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Research Article



Colonial Subjugation and Cultural Erosion in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This paper deals with British colonizers' colonization over Nigeria, subjugation and cultural Erosion in Nigeria. On the one hand, it shows how Nigeria is endowed with their different primitive cultural practices and natural resources. Native Nigerians were happy with their indigenous cultural legacy and identity before the British colonization started. But, they became unable to govern their nation developing their natural resources and preserving their cultural practices. On the other hand, it shows the encroachment of Britishers in Nigeria. The white Europeans start implanting seeds of Christianity, education system, establish courts, and their government in Nigeria rejecting the indigenous cultural norms, social values, their ancestral spirit and divine power of cultural society. As a result, the conflict between the white intruders and African indigenous people that gets reflected in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is clearly

discussed in the research. Finally, the research reflects how the novel is written as a counter-narrative that opposes western views towards African civilization. Regarding research methodology, qualitative approach becomes very contextual since the novels deals with the fictional characters and details. For a broad theoretical framework, the postcolonial theory that incorporates the idea of colonization and after effects of colonization becomes very effective. Likewise, for the theoretical tools, Edward Said's Orientalism becomes a very applicable tool as it shows how the westerners take the orient, subjugate, dominate, exploit and colonize. Besides, Frantz Fanon's theoretical concept of racism and Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concept of mimicry become effective tools for the textual analysis of the primary text.

Keywords: Colonialism, Subjugation, Mimicry, Indigenous culture, Orientalism

Introduction

This research deals with the cultural erosion of indigenous Nigerians due to colonial subjugation. The characters portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* represent indigenous Nigerians and white colonizers/missionaries. Achebe's first novel was *Things Fall Apart* which was published in 1958. It was his masterpiece. It has been a milestone not only for Achebe's literary career but also for the history of African literature since it has been the first African novel to write about Africa from the mindset and point of view of an African instead of from the point of view of western writers. It has got a pivotal place in African literature and it has been the most widely read, translated and studied African novel. Along with *Things Fall Apart*, he has written other novels such as *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). He was born at Ogidi in Nigeria in 1930, whereas Nigeria was colonized in 1884. It means by the time he was born, Nigeria had already been colonized by British government. His childhood was influenced by both African traditional Igbo culture and postcolonial educational system, law and Christianity. So, his novel reflects the conflicts between Nigerian culture and British culture. In other words, his writing reveals how Nigerian culture is influenced by western culture. In "The Distortion of Cultural Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*," Sule Okuroglu Ozun and Nagihan Baskale state, "Born on the 15th of November in the small town of Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria, and growing up in Nigeria which is one of the colonies of British Empire, Achebe, along with his family, was imposed extensively to the language and culture of the colonizer as a result of which his family became the early converts of Christianity" (88). Achebe's life reveals the influence of colonizers' religion and other aspects of culture. In 'Introduction: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.' Harold Bloom's claim about *Things Fall Apart*, "*Things Fall Apart* is a historical novel, set in the British colony of Nigeria at about the turn from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Since Chinua Achebe was born in 1930, he goes back a full generation, to the Nigeria of his parents" (1) suggests that the select novel is related to the history of Nigeria, too.

This research tries to explore how the indigenous Nigerian characters have a conflict with the European whites who become colonizers/missionaries. The research tries to discover how Nigeria was before it was colonized and after it was colonized. In one way, the select novel gives historical flavor as it shows how colonialism started engulfing entire Nigeria along with

other African countries. Thus, the setting of the novel was in the then British colony of Nigeria at about the turn from nineteenth into twentieth century. The novel tells the story of Ibo people, their culture, religion, language in the Ibo village in Nigeria. It mainly revolves round the protagonist Okonkwo who is a champion wrestler, a wealthy farmer, an influential man having a control over his community due to holding a title, a husband of three wives and a member of the select Egwugwe. The research deals with three different parts of the book – life style of Nigerians before colonization, conflict between the Nigerians and white colonizers and the negative impact of colonization upon the native Nigerians.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology is qualitative since the study deals with fictional characters delineated in the select novel, their feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Since the research starts from specific to generalization, the inductive approach becomes suitable. Likewise, the textual analysis is adopted as a fundamental theoretical method for doing narrative analysis, naturalistic analysis an interpretative analysis of the select novel. The study focuses on the colonial aspect of the novel as the novel reflects the influence of colonialism upon Nigerian people their culture. Hence, postcolonial theory as an umbrella becomes suitable to make a research. Likewise, as for theoretical lenses, Edward Said's 'Orientalism', Homi K. Bhabha's 'Mimicry' and Frantz Fanon's 'Theory of Racism' are applied for a broad theoretical framework.

Objectives

This research project focuses on the transformation of culture of indigenous Nigerians through the colonization of British. Since the language, religion and other cultural aspects of the latter one are dominant, the cultural identity of the former one is in crisis. Hence, one objective of the study is to explore how Nigeria was before colonization. The second objective of the study is to discover how the British whites become successful in subjugating the native Nigerians. Finally, the third objective is to scrutinize how the novel is written as a counter narrative.

Discussion

The research describes Igbo culture and traditions before white colonizers colonize Nigeria. Achebe narrates the history of Nigeria along with strengths and weaknesses of Igbo culture describing native Nigerians' festivals, their gods and the practices in their ritual ceremonies, their rich culture and other social practices. The select novel revolves round the central character Okonkwo whose life reflects the hero worship trend in the Igbo society. Achebe portrays Okonkwo's as the hero "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amaline the Cat. Amaline was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Mbaino" (1). Portraying Okonkwo as the invincible hero, Achebe tries to give a clear picture of the then Nigeria that highlights physical prowess of males and the trend of hero worship. Achebe describes Okonkwo:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father.

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. (7-8)

These lines indicate that the then African society valued physical prowess of man, polygamy and wealth of farmers. In 'The Cultural Impact Upon Human Struggle for Social Existence in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*,' Mohamed Fawzy El-Dessouky argues:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tells the story of an Ibo village of the late 1800's and one of its great men, a warrior named Okonkwo. Okonkwo is a champion wrestler, a wealthy farmer, a husband to three wives, a title holder among his people, and a member of the select Egwugwu, whose members impersonate ancestral spirits at tribal rituals. However life changes dramatically for the Ibo society and Okonkwo with the arrival of British colonizers and missionaries, also known as the white man. (100)

How the cultural rituals of Ibo society was before colonization of Ibo society gets reflected through the novel.

Ibo society of Nigeria before colonization is depicted very rich as it is endowed with different cultural, religious and social practices. But, western colonization causes cultural hegemony in Nigeria. In "Cultural Hegemony in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart: A Postcolonial Analysis*," Shymaa Neamah Mohammed Almkhilif argues:

The Igbo society is known for its distinctive social structure which is composed of the Igbo Council of Chiefs. The Council of Chiefs comprises the Igbo Clan Heads of many villages. Each clan consists of families and each family has a leader. Each clan also has its own political and economic system. Nevertheless, the Igbos, as a whole, are unified by their beliefs and traditions. They all believe in ancestors, gods, and goddesses. These beliefs are the main source of their religious and human activities (Ogbaa, 1995, p.21).

As soon as the colonizer enters this society, the Igbo culture starts changing. (187)

Almkhilif points out that the structure of Ibo society before colonization, which has undergone a drastic transformation due to western/British colonization. As for the instance of cultural tradition of Ibo society, Achebe's clear description is:

Many years ago when Okonkwo was still a boy his father, Unoka, had gone to consult Agbala. The priestess in those days was a woman called Chika. She was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared. Unoka stood before her and began his story. . . .

I saw the yams when the young tendrils appear. I weed- "Hold your peace!" screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. (17)

Nigerian society was full of such cultural rituals and practices before the arrival of the white Britishers. Even Diana Akers Rhoads points out in her essay "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," "One of Achebe's aims is to present the peculiarities of the Igbo culture, especially the beauties and wisdom of its art and institutions, though . . . Achebe also presents its weaknesses which require change and which aid in its destruction. A further aim, however, is the presentation of a common humanity which transcends the European and the African, which belongs to both but is peculiar to neither" (62). Though Rhoads tries to focus on strengths of Ibo society, she happens to point out even negative ones too.

However, after the advent of the white Europeans particularly the British, the Nigerian society undergoes so many changes. The novel shows how the whites intrude into Okonkwo's society Umuofia after Okonkwo has fled to Mbanta for murdering a young boy. So, Okonkwo has taken a shelter at his maternal uncle's house at Mbanta. Hence, the characters are mainly located in these two places in Nigeria by Achebe. Achebe's statements "But 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" (164) indicate that whites start colonizing Nigeria through religion and judicial system as they find the native Nigerians much weaker than they are. The whites start influencing the indigenous Nigerians othering them. According to Edward Said, the westerners have divided people between the orientals and the occidentals regarding the occidentals/westerners superior to the orientals/non-westerners. In *Orientalism*, Said claims "Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (3). The whites start outsmarting the native Nigerians through their skills, training and knowledge. Said's concept becomes applicable here as the whites make them feel they are inferior to them. Achebe's lines in the novel "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad" (166) reflect that the native Nigerians are easily othered by the whites, so the natives' culture gets eroded. El-Dessouky points out in the article how the whites start weakening native culture:

Traditional way of living for the Ibo society was rapidly changing in the early 1900's due to European colonialism. Many Nigerians were being absorbed by the British and straying from their traditional beliefs and values. With the advent of the white man there was a loss of native values such as communal harmony, placing society above self, respect for the aged, and reverence for achievers, which resulted in the absence of self analysis and a stable code of ethics in the society of pre-Independent Nigeria. Lured by western education and well paying jobs, the youth of the country did not hesitate to stoop to the levels of immorality and dangerous permissiveness. (100)

The success of colonizers causes a great loss of native language, religion and ancestral practices and rituals, which becomes possible due to dominant British policy. In this context, Gokcen Kaara seems to agree with Said and El-Dessouky. How Nigerian cultural and social practices and norms are weakened and degraded gets reflected in Kara's article 'The Pen and the Plow: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and The Reimagining of African Culture':

Eurocentric narratives and challenges readers to reevaluate and acknowledge the depth and value of indigenous African cultures. "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." This line metaphorically describes the destruction wrought on Igbo society by the European invasion. The "knife" symbolizes the European influence, especially the introduction of Christianity, which significantly disrupted the cohesion and unity of the Igbo community. Echoing Edward Said's criticism of Western depictions of the 'Orient,' Achebe's portrayal of Igbo culture serves as a powerful antidote to the monolithic views often perpetuated by Eurocentric narratives, making readers to confront and dismantle their own prejudices and misconceptions about African societies. (1364)

On the one hand, the above quoted lines indicate how westerners appear as dominant colonizers; on the other hand, the lines show how Eurocentric narratives, according to Said get reflected in the novel, which Achebe wants to show to the readers.

The British become successful in colonizing Nigeria through cultural hegemony, which gets depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue “The Cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes to post-colonial literatures which identify them as isolated national offshoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions” (*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, 7). Thus, the British make the native Africans/Nigerians the mimic subordinate and they realize they are really inferior to them. In his essay *Reflections on Exile*, Said argues:

My whole education was Anglocentric, so much so that I knew a great deal more about British and even Indian history and geography of the Arab world. But although taught to believe and think like an English schoolboy, I was also trained to understand that I was an alien, a non-European other, educated by my betters to know my station and not to aspire to being British. The line separating us from them were linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic. (558)

The native people or colonizers believe so become they are othered and they are under the hegemony of the western dominant culture. Said’s theoretical concept becomes contextually applicable here since the native Nigerians are othered in the select novel.

Things Fall Apart presents firstly a conflict between the white missionaries/colonizers and the native people and then the novel presents how the native Africans get colonized and othered. Though Okonkwo the protagonist is in exile, he becomes concerned how his land is controlled weakening his culture by the intruders. Kara discloses:

Okonkwo hears about the white men while he is in exile for unintentional manslaughter. His friend Obierika informs him of the destruction of Abame by the white men, who retaliated after a clansman killed one of their own. The arrival of the white men symbolizes the beginning of a complex period where the community confronts an alien presence that threatens their customs and beliefs. Achebe highlights the detrimental impact of colonization on Nigerian society and foreshadows the dramatic transformations and conflicts that permeate the rest of the novel. (1369)

The white British’s arrival causes not only subjection of the native people but also the decline of their cultural, social, religious and ancestral norms and values.

Things Fall Apart realistically presents the Eurocentric concept of the British that the native people are in the margin and they need to be civilized by the whites who have come to their nation to civilize them with a civilizing machine. The colonialist ideology consists of white colonialists’ such concepts, which means the center and peripheri relationship. Regarding such colonialist ideology, Lois Tyson argues:

So, the colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonized were at the margins. The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper “self”; native peoples were “other,” different, and therefore inferior. This practice of judging all who are different as inferior is called othering and it divides

the world “us,” the “civilized,” and “them”- the “others”- the “savages.” (*Critical Theory Today*, 366)

The colonizers through their ideology other others and subjugate them.

Before the arrival of the white missionaries/colonizers, the Igbo people/the native people follow different religious and cultural practices. As for the religion, they believe in polytheism, whereas the British colonizers believe in monotheism. In this context, El-Dessouky writes:

This is how religious the people of the tribe are. They worship all gods and believe that every god helps or harms them. When the Christian religion is introduced, many people of the Ibo became interested in this new religion. The most interested of the tribe were the people with the least titles. The British told the Ibo people that worship of polygamy is senseless and that there is only one god. (100)

Hence, the conflict between the British missionaries and the Igbo people begins regarding the religion as the British start attacking the primitive religion of the native people.

The colonizers firstly make a blow upon the religion of the native people making their creed inferior to the colonizers'. The white missionary tells the local interpreter “All the Gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who will tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has made the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us” (137-138). The white man hints at the Christianity which is superior to the native people's religion. The white man further strengthens his argument claiming that “Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm, replied the white man. “They are pieces of wood and stone” (138). Thus, the whites through their discourse become successful in convincing the native that the natives deserve to be ruled. Frantz Fanon rightly argues “Every colonized people- in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality- finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 18). The whites' success in the mission of colonization of the native Africans depends on the natives' realization that they are inferior to the whites as Fanon opines.

In one way, *The Things Fall Apart* is written as a counter-narrative to the Euro-centric ideology creating a binary that the orient is backward and uncivilized, whereas the occident is advanced and civilized. Since African religion, social norms, language, and different other cultural practices are misrepresented in western discourse by the westerners, Achebe through *The Things Fall Apart* tries to give the counter. Achebe's novel can in this context be analysed applying Said's argument that British try to show their superiority pointing out and subjugating non-Europeans. Said's argument “In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerners in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7) becomes quite applicable in context of Britishers' subjugating the Igbo people affecting their culture. Achebe seems to raise voices on behalf of the Nigerians regarding the politics of recognition highlighting rich African cultures. A critic, Kara, agrees with both Achebe and Said claiming:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe masterfully illuminates the Igbo culture and refutes Western stereotypes and prejudices. While the rich oral traditions of the Igbo

community, as cited by Achebe, represent cultural depth and reverence for communication, European colonizers often misjudged and oversimplified these traditions. This misunderstanding goes beyond proverbs and encompasses various aspects of the Igbo way of life, from their system of government to their religious practices. The inability or unwillingness of Europeans to comprehend the complexity of Igbo society led to generalizations and a tendency to view African cultures through the lens of European superiority. Such views inevitably led to cultural impositions and efforts to civilize so-called 'primitive' societies. By highlighting the different aspects of Igbo culture, such as their cherished art of conversation, Achebe effectively challenges Eurocentric narratives and challenges readers to reevaluate and acknowledge the depth and value of indigenous African cultures. (1363-1364)

Without pointing out the richness of Igbo culture and African civilization, the British seem to only point out the negative aspects to subjugate the native Nigerians. Besides Kara, another critic, Cigdem Pala Mull in 'Clash of Cultures in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*' argues:

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) presents Iboland (western Nigeria) in the period between 1850-1900, covering the incidents both before and after the arrival of the Christian missionaries. In this novel, Achebe offers an almost documentary account of the daily life, customs, ceremonies and beliefs of the Igbo people without evasion or romanticizing. Tired of the misrepresentations of Africa and the Africans in the western canon, Achebe tries to portray western colonialism and Christianity confronting an animist tribal system in Nigeria in its full complexity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes both the positive and the negative aspects of the Igbo people without romanticizing or sentimentalizing them. He also avoids a total condemnation of the White man. (1895)

Thus, on the one hand, Achebe gives counter to the westerners' Eurocentric narrativity; on the other hand, Achebe highlights the depth and richness of African culture and society.

On the one hand, *Things Fall Apart* reflects the counter narrative for the British/Colonizers as the colonizers impose their colonial ideology upon the Nigerians; on the other hand, Achebe artistically gives a powerful message to the readers that colonialism does not have disadvantages only for the Nigerians. Colonialism which symbolizes modernism incorporates British education system, democracy, liberalism, and new government system. The British missionaries help the Igbo people get rid of different evil and superstitious practices too due to which even the Igbo people start supporting them even embracing changes. As for an example, killing of Ikemefuna who is reared by Okonkwo as his own son in the family, but is killed by himself due to superstitious belief can be taken. Achebe's statements about killing innocent boy Ikemefuna "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it" (54) and "My father, they have killed me, as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machet and cut him down" (57) reflect evil practices and heinous crime. Likewise, the practice of killing twins regarding them evil reflects how backward and superstitious Igbo people are. Nwoye who is Okonkwo's son hates such practices. About Nwoye, Achebe states: "Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest" (58). Killing Ikemefuna and twins is a great superstition that causes Nwoye to be a

Christian going against his indigenous religion. In 'The colonized Fall Apart: A postcolonial Analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*,' Md. Jahidul Azad argues: "The majority of people undoubtedly never voiced concern about it, but the system was a tremendous mystery to the intelligent. Both Obierika, an Okonkwo acquaintance, and Nwoye, his little son, are perplexed and bewildered. The murder of Ikemefuna in the name of the so-called oracle and society also violently shocks Nwoye's conscience" (120). Nwoye's embracing Christianity represents Nigerians' following Christianity giving up their old and traditional religion because of superstitious evil practices as mentioned above.

The colonialism gets justified by missionaries and the Igbo people who are convinced by the missionaries to give up old evil practices of their society and to embrace modernity. Firstly, British colonialists/missionaries work as the caviling machine through Christianity, education and law. Achebe's statement about the interpreter Mr. Kiaga "We have built a church. We want you all to come in every seventh day to worship the true God" (142) indicates how missionaries try to prove their western god is true, whereas their god is false. Achebe's statement about Br. Brown's (District Commissioner) "And the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created" (170) reflects missionaries' making the religion of the Igbo people inferior and false. Likewise, regarding education, Achebe writes about Mr. Brown's advice "He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write" (171). Achebe again mentions "... the white man's medicine was quick in working. Mr. Brown's school produced quick results" (171). Secondly, the Igbo people start mimicking the colonizers' religion, language, education system and other changes that make modernity. In 'The Dilemma of Preserving or Progressing in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*,' Mehmet Recep Tas claims "The erosion of cultural identity is evident in the character of Nwoye, who undergoes a transformative process as he embraces Christianity" (310). Explicitly, Nwoye's adoption of Christianity indicates erosion of cultural identity. Implicitly, it indicates his embracing modernity. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" is highly applicable in case of the Igbo people like Nwoye in Nigeria. But, Okonkwo's suicide at the end of the novel indicates his refusal to accept modernity and changes brought by modernity in Nigeria. The tragic end of Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* reveals the success of colonization and surrender of the Igbo people. Tas's argument "The traditional festivals, rituals, and practices that once defined the community become marginalized in the face of modernity" (310) indicates how modernity or mission of the colonizers causes the cultural erosion.

Conclusions

Thus, though *Things Fall Apart* shows even the positive changes brought by civilizing mission of the westerners/British, the novel mainly discovers the Colonial subjugation of the British in Nigeria, which they do through Christianity, education system and law. They other the indigenous Nigerians, make them feel inferior to them, enable them to mimic their system, give up their (Nigerians') own culture and surrender to the colonialists'. As a result, age-old traditions of Nigeria diminish at the cost of dawn of new belief systems. Thus, the research reflects the colonial subjugation and the cultural erosion in Nigeria.

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