
Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Illustrating African Postcolonialism

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Abstract

The decade beginning 1980s saw the emergence of a new discourse of postcolonialism in the wake of the publication of Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* in 1978. By the end of the twentieth century, it turned out to be one of the most influential theories of the century as it forced revisiting and reinterpreting classical literary and non-literary texts to understand how it shaped Euro-centric knowledge system across the world. This exercise led to the critical understanding of knowledge/power dynamics as existed in colonial times and its continuing prevalence in most of the postcolonial societies. As the case with most of the theories, postcolonialism too suffered from Euro-centric bias, i.e., looking at the knowledge construction from the European point of view. The last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century reformulated postcolonialism along the lines of postmodernism, i.e., looking at postcolonialism through the lens of different communities in different parts of the world. It was clearly understood that the postcolonialism in India could not be like that of Puerto Rico. This paper looks at African version of postcolonialism with special reference to Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, African literature, Igbo, Aesthetic norms

Introduction

In the recent times, the postcolonialism has become the most fashionable theoretical enterprise in academia – mostly humanities – all over the world. There have been versions and subversions of postcolonial theories since 1980s. The term – postcolonial – gained currency with the publication of the text *Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature* edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in 1989 and then closely followed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1990 in her collection of interviews and recollections called *The Postcolonial Critic*. Since then, the term has been the site of intellectual contestation regarding its definition, nomenclature, subjectivity, scope and dimension. In this paper, I propose to investigate the nuances of defining postcolonialism, its problematics and finally to illustrate how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* illustrate African version of postcolonialism.

Research Methodology

Textual analysis using the theoretical frames of postcolonialism.

Investigating the Term: Postcolonialism

“Postcolonialism,” according to Bill Ashcroft *et al*, “deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies.” (2007: 168) The term has been used in two different ways – one is postcolonialism and the other is post-colonialism (with a hyphen). The prefix “post” in postcolonialism at the most simplistic level refers to time period after colonialism, but instead it carries a whole baggage of cultural and material connotations of impact of colonialism on colonized societies. The simple understanding of “post” in postcolonialism has been contested by Aijaz Ahmad who believes that postcolonialism is a transhistorical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in our part of the world or another (9). Postcolonialism is now used to analyze the process of colonialism, its effects on colonized societies and their reaction to this subordination. As Ashcroft *et al* say, “Post-colonialism/postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialism, the discursive operations of Empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing response to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities.” (2007: 169) A postcolonial critic investigates the various sources of colonial discursive practices to see its effect on the colonized and to record the resistance, if any, offered by the colonized societies. This process has been exemplified in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in which Caliban, the original inheritor of the island, has been subjugated by an alien, Prospero, by the virtue of superior power. Prospero captures Caliban and turns him into a slave and teaches him his own language. At one point Caliban retorts by saying,

You taught me language, and my profit ou’t
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language. (*The Tempest* Act 1, Scene 2)

This is the classic case of Empire writing back to the centre. From here, I will move on to the academic postcolonialism. This theory has been charged for mere discourse without accounting for the realities of the postcolonial societies. Makarand Paranjpe says that “postcoloniality, paradoxically may even be defined as that which is not contained in the discourse of postcolonialism.” (1996: 37) Many postcolonial critics take postcolonialism as a discipline. Leela Gandhi looks postcolonialism as a “theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and crucially, interrogating the colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized. And it is in the unfolding of this troubled and troubling relationship that we might start to discern the ambivalent prehistory of the postcolonial condition.” (4)

The study of relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is not something new which started with postcolonialism. In fact, postcolonialism is itself not a new phenomenon as we can see Ahmad's argument. Ashish Nandy puts forward his thesis that postcolonialism begins with colonialism itself. Many writers have tried to explore colonizer-colonized relationship through psychological dimension. Nandy is one of them. Octave Mannoni, in his *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, puts forward a proposition that particular societies are colonized because they suffer from unresolved "dependence complex", which leads them to revere their ancestors and transfer this reverence to their colonial masters." According to Mannoni, colonizers need to colonize because they suffer from inferiority complex and want to prove themselves by ruling over others. This thesis has been challenged by many critics who questions the neat psychic distinction between colonizers and the colonized. In his book, *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy examines how colonizers as well as the colonized both suffer from the dialectic of colonialism and how both fashions a defense mechanism to escape the psychological onslaught of colonialism in all its cultural connotations. Nandy also looks how colonialism has different operative strategies and discourses in different situations. According to Nandy, colonialism works with the notion of age and sex. Hegelian teleological progression of human civilization works on the analogy of human life. Just as a human life has different stages such as infant, childhood, adolescent, adult (mature), old/decay; similarly in human history, some societies occupy some stages of life. Colonial discourse theory maintain that European civilization is at the adult stage while Africa is at primitive/childhood stage. This notion rests on the lack of written history of Africa. Nandy also argues that India has occupied a place is one of decayed civilization which white colonial masters seeks to reverse by ruling over it. Similarly African must be brought up to the level of maturity and so they must be ruled over.

Postcolonialism investigates the discursive operations of colonial masters and how more than traces lingers on in the now-independent societies. Albert Memmi looks at postcoloniality as a historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom and the concealed persistence of unfreedom. He suggests that the pathology of postcolonial limbo between arrival and departure, independence and dependence have its source in the residual traces and memories of subordination. This perverse longevity of the colonized is nourished in part by the persisting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and value which reinforces what Said calls the "dreadful secondariness" of some people and culture. So also, the cosmetic veneer of national independence barely disguises the foundations of economic, cultural and political damage inflicted by colonial occupation.

In 1977, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffins brought an influential collection of writings, mostly from erstwhile colonial societies. This book was titled as *Empire Writes Back*. It defined its scope as, "We use the term post-colonial to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupation throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression." (2) Apart from other things, this book foregrounds the fact that

natives have perfected the use of English language and rhetoric, and they use it to interrogate and subvert the dominant western historiography. The problem with this book is that it overgeneralizes the postcoloniality in different parts of the world which is far from true. The nature of colonialism was different in India, Africa, Canada, Australia, Caribbean Islands and Latin America. Similarly, the resistance to colonialism and postcolonial refashioning took different shapes in these erstwhile colonies and thus, to look at all these societies with same set of theoretical apparatus will not yield any result. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that many postcolonial critics questioned the logic of using same discursive framework for countries like India and Australia when the average weekly income of an average white Australian may be equal to that of the annual income of an Indian engaged in similar work (8).

African Postcolonialism

Coming to the African version of postcolonialism, first thing to be looked is the nature of colonialism prevalent in Africa. Africa experienced the worst of colonial experiences to the level of being labeled as dehumanization of the natives. Under the guise of civilizing the primitives, colonial powers erased virtually the whole of African past and thus in western historiography, Africa came to represent the continent without history and without civilization. This description of Africa resonates with the whole novel of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. For all the sympathies which Conrad feels for Africans, he still looks at them as primitives and their continent as dark and void. So, postcolonial writers of Africa took as their project to rediscover the past of Africa. They aspired to revisit and reinvent the history and rewrite to re-right it. In his influential essay, "The Novelist as Teacher", Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe envisages the novelist's role as a teacher who has to re-educate and re-generate his society. Achebe says, "Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complex of years of denigration and self-abasement. And if is essentialism a question of education in the best sense of that word. Here I think, my aims and deepest aspiration of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul But for the moment; it is in the nature of things that we need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racial racism to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we're much better." (44-45) Achebe's motive is to "teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which first European working on God's behalf delivered them." (45)

Things Fall Apart as the Representation of Pre-Colonial and Colonial Africa

Things Fall Apart published in 1958 describes the whole process of colonialism right from its beginning, in fact going beyond it. This novel has been divided into three parts: first part presents the pre-colonial past of Achebe's own Igbo community, second part deals with the arrival of missionaries, and the third part shows the full-fledged colonialism. In its protagonist Okonkwo, Achebe presents the nation itself and its several forms in the period of colonialism. In the first part, Achebe describes the society and culture of Igbo people, he describes the whole set-up and daily life. Achebe presents the well-

established civil society which was self-sufficient and have its own customs, rituals, myths, and code of conduct. Okonkwo is described as a man who comes from the humble background without any inheritance, but he climbs the social ladder by his sheer grit, determination and hard work. He is a great wrestler and has beaten the Amalinze the Cat who remained unbeaten for seven years. He had struggled against poverty and against his destiny and succeeded in providing his worth. Achebe portrayal of Okonkwo and the socio-political and cultural life of Umuofia goes hand in hand. He describes virtually every custom and ritual of the Igbo society. The intricacies of marriage have been presented in all its entirety from the beginning when suitor came for Obeirika's daughter to the marriage. Readers are present in the agreement and discussion over the marriage contract for Akneke, Obierika's daughter. There was a large period of drinking and talking before deciding the dowry price. They also contrast their system with that of neighboring village. One of them remarks, "All their [clans of Abome and Aninia] customs are upside down. They do not decide bride price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market." (51) Achebe has also pointed out the complex relationship between husband and wife in Igbo's society. Despite his impulsiveness and sometimes cruel behaviour towards his wives, Okonkwo has mostly genial relationship with them. There is another story how Ndulve, when wife of Ozoemena, died when she learns about his husband's death. Obeirika remarks, "It was always said that Nduiue and Ozoemena had one mind."

In Umuofia, there is a group of elders who shares decision making, they are trusted by their people. The chief responsibility of this group is the maintenance of a peaceful, prosperous and respected community for all. Their decisions are based on their tradition blended with religious, social and political beliefs. Achebe has described the farming procedure of yam and all the related festivals such as New Harvest Season. As a critic points out, "...one of the most significant things about *Things Fall Apart* is the way in which it demonstrates the intricate relationship between a man's individual psychology and the social context in which he has grown up." The first part of the novel ends with Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta. Without knowing, he becomes the cause of death of a clansman and as a punishment he must be exiled for seven years. He moves to his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta.

In the second part, we are presented with Okonkwo's life in Mbanta. This section also stands for the condition of a society with the coming of missionaries. It shows how Okonkwo's maternal relatives treats him and his feeling of loneliness. His maternal uncle, Uchendu, brings him out of his depression by telling him the traditional belief and custom that a child belongs to its fatherland but when he is threatened, he seeks protection in motherland as it stands for protection and security. Uchendu also tells the reason why they have beliefs like "Mother is supreme." So, if Okonkwo remains depressed, it will amount to bringing displeasure to his dead mother. In his exile, Okonkwo keeps getting news from Umuofia when Obeirika visits him. In Okonkwo's absence, it is Obeirika who takes care of Okonkwo's harvest and land. He also tells the story of a white man who was murdered by

the villagers on which Uchendu tell them a story whose moral is always fear the silent one. In chapter 16, Obierika tells Okonkwo that missionaries have built church in Umuofia and had got some recruits who were mainly efulefu, worthless empty men. One of them is Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son. Nwoye's mother tells Obierika how Nwoye had left them to become Christian (101). Achebe described how the church headed by Mr. Kiaga in Mbanto gains grounds in the village how he is able to get more and more converts. Okonkwo want to drive them out of the village but was stopped by the elders on the grounds that their own Gods are capable of fighting their own war. This part ends with the feast given by Okonkwo to the village of Mbanta before he returns to Umuofia. The oldest man of the village thanks Okonkwo for organizing the feast and calling all of them. He also put into words the feelings which Okonkwo undergoes in future, "We came together because it is good for kinsmen to do so I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice." (118) The note of discordance has set in which will yield its fruits very quickly.

The third part of the novel stands for post-contact working of colonialism. Okonkwo returns home to find a changed Umuofia. His return was not a warrior's return because standards of warriorship had changed. People had started forgetting old ideals of the clan under the impact of alien culture and religion. Not only low-borns but some men of prestige also joined it like Ogbuefi Ugonna. And as the saying goes 'If missionaries came can military be far behind' and white government was put in place. "They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance." (123) This section also records some stray incidents of violent resistance to the white government which was crushed harshly. As Okonkwo contemplated any action, Obierika says, "It is already too late. 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." (124) This is how colonial apparatus works. The problem with Okonkwo was that he was alone in his strong resentment against the new order. People of Umuofia did not feel as strongly about the white government because it has brought trade and money into the village. The head of the missionary maintained cordial relationship with the clan and slowly persuaded many people to send their children to the mission school. This school produced quick results; people started getting jobs. White men's medicines were better. "New churches were established in the surrounding village and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand." Reverend James Smith, who succeeded Mr. Brown was a more exacting person who despised Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. His working mechanism was more intense. One of the impulsive converts, Enoch, committed the crime of unmasking an egwugwu in public, which created tremendous agitation in Umuofia and the clan. In response, the egwugwu destroyed the church. Government retaliated by punishing six leaders of the clan. In the meeting about the future course of action, Okonkwo, convinced that his people will do nothing, killed one of the government head messengers and hanged himself later on. When District Commissioner arrived at the site, Obierika said, "That man was one of the greatest men in

Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog....” (147) The novel ends with District Commissioner thinking about his new novel *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (148).

Thus, we have a picture of African society moving from self-sufficiency to disintegration. It is not Achebe's motive to glorify all things African. Rather he would give a picture and let the reader decide about it. Thus, we have Okonkwo, Umuofia with all its good and bad customs, rituals, myths and superstition. It is a fairly well-organized society. This representation counters the western historiography's contention of Africa being without history, law and civilization. Rather, it is such a wonderful organization which merits individual achievements. Okonkwo achieved the high status due to his hard work. But Achebe do not glorify hyper-masculinity, which is the quality Okonkwo likes most. Through various characters, Achebe makes it clear that Igbo culture values both masculinity and femininity in equal measure. We find this when one elder man of the village Ezeudu tells Okonkwo to keep away from the murder of Ikemefuna. Ezeudu says, “That boy calls you father. Bear no hand in his death.” (85) But Okonkwo did kill Ikemefuna for the fear of being considered weak. Obierika also disapproves of his act. In fact, we can say that Obierika is a foil to Okonkwo. Obierika possesses the right mix of head and heart whereas Okonkwo believes that emotions will make him weak. He regrets that Ezinma, his favorite daughter is a girl, laments that Nwoye has too much of his mother in him. When Nwoye joined the missionary, Okonkwo “sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly, living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again deeply.” (109) This failure to make Nwoye more many pricks him throughout his life and we are reminded of Unoka's words to his son, Okonkwo, “A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone.” (18)

Bending English for the Sake of Igbo Cultural Vocabulary

Another significant device used by Achebe is the use of African Igbo words. This can be seen as technical perfection of Achebe who can use English language to convey the distinct Igbo flavour. In his essay, “English and The African Writer”, Achebe says that “The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to convey his peculiar experience.” (347) So, we find the abundance of Igbo words in this novel right from the beginning. Words such as harmattan, chi, ogene, agodi, nwayi, obi, ndichie, eguguwo are used in such a way that even non-readers can make sense of them. Achebe has also included a glossary to the novel, explaining the words. This is to emphasize that English words cannot capture the essence of Igbo words such as harmattan or chi. Not only words, there are also some phrases which has been translated literally to capture the essence of the Igbo language. This creative manipulation of English language

to convey the local flavour is something which Achebe shares with all postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Wol Soyinka, etc.

After reading the novel, it cannot be argued that Achebe glorifies African past. Rather, we are given a picture and asked to make our own judgement. We can guess little about Achebe's own ideology. It can be safely assumed that Achebe stresses the balance of all qualities in a person. Only that can make the person complete. Obierika is the obvious example of such a person. Onkonkwo refuses to accept the change with the passage of time, so it is time which changes him and to escape that condition, he kills himself. He refuses to compromise even when Obierika tells him to modify his version of truth. Instead, Okonkwo realizes only that thing, which kept them together, have fallen apart which makes us to recall W.B. Yeats' lines from "The Second Coming" which is also the source of the novel's title *Things Fall Apart*:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The Ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst,
Are full of passionate intensity.

We can see that there are internal reasons as well which were responsible for the breakup of Igbo society apart from the colonizers. Their own superstition made many people of the clan look for other option. It is natural that if one's society do not treat oneself with decency, then one has every right to look for different society. Igbo society was found wanting in their treatment of lepers, twins, so-called worthless men and it is this loophole which provided a comfortable entry point for the colonizers. As postcolonial novelists believe, Achebe goes into the past of his society and found that there is enough material from which a credible future could be envisaged.

Like all postcolonial writers, Achebe uses fiction to recreate the history which counters the hegemonic western historiography. In the last sentence of *Things Fall Apart*, magistrate thinks about the history which was going to write and thinking how much space he should devote of Okonkwo's death in *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribe of Lower Niger*. Achebe makes it clear that magistrate's history will not be the one the reader has just finished but it will be something in which Igbo people will be depicted as savages, their custom will be run down upon, and their past will be completely erased. But works like that of Achebe will ensure that African past will remain alive and provide sustenance.

Conclusion

In the end, it will be fruitful to look at Meenakshi Mukherjee's views regarding postcolonialism, she says, "post-colonialism is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the demise of empires. It is ideologically an emancipatory concept particularly for the students of literature outside the western world, because it makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us not only to read our own texts in our own terms, but also reinterpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and

geographical location. It brings severely into question the old idea of autotelic nature of literary text and the sealed anti-septic notion of 'artistic' value uncontaminated by political circumstances of production and reception – forcing everyone involved in the discipline to rethink the limitation of the Eurocentric/universalist aesthetic norms." (3-4) So, Achebe provides an alternative version of history which refutes western historiography as well as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

It will be wrong to think that postcolonialism has changed the attitude of entire western world on Third World. Western Academia or WASP scholarship still treat postcolonial literature as marginal. Scholars like Harold Bloom (in *Western Canon*) and Gerald Graff (in *Beyond the Culture Wars*) still believes in superiority of western literature, so believe that postcolonialism still has a long road to cover and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* will keep on being inspirational source for postcolonial novelists.

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