

Quest for ‘Identity’ in the Post-Colonial Text, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the boundaries set by the European colonists on the culture and tradition of ‘pure’ Africans- resulting in confusion among people to choose what is ‘their own’. We will be dealing with Chinua Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart* – how things fall apart before and after the arrival of missionaries, and how their ‘civilising’ mission works on the natives. They imposed restrictions, which put forth the implications of a closed system and lack of liberty to choose the linguistic features one wishes to inculcate in their literary work. Achebe also highlights the oral tradition by using narrative proverbs in the structuring of the action of the novel. Achebe refuses to completely step into the refined space as imposed by the Westerners. He chose to stick to ‘his’ culture which gave him comfort and stability. The Europeans inflicted a sense of inferiority by setting margins, which implied that the native’s actions were wrong, and it would only get better if they followed what had been told to do. It is nothing but the psychological impact of colonial education. Though we believe that Achebe gave more importance to his culture, we also cannot deny that he did get influenced by the Westerners. Elements of double consciousness in *Things Fall Apart* often lead to the Identity crisis of his characters which is stemmed from the hybrid nature of the Author himself. Achebe’s western influence is notable by his acceptance of the idea of ‘author’ which implies the authorisation of a text. In the oral tradition, we cannot imply the same because the importance is given to the reader- free interpretation is possible. We would like to find out how *Things Fall Apart* as a ‘hybrid text’ comes under the post-colonial perspectives.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Western influence, Double consciousness, Hybridity, Post-colonial perspectives

INTRODUCTION

This paper sheds light on the first novel of Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* as a text of hybridity. Different types of cultures in the world carry out their own traditions, values, and practices. These are the elements that define people, thus drawing a similarity between the people of the community and keeping them bound together. When a foreign culture tries to replace a current culture, it may affect the stability and security of that structure. Also, adaptation to ‘the change’ could bring ‘heavily’ reacting or easily ‘adjusting’ minds. Imposition of the White colonial rules created adjustable humans with a mind full of confusion through governing their native land, studying their native cultures, and the slow transformation of native societies.

The Whiteheads believed that the natives were primitive, child-like, effeminate, irrational, irreligious, criminal, and unreliable: so they must be taken care of by the Europeans. This dominance created binaries among the races and helped the colonists to get into the native heads as their ‘guides’. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brings the colonial-cultural- pressure on the characters like Okonkwo, Ikemefuna, Nwoye, Obierika, Enoch, Ezinma, and the other women characters by describing indirectly about their double identities. They are all influenced by the colonial and post-colonial-isms and react to them in different ways.

Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation occurred during colonial rule. The post colonial theory identifies how the feminisation, marginalisation and the dehumanisation of the natives happened during that period. Robert Young, the author of *Postcolonialism- a historical introduction* (2001) claims that “postcolonial theory is always concerned with the positive and the negative effects of the mixing of people and cultures”. The mixed nature prevents them from possessing a culture of their ‘own’. It is clear that there is a white influence in Achebe’s unconscious and this essay will be focusing on the evidence to support this statement.

Hybridity; Influences and Examples

The genre of post-colonial literature is an umbrella term that indeed covers the theme of hybridity as well. Hybridity is a concept popularised by the post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha. It is the creation of new cultural forms and identities as a result of the colonial encounter. Hybridity deploys the people under colonial rule to mimic the actions and imitate the culture of the whites. The idea is more important because it shows the unstable environment that the natives are forced to adapt/accept or to reject- which is not that easy. In order to interpret the novel as a hybrid text, we may first begin with the title itself. The title is taken from the poem *Second Coming* by a modern Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who also has a 'coloniser-colonised' identity. There is plenty of African proverbs throughout the text, but the title does not follow the same.

The origin of Achebe's hybrid personality can be traced back to his very childhood. Just as a young boy he was surrounded by an environment where traditionalism and the Christian influence co-existed. Achebe constantly suffered from the notion of 'where to belong' until his culture, which is rich in orature, familiarised him with the proverb, "Until lions have their own historians, the history of the Hunt will always glorify the hunter". This helped him stick to his origin while using the imposition of the English language by the Europeans to his own advantage. Thus, Achebe, who grew up in a British colony used the product of the coloniser, against the colonised. He obtained the knowledge of English by spending time in his father's library while also becoming well-versed with his own culture through the oral tradition of African folk tales with the help of his mother and sister. As a student, he came across a lot of texts where European writers disoriented the African values and social order by imposing their own ideologies on the traditional African society. This is where, as mentioned before, he used the English language to his own advantage. He considered it mandatory to eradicate this misinterpretation of culture by depicting it in the most realistic way. Thus, he introduced the world of literature to his first postcolonial novel *Things Fall Apart*. The education he got from the college naturally was Western-oriented, which is why he was familiar with the works of A E. Houseman, TS Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Ezra Pound, WB Yeats, and JM Synge, but the writer who influenced him the most was, WB Yeats.

Achebe says, "but I like Yeats, that wild Irishman. I really loved his love of language and his flow. His chaotic ideas seemed to me just the right thing for a poet." This influence of the Irish poet resulted in his need to inculcate Yeats's poetry as an epigraph and thus, finding a suitable title for his novel. Hence, we may say that even though Achebe tries to bring out the rich oral traditions throughout the novel, he still sticks to a title which is stemmed from the education he received from the western-oriented formal education.

Another aspect of hybridity can be seen by the use of language in the text. The language becomes the result of Achebe's medium of education clubbed together with his roots. The novel is fabricated with the usage of Igbo proverbs, folk tales, and African oral traditions. Achebe introduces his readers to a number of Igbo words that are literally translated into English words such as 'egwugwu', 'ogbanje', 'egwu', 'efulefu', 'obi' and 'osu' etc. He simplifies the reader's understanding of these words by adding a glossary along with the novel. He tries to maintain the essence of the beauty of the African language by using these words as it is. He is using a 'new language' by clubbing Ethnic and National languages.

"Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water"- was one of the first proverbs in the novel. Achebe introduces Okonkwo's character by comparing him to a slippery fish, which is hard to catch: which implies Okonkwo is also strong and hard to understand. Folktales also enhance the language like Igbo proverbs. The rich oral tradition can be traced from the past, through the stories narrated by the characters. Achebe included the Tortoise Tale in the novel to show the mental state of Okonkwo after Ikemefuna's death. The story also talks about how the tortoiseshell got cracked when he changes his real identity to that of a bird. The cracked shell can be considered as the representation of those colonised minds. Having an understanding of these proverbs and tales and their possible interpretations can help the readers to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and values of the Igbo culture, which encompasses polytheistic religion, father-son inheritance, farming traditions, and belief in evil spirits, which are quite different from non-Africans. Through folktales, proverbs, and myths, he reflects the values of his clan like solidarity, perseverance, and adaptability, which hold them together and acts as a mechanism to stay united. This unity is seen trembling by the arrival of the colonisers. With the arrival of whites onto the land of an African tribe, there occurred a coexistence of two different cultures. The vast difference between the two cultures is clearly defined by depicting the need for a translator and therefore indicating the multiculturalism of languages. Achebe also utilises it to add some comical elements at the time of missionaries' arrival in the book. The villagers mocked the interpreter's dialect when he kept saying 'my buttocks' instead of 'myself', without knowing the future domination of English.

There is an instance where Obierika says "The White man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion, now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on things that held us

together and we have fallen apart.” This dialogue again adds to the hybrid nature of the author by signifying that not only is he well versed with his roots but is also able to skillfully wove the phrase from a borrowed language into the literary work representing the native cultural milieu.

The Igbo patriarchal community always placed men on a pedestal seat. They considered women as a ‘second sex’ and used them as objects for male satisfaction. ‘She’ wasn’t ‘aware’ of ‘the being oppressed process’ because of the influence of patriarchy. Inequality, lack of inheritance for female children, women beating and feminine abuse were appreciated to a certain extent and treated as ‘normal’. Igbo women lived their lives to deliver kids and to do domestic chores. Females are in an inferior position throughout the novel and the idea of masculinity erased them from the political, economical and judicial strata of the society. Women weren’t allowed to identify their true character and the dominance above her gender and race indirectly forced her to obey the ‘male rules’ without any objection. This suppression of the female by the male, in the Igbo tribe is similar to the oppression faced by the colonised under the coloniser. Igbo men inflicted ‘subaltern’ treatment on his family.

The protagonist Okonkwo wishes his eldest son Nwoye to behave like a ‘real’ man – he wanted to completely erase Nwoye’s ‘motherly’ side. Okonkwo was a man of strength and was afraid to be called weak or a woman. He was ashamed of his father Unoka, who was a ‘coward’ and a ‘spendthrift’, by the standards of the clan. Okonkwo tried to hate everything his father had loved but still the memories of Unoka haunted him in a very uncomfortable way. In other words, Unoka is a representation of the past; a past that belonged to the traditional Igbo community. He must have inherited most of the cultural traits and beliefs of their culture. Differing from the ‘real man’ concept doesn’t mean that Unoka is an outcast of the Igbo tribe. So that hating Unoka signifies that Okonkwo is not fully immersed in traditions. One of his sides always rejected Igbo traditions while the other side always accepted them. The violence, intolerance, and the passion for becoming a respectable leader- which are the characteristic features of missionaries – clearly show that Okonkwo is different from his peace-loving tribe. When the oldest man of the clan, Ogbuefi Ezeudu asked Okonkwo not to kill his son-like Ikemefuna, he never listened. He did kill him with full remorse and regret. In a sense, Okonkwo was respecting the order of Oracle, but also disrespecting the words of a ‘living tradition’.

Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu’s son with a gun at his funeral. The old man’s death creates a vacuum in their heritage. His son’s death is a complete wipeout of his essence with a ‘modernized European concept’, a gun. It gives a picture of a confused individual trying to erase his ‘own’ people using the ‘European brain’. This confusion clearly states Okonkwo’s mixed nature, which leads to his death.

Nwoye is the binary opposite of Okonkwo. He seems more like Unoka and has an attachment to his mother. He tries not to be like ‘himself’ for making his father happy. He was unable to express his true self since childhood. This traumatic experience leads to his conversion. He is neither Igbo nor Christian; he has double identities but is not even sure about who he really is. His jumping consciousness creates nothing but confusion.

Enoch is a character who is similar to Okonkwo in many ways. Their personalities are comparable, they both have issues with their fathers, and they consider themselves to be above their peers, but their belief systems are quite different from each other. He passionately accepted Christianity without any hesitation and cut his Igbo roots by killing one of the ancestral spirits by unmasking an egwugwu. When Mr. Brown becomes ill and is replaced by a zealot named Reverend Smith, he uses Enoch’s ‘grown up’ fanaticism to turn against a race that once belonged to him. The fact that Enoch is not killed for his action highlights an acceptance of colonial rule from the local rulers and traditional elite. Mimicry appears here when Enoch imitates the colonised culture and makes the environment unstable. Literally speaking, he is a combination of Okonkwo and Nwoye.

Ikemefuna’s death signifies the eradication of a minor culture from a major culture. He reached Umuofia as a part of the sacrifice. Willingly he adjusted to the clan’s customs, but the memories of his family is a reminder that he hasn’t fully adapted to the new world. He tried to believe that the new clan is his family, but his beliefs ended with his death. Also, Okonkwo is questioning the identity of his eldest daughter Ezinma. He wishes that she had been born a son.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the novel, we come to know how important farming is to the Igbo tribe. We see an instance where Okonkwo plants yam seeds in his farm, given to him by Okoye. Okoye does not belong to his family, implying that he is the ‘other’. However, it does not work out due to the drought and heavy rains. This incident can be seen as symbolic of the seeds of western ideologies that have been planted in the natives’ minds. Thus, causing instability in his mind,

resulting in a state of confusion. The relationship between farmer and farming is that of the coloniser planting seeds of ideologies into the mind of the colonised.

The impact on natives due to this colonisation gives rise to the double consciousness in the characters. They are torn between the constant dilemma to know where they belong, and which culture to follow. This dilemma is rooted in the childhood days of the author. The author, being under colonial rule himself, was influenced by the westerners. The very notion of authorisation is a western concept, in contrast to the oral tradition, where the importance is given to the reader. The reader is free to interpret and retell it in his/her own way. While the same cannot be implicated in the case of an authorized text. Therefore, we can conclude that he does not fully follow the traditions. This feature is also seen in the protagonist of his novel. Okonkwo does not fully follow his own tribal instinct, and neither does he welcome the whites. In the end, Okonkwo commits suicide, even though he knows that it is against his own tribe. The reason for his action is his intolerance towards the arrival of the whites. Hence, his suicide can be seen as a protest.

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