

Politics of Cultural Dominance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Dr. Rajesh Kumar

Assistant Professor of English
Indira Gandhi National College
Ladwa (Dhanora), Haryana

Abstract

The present paper analytically explores the novel to find out the changes in the cultural trends of the Igbo people with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Africa. The paper throws light how the native culture has been shattered and subjugated by colonial authority and the Christian missionaries' teachings and education. The Igbo people began to turn towards Christianity and become followers of a new alien faith in their land with a rich cultural heritage. Their own culture has been started to decline and shrink as the influence of Christianity and European culture enhances. The study unveils the dynamics of cultural dominance and subjugation of culture in the present novel. The novel is regarded one of the classic documents in post-colonial studies which graphically reveals not only the economic conditions, social, political and cultural changes in the lives of the natives. It is an endeavour to explore value degradation and political subjugation of the natives to the colonial forces in all walks of life.

Keywords: Culture Hybridity, Colonialism, Chinua Achebe, African Culture, European Culture, Igbo and Cultural Exchange.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is one of the most famous works in cultural and postcolonialism studies. It is an endeavour to highlight the traits of native culture and the impact of colonialism on the natives of Nigeria. In the beginning of the novel the Igbo people who are living with their rich cultural heritage and high happiness index in their own world. Culture plays a very important role in and individual as well as society. It is an important part of any society or race which give it a unique identity. E.B Taylor define culture, "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor 1). John Scott in the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology asserts that cultural dominance is a concept one whose values, practices, and ways of living are imposed on a subsidiary culture or cultures through economic control or political influences. Culture is not a natural phenomenon or instinctive, it is something acquired and everchanging. Homi Bhabha defines 'hybridity and 'third space' means the ways in which two or more cultures interact and mix up with each other. Hybridity in context of culture refers to a third space as it relates to migrant communities in mix up with one another. In words of Islam, "By hybridity Bhabha (1990) means the way in which two or more culture interacts and combined in a metropolitan space without privileging any one of the constituent parts but incorporating element from the both." (Islam 232). However, the present novel

illustrates the imposition of alien culture on the native one through colonization. European culture either weakens or completely transforms Igbo society's cultural development. Culture is the representation of any nation and community. It can be understood in the words of Raymond Williams who believes culture is not for high gentry but for the whole society. "Culture meant a state or habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities it means now, also whole way of life "(Williams XVI-XVII).

The present work was written by Chinua Achebe, a well-known Nigerian thinker and storyteller. The novel set in Nigeria's outskirts, in a little fictional community called Umuofia, shortly before European missionaries arrive. Due to the unexpected inflow of white missionaries in Umuofia, the villagers are unsure how to respond to the dramatic cultural changes that the missionaries want to bring about with their new power structure and institutions. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the consequences of European settlement and influences on Igbo culture and civilization.

Postcolonial literature deals with people who have previously lived under colonialism and reflects cultural hybridization. Colonization affected practically all continent's countries and nations in one way or another. Africa was the most affected continent, with colonialism and imperialism causing significant changes in the life of local peoples. Chinua Achebe in the present novel depicts the issues related to colonialism and its darken aspects. The fundamental thematic concern of Chinua Achebe's work *Things Fall Apart* is the uprooting of Nigerian culture by colonialism. He depicts the effects of imperialism through cultural disputes; hence, we must focus on the cultural clashes to comprehend that the novel is a postcolonial novel, and it should be added to the list of literature dealing with the aftermaths of colonialism. Postcolonial literature is not literature published after colonialism, but literature dealing with the consequences of colonialism. Every novel in which the author examines the consequences of colonialism should be labelled a postcolonial novel. Given the definition, we can confidently conclude that Chinua Achebe explains the effects of colonialism on his society, and so his novel interprets the theme of cultural changes in the original culture.

Achebe wrote the work in response to European novels that portrayed Africans as primitives who needed to be educated by Europeans. Achebe presents to the reader his people's point of view, including both strengths and weaknesses, by describing, for example, Igbo festivals, God worship and ritual ceremonies, their rich culture and other social practices, the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras, which both shattered and benefited Igbo culture. With its portrayal of Igbo society, the novel corrects the misrepresentation of Western literature that portrays Africans as barbarians and investigates the repercussions of European colonization on Igbo society from an African standpoint. The novelist places his view of the European writers:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at the friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "The man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." He could no say any more.... He had already chosen the title of the book, after much though: *The Pacification of the primitive Tribes of the lower Niger* (208-209).

The narrative suggests that the relationship between whites and Igbos had both bad and good, beneficial consequences. The novel shows how Europeans had a significant impact on Igbo society's way of life. Achebe asserts his point:

There are many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Onkonwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and the first-time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia (178).

Achebe's principal goal in creating the novel is to educate his readers on the importance of his culture as an African entity. The tale gives readers a glimpse of Igbo culture just before white missionaries stormed their nation. The conquering force's invasion wants to modify practically every area of Igbo society, including religion, traditional gender roles and connections, family structure, and trade. Chinua Achebe presents his concerns through the words of Onkonwo, "Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government" (176). Postcolonialism opposes colonialism. As a result, postcolonial literature functions as an anti-colonial tool. Through literature, we can understand the primary focus of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: a novel written by a person who grew up under colonial rule in response to the effects of colonialism on his culture. Achebe criticizes European writers and their misrepresentation of Africans in their works. A colonized person is frequently forced to follow the culture of their masters, regardless of their preferences. Postcolonial authors typically write about how imperialism infiltrated their rich original cultures. Cultural hybridization remains a process of opposition and transformation. This is manifested in the creation of new advantages in postcolonial societies, which are frequently backed by neocolonial institutions. The colonized people do not feel comfortable with the imposition and invasion of the culture of the masters but they become so helpless to do anything. They wish to counter their cultural invasion but some of their people are tempted to a new culture for its new idea. Achebe expresses this pain when his protagonist wants to drive the white Christian missionaries out but fails because many of their own people turn towards the enemy side. he asserts, "Does the white man understand our custom about land? But he says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (176). Achebe has a thorough understanding of both Igbo and British culture. Nevertheless, neither of them was willing to give up their opinions in favor of the other's ideas, nor did they have a thorough understanding of the other's culture:

We cannot leave the matter in his hand because he does not understand their customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not his. Let him go away (191).

This fact was widely known to Achebe, who once stated in an interview that the "conflict that existed between these two cultures created sparks in his imagination" (Sickels 1). In *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of God*, two of his works, his primary goal "seems to be the introduction of a new religion as well as its destructiveness

in society." (Alimi 121). The story depicts the "collapse, breaking into pieces, chaos, and confusion" (Alimi 121) of indigenous Igbo culture as a result of white men's arrival and activities in Umuofia, as well as his religious goal. Both civilizations have different perspectives on life. In the tale, the people of Umuofia are divided into two groups immediately after Christian missionaries arrive in their kingdom. The first category consists of Igbo followers, while the second group consists of Christian missionaries' converts who choose to renounce their religion, traditional ways of life, and people in order to follow an alien culture. They are keen to reform certain aspects of traditional Igbo culture that they believe are inappropriate and insulting in modern times. However, the white missionaries do not notice that these unsuitable and objectionable characteristics of old-style Igbo culture are what keep the Igbo together. The novelist makes his observation, "The white man is very clever. We amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (176).

The poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats (1912) served as the inspiration for the title Things Fall Apart. The poem predicts the end of the current era and the dawn of a brand-new, entirely different one:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer,

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1912).

The Igbo and their well-being from Europeans exacerbate the disparities between the two civilizations, driving them to a cultural conflict. It also questions the dominance of white missionaries. How can a civilized and educated set of people who do not take the effort to learn about Igbo culture justify calling the Igbo people uncivilized and primitive? The Igbo appear to be more civilized in many ways than the Christian missionaries. The following exchange between Onkonwo and Obierika reveals that a significant transformation has occurred in Umuofia. His head was lowered in sorrow when Obierika informed him these things:

Perhaps I have been away too long.... What is it that has happened to our people?

Why they have lost the power to fight.... We must fight these men and drive them from the land" (175).

Their courts and laws have their weaknesses and strengths. The white man courts do not give opportunities to the people in case of crime whereas Igbo courts hear their plea at conflict before delivering any decision. When Okonkwo beats up his youngest wife for minor reasons during the Week of Peace, she is granted the opportunity to seek legal redress, despite the fact that wife beating is acceptable in Igbo society. Okonkwo was judged not guilty of assaulting his wife, but of doing so during the Week of Peace, which prohibits acts of

violence. Igbo is a compassionate but brutal society. Okonkwo represents his tribe. However, Okonkwo's behaviors demonstrate that Igbo only become violent when specific conditions motivate him to do so. For example, Okonkwo descended upon one of the messengers dispatched by the white man authorities to halt their meeting.

He acts in this way because he is fed up with the white missionaries' dominance and the power they assert over their territory and culture. It is understandable why he does so, even when his choice is not warranted. One could argue that this is the case because six Igbo community leaders are subject to their authority. According to this, the Igbo people do not even understand what Christianity is. Because white people's culture and nature have up until now been based on their language and knowledge. They don't know how to respond to this new religion and society. However, despite the fact that the so-called primitives showed little interest in their initiative for assistance, the white missionaries chose to civilize the Igbo because they believed that they were primitive. When the white missionaries first arrive in Umuofia, they practically instantly assume that the locals will accept their rule without question. But the people are served by the missionaries. Some indigenous people appear enthusiastic about the white men's proposal. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, is among the first to convert to Christianity. This choice was made following the sacrifice of Ikemefuna, who was nearly like a brother to Nwoye. He was absolutely opposed to the Igbo's choice to assassinate Ikemefuna. He opposed this act by joining the school and the church. His father, on the other hand, is not pleased with Nwoye's decision to become a Christian. Okonkwo is angered by his son's decision, but he doesn't act on it. He expected this kind of behavior from his kid because he always considered Nwoye as "weak and woman-like" (Strong-Leek 2).

However, Okonkwo disowns his son, Nwoye, once he abandons the Igbo religion. Okonkwo's decision to disown his own son for practicing another religion exemplifies the Igbo's incapacity to cope with change, particularly change that does not exist inside Igbo society. By adopting to Christianity, Nwoye disrespects his father in the most heinous way. The novelist observes through his typical character about the transformation of culture, "Worthy men are no more", Okonkwo sighed (200). At the end of the novel, Okonkwo's suicide represents the Igbo culture's subjection. Along with Nwoye and the expecting mother, many of the village's outcasts become enthusiastic Christians because, in "God's eyes (though not in the eyes of the missionaries), they are equals to everyone else" (Akers-Rhoads, 69).

The novelist is successful in depicting the impact of European colonization on Igbo culture, as well as its aftermath. Igbo society gains from education and other minor items such as bicycles. Establishing power over native people is one of the factors that make white missionaries' horrible people. The Christian missionaries and colonial authority the improper tactics in their attempts to reform the rich cultured Igbo society. Mr. Brown represents the transformations initiated by Christian missionaries; if all white men acted like Mr. Brown, the village's Igbo culture would not have been destroyed. Mr. Brown arrives in Umuofia with the hope that he will be able to convert the majority of the Igbo people, if not the entire village, to Christianity and introduce them to modern education.

The cultural hybridization between the two civilizations may have benefited the Igbo in a variety of ways, but they were all unable to accept the changes. Today, most Igbo are literate individuals who have broadened their knowledge in order to be more open-minded. The Europeans also taught the Igbo about their own culture, and while the Igbo found it difficult to adapt to an alien culture, they learnt something new. Nonetheless, the Igbo encountered considerable difficulties as a result of the presence of the European missionaries. Achebe highlights the pangs of the Igbo:

The clan had undergone such profound changes during his exile that it was barely recognizable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eye and minds.... Onkonwo was deeply grieved. And it was not a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women (182-183).

Igbo lost most of the values that united them as one; social coherence between the individual and community was lost, along with their traditional values, way of life, and religion.. Okika asserts:

All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes" He stopped again to steady his trembling voice.... "This is a great gathering. No clan boasts of greater numbers of greater valor. But are we all here? I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?" ... "They are not," he said. They have broken the clan and gone their several ways (203).

Their allegiance to the language ultimately caused the Igbo to fall because of their conflicted mental state, which left them unsure of whether to accept or reject these changes. When white missionaries arrived in Umuofia to assume power, the Igbo people, who are a kind people who were also unaware of the white men's plans, welcomed them into their country and gave them a portion of it, not realizing that these men would be the reason their culture would collapse. Without culture, Igbo society is doomed, which is why Okonkwo's death is so significant.

At the end of the novel, Okonkwo's suicide represents the Igbo culture's subjugation to colonial forces. Along with Nwoye and the pregnant mother, many misfits of the town become enthusiastic believers of Christianity. However, Okonkwo disowns his son, Nwoye, once he abandons the Igbo religion. His decision to disown his own son for practicing another religion exemplifies the conventional Igbo followers' incapacity and reluctance to cope with change, particularly change that does not exist inside Igbo society. Edward Said, "Just as human beings make their own history; they also make their own cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitation, national language, and cultural geographies" (Said 408). The present paper analytically focuses on the various aspects of cultural representation and cultural collisions of both cultures. Throughout the novel, the dynamics of cultural hegemony can be observed instead of cultural hybridity. The novel graphically unearths many stances which show that it is not the representation

of cultural hybridization but the control of cultural traits and values of native culture by dominating and ruling class colonizers.

Work cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

Achebe, Chinua. "Chinua Achebe." Interview by Bradford Morrow. *Conjunctions* 17 (Fall 1991). Web. 10 Dec. 2012.

Akers Rhoads, Diana. "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" *African Studies Review* 36/2 (1993): 61-72. Web. 4 Jan. 2013.

Alimi, A. S. "A Study of the use of proverbs as a literary device in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 2/3 (2012): 121. Web. 31 Dec. 2012.

Islam, Md. Sajidul. "Cultural, Racial and Ethnic hybridity in Hanif Qureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" *Diaspora Literature*. Eds. Dinesh Pawar et al. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publisher and Distributors. 2017.

Said, Edward. *Cultural and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Sickels, Amy. *Critical in Sights: Things Fall Apart (Kindle Edition)*. *Critical Reception of Things Fall Apart*. Salem Press. Web. 15 Jun. 2012.

Strong Leek, Linda. "Reading as a woman: Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' and Feminist Criticism." *African Studies Quarterly* 5/2 (2001): 2. Web. 9 Sep. 2012.

Williams Raymond, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1963.

Yeats, Butler William. "The Second Coming." Org. (1921). Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

