interrupts and transforms traditional identities, resulting in a complicated balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new, modern influences.

Pre-colonial Igbo Identity

The main purpose of his writing the novel is writing back to the Europeans or the colonizers who had misinterpreted Africa by creating false stories about Africa's traditions and cultures. Fanon 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).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe shares this optimism by revealing Nigeria's proud history through a true depiction of the Igbo culture before colonial times. He emphasizes that there was nothing shameful about the Igbo's pre-colonial past. He shows the pre-colonial Igbo society as well-organized and rich in culture. The Igbo people of Umuofia follow shared values and traditions that shape their identity as a community. The novel focuses on the life of Okonkwo, a respected leader and wrestling champion in the Umuofia villages of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. He is one of the strongest and most influential men in his tribe. The villagers either feared or honored him. He achieved this status by his own hard work and achievement. This is evident by this quote,

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on the solid personal achievements. He brought honor to his tribe by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (Achebe 3).



2. Impact of Colonialism

Okonkwo is seen as one of the most respected and powerful men in the Igbo tribe. People in the village either feared him or looked up to him. He earned this reputation through his own hard work and accomplishments. This is shown in the line,

“Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. He brought honor to his tribe by throwing Amalinze the Cat” (Achebe 3).

He dreamed of becoming one of the top leaders in his tribe. He loved his tribe. However, over time, things changed. His life took a downward turn, and eventually, his own people rejected him. He stood as a symbol of his culture's traditional and religious values, but the arrival of the colonizers challenged those beliefs. Despite the pressure to change, he refused to give in and held tightly to his identity. In the end, realizing he could no longer protect it, he took his own life. In Igbo culture, this was considered a terrible act, as “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life” (Achebe 186).

He did not only lose his tribe, his family and his religion; but he also lost himself along the way. As the protagonist, he represents the entire Africa and his failure to save his own identity. He is considered as the loss of African Identity. The Igbo people had a very strong religious, cultural and traditional background. Their religion was very unique. Their rituals of religious practices and their traditional activities are very much interconnected and interlinked. They believed in many gods; they were a polytheistic tribe. The Ibo supreme god was Chukwu, and the people believed that: "He made all the world and the other gods" (Achebe 179)

The Ibo believed that all things had spirits, and that ancestral spirits called the "Egwugwu" enforced the community's laws. However, this belief system was disrupted by the introduction of Christianity in Africa. Many villagers abandoned their traditional faith. They started to follow the teachings of Christ brought by British missionaries. This caused a division between those who accepted the new religion and those who remained faithful to their old beliefs. As a result, they began to lose their religious identity. Chinua Achebe notes that the arrival of the Christian missionaries created significant turmoil in the village of Mbanta, leading to confusion and a loss of traditional religious identity: “The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta” (Achebe 131).

The arrival of Christian missionaries impacted more than just religious identity. It also led to the loss of the native language. The missionaries started education institutions and made the converts to study the language of the colonizers. For instance, Nwoye the son of Okonkwo also got converted to Christianity and learnt the



language to read and write. That's how the Ibo language became weak and the colonizer's language became a dominant language. The Ibo people slowly lost their identity of their own language too.

In the same way, the native Ibo people began to lose their original culture and their own rituals for the religious practices. Following Christianity means Ibo people have to remove their own name and give up their titles after their name and take the new names from the Bible. For instance, the name of Nwoye was changed into Isaac. When the Ibo people convert into Christianity, they have to give up their cultural dress and remove the mask on their faces. It created conflict among the believers of Christianity and non-believers. These changes lead to identity crisis. It is revealed in the story that the main reason for losing identity is the British colonizers. They came to the African village in the name of civilization. The following lines reveals in the name of civilization how the British divided the Africans.

"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." (Achebe 160)

3. Response and Resistance

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo opposes the rule of the white colonizers in his community. As the leader of his clan, being dominated by outsiders is a direct affront to his masculinity. His resistance is partly driven by fear of losing his social status. In this way, his defiance serves to affirm his sense of identity and existence. This is why he finds British colonial rule unbearable and views the colonizers as his greatest enemies. Their control is unacceptable to him. He ultimately leads to his decision to take his own life. Angela Smith argues that "Okonkwo [is] conforming too rigorously to tribal conception of manliness" (17) and that "he feels intense personal bitterness against all white men for what they have done to his family" (20).

Unlike Okonkwo, Obi has been educated under the colonial system. His struggle isn't against colonial rule itself but against the corruption that exists in his society after independence. When asked in a job interview if he would accept a bribe, Obi gets upset and feels this practice should be stopped. When his friend Joseph disagrees, especially about his attitude during the interview, Obi calls that way of thinking "colonial mentality" (37). Even though he doesn't succeed in fully living up to his principles, his effort to resist corruption is admirable.

When Okonkwo opposes the colonizers, he encounters difficulties because he lacks support from his own clan. The villagers are generally torn between resisting and accepting change. They are struggling with the conflict between tradition and progress. Many are enthusiastic about the "new world order" introduced by the



Europeans. Most villagers welcome the new opportunities and technologies brought by the missionaries. However, this European influence threatens to replace traditional practices in farming, harvesting, building, and cooking. In this rapidly changing society, Okonkwo feels powerless.

One of Okonkwo's greatest weakness points in *Things Fall Apart* is fear. He is deeply disturbed when he discovers that his son Nwoye has rebelled against him. This revelation affects him more than anything else because Nwoye represents his legacy and future. He becomes furious when he hears of Nwoye's plan of converting to Christianity. He says to Nwoye: "Answer me, before I kill you!" He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows" (Achebe107). Willene P. Taylor has this to say about this scene: "Ironically, it is Okonkwo's obsession with the adherence to the Ibo Value system which causes him to lose his son, Nwoye, to the European way of life" (Achebe31). His beating of Nwoye is a part of his attempt to resist the encroachment of the colonizers.

Conclusion:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe explores the complexities of post-colonial identity by focusing on Igbo society in Nigeria. This novel depicts not only the damaging effects of colonialism on traditional African cultures but also how these cultures respond and resist under external pressure. Okonkwo goes through big changes and ends up with a sad fate because he tries to hold on to his traditional ways while facing the new changes brought by the colonizers. His personal journey reflects the larger experience of the Igbo community, which undergoes a profound upheaval with the British arrival and the weakening of its cultural foundations. The Igbo people become divided and lose their strength. Chinua Achebe illustrates the harmful consequences of this cultural breakdown through the collapse of Okonkwo's world and his final tragic fate.

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