

CULTURAL COLLISION AND COLONIAL POWER: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This study explores Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart through the lens of postcolonial literary theory, focusing on the cultural, ideological, and psychological impacts of colonialism on indigenous Igbo society. The novel, often regarded as a foundational postcolonial text, reveals the complexities of cultural identity, resistance, and displacement in the face of European imperial domination. Through close textual analysis, the research highlights how Achebe deconstructs colonial narratives and reclaims African voice and agency. This paper also investigates the nuanced portrayal of hybrid identities, the clash between tradition and modernity, and the broader implications of colonial disruption. Ultimately, the study affirms Things Fall Apart as a powerful literary act of resistance against the hegemonic structures of Western imperialism.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Postcolonialism, Colonial Disruption, Chinua Achebe, African Identity, Things Fall Apart</p>	<p>Received: 12/02/2025</p> <p>Revised: 22/02/2025</p> <p>Accepted: 25/02/2025</p>

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial literature emerged as a response to the long-standing cultural, political, and psychological consequences of colonization. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958, stands as one of the earliest African novels written in English that reclaims the narrative agency of colonized peoples. It tells the story of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo leader, whose world disintegrates with the arrival of British colonialists and Christian missionaries. Achebe seeks not only to depict precolonial African life with complexity and dignity but also to expose the destructive consequences of imperialism on indigenous cultures.

The relevance of a postcolonial reading of this novel lies in how Achebe rewrites history from the perspective of the colonized. By presenting Igbo society on its own terms—

rituals, customs, belief systems—the novel resists Eurocentric portrayals of Africa as savage or uncivilized. This paper will explore how *Things Fall Apart* challenges colonial ideologies and portrays the struggle for cultural preservation in the face of violent cultural disruption.

Postcolonial literature emerged as a response to the complex legacies of colonization, providing a voice for those historically marginalized in imperial discourse. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, first published in 1958, stands as a seminal text in this tradition. The novel reconstructs the image of precolonial African life from the perspective of the colonized, challenging the dominant narratives that framed Africa as a primitive and passive space. Through the character of Okonkwo and the richly detailed portrayal of Igbo culture, Achebe resists reductive Western stereotypes and offers a layered, humanized representation of African society before and during the advent of British colonialism.

Moreover, the novel addresses the profound psychological and cultural dislocation caused by imperial intervention. Achebe's nuanced storytelling does not merely reverse colonial assumptions; it complicates them. By focusing on the internal tensions within Igbo society alongside external colonial pressures, the novel avoids romanticizing the precolonial past and instead acknowledges its complexities. This balanced representation allows *Things Fall Apart* to function as both a critique of colonialism and a reflection on the challenges of cultural change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provide the foundational framework for analyzing literary texts shaped by colonial experiences. Said's concept of Orientalism illustrates how the West constructs the East as an exotic and inferior "Other," a concept applicable to the British perception of African societies in Achebe's novel. Meanwhile, Bhabha's ideas of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence help unpack the complex identities that emerge under colonial rule.

Previous studies on *Things Fall Apart* have noted its pivotal role in deconstructing colonial discourse. Critics like Simon Gikandi and Elleke Boehmer emphasize Achebe's use of language and form to resist colonial cultural dominance. The novel's blend of English with Igbo proverbs, idioms, and folklore reflects an effort to reclaim linguistic power. This research builds upon such readings by emphasizing how *Things Fall Apart* represents a site of ideological contestation, where African identity is not only defended but reimagined.

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws from the works of major postcolonial thinkers. Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (1978) lays the groundwork for understanding how colonial powers constructed Africa and its people as the "Other." Said's theory reveals how literature was used to justify colonial rule through misrepresentation. In Achebe's case, *Things Fall Apart* serves as a counter-narrative that reclaims African subjectivity. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) is equally essential, as it provides tools for analyzing the

ambivalent and overlapping identities formed under colonial rule—an idea central to characters like Nwoye.

Additionally, Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) raises questions about whether colonized peoples can ever fully articulate their experience within the structures imposed by colonial discourse. Scholars such as Elleke Boehmer (2005) and Simon Gikandi (1991) further develop the role of language, memory, and historical reclamation in postcolonial literature. Gikandi argues that Achebe's fusion of English with Igbo oral traditions is itself a form of resistance, challenging the dominance of Western narrative forms. Collectively, these perspectives position Achebe's novel not just as a story of cultural collapse, but as a strategic literary intervention in postcolonial discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in postcolonial theory. Through close reading and textual analysis, the study focuses on key themes such as cultural imperialism, resistance, identity crisis, and epistemic violence. Postcolonial concepts from Said, Bhabha, and Spivak guide the analytical framework, allowing for an exploration of both narrative content and structural elements of the novel.

Primary data is derived from Achebe's novel, while secondary sources include academic articles, literary critiques, and theoretical texts. The analysis is conducted thematically, concentrating on character development, plot progression, and symbolic motifs that reflect the tensions of colonial encounter. This approach provides insight into the ways literature can serve as both historical testimony and political intervention.

This research employs a qualitative, text-based analysis, with postcolonial literary theory as its primary framework. By engaging in close reading of key passages, the study uncovers how Achebe critiques colonial narratives and reconstructs African cultural identity. The analysis centers on themes such as resistance, identity, hybridity, and cultural hegemony, and examines how these are represented through characters, symbolism, and narrative structure. The interpretive nature of this method allows for a deeper engagement with the text's ideological subtext and its dialogue with historical realities.

In addition to textual analysis, the study draws upon relevant secondary sources to contextualize the novel within broader theoretical debates. Articles from journals such as *Research in African Literatures* and *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing* provide scholarly perspectives that enrich the interpretation. This dual reliance on primary and secondary material enables a layered analysis that connects the literary and the historical, the textual and the theoretical.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this chapter, the analysis focuses on how the global crisis brought by colonialism is represented in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The novel illustrates the multifaceted impact of British colonialism on Igbo society—highlighting the clash between indigenous traditions and the foreign systems brought by missionaries and colonial administrators. By using a postcolonial lens, particularly the theories of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, this chapter explores the symbolic, cultural, and psychological dimensions of colonial disruption.

Achebe's narrative presents not only the external invasion of colonial powers but also the internal fragmentation and identity crisis experienced by the colonized people. The selected quotes below demonstrate key moments where the traditional values of Umuofia are challenged, deconstructed, and eventually transformed under colonial pressure. Each quote is followed by an in-depth explanation and a theoretical interpretation to uncover the layers of meaning within the text.

"He was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (*Things Fall Apart*, Achebe)

This quote appears after the tragic suicide of Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, who takes his own life after failing to adapt to the colonial regime. In Igbo culture, suicide is regarded as an abomination—dishonorable and spiritually impure. Ironically, Okonkwo, who spent his life defending traditional values, dies in a way that defies those very norms. His death signifies not only personal despair but also the symbolic collapse of the pre-colonial cultural order he stood for.

From a postcolonial perspective, Okonkwo's demise reflects what Edward Said might term "epistemic violence"—the imposition of colonial knowledge systems that erase indigenous ways of knowing and being. Okonkwo loses not only political power but also the framework through which he understands his identity and place in the world. Drawing from Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern", Okonkwo becomes a figure who can no longer speak or be heard in a world redefined by colonial authority. His final silence in death is a powerful metaphor for the silencing of colonized subjects.

One key finding is the representation of cultural disintegration through the character of Okonkwo. His identity is deeply rooted in Igbo customs, masculinity, and ancestral honor. However, the arrival of British colonizers destabilizes the traditional structure, introducing new systems of governance and religion that erode communal bonds. Okonkwo's ultimate suicide symbolizes the collapse of a cultural world unable to withstand the pressures of imperial domination.

Another finding is the emergence of hybrid identities among younger generations. Characters like Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, illustrate the internal conflict between traditional

values and colonial influence. Nwoye's conversion to Christianity is not just a personal rebellion but a reflection of how colonialism seduces and reshapes indigenous consciousness. This hybridization underscores the complexity of identity in a colonized society—not as binary but as fragmented and evolving.

One of the most prominent findings is the portrayal of epistemic violence—the way colonial ideology invalidates indigenous knowledge systems. The introduction of Christianity and colonial law systematically undermines the authority of the Igbo elders and their spiritual traditions. Institutions like the *egwugwu*, once central to justice and community life, are dismantled, not through direct warfare, but by cultural infiltration and moral redefinition. Achebe illustrates how this epistemic domination leads to not only institutional collapse but also psychological fragmentation.

"It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow."
(*Things Fall Apart*, Achebe)

This quote reflects Nwoye's attraction to Christianity—not because of its theological coherence, but due to its emotional resonance. Nwoye, who feels alienated by the rigid and violent aspects of Igbo masculinity, finds solace and beauty in the Christian message. His conversion illustrates how colonialism operates not only through force but also through emotional and spiritual seduction.

This moment exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and ambivalence. Nwoye stands at the intersection of two worlds—Igbo tradition and Christian colonial influence—without fully belonging to either. His identity becomes hybrid and fractured. Achebe shows how colonialism reconfigures personal subjectivities, creating divided selves who are emotionally caught between resistance and acceptance.

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers..." (*Things Fall Apart*, Achebe)

This quote reveals the regret of the Igbo elders for initially underestimating the power of the missionaries. The colonizers did not invade with weapons at first; instead, they used religion as a subtle and strategic tool to gain influence. This clever, quiet infiltration divided the community, allowing the colonial system to take root from within.

This scene illustrates Edward Said's idea of Orientalism, where the West constructs the East (or Africa) as inferior and in need of salvation. The "peaceful" arrival of Christianity disguises a deeper ideological violence—a dismantling of indigenous beliefs and systems of value. Achebe critiques how colonialism uses soft power (religion and discourse) to erode the community's internal cohesion, while portraying itself as benevolent.

Another key finding is the complexity of resistance and complicity within the colonized community. While characters like Okonkwo resist the new order with open hostility, others—such as Obierika or the younger converts—exhibit more ambivalent responses. This spectrum of reactions reveals the nuanced human consequences of imperialism, which cannot be reduced to simple binaries of oppression and defiance. Achebe does not idealize resistance; instead, he exposes its costs and contradictions, especially in a society already burdened by internal hierarchies and rigid gender norms.

"The egwugwu house was now a pile of earth and ashes. And for the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that the old days were gone, never to return." (Things Fall Apart, Achebe)

This quote marks the destruction of the egwugwu house, the sacred center of Igbo justice and ancestral connection. Its demolition is both literal and symbolic: it represents the loss of indigenous authority, legal systems, and spiritual heritage. Okonkwo's realization that "the old days were gone" is a moment of cultural mourning—a recognition that the pre-colonial world is irreversibly changed.

According to Gayatri Spivak, the destruction of local institutions can be seen as an example of silencing the subaltern. Without their traditional systems, the people of Umuofia no longer have a space to articulate their worldview. The destruction of the *egwugwu* house symbolizes how colonialism displaces native epistemologies, replacing them with Western structures of meaning and control.

The textual evidence drawn from *Things Fall Apart* reveals the deep cultural, psychological, and epistemic consequences of colonialism on indigenous societies. Through the character of Okonkwo, Achebe illustrates how traditional values rooted in masculinity, honor, and communal identity collapse under the weight of imperial domination. At the same time, characters like Nwoye demonstrate the formation of hybrid identities, torn between ancestral roots and the seductive power of foreign belief systems. These representations are not simplistic depictions of good versus evil, but rather complex portraits of a society undergoing profound disruption.

The dismantling of indigenous institutions, such as the egwugwu, serves as a metaphor for epistemic violence—the process through which colonial ideologies invalidate native knowledge systems and impose foreign structures of meaning. Achebe's narrative captures not only the external transformations brought by colonial governance but also the internal struggles of a people navigating conflicting realities.

Collectively, these findings affirm that *Things Fall Apart* functions as both a literary and ideological site where African identity, resistance, and memory are negotiated. Achebe does not merely reverse colonial stereotypes; instead, he constructs a balanced portrayal of a society in crisis, highlighting the tragic human cost of imperial ambition. The novel thus

stands as a powerful postcolonial intervention that reclaims narrative space for those silenced by empire.

Achebe's narrative is a counter-discourse to colonial literature that often depicted Africa as a land of chaos awaiting European salvation. By centering the narrative on an African protagonist and immersing the reader in Igbo life, Achebe restores the dignity of African history and tradition. The novel shows that colonialism was not merely a political conquest but a profound epistemic invasion that sought to redefine reality itself.

The novel also engages with the ambivalence of colonial power, as described by Bhabha. Missionaries are not uniformly villainous; some, like Mr. Brown, display moments of empathy and cultural curiosity. Yet, even these "softer" forms of colonialism function as tools of assimilation and control. Achebe demonstrates how colonial authority masks its violence under the guise of civilization, gradually displacing indigenous values with Western norms.

Achebe's narrative operates as a form of literary decolonization, reclaiming narrative space previously dominated by colonial authors like Joseph Conrad. In fact, Achebe's own critique of *Heart of Darkness*—which he labeled a deeply racist text—clarifies the urgency of offering alternative African perspectives. By embedding Igbo proverbs, oral traditions, and indigenous worldviews into the narrative fabric, *Things Fall Apart* resists the erasure of African epistemology and asserts its place in global literary discourse.

Furthermore, the novel engages deeply with Bhabha's notion of hybridity. Characters such as Nwoye embody the contradictions of colonial identity formation: drawn toward the ideological security of Christianity while still haunted by ancestral traditions. Achebe illustrates how colonialism produces fractured selves—neither entirely traditional nor wholly assimilated. This liminal space becomes a site of both psychological trauma and cultural negotiation, underscoring the long-term impacts of colonial domination on personal and collective identity.

CONCLUSION

Through a postcolonial lens, *Things Fall Apart* emerges as a powerful critique of colonial disruption and a celebration of precolonial African life. Achebe uses fiction as a space for cultural recovery, challenging the historical silencing of African voices. The novel does not romanticize tradition nor portray colonialism in simplistic terms, but rather explores the nuanced and often painful intersections of resistance, adaptation, and loss. This research affirms that *Things Fall Apart* is not merely a novel about individual tragedy but a collective narrative of cultural upheaval. Achebe's work invites readers to question the legacy of empire and consider how literature can both reflect and resist systems of oppression. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a profound reflection on the violence—both visible and invisible—that accompanies colonization. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the novel reveals the insidious ways in which colonial powers dismantle indigenous societies—not only through political conquest but through cultural and ideological imposition. The tragedy of Okonkwo

is emblematic of a larger tragedy: the unraveling of a people's identity under imperial rule. The novel's legacy endures because of its ability to speak across historical and cultural boundaries. By affirming African cultural integrity and challenging colonial myths, Achebe has provided a powerful model for postcolonial literature. His work continues to inspire critical dialogue about history, memory, and the politics of representation—making *Things Fall Apart* not only a literary masterpiece but a pivotal text in global decolonial thought.

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