

# ORIENTALIZING THE ORIENT: INTRICACIES OF POST-COLONIALISM IN THINGS FALL APART

Abhilash Kaushik<sup>1</sup>  
M.A. English<sup>1</sup>, Dept. of English<sup>1</sup>  
AIMS Institutes<sup>1</sup>, Bangalore University<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Power and the consequential subjugation and domination of one group over the other have always been one of the distinguishing depictions of post-colonial literature. Colonialism has left an undeniable scar on the so called "Orient" relegating them to a position from where they could never recover. They were the lab-rats of various discursive manipulations, subtle policies of the "Occident" who tired their level best to oppress, namely the middle-eastern countries and the Eastern countries, at the same time 'constructing' them according to their wish. This policy of 'ruling' and the same-time 'constructing' the "Orient" led to the inherent implication that the people of these countries in particular were not capable enough of self-governance and thus the British were required for their 'civilization'. A classic in itself, *Things Fall Apart*, came to the scene in the midst of Nigerian Renaissance and is the first novel of one of the steamrollers of Nigerian literary history, Chinua Achebe. A multifaceted personality, Achebe, in the novel, portrays the clash between the old Igbo culture and the society after the advent of the British. However, what elevates the oeuvre of the piece is the captivating depiction of the manipulative techniques used by the British in order to destroy the native Igbo culture from the grass-root level. This paper is an attempt to depict the process of Orientalizing the already Orient through the pen-picture of the destruction of Okonkwo, at the first place, along with his society at the other using the theory of post-colonialism. Moreover, the paper also deals with the various inherent 'flaws' of the Igbo society which too contributed to its downfall. In short, the paper unmasks the experience of a whole culture through the calibration of post-colonialism and power equations which hinges on the idea by Foucault.

Keywords- Construct, Orient, Occident, Power, Post-colonial

## INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial studies emerged to be one of the significant branches which glaringly portrayed the development of the so called 'Eastern' countries through their writings. Pen appeared to be the greatest weapon in asserting their 'fight' against the colonial power. Writing from within, post-colonial writers like Chinua Achebe, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and many others wrote back to the Empire in the strongest of manners possible asserting their identity, at the same time not submitting to the colonial power. Post-colonial theory and criticism tacitly assumed common ground between the cultural products of the former colonies and the culture of the metropolis and also emphasizes the tension between the metropolis and the former colonies. At the heart of Post-colonial studies there is a critique of Euro-centrism and a strong focus on those who in one way or the other have become the victims of Eurocentric thought, politics, exploitation, and other unwarranted intrusions. "Post-colonial criticism has embraced a number of aims to re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized people and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of decolonization." (Young, 2001).

African literature forms a major part of twentieth century world literature. The value of African literature lies in its African-ness retained in spite of its cosmopolitan origin. *Things Fall Apart* remains a testimony to this. Commanding a pride in world literature, the novel is a valuable landmark in its expression and a remarkable exposition of the life and culture of people. Delineating a story of an Igbo warrior Okonkwo, who single-handedly fought the atrocities of white rule in the native life, the novel also draws the attention of the readers to numerous issues like religion, culture and the anarchic tendencies prevalent in native Africa. David Carroll

observes, “The most impressive achievement of *Things Fall Apart* is the vivid picture it provides of Igbo society at the end of the nineteenth century”.( Carroll, *Chinua Achebe*).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.The paper uses perspective-based analysis in relation to various ramifications of post-colonialism in the text. Moreover, it also follows interpretations at different depths of meaning leading to the vivid portrayal of different ways of British subjugation.

2.The paper uses the movement of post-colonialism as a concrete entity, an entity having a distinct form which can studied in detail for knowing its intricacies. Thus it negates the very idea that this particular concept is nothing but the cumulative outcome of certain characteristics which in a way define the movement. This very idea in a way helps uncover the subtle hegemonic ways of assertion of dominance seen in the novel.

3. The paper also follows the method of extensive study of the Igbo society in order to portray the very fact that there were a lot of ‘demerits’ in the society itself before the advent of the British which led the ‘things’ to ‘fall apart’. It can be related to this very idea that inherently the society was with its own flaws which could, along with the British, well be said to be the causes of the disintegration of the Igbo society.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

1. The struggle between change and tradition is one of the very important findings of the research. The novel deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters taking into account that it focuses on a culture on the verge of change. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status. The Igbo villagers of the Igbo society are caught between resisting and embracing change and they face the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change. “Does the white man our custom about land?” “How can he when he does not even speak out tongue? (TFA,176).

2.The very idea of ‘masculinity’ and its varying interpretations can be said to be another notable finding of the research. Okonkwo’s relationship with his father, Unoka shapes much of his violent and rough personality. Having fear of failure as his “Hamartia”, Okonkwo wants to rise above his father’s legacy of spendthrift, indolent behavior, which he views as weak and therefore feminine. “Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength” (TFA,20).

3. Language as the carrier of cultural difference is another worth-mentioning finding of the research. It can be seen as acting at different levels in the novel. This particular novel goes against the negative portrayal of Africa in novels like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and portrays Africa as a place having its own identity and language, in this regard, plays the vital role. Various proverbs, adages, rituals seen in the novel clearly defined the African life. Various proverbs like “You can tell a ripe corn by its look” ( TFA,16),“If a child washed his hands, he would eat with kings”(TFA,5),, “ You have the yam and you have the knife”( TFA, 70) are a vivid indication of different belief systems of the Igbo society. Pidgin words like “kotman (TFA,23)” ‘(courtman)’ , “palavers(TFA,136)” ‘(conferences)’ etc. are sheer indications of the crude form of language.

4. The disintegration of the social life is another notable finding of the research. The last part of the novel depicts the events leading to the breakdown of the village of Umuofia. The religion of the people gets threatened, words like self-determination gave way to chaos and anarchy. The very centers of the life of the

people got disintegrated. Okonkwo,, for all his desire to be strong, is haunted by fear. This fear drives him to rashness, and in the end contributes to his death.

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

*Things Fall Apart* can rightly be said to be the precise representation and also the reconstruction of the past of the native Nigerians; a reconstruction which symbolized their very events of history as well as politics. Not turning his back to the culture and the crude form of life of the native Nigerians, Achebe skillfully portrays the native tradition in a mesmerizing manner at the same time dismantling the very “Euro-centric” thought of the English people. Nigeria, basically the Eastern part, in the 1880’s was witnessing tremendous cultural as well as political changes and the realistic tinge to the novel comes from the very core of the use of Igbo proverbs, depiction of Igbo belief systems, the Igbo social hierarchies, the Igbo adages. The tumultuous period was in a way challenged by Achebe because Achebe believed, “A writer has a responsibility to try and stop (these damaging trends) because unless our culture begins to take itself seriously it will never...get off the ground. (Achebe, ‘African Writers Talking’, 1972).

The highlight of the novel can very rightly be said to be the captivating closest-to- reality portrayal of the Igbo community. Basically the novel can be said to be the chronicle of the Igbo life before and after the advent of the British. Achebe hits his stride with his portrayal of the subtle ways adopted by the white missionaries in the form of the religious talks and also their intrusions in the traditional political system of the village of Umuofia. Having said that , it was not that the village of Umuofia was devoid of its own flaws. There were numerous idiosyncrasies of the people and the society in general which paved the very root of the impending downfall long before the arrival of the white missionaries. The novel combines the tragedy of Okonkwo, the hero of the Umuofian clan on other hand, as well as the tragedy of that befell the society of Umuofia at large as a result of different reasons on the other.

Driven by the hatred towards his father, Unoka, and his fear of becoming like him, Okonkwo, in many instances in the novel is seen to have acted violently without thinking, often provoking avoidable fights. His bad temper often leads to his stringent rules at his home, associating his father with ‘weakness’ and weakness with ‘femininity’, he unconsciously or consciously developed rough personality because he believes that it constitutes masculinity. “It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious and of magic, the fear of forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo’s fear was greater than these”( TFA, 9). Okonkwo was shown to be a man who showed no regard for persons with no titles, the unsuccessful ones. He always valued masculinity and power. During the course of a clan meeting, a man with no title, who bears no ill-will towards Okonkwo, contradicts him only to meet with a stinging rebuff from Okonkwo: “This meeting is for men.”(TFA, 19).

The anarchic tendency in Okonkwo breaks open in many instances. He misreads the philosophy of his society. While it is true that the society gives more importance to strong individuality, physical prowess and material prosperity, achievement and respect for elders of the clan, it never forces him to give up gentleness and warmth towards others. But “Okonkwo knew how to kill a man’s spirit”(TFA, 190). His flawed mind would rather allow the act of provoking his toughness of heart, than pay heed to his inner voice. Taking the concept of ‘discourse’ into account, Michel Foucault has often quoted that “a discourse is a violence which we do to things”( 1981,67). In this regard, Stephen Slemon explains the connotation behind the statement, “discourse.... Is the name of that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the fields of ‘truth’ through the imposition of specific knowledge, disciplines, and values” (1987, 6). Okonkwo, thus constitutes his field of

'truth', of masculinity, of power, of earning a name in the society without letting the traits of a woman creeping in.

Regarding the colonial process, Raymond Williams comments, "... but now (we) see the (colonial) process from within a rural community as the white men- missionaries, district officers- arrive with their mercenary soldiers and police... what is impressive about *Things Fall Apart* is that as in some English literature of rural change as late as Hardy, the internal tensions of the society are made clear, so that we can understand the modes of penetration which would, in any case, in its process of expansion, have come"(1973, 286).

Although the personal tragedy of Okonkwo is a remarkable aspect of the novel, the inherent flaws of the Igbo society act as another glaring factor of the disintegration. The novel is not only about a story about the disintegration of an African culture as a result of European intervention. Although the people in Okonkwo's society had a common culture, they did not always agree on its various aspects. As an instance, we see an elder advising Okonkwo not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna. This statement is quite strange because the elders are the keepers of the culture and wisdom of the society and also bearing in mind that the killing of Ikemefuna had been ordered by the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves (TFA, 40).

Another old man, Obierika, was a staunch critic of Umuofia's culture: Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, "if one finger brought oil it soiled the others" (TFA, 125). There are numerous instances in the story itself where it is told that the social customs and values had been falling apart as a result of the developments within the society itself. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in Okonkwo's village, complaining "that the punishment for breaking the peace of 'Ani' had become very mild in their clan"(TFA, 23). Similarly, when Okonkwo was in exile, we see another old man, Uchendu, complaining about how Okonkwo's generation had abandoned some of the old ways (TFA, 96).

The novel is not merely about other written texts, or even about textuality as such alone, but it is also about yet unwritten or, perhaps still born texts like the District Commissioner's yet unfulfilled literary project, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, and, possibly also, the archives of imperialist governance. Even though the D.C.'s book hangs fire at the end of the novel, given his conduct and attitudes, it is not very difficult to imagine just what sort of Grand History he would write. Containing, sub-altering, and subsuming the D.C.'s project within its own fictional space and boundaries, *Things Falls Apart*, ironically has precedence over the 'official' story of the administrator in terms of both priority and actual literary achievement.

The novel, as a text is a site of conflict and contestation of meanings, of at least two mutually exclusive 'readings' of the history of colonization, in the late nineteenth-century, of the Niger Delta region, namely, the colonized's interpretation of 'that' history of "pacification", over against the colonizer's account, such as might be presented in the D.C.'s work-in-progress. The D.C.'s projected narrative of "pacification" is not only at odds with Okonkwo's story, but also disjunct and discontinuous with it, for it would celebrate everything that is an anathema to Okonkwo. Placed over against the D.C.'s continuous and continuing project which appears to be univocal and hegemonic, it is the "discontinuous" narrative of the novel, which is multi-vocal and autonomous. Achebe has maintained: The Igbo people say "If you want to see it well, you must not stand in one place."... If



you are rooted to one place, you miss a lot of the grace. So you keep moving and this is the only way the world's stories should be told, from, many perspectives (Achebe, 1994). These ramifications of the movement of post-colonialism clearly grant the novel its status of a post-colonial text.

The novel maintains that no story could be told as if it was the only one. Although it mentions the D.C.'s story, it does not subordinate the narrative. This is because Achebe's own text is not imperial, univocal or hegemonic but rather it suggests that it is possible for everyone to tell his story, from a different perspective or orientation. Thus, the novel holds together, not one, but multiple narratives. The story is not told as Okonkwo's story alone but as a concurrent narrative of collective calamity, or catastrophe, visited on different people in different places, eg, Umuofia, Mbanta, Abame, Mbaino and so on. Moreover, the hybridity and heterogeneity of the novel is signaled not only through its many voices, and many story-tellers, but also through its deployment of a variety-and shades-of tone: ironic evocative, lyric, reminiscing, descriptive, symbolic, comic, pathetic, tragic and also satiric. Moreover, Achebe's invocation of African weather, flora and fauna, rituals and ceremonies and narrative-mythic modes, not to speak of the local language and proverbs, and social and well as agricultural activities renders his novel oppositional. Achebe looks at the European stranger as an "Other", and not at all as an integral part of the local life, which he fractured and disrupted, and which itself is treated 'concretely' and also 'sympathetically' in the novel. As Elleke Boehmer maintains, "Rather than simply being the writing which came after empire, post-colonial literature is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship... it is a writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives. In other words, *Things Fall Apart* is not a work of a mimic man or a merely imitative piece of exotica. It is, rather, a resonant work that displaces and disperses imperial perspectives- territorial as well as literary- to generate multiple perspectives on the colonial history of Eastern Nigeria circa 1880's and 90's. (Boehmer, p-3).

One of the highlights of Orientalizing the already orient was the British educational system which was one of the subtle ways in order to make them civilize because they were not having any particular pattern and system of education. The Igbos had traditional oral system of education which was suppressed by the white missionaries through establishing schools in various clans "Orature" is deployed to connote "a system of aesthetics, an oral narrative system, for instance, which could be differentiated from the system of visual narratives." (Thiong'o 1998, 111). The British started imparting Christianity by telling the native villagers various stories of culture, legend, fairy tales, folk tales, fables and mythology. White missionaries again gained more converts by telling them directly that the God of Igbo people were false and their beliefs were based on falsehood.

According to Michel Foucault, knowledge is inextricably bound to power and both are intricately linked to one another. One is not devoid of the other. Thus power becomes of tremendous importance in the novel. To add to the conflicting state of the Igbo people, the white missionaries established schools and hospitals. This in a way led to the conversion of more natives to the religion of Christianity. This is one of the integral parts of oppression by education as the minds of the people of Igbo tribe got diverted. In Achebe's expressions, "... (Mr. Brown) came to conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family to begging people to send their children to his school but at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children." (TFA, 163-164).

The economy of the people which was mainly an agriculture-centered one was also disrupted to a great extent by the British in the form of the introduction of the trading centers. "... the white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel become things of great price, and much money flowed in to Umuofia" (TFA, 161). Moreover the imposition of fines by

the colonial administrator to those who opposed the new Christian religion coupled with the oppressions of the court messengers.

Discourse, as Sara Mills makes the point, “has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory, and yet it is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined” (Mills, 1997). Thus, the very colonial discourse of the British coupled with their knowledge inevitably rendered the Igbo people inferior and thus were able to subjugate according to their wish. Thus, the own flaws of the people of the village along with the manipulative techniques adopted by the British proved enough in order to shatter the Igbo-land to the core.

## CONCLUSION

The following lines vividly sum up the drastic impact which the colonizers had on the native Igbo villagers. “Does the white man understand our custom about land?” “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says he says our customs are bad; the white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (TFA, 176) All told, *Things Fall Apart* can be said to be both a “historical” and a “political” novel that eschews nostalgia or any self-deceiving sentimentality about the break-up of the old way of life in the Igbo land, marking its beginning in the 1880’s. It is only apt to end with a comment regarding the root of the destruction of the Igbo society, “By allowing the white man to land on African shores, Africans allowed the white man to impose Christianity... with its craving for right and wrong, its love of truth and beauty on the African social system” (Egar, 2000, 8).

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1996. Print.
- Achebe, Chinua. *African Writers Talking*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1962.
- Achebe, Chinua. “The Paris Review Interview”, 1994-95.
- Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe*. New York: Twayne, 1970
- Egar, Emanuel. *The Rhetorical Implications of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000, p-8.
- Elleke, Boehmer. *Colonial and Post-Colonial literature: Migrant Metaphors*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p-3.
- Foucault, Michel. “The Order of Things.” *Uniting the text: A post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p-61
- Mills, Sara. *Discourse*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Slemon, Stephen. “Moments of Empire: Allegory/ Counter-Discourse/ Post-Colonial Writing.” *Kunapipi* 9.3, 1987, p-6
- Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of Arts and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1998, p-111.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p-286.
- Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001