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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Postcolonial Theory Perspective

Benson Wabwile Juma
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5283-7783>
Laikipia University

Abstract

The research article is a critical evaluation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through the lens of postcolonial theory, trying to explain the novel's resistance to colonialist discourse and its recuperation of native African identity. The research article clarifies colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonization, establishing the theoretical framework necessary for an educated critique of Achebe's novel. Using qualitative research based on detailed textual analysis supported by secondary scholarly literature, the paper evaluates fundamental postcolonial theoretical notions of otherness, opposition, and hybridity. The research article shows how Achebe dismantles Eurocentric interpretations of African societies, corroborating the complexity, vibrancy, and resilience inherent in Igbo society. The deliberate use of both Igbo and English languages in the novel is examined as a linguistic subversion of imperial discourses of cultural hegemony. The analysis also demonstrates how Achebe's representation of cultural negotiation and resistance constitutes a significant body of work to enhance wider postcolonial studies discourses on identity construction, cultural memory, and historical agency. In conclusion, this article explains that *Things Fall Apart* is a foundational work that still shapes the discussion on decolonization, cultural autonomy, and literary recuperation of subaltern experiences.

Keywords: Colonialism, Decolonization, Hybridity, Opposition, Otherness, Postcolonial Theory.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is regarded as a classic of African literature and postcolonial studies and is renowned for its searing exploration of the intricate interconnectedness of native African tradition and the unsettling impacts of European colonialism. Serving as the author's debut novel in his oeuvre, *Things Fall Apart* functions on both literary and historical planes, working as an intervention that challenges and deconstructs the Eurocentric discourse that has so far monopolized the portrayal of Africa in Western literature. With its detailed representation of Igbo culture, the novel restores African identity, dignity, and intellectual independence, revealing a cultural universe that is simultaneously sophisticated, structured, and profoundly human, contrary to the distorted representations spread by colonial ideologies.

Set against the background of late nineteenth-century Nigeria, *Things Fall Apart* is the tale of Okonkwo, a hot-tempered Igbo warrior, as proud as he is ambitious. Okonkwo's individual story of fall and rise is set against the broader landscape of a society in seismic movement created by the force of European imperial conquest. Achebe's selection of a tragic hero, based on the Aristotelian prototype but set amidst the distinctive features of Igbo cosmology and social hierarchy, enables an exploration of the psychological, cultural, and existential dislocations wrought by colonial contact. The narrative form, marked by sequential unfolding and densely textured with proverbs, folktales, and communal rituals, is not merely stylistically graceful but also thematically calculated to underscore the density and sophistication of precolonial Igbo civilization.

Besides, *Things Fall Apart* holds a pride of place in the development of modern African literature. By employing English a colonial power's idiom Achebe stages a subversive reclamation, reshaping the imperial language into a vehicle for

African points of view, expressions, and knowledge systems. This linguistic strategy underscores the novel's nature as a cultural palimpsest, where native wisdom and colonial discourse coexist in dynamic tension. Achebe's spare stylistic manner, his narrative restraint, and his profound ethical awareness all work together to render *Things Fall Apart* not just a great work of African literature but also a lasting examination of the dynamics of historical marginalization and cultural dislocation. Lastly, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* pushes beyond the traditional limits of the novel form to work as a deep meditation on cultural encounter, identity formation, and historical transformation, providing a counter-narrative that still influences critical discourse in the fields of postcolonial studies and world literature.

Research background

Postcolonial theory is a literary theory that deals with literature produced in countries that were once or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that take colonies or their people as its subject matter. Post colonialism focuses on effects of colonization on the culture and thoughts of colonized societies (Rana, 2021). Postcolonial literature is literature produced by countries that gained independence from colonial rule in twentieth century and beyond, it can also signify cultural, political, social, economic and linguistic effects on the former European colonies. Post colonialism attempts to decentralize Eurocentric norms and constructs the identity of the native; it counters the assumption that Western and European ways of life is superior to African way of life. According to Gandhi (2009) postcolonial literary writers evoke a pre-colonial version of their own nations and ways of life which was spoiled by the colonizers during the period of colonialism and they reject the modern contemporary colonial status of their countries. Proponents of postcolonial theory examine the ways in which literature from colonized countries attempts to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identity and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examines ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of image of the colonized as inferior (Shmoop, 2021).

Before discussing tenets of postcolonial theory domiciled in the results and discussion sub-heading and which form the very subject of this article, it is pertinent for this article to define the term colonialism and shed light on its aftermaths that trigger the emergence of postcolonial literature studies by African literary writers. The term Colonialism for the purposes of this article is defined as the practice by which a powerful country directly controls less powerful countries and uses their resources to increase its own power and wealth (Collins, 2021). Decolonization means the period when colonized nations gained independence from the hands of the British imperialists for their own power control, assertion of their own cultures, values and identities (Umah, 2022). For the purposes of this article, the term Postcolonial Theory is means of defiance and resistance by which any exploitative and discriminative practices, regardless of time and space, can be challenged.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this article is an in-depth reading of *Things Fall Apart*, buttressed by a reading of secondary literary resources. In adopting the mentioned research methodology, this article is guided by Kothari (2004) who opines that research refers to a search for knowledge. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English lays down the meaning of research as careful investigation or inquiry especially through search for new facts in any branch of knowledge.

Results and Discussion

Postcolonial theory on the concept of otherness in both identity and difference, seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites. Colonialism promoted the idea that the West is ordered, rational, masculine and good while the East the (colonized) is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil. According to *Orientalism* a study of Western colonial powers over the orient (colonized), Said urges that it created a binary division between the colonized (orient) and the colonizer (occident). Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978) describes how the Western colonial powers constructed the "Orient" as a monolithic, timeless, and irrational space, a discursive Other whose mere existence provided the seal of approval for Europe's self-image as rational, progressive, and superior. In a binary opposition of this kind, otherness is the very foundation upon which identity is formed. Said contends that the European Self cannot be understood as an autonomous or stable construct; rather, it achieves its coherence and legitimacy through the denial and domination of its colonial Other. Thus, identity is demonstrated to be neither a fixed nor essential attribute but relational and contingent, generated from a dialectical encounter with difference (Said, 1978).

This question is further developed by Bhabha (2004) through his concepts of ambivalence and mimicry, describing how colonial discourse is marked by a double desire to fix the Other in a subservient position, with a fear of the Other's ability to contest and destabilize this fixed hierarchy. Mimicry, in Bhabha's (2004) explanation, is where the negotiability of colonial identity is stressed, and the colonized self, in selectively adopting the language, attire, and tradition of the colonizer, exposes the artificial nature and fragility of imperial power. Difference, then, is no longer an equitable indicator of cultural difference; it is a place for ideological struggle and resistance (Milostivaya et al (2017)). In the same manner, Spivak's seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Emphasizes the marginalization of the subaltern Other within Western representation frameworks and knowledge production processes. Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern self is being perennially represented by hegemonic discourses, thus precluding authentic self-representation in imperialism's epistemological structures. The observation underscores the work of otherness not only as a designation of the "different," but also as an instrument of erasure and epistemic violence. It is in accordance with postcolonial theory that categories of identity and difference are inevitably bound up with the forces of representation and power (Spivak, 1988). Colonialism fixes and multiples identities; the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, no longer merely as representations of inherent qualities but as ideological strategies intended to give legitimacy to oppression and exploitation.

Thus, deconstruction of Otherness remains a component of postcolonial criticism in that it seeks to lay bare the constructed and unstable nature of identity and advance the recuperation of subaltern voices (Young (2024)). In short, the postcolonial perspective on otherness interrogates essentialist notions of identity and difference, revealing such notions to be contingent upon historical, cultural, and political processes instead of being fixed or necessary truths. Identity, when viewed in this light, emerges as a flexible and dynamic category, one that is shaped continuously by colonial histories and intercultural contact. The orient is regarded as inferior and the Occident superior. The West is given a higher rank and considered the land of knowledge while the Orient is regarded as the 'other', the land of ignorance (Lye, 1977). Postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates that the orients also had ideas, opinions and it was not pagan and uncivilized, that colonized people are highly diverse in their nature and in their traditions, so that while they may be unified 'others' from a colonized point of view, there are traces of difference from one another and from their own past among themselves hence they should not be totalized. Chinua demystifies the notion of totalization of Africans as a people, of their culture and traditions which give the culture and ways of life of the colonizers sense of unity while mystifying that of Africans. For instance, Ibo community has nine clans and each clan exhibits some differences in customs and traditions, during the marriage ceremony of Akueke, a daughter to Obierika and Ibe the bridegroom, we learn that in among the Umuofia clan, pride prize is negotiated using broomsticks while among Abame and Anita clans, pride prize negotiation is a matter of life and death. In the view of Umuofia people, the Anita and Abame clan customs are upside-down:

"We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, 'If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play'. Marriage should be a play and not a fight so we are falling down again." (Achebe, 1958, P.51).

He then added ten sticks to the fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu. In this way, Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. It was already dusk when the two parties came to this agreement.

"It was only this morning," said Obierika, "that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta, where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives. All their 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" (Achebe, 1958, P. 51).

Postcolonial theory tenet of opposition. Young (2024) define post colonialism as an opposition of always present tendency in any literature of subjugation marked by systematic process of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial structures of power, postcolonial theory examines the ways in which imperial discourse traditionally depended on binary categorizations for instance, colonizer and colonized, civilized vs. primitive, self and other, modern vs. traditional to delineate domination of colonized countries and peoples. These oppositional dichotomies were not harmless categories but rather ideological ones that were meant to justify conquest, exploitation, and cultural erasure. A very clear articulation of this dynamic is found in Said's *Orientalism*. According to Said (1978), European imperialist thought rested upon a binary vision that imagined the Orient as the West's epistemological, moral, and cultural other.

Within this binary paradigm, the West developed its rational, enlightened, and progressive identity at the expense of intentionally framing the East as its irrational, enlightened, and regressive opposite. The power of this oppositional paradigm lies in its claim to naturalness and universality, which masks its own historical particularity and ideological function. Opposition, then, becomes not only a descriptive statement of difference for Said, but an active tool of imperial hegemony. Following this, Bhabha (2004) critiques the strict logic of binary opposition through the notions of hybridity and ambivalence.

For Bhabha (2004), colonial discourse is inherently riddled with internal contradictions because its dependence on absolute oppositions is eventually unworkable. The colonized subject, typically forced to emulate the colonizer in terms of language, clothing, or rule, disrupts the presumed purity of these categories. The subsequent hybrid identities undo the constructed and vulnerable status of colonial binaries, consequently demonstrating that these oppositions are at work as cultural constructs rather than fixed realities. In this way, opposition is presented not merely as an instrument of imperial differentiation, but also as a space for subversion and resistance.

Along the same lines, Spivak (1988) interrogates the oppositional model that excludes the subaltern from the realm of speech and self-representation. In her essay *can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) refers to how oppositional frameworks, especially those generated in Western intellectual traditions, silence and erase subaltern voices. Spivak's (1988) critique implies that the task of postcolonial theory is to deconstruct such oppositional frameworks to recover the agency and historicity of the oppressed. The principle of opposition is thus both descriptive of colonial practice and diagnostic of colonial weakness. While colonial regimes flourished on the basis of sharp oppositions between self and other, civilized and savage, postcolonial theory reveals these oppositions to be ideological constructions and not necessary truths. In addition, the deconstruction of opposition enables postcolonial scholars to discover complex interdependencies, cultural negotiations, and resistances that underlie surface-level oppositions. Oppositionally and postcolonially, is not a fixed relation of difference but a dynamic, historically contextual system of power, identity construction, and cultural production. Deconstruction and analysis of such oppositional formations are the basis for postcolonial scholarship, enabling more complex and pluralized conceptions of identity, history, and cultural practice in the aftermath of imperial rule. Postcolonial theorists like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, recalls the responses of resistance and opposition to the legacy of colonialism in the field of literature and presents the identity of the colonized and its culture representing the unrepresented and voicing the unvoiced with a past not available in colonialism; the subaltern can speak. Colonialism is associated with oppression, discrimination of Africans by the colonizers, marginalization and white man domination. According to Young (2024), postcolonial literature as a political discourse emerged mainly from the experiences of oppression, and struggles for freedom after the trio-continental awakening in Africa, Asia and Latin America; the continents associated with poverty and conflict.

The theory was born out of the colonized peoples' frustrations of their direct and personal cultural clashes with the conquering culture, and their fears, hopes, and dreams about the future and their own identity. Postcolonial literary works like *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a form of critique around the social histories, cultural differences and political discrimination that were or are practiced and normalized by colonial and imperial machineries. *Things Fall Apart* is a dialectical discourse which broadly makes the Africans and Africa at large historical facts of decolonization (Young, 2024). The book allows Africans to emerge from social-political and economic domination to reclaim their sovereignty as a people, it gives them a negotiating space for equity. The language in *Things Fall Apart* is uncompromising as it threatens privileges and power by rejecting and challenging the superiority of the colonizers (whites) over the colonized (blacks). *Things Fall Apart* celebrates the lost history of resistance while also criticizing the contemporary colonial ways of seeking powerful substantial change in postcolonial Africa. For instance, the majority of Ibo men and women opposed imposition of Christianity on them by the whites; Chinua Achebe brings out this opposition when the new converts disregarded the traditions and unmasked *egwugwu*-the earth deity. As a result of abomination of Christians, the church was set on fire.

"Mr. Smith stood his ground. But he could not save his church. When the *egwugwa* went away the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was a pile of earth and ashes. And for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified" (Achebe, 1958, P. 135). The tenet of opposition and resistance in post colonialism also addresses the question of complexity and perplexities around the difficulty of understanding how a colonized society can reclaim or reconstitute its identity in a language that is now but was not its own language and genres which are now but was not the genres of the colonized. Postcolonial writer, demonstrates the opposition to so called Standard English, literature may be written in the style of speech of the inhabitants of a particular colonized people or area, a language that does not have to read as a Standard to a white man (Lye, 1997). Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* illustrates that the standard literary allusions and common metaphors and symbols may be inappropriate and may be replaced by allusions and tropes which are alien to colonizers. Achebe chose to blend; to use both English and Ibo languages throughout the book but from a post colonialist point of view, the use of Ibo language is a form of opposition to Whiteman's English language superiority, Achebe inform the readers that the colonized had a language too.

Postcolonial theory tenet of hybridity. Hybridity refers to integration or mingling of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and colonized culture. Hybridity helps to break down the false sense that colonized cultures or colonizing

cultures for that matter are monolithic or have essential, unchanging features (Lye, 1997). Traditionally, the colonial project was based on the creation of firm distinctions between the colonizing power and the colonized subject on the axes of culture, race, and knowledge. The binary oppositions between civilized and primitive, self and other, and European and native were utilized as building blocks for the ideological edifice of imperialism. The concept of hybridity explicitly defies the assumed naturalness and inevitability of these oppositions, instead revealing them to be ideological constructions and not inherent separations. In his work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (2004) contends that colonial identity is unavoidably ambivalent since it is constituted through strategies of mimicry and negotiation instead of essential opposition. This vision understands hybridity not as a simple adding together of two contradictory cultures, but more as a rupture of the totalizing force of the colonizer and a re-construction of the colonized self. This hybridity often results from the contact and exchange of language, religion, and social practices that occur in colonial situations. In these environments, the colonized subject incorporates elements of the imperial culture but also reinterprets them in ways that resist colonial authority. Bhabha calls this phenomenon the "Third Space," an in-between space of cultural production where meanings are neither entirely colonial nor wholly indigenous but instead embody a negotiated, hybrid presence. In this Third Space, cultural identity is not stable but contingent, dynamic, and dialogic in nature. Such a view of identity is poles apart from the static essentialism that supported imperial domination and racial hierarchies.

Hybridity has deep political implications because it questions the totalizing claims of both colonial and nationalist discourse. For Bhabha (2004) and other postcolonial thinkers, hybrid identities are the capacity of colonized individuals to resist erasure and assert agency in spite of conditions of subordination. Rather than viewing colonial subjects as passive recipients of Western modernity, hybridity recognizes their active participation in reworking and reclaiming imposed identities. This approach enables a less simplistic appreciation of postcolonial societies that are frequently characterized by various levels of cultural translation, contestation, and synthesis. In short, postcolonial theory's concept of hybridity breaks down essentialist claims to cultural purity and provides an effective critique of the dichotomies that underpinned colonial relations of power. By stressing the negotiated and dynamic aspect of identity, hybridity calls attention to postcolonial subjects' ability to be creative, flexible, and politically resourceful in negotiating against imperial control. It continues to be a vital analytical frame through which one can examine the intricacy of cultural exchange and change in both past and present postcolonial worlds. According to Milostivaya et al (2017) colonial encounter between native and European, the natives became Anglicized but never became truly white or European. This native is a mimic man who can now get respect in the colonial establishment and use logic and reasoning in arguments which has been taught by western education. Though the colonial master wants the imitation of the white man by native, the colonial master on one hand want the native be similar to the white to aid in the colonial enterprise, on the other hand also wants to keep him in a separate category and think that he is weak, uncivilized, and traditional with a slave-like mentality. Postcolonial culture is an inevitably a hybridized phenomenon that involves a dialectal relationship of the grafted Western cultural systems and a native ontology, which recreates a new local identity (Ashcroft 2017).

Postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* illustrate that the colonizer attempts to make the colonized adapt to white man's values and standards so that they do not remain 'other' to the colonizers, however, since the colonized have a culture of their own preserved through the history and mythology of their respective native lands that do not leave their psyche and thus they offer resistance to those values forced by the colonizers, as a result, there occurred a hybridization of values instead of total transformation in which both the minds of the colonizers as well as colonized adapted some values of the other which with passage of time became indispensable for both. The native in *Things Fall Apart* refuses to acknowledge the colonizer's position and authority, Chinua places the native in situation of dualism, a position between Englishness and original Africanness, this hybrid culture of the two original yet different materials becomes a new material in itself, failing however to identify fully with either of the two. The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of the cultures in a stand point of postcolonial writers can be seen as positive, enriching and dynamic for instance, as much as the majority of Ibo men and women opposed the entry of the white man in their ancestral land, there are some who were impressed with his entry. Some Ibo members like; Akuna, Nwoye (Isaac), Enoch among others converted into Christianity and received white man's education.

Conclusion

This research article has critically engaged Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through the analytic lens of postcolonial theory, reaffirming the novel's timeliness as a piece of literary masterwork as well as counter-narrative to colonial epistemology. Of

central attention in this analysis was the encounter with the ideological paradigms of otherness, opposition, and hybridity as theorized and solidified through colonial discourse and subverted in Achebe's writing. The findings emphasize Achebe's role as a literary decolonizer who resists Eurocentric representation of African societies as primitive and silent by reaffirming the complexity, diversity, and integrity of Igbo culture prior to and during the colonial encounter. The hypothesis of otherness, developed through Said and Spivak's (1988) theories, was found to be essential to understand how colonial powers constructed and imposed binary oppositions to legitimize domination. Achebe, in his rich explanation of Igbo cosmology, dismantles these dualities and brings to the fore the complex interplay of identities and voices that had been suppressed by colonial discourse. Similarly, resistance was critically analyzed through the writings of Said (1978), Bhabha (2004), and Spivak (1988) to unmask the modes of imperial hegemony and cultural domination.

In response, *Things Fall Apart* places resistance at the center, primarily the social and religious resistance of the Igbo to foreign systems of ideas and religious structure. Theory of hybridity by Bhabha (2004) further supplemented the discussion by setting up the colonial encounter not merely as an exercise in domination but as a zone of cultural negotiation. Achebe's careful play of language, his syncretism of English and Igbo, is effective not simply to regain power in narration but to privilege the assumed superiority of colonial epistemologies. Such a syncretic culture formation establishes that postcolonial identity is heterogeneous rather than uniform but is a function of complex, liminal spaces permitting resistance, adjustment, and recovery. It concludes that *Things Fall Apart* is not just a literary intervention in the Eurocentric archive but also a foundational postcolonial text that attests to the historical agency and cultural sovereignty of the African people. Achebe's work resists simplistic representations and offers a nuanced presentation of the psychological and cultural impact of colonialism. With the use of postcolonial theory, this essay demonstrates how literature can function as a site of ideological contestation and cultural recovery, inscribing *Things Fall Apart* on the postcolonial list it needs to be on.

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The researcher acknowledge that all the data collected were handled ethically and accurately reflected without any manner of manipulation or prejudice.

Authors' Affiliation

The author certify that the research article was prepared with no impartially, competing interests, financial, professional, or personal that might have influenced the outcome of biased findings or interpretation.

Authors' Contribution

The author is a sole contributor to this research article.

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Ethical Consideration

Ethical guidelines involving respect, honesty, anonymity, and confidentiality of the respondents were maintained.