



# **The Postcolonial Experience: Socio-Cultural Dislocation in *Things Fall Apart***

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## **Abstract:**

Disintegration is usually caused by imperialistic totalitarian imposition in a political sense. The present study is an examination of Acheb, 1992's *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel, published in 1958. From its date of publication, the novel has extensively attracted many critics, as Chinua Acheb 's ideas have caused some consternation due to their polemical nature. Acheb 's writings are primarily based on traditional oral literature and on the present and rapidly changing society. Unlike some African writers struggling for acceptance among contemporary English-language novelists, Acheb has been able to avoid imitating trends in English literature. This paper will explore how indigenous people suffered from cultural imperialism, which is the cause of the disintegration of society. Acheb 's portrayal of culture in his fictional universe reflects the prevailing socio-cultural context of the period. Critical insights from post-colonial studies have been employed to interpret the novel, and MLA has been utilized to present references. The study's findings in this article are that *Things Fall Apart* presents the struggle between change and tradition, which leads to the protagonist's downfall, specifically the suspension of social hierarchy in Igbo society, as white people imperialize Nigeria in the name of religious missionaries.

**Keywords:** civilization, clash, culture, colonization, imperialism, Indigenous

## **Introduction**

Cultural imperialism is one of the causes of the disintegration of society. Acheb's (1992) portrayal of culture in his fictional universe reflects the prevailing socio-cultural

context of the period. Many critics viewed Acheb's novels as a means of negotiating the conflicting cultures to achieve a solid and positive sense of identity, as well as a desperate protest against the injustices of the past. However, *Things Fall Apart* presents the struggle between change and tradition, which leads to the downfall of the protagonist in the suspension of losing social hierarchy in Igbo society, when white people imperialize Nigeria in the name of religious missionaries. Apart from that, the article observes how Acheb introduces Igbo customs throughout the novel, how the novel presents the exchange of culture, and how fear is created within the Igbo people. The elegance of Igbo culture, the impact of missionaries on indigenous people, and the depiction of an ideal culture, and how disintegration occurs within the Igbo society, are all themes explored by Acheb. Concentrating upon these questions, the research has, therefore, studied the cause of disorder in the Igbo people, whether it is the interference of the white people and their imperializing of Nigeria that has led to the disorder in the Igbo clan.

Acheb's understanding of the African context has influenced both the aesthetic of his novel and the technical aspects of his work. Acheb was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transform the conventions of storytelling, a European art form, into African literature. However, the present study differs from other approaches in that it concentrates on the cultural imperialistic elements that are dominantly presented in *Things Fall Apart*, making it a representative example of post-colonial writings.

### Review of Literature

*Things Fall Apart* is significant because it marked the beginning of the vogue of African novels about cultural contact and conflict. In proportion to its popularity, images of women receive attention. In a style that is expository rather than prescriptive, Acheb's novel mirrors the sociocultural organization existing in the Africa of the era he describes. Mezu (1998) opines in her essay "Women in Acheb's World" that Acheb's women are voiceless. However, even though he is highly visible, his women are virtually inconsequential" (p. 26). She emphasizes that the world in *Things Fall Apart* is one in which "patriarchy" intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence. It is an "androcentric" world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. In domestic terms, women are quantified as part of men's acquisitions.

Appiah (1992) writes, *Things Fall Apart* may well be Africa's "best-loved novel", it is read widely in Nigeria, where it was written, and in the rest of Africa...There are, no doubt, many reasons why Chinua Acheb, 1992's first book has achieved its "status as the archetypal modern African novel in English" (p.10). Heather Sofield opines in *Post Colonial Identity Post Colonial Literature*, "Chinua Acheb's *Things Fall Apart* is the desperate protest against injustices of the past, thereby characterizing identity in a retributive light" (p.275). This idea might apply to an individual struggling for a sense of self. Landow (1985) in *Art History* writes:

Achebe, 1992 uses language, which he sees as a writer's best resource, to expose and combat the propaganda generated by African politicians to manipulate their own people. Faced with his people's growing inferiority complex and his leader's disregard for the truth, the African writer cannot turn his back on his culture. (p.19)

Achebe believes that a writer has a responsibility to try to stop these damaging trends because, unless culture begins to take itself seriously, it will never gain momentum. *Things Fall Apart* focuses on Nigeria's early experience with colonialism, from the initial contact with the British to the establishment of widespread British administration. Chinua Achebe, 1992 creates in these two novels a coherent picture of coherence being lost, of the tragic consequences of the collision between Africa and Europe. In *The Novels of Chinua Achebe, 1992*, Omaregie (1983) writes:

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the newly converted Christians renounces their traditional lifestyle, thus advancing the cause of colonialism. The European exploiters, oppressors and grabbers use Christianity as a tool to explain the manifest contradictions portrayed in African literature because of the working out of broader historical forces. *Things Fall Apart* tended to impute African society's problems to color prejudice rather than class conflict. (p.40)

Achebe is not only trying to inform the outside world about Igbo cultural traditions, but also to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it contains much of value.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been the subject of extensive discussion, as it has consistently provided critics with rich material for their analysis. The references from the various critics lead to the conclusion that the novel is "Nigeria's early experience of colonialism"; "negotiation of identity"; "post-colonial literature", which, over time, comes forth as "an interesting novel." However, the novel portrays a peaceful Igbo society, which is culturally elegant, but is affected by cultural hegemony that causes disintegration within the society.

### Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is the perspective that includes the discourse of minorities. To cite from *Redrawing the Boundaries*: "Post-colonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of the Third World countries and the discourse of minorities within the geographical divisions of east and west, north and south" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 437). It is the study of "the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European powers" (Abrams, 1993, p. 245). It is the study of the culture, social, and economic conditions of previously colonized places. In this connection, Abrams (1993) says: "Postcolonial studies sometimes encompass also aspects of British literature in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, toward through a perspective that reveals how the social and economic life

represented in that literature was tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation” (p. 245). To quote Habermass (1995) for our purpose we could also argue that post-colonial project at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies- "loss of meaning, conditions of anomie" that no longer simply "cluster around class antagonism [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies" (p.348). As the postcolonial perspective resists the holistic attempt of social explanations formed by colonized discourse, it creates literature of its own in the way of resistance. Thus, Postcolonialism deals with the effect of colonization on cultures and societies. It is now used in a wide and diverse range of ways, including the study and analysis of colonized discourse, colonial resistance, and colonial legacies in pre- and post-independence nations.

The colonized people struggle to erase the colonizers' ideology and practice of colonialism. Ashcroft et al. point out that anticolonialism signifies the point at which the various forms of opposition become articulated as a resistance to the operations of colonialism in political, economic, and cultural institutions. “Anti-colonialism has taken many forms in difficult colonial situations: it is sometimes associated with an ideology of racial liberation” (p.15). Post-colonialism does not limit itself to activities directed solely against colonialism, nor does this kind of post-protest against colonialism have any meaning. However, the once-colonized people can share their experiences during colonial domination and make intellectual protests. Tyson (2006) states, "Most postcolonial critics analyze how a literary text, whatever its topics, is colonialist or anticolonialist, that is, the ways in which the text reinforces or resists colonialism's oppressive ideology" (p. 427). It is a form of ‘writing back’ against the imperial misrepresentation of the natives, their beliefs, practices, thoughts, knowledge, scholarship, cultural heritage, and civilization as a whole. It is a critical stance that redefines the Self.

However, imperialism results from a complex of causes in which varying degrees of economic pressures, human aggressiveness, and greed, search for security, drive for power and prestige, nationalist emotions, humanitarianism, and many other factors are effective for it, and it gets imposed forcefully to the other group of people. Africa suffered badly during Western colonization, and other nationalities have been colonized or are in the process of colonizing themselves with or without their knowledge and will in the name of modernism. This ‘Whiteism’ is almost sure to make the ‘things fall apart’ as Acheb (1992) has dramatized in his novel of the same title. In this article and the people are torn between the diverse cultural norms, values and practices.

## **Discussion**

### **Clash of the Cultures**

Culture is the total behavior peculiar to humankind, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and other

elements. The existence and use of culture depend upon an ability possessed by humans alone. This ability has also been referred to as the capacity for rational or abstract thought. When things and events are considered in the context of their relation to the human organism, they constitute behavior; when they are considered not in terms of their relation to the human organism but in their relationship to one another, they become culture by definition. Tylor (1977) has defined it as "Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (p. 19). Culture is an ability unique to humans. The question of whether the difference between men and men of different places is one of kind or of degree has been debated for many years.

'Sociocultural system' defines the culture possessed by a distinguishable and autonomous group (society) of human beings, such as a tribe or a modern nation. Sociocultural systems vary widely in their structure and organization. These variations are attributable to differences among physical habitats and the resources they offer or withhold for human use, to the range of possibilities inherent in various areas of activity, such as language or the manufacture and use of tools, and to the degree of development. Whatever differences in native endowment may exist, they are insignificant compared with the overriding influence of the external tradition and culture. Cultural elements may pass freely from one system to another (cultural diffusion). However, sometimes, the culture of a group may be imposed forcefully on the other as an impact of imperial power.

*Things Fall Apart* portrays the clash between Nigeria's White colonial culture and the tribal culture of the indigenous Igbo people. Igbo people and their religious spirits used to make them believe in the importance of works, ethics, and morality. People were usually punished for their evil activities. The person who was progressive and successful was awarded with prestigious titles. Apart from that, they used to avoid effeminate and lazy people like Onako, the protagonist's father. He was idle, poor, profligate, and a coward. They preferred productive, wealthy, thrifty, and brave people. People's sense of self-esteem was dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judged. The narrator reveals the importance of own strength in the novel:

"Hold your peace", screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. You have offended neither the gods nor his ancestors, his harvest will be good of bad according to the strength of his arm", the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us increase and we shall all perish. (Achebe, 1992, pp. 14- 26)

Igbo people were much conscious of maintaining peace in society. "My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace of the village was dragged from life on the ground through the village until he died" (Achebe, 1992, p. 27). In such a way, people had to pay outstanding penalties for the disruption of peace.

A kind of chaotic situation emerged when white men came to the Igbo land. Acheb in the Second Part of *Things Fall Apart*, has quoted Okonkwo, the protagonist, and villagers as:

He sipped his wine. And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them...so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends.... They were locusts, it said and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him. (Acheb, 1992,p. 120)

In this manner, white men arrived in the traditional Igbo land. They were able to capture the land and convert the indigenous people to Christianity. The native people were colonized economically, socially, psychologically, and culturally. None of the colonizers made the necessary reforms. They were always inclined to expand industry and commerce. The narrator explains about the picture of inhumanity:

The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home...Their clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake has turned the color of blood. A great evil has come upon their land as the oracle had warned. (Acheb, 1992,p. 221)

It's true that some black men had killed a white man and tied up his iron horse but the retaliation of the white men is excessive. For the ignorant and fearful murder of a man, the whites responded with a brutal massacre that destroyed a whole village.

White people treated the natives as beasts of burden. They destroyed the native culture without giving them new cultural stability. They received the indigenous elegant culture, civilization, trade and commerce. Said (1993) has argued, "The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture" (p.2). Few of the post-colonial critics have argued that the colonizer provided the psychological service for the brainwashing of the natives. They went to the African nations as a cultural project. The natives developed an inferiority complex among themselves. Okonkwo's own son refuses to talk about his father because Nwoye is one of the converts.

### Political Conflict

There was a political predominance of the Whites. The native Aborigines behave as mere laborers, slaves, savages, and subhuman beings. A kind of fear was created within Igbo Society. Obierika has said in the novel: "But I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories

about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas.” (Achebe, 1992,p.122). The ancestral deities of the natives and the social costumes were destroyed. The structure of old tribal society was shattered to the ground without putting anything in its place as Sartre (2001) in *Colonialism and Neo-colonialism* has argued:

Colonialism denies human rights to people. It has subjugated by violence and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance by force, therefore, as Marx would say, in a state of sub humanity. Racism is inscribed in the events themselves in the institution, like the exchange and the production. The political and social statuses reinforce one another: since the natives are subhuman, the declaration human right does not apply to them. (p. 2)

Imperialist domination for its own security requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect destruction of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people. The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* says:

Apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial...on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the center of their religion and trade and government. (p.150)

The missionaries brought the British colonial government with them, and they are often viewed as agents of imperialism. There is a saying familiar to Africans alike: “Before the white man came, we had the land, and they had the Bible. Now we have the Bible, and they have the land” (Achebe, 1992, p. 155). This is the most significant pain of the Aboriginal people of Africa, that they have lost their land in exchange for the Bible.

The rise of government by dictatorship throughout Africa, which characterized the 1970s, perpetuated the political, economic, and social practices of colonialism. The age of independence also witnessed the emergence of social classes and class contradictions. This development disappointed and shocked many African writers, who created artistic works expressing disillusionment with postcolonial African society.

The new African ruling middle class is underdeveloped, has no economic power, and, therefore, reflects the culture of the metropolitan bourgeoisie with whom it has economically allied itself to exploit its own people. Members of the new African ruling middle class have assimilated the colonizers' mentality and regard themselves as “culturally superior”. Their imitative culture reflects this class's political and economic dependence on the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

### **Religious Interference**

Likewise, in *Things Fall Apart*, the tradition of storytelling, symbolic deities and imagery, and the idea of democracy prove the Igbo people to be cultured and civilized.



However, as soon as Christian missionaries were opened, disintegration started. The narrator says in the novel:

He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone... He told them that the true God lived in on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom. We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die. (Achebe, 1992, pp. 125-126)

The colonizer's 'divide and rule' policy is employed within the Igbo homeland. The missionaries sought to demonstrate that Christianity is the best religion. They propagated the idea that innocent people should avoid ancient deities and suggested that they follow Christianity. Igbo society is shown as having grown from a long tradition of careful decision-making and a careful system of religious, social, and political beliefs.

The novel illustrates the struggle and transformation of the traditional Igbo society under British colonialism. Okonkwo lives a successful life by Igbo standards and is well respected by his tribesmen until he accidentally takes the life of one of his clansmen and is banished from the village. After seven years, Okonkwo returns to his village to find his previous prosperity, but the Umeofia is under colonial laws. Additionally, he finds that Christianity is rapidly replacing his tribe's religious beliefs. Okonkwo opposes to these new practices and struggles to put a stop to the destruction of his Igbo culture. Okonkwo attempts to rally his tribesmen but finds little support. The tribe is divided, and only a few people continue to defend the Igbo ways. Some have already freely embraced Christianity, while others have given in to the "white man's" new ways.

Igbo people are divided into two groups: the fundamentalist group of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and the group of converts. They clash. The fundamentalists kill the converters, causing disorder in society. Similarly, those who have converted to Christianity fail to realize the damage that the culture of the colonizer does to the culture of the colonized. In a way, the rich religious practice turns into 'xenophobia'. Religion is a preliminary phenomenon that can also associate with people and dislocate them. People easily start to believe in what is thought to be one's own, without any evidence or reason and are even ready to fight against interference.

Opening churches and missionary houses is cultural exploitation by white people and a way to motivate the minds of the local people of African origin. The humiliation visited on Africans by colonialism ultimately leads to the death of the protagonist in the fiction. The hero is deeply dedicated to the traditions and social hierarchies of the people. Okonkwo, the protagonist, finally gives in to despair. He kills himself so that he will not be executed under the white men's law. In this way, falls occur in Igbo society. Igbo society begins to fall apart. Religion is threatened. The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* remarks that



the “white man has put a knife to the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart” (Acheb, 1992, p. 161), the African society has disintegrated.

### Social Disintegration

In the course of extending the geography of the nation, the colonizers exploited the natives economically, politically, and psychologically. The natives were treated as mere subhuman beings. Although the proclamation of humanity is urged all over the world, it remains only in words. The colonized lands were highly fertile for raw materials, and the colonies were prosperous. In *Orientalism*, Said (1995) argues: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe. It is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest colonies, the source of civilization and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other”(p. 1). The colonizers have significantly benefited from the colonized country. Cheap labor and sufficient raw materials enable them to thrive in various industries within colonized nations. Therefore, the colonizers are economically stable. Acheb portrays the arrival of colonizers. They bring chaos with them. The arrival of the white man in Umuofia sped the riot to its horizons. The narrator reveals in the novel:

And then quite suddenly a shadow fell on the world and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud.... Locusts are descending...at first a fairly small swarm came. They were the harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny of light...They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty branches broke away under them. (Acheb, 1992, p. 48)

Acheb, 1992's language to describe the Locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like "settled" and "every" emphasizes the sudden ubiquitous presence of these insects. They hint at how the arrival of white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. “They settled on every...branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown earth color of the vast, hungry swarm” (Acheb, 1992, p. 49). Said (1995) writes his observation:

The Locusts are so heavy that they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. “It told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them” . . . And they began to shoot. . . . The colonizers began to show their power over indigenous people, “Their clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake has turned the color of the blood. In this way disorder occurred within the Igbo society. Xenophobic situation is created among the Igbos. (pp.120-21)

Said’s (1995) argument justifies that the world becomes ‘polarized’ based on geography, culture, politics, military power, racial prejudice, etc. Therefore, the world is divided into

two halves: the first world and the Third World. The physical disparity leads the natives to fight for their rights in their land. Complete chaos has emerged among the suffering people and in their nation. The peace-loving Igbo people are distorted, and disorder has become their lifestyle. The peaceful society has undergone a significant transformation into a distorted one.

The drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat. Darkness was around the corner, and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the center of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the

center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old, who, with his brothers and half-brothers, had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded, and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. (Achebe, 1992, p.109)

Things begin to fall apart after this event. Okonkwo's exile in Mbanta is not only a personal disaster but also removes him from his home village at a crucial time; he returns to a changed world that can no longer adapt him. The peaceful society has changed into a battlefield. Okonkwo is the victim of chance. "They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals, and destroyed his barn" (Achebe, 1992 110). The most significant loss is more than material: Okonkwo's faith in the power of hard work is shaken. His will and strong arms cannot prevent this disaster, nor can he hold society together. His world burns down at his eye-witness, he can no longer stop the world from falling apart, changing into ashes.

### Conclusion

It is not Achebe's intention to demonstrate any superiority that an idealistic pre-colonial Nigerian existence might hold over life in Europe. What he seeks to achieve is an illumination of the complicated truth of African existence and a concrete insight into the reality of their existence. Similarly, he does not attempt to impose Nigerian culture on a European audience. This is precisely what he objects to in the colonial project -- the forcing of European culture on an unwilling Nigerian clan. Upon first contact, the natives are instantly and ignorantly labeled "false" and "wicked". It is easy to understand how Achebe repeatedly views colonial relationships as "master and slave" relationships. Achebe mentions the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonizer in the novel. The disintegration of Igbo society is a central theme in *Things Fall Apart*. The new faith divides father from son, and the Christians seek to attack the very heart of Igbo belief; such an attack also attacks the core of Igbo culture, as the tribe's religious beliefs are integral to all other aspects of life. The people of Umuofia find it challenging to arrive at a firm conclusion as to their opinion of the Whites. In the end, they remain ambiguous; for example, they like the wealth and newfound value that white trade brings, a potent reminder of the missionaries' role in finding a

substitute for slaves. The missionaries and churches have replaced the traditional rituals. The elegant (Igbo) culture is distorted. Political, religio-cultural, social, and economic disorders occur within the Igbo society due to the interference of colonizers. Disorder occurs in their peaceful society; all the Indigenous heritages fall apart, fall apart the personal integrity, socio-cultural identity and sense of belonging.

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