

Elements of Postcolonial Literature Studies in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"

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Abstract: This paper is written after a thorough reading of Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" in order to reveal his mindset against white man's invasion of his native land as a trend setter of postcolonial literature in Nigeria. It takes into consideration how African postcolonial writers view colonialism and its tragic effects felt by their people and their individual countries at large after decolonization. The research, in the first instance, defines colonialism, postcolonialism and will also examine postcolonial theory so as to see what it focuses upon. The research work will, furthermore, discuss the features of postcolonial literature, and eventually make known the objectives of postcolonial writing i.e. what triggers them to resist the imposition of the white man's culture and identity upon them (colonized), as well as how they render the resistance through revisiting and glorifying their history, culture, identities etc.

Keywords: Colonialism, Decolonization, Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Theory

Introduction

Things Fall Apart is a novel written by a Nigerian novelist, poet, critic and professor Chinua Achebe in order to expose his heart-felt agony on how European missionaries and colonial masters invade Ibo land and destabilize the indigenous cultures and identities of the Ibo populace. Of course these people witness the grief of colonization and its aftermaths, leading to disintegration of their cultures and identities as presented in the novel. This split of these cultures and identities is pronounced by Obierika thus:

We were amused by his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (Achebe, pp. 124-125).

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* writer, is born on 16th November, 1930 at Ogidi village, Anambra State, Nigeria and dies in March 21, 2013 at Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. With his peculiar concern about the coming of Africa at its times of crisis; his novels differ in subject matter since from the Umuofian first contact with the white man to the moment when African literary writers attempt to create a stable moral order out of the values taking changes in urban areas. Achebe reads English and literature at University College (presently University of Ibadan). He teaches briefly before taking appointment at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos. There, he serves as external broadcasting director in 1961–66. Together with the poet Christopher Okigbo, they find a publishing company at Enugu in 1967. He tours to the United States in 1969 with his associate writers Cyprian Ekwensi and Gabriel Okara. When he comes back to Nigeria he takes the appointment of a research fellow at the University of Nigeria and handles the position of a professor of English from 1976 till 1981. He is the director of two Nigerian publishers, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. and Nwankwo-Ifejika Ltd. in 1970. After a car accident in 1990 in Nigeria, he is left partially paralyzed. In this condition, he moves to the United States and teaches at Bard College, New York. He leaves Bard, where he joins the faculty of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island in 2009.

Therefore, Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958, concerns traditional Igbo life at the time of the emergence of missionaries and colonial government in his homeland. His principal character - Okonkwo cannot embrace the new order, though the old has already collapsed as indicated by Obierika above. In the second novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960), he portrays a newly appointed civil servant, who returns from university study in England and one failing to cope up with the moral values he acknowledges to be right amid the mandates and seductions of people surrounding his present civil rank in the community. In *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe presents his principal character and of course the chief priest of the village that is under British control, whose son turns out to be an anxious Christian, displaying grievances over the position he is put in by the white man against his own people. *A Man of the People* (1966) as well as *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) deal with cases of corruption and other facets of postcolonial African life.

Before discussing elements of postcolonial writing, which form the very subject of this write up as indicated in the abstract, it is pertinent for this paper to define the term colonialism and throw light on its aftermaths that trigger the emergence of postcolonial literature studies (post colonialism) by African and Eastern theorists and novel writers. The research will describe post colonialism and thereafter postcolonial theory. While elements of postcolonial writing should come in the literature review section of the paper to establish the body of the paper.

The term Colonialism is defined as the practice by which a powerful country directly controls less powerful countries and uses their resources to increase its own power and wealth (Collins, 2021). While the term decolonization means the period when colonized

nations gained independence from the hands of the British imperialists for their own power control, assertion of their own cultures, values and identities. The word "postcolonialism", then, deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies ... of formerly colonized societies ... However, from the late 1970s, the term has been used by cultural critics to discuss the various social, political and cultural effects of colonization ... It now describes ... a discourse generating a specific reading practice (Ashcroft, 2012). Postcolonial Theory is therefore defined from the view of Edward Said, who is seen as the cornerstone of the literary postcolonial literature. Said considers it as the false image of the Orient fabricated by Western thinkers as the primitive "other" in contrast with the civilized West, believing that the consequences of colonialism are still persisting in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which permeates many ex-colonies. The powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture, whereas those of the Oriental peoples have been ignored or distorted (cited in Hamadi, 2014).

It is really the mentality of the colonial powers to impose their worldview on the peoples or countries they degraded, rendering them "objects" of observation as well as denying them the authority to see themselves as full individuals. The colonizers, then, see themselves as "subjects" i.e. those having superior identities and experiences. Post colonialism, tries to focus on the attempts of those colonized societies with a view to reasserting and revisiting the identities they claim they have, which include cultural and national identities that were hitherto tarnished and denied for them by colonizers in an attempt to impose theirs.

In this dimension, post colonialism goes hand in hand with deconstruction in trying to reject those man-made "binaries," which incorporate fixed perspectives and disowning the rest, decreasing outsiders to the position of "others." Colonized countries are seen as existing outside the system of beliefs or values of the colonizers. The imperialists, to them, possess the sense of inexplicable, exotic and strange against the ideas and customs of the "other" i.e. colonized.

Objectives of the Study

- (a) To get rid of those artificial binary oppositions.
- (b) To deconstruct universal truth (Metanarrative)
- (c) To reclaim or revisit their past (history) by making known their customs, folklores, legends, stories, songs etc.
- (d) To create and rewrite their history from another perspective (i.e. to give it a meaning).
- (e) To embark on appropriation of the English language (Standard Code) from its hegemonic nature and switch to Linguistic Code (substandard or impure language).
- (f) To subvert the superiority of the western culture and ideology.
- (g) To prioritize their culture, identity and ideology through their texts.
- (h) To prove to the western powers that "subalterns" can now talk.

Literature Review

This section of literature review presents the elements of postcolonial writing the research is targeting at. One of the elements postcolonial writers fight against has been the establishment of binary opposition which reflects the white man's superiority complex. In Ibo society, more especially Umuafia and its neighbouring clans of Ubaino, Mbanta etc., women suppression matters in those days and beyond in the name of gender superiority. Social crimes are divided into two. If a person kills another person accidentally, this is woman crime. But where a person kills another intentionally, this one is man crime. During the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezeudu an important figure in Umuafia, Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills the dead man's sixteen-year-old boy as the noble men of the clan fire their guns as a traditional farewell to the deceased. For killing this poor boy, Okonkwo only commits the female crime since it is unintentional:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years (Achebe, 1958, p. 87).

Another gender segregation in Ibo land is exposed by Uchendu – Okonkwo's mother's youngest brother that goodness and sweetness in life are associated to fatherland, while sorrow and bitterness are linked to mother land. This is understood when Okonkwo flees to Mbanta his motherland on seven years exile. He and his family are warmly received by his mother's kinship. In words of consolation and courage giving for Okonkwo and his relatives there to live and speak as one, Uchendu confides in Okonkwo that:

A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland (Achebe, 1958, p. 94).

In a similar gender superiority and woman suppression, which postcolonial writers frown at and describe as patriarchal, Okonkwo is seen beating his wife, because she fails to cook his afternoon meal on time. She goes to plait her hair instead. It is the time when Umuafia begins celebrating the Week of Peace in preparation for the next rainy season. Beating a woman is not only patriarchal, as in the case of postcolonial literature, but also an abomination to the injunction of Ani - the earth goddess being worshipped in Ibo land in those days, because she is too part of the clan. Hence Okonkwo is punished. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess explains:

Your wife was at fault, but even if you come into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her... The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give her increase, and we shall all perish.

You bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries (Achebe, 1958, p. 22).

Another thing worthy of notice in the eyes of postcolonial writers is still that human segregation by means of artificial binary opposition. The whole village of Umuafia gathers at the village square to watch a wrestling contest that takes place annually. Human segregation is made by reducing some children to slaves “The elders and grandees of the village sat on their stools brought there by their young ones and slaves” (Achebe, 1958, p. 33).

The other major postcolonial literature characteristic, which postcolonial writers take pleasure to establish is the Appropriation of the English Language (Standard Code). English as a colonial language is used as a suppressing tool of the native languages of the colonized societies through which the colonizers force their religion, ideology and other identity complexities upon the colonized. Thus postcolonial writers introduce the use of Linguistic Code (substandard or impure English) by injecting their local words and phrases in their texts to resist the impact of the Standard English upon their native languages. It is like they take the language that is used to subjugate them and then use it to challenge their oppressors (Shmoop, 2021). In this regard, Chinua Achebe uses local words and phrases in his text to impure the British English. Such words and phrases are: *agadi-nwayi* (old woman), *agbala* (woman, no title), *chi* (personal god), *efulefu* (worthless men), *egwugwu* (masquerader impersonating ancestral spirit), *eze-agadi-nwayi* (old woman’s teeth), *ndichie* (elders), *ogbanje* (a child that repeatedly comes back to its mother’s womb to be born again), *nze* (little bird), *Ezigba* (the good one), *ilo* (village playground), *jigida* (waist-beads) etc.

One significant element in postcolonial studies is their quest to subvert and resist that white man’s approval of universal truth. White man’s superiority complex, during colonization and beyond, makes them to believe that all peoples of the Eastern and African countries have no history. They are savages, barbarians, uncivilized, uncultured, uneducated as well as exotic “other,” and therefore fit to be pushed to the margin of humanity. To the colonizers, they rule not because of profit, but they enlighten the darker peoples i.e. they civilize them (Shmoop, 2021). To resist this metanarrative mentality of the white man, postcolonial writers figure out their history, cultures, systems of justice, belief systems, folktales, folksongs, legends, myths, wrestling, dances etc. in their texts. Thus Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* tries to show that Ibo people are far beyond the white man’s crazy preconception about Africa.

To start with phasing out the mentality of universal truth, Achebe talks on how marriage in Ibo land is conducted especially in the clans of Umuafia, where even within these nine clans the manner in which the marriage is done differs. This is a justification that there is a sense of diversity in African cultures as opposed to the mindset of the white man, who pre-empt and presents Africa in their texts as “unanimously uncivilized”. The writer tries to depict that what is real or true here is not real or true there. Achebe presents this through a chat between Okonkwo and Obierika while gossiping how marriage construction in the neighbouring clans is different from that of Umuafia:

It was only this morning...that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Anita, where titled men climb trees to pound foo-foo for their wives. All these customs are upside down. They don’t decide bride price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or cow in the market (Achebe, 1958, p. 51).

Obierika’s eldest brother continues with the argument thus:

That is very bad...But what is good in one place is bad in another place. In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom because it leads to a quarrel (Achebe 1958, p. 51)

In this regard, Okonkwo contributes by saying: “The world is large. I have even heard that in some tribes a man’s children belong to his wife and her family” (Achebe, p. 51). This shows that the kind of story the colonial powers narrate against the colonized societies is one-sided. In other words, it is given through a particular point of view. Hence postcolonial writers believe that there is more than one side to any story.

In order to clear the air as well as debunk the white man’s narrow-mindedness that African societies are culture-free zones, Achebe unveils some cultural practices being witnessed in Ibo land. This will prove to colonizing powers that Africa is not marginalized in the world of humanity. In Ibo land when rains fall thinly and in slanting showers under sunshine, children do not stay at home, but come out running and singing a folksong about Nnadi, who survives only in abstract thus:

The rain is falling, the sun is shining,
Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating (Achebe, 1958, p. 25).

Again, in Umuafia they have and use their local proverbs in their day-to-day conversations either at home, workplaces or town squares. Such proverbs comprise of:

If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings (Achebe, 1958, p. 6).

Another one says:

A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing (Achebe, 1958, p. 15).

In Ibo land, it is a superstitious belief that they don't answer calls from outside. When a voice calls Ekwefi outside their hut, she refuses to answer thus:

'Ekwefi' a voice called from one of the other huts. It was Nwoye's mother, Okonkwo's first wife. 'Is that me?' Ekwefi called back. That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling (Achebe, 1958, p. 29).

Traditionally, Ibo people have that expertise and intellect to cure their illness. This is understood when Ezinma is sick and her father Okonkwo goes to the bush for herbal medicine thus:

Okonkwo returned from the bush carrying ... large bundle of grasses and leaves, roots and barks of medicinal trees and shrubs ... selected the best from his bundle ... cut them up ... put them in the pot and Ekwefi poured in some water ... when he felt that the medicine had cooked long enough ... He took down the pot from the fire ... roused Ezinma and placed her on the stool, astride the steaming pot. The thick mat was thrown over both (Achebe, 1958, p. 60).

Another cultural activity which Achebe successfully presents has been wrestling. It happens that there is a wrestling contest between Umuafia and another clan. Men and women, boys and girls, elders and grandees have all gathered to witness the occasion at the Umuafian playground. The match is presented thus:

It looked like an equal match. The two judges were already moving forward to separate them when Ikezue, now desperate, went down quickly on one knee in an attempt to fling his man backwards over his head. It was a sad miscalculation. Quick as the lightning of Amadiora, Okafo raised his right leg and swung it over his rival's head ... Okafo was swept off his feet by his supporters and carried home shoulder-high. They sang his praise ... (Achebe, 1958, p. 36).

Justice in Ibo land is carried out by the ancestral spirits (*egwugwu*), who possess supernatural powers. They settle cases between husbands and wives, friends, elders and young ones, theft cases, land disputes etc. Thus, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe shows how a case between Uzowulu and his wife represented by her brother is treated. Evil Forest – the leader of the *egwugwu* conducts the case. Evil Forest tells Ozowulu this:

We have heard both sides of the case. Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute...Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman (Achebe, 1958, p. 66).

Now the supreme judge Evil Forest turns to Udokwe, Ozowulu's wife's brother "If your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him. I salute you" (Achebe, 1958, p. 66).

The above paragraphs show that Ibo people, symbolizing Nigeria and Africa, have their system of justice, which is conducted by the *egwugwu* (masquerader impersonating ancestral spirit). They also have system of belief which is still belief in these ancestral spirits. Achebe displays a variety of cultures like wrestling, dances, and marriage ceremonies and so on. He, then, proves to the white man that his people have traditional songs and proverbs that they often use during certain occasions and situations demanding the use of those proverbs.

Conclusion

Now taking into consideration of the above presentations contained in the literature review section of this paper, which forms the body of the write up, Achebe undoubtedly reveals most of the postcolonial elements the research aims to display. The research first defines some essential words like colonialism, postcolonialism, postcolonial theory and eventually moves to present those elements of postcolonial literature writings, which explicitly appear to be the main subject the paper targets at discussing. In the write up, the white man's superiority complex which leads to the entrenchment of binary opposition is tackled, because postcolonial writers hate that segregation of this is male and this is female. Again the issue of patriarchal treatment of women by men is exposed and frowned at. Furthermore, the research deals with the problem of the white man's approval of universal truth, where Achebe disbelieves that a thing should be seen and thought of in a particular point of view, but from different angles to avoid generalization and to allow or give it free-play of meanings. This is witnessed in an interlude chat among Obierika, Obierika's eldest brother and Okonkwo on the page 51. Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* succeeds in resisting the power of the colonial language over the indigenous ones through appropriation of English language (standard code) whereby switching to linguistic code (substandard) by employing his native words and phrases in his text. Finally, the write up exposes the many and divergent traditional and cultural practices being observed in Ibo land to prove to the white man that Ibo people are not uncultured and uncivilized and at the same time challenges the authority of the European literary class that subalterns cannot talk. "Subalterns" can now talk since they can write and rewrite their histories, whereby glorifying their cultures and identities through their literary writings.

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