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Colonial Education And Historical Transformation Of Igbo Society In *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the historical and cultural background surrounding the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe. Prior to the appearance of this novel, most literary representations of Africa and its people were shaped by Western authors, many of whom portrayed the continent through a distorted and reductive lens. In response to such misrepresentations in colonial literature, Achebe and other African writers emerged as powerful voices, offering narratives rooted in African experiences and perspectives. These nationalist writers sought to challenge and dismantle the stereotypical and dehumanizing images that had long defined Africa and its inhabitants. This study argues that, although colonial novels propagated misleading portrayals of Africa, they inadvertently contributed to a growing awareness among Africans of the importance of reclaiming and narrating their own histories. This realization played a significant role in inspiring the creation of *Things Fall Apart* and other contemporary literary works that aimed to assert the richness and complexity of African cultures and traditions on a global stage. Employing a critical postcolonial framework, the paper places Achebe at the center of this intellectual and cultural movement, highlighting his dissatisfaction with colonial discourse and his commitment to representing Igbo and broader African traditions authentically. Ultimately, *Things Fall Apart* is interpreted as an Afrocentric narrative designed to reshape European perceptions and foster a more accurate understanding of African cultural identity.

Keywords: colonial novel - racism - biased description - Africa - rehabilitation novel

Introduction

Africa is often described as a continent marked by both richness and contradiction. It possesses abundant natural resources, both visible and hidden, along with significant human potential factors that ideally position it for development and economic advancement. From an early period, however, these resources attracted the attention of Western powers, leading to an aggressive scramble for the continent and the systematic exploitation of its wealth. This exploitation included the forced removal of millions of able-bodied Africans to regions such as the New World, the Middle East, and Europe, under systems organized by European authorities. Enslaved Africans were compelled to perform a wide range of roles, including agricultural labor, domestic service, entertainment, and craftsmanship. In this regard, Marmer and Sow (2013) argue that within the expansionist agenda of Europeans in the fifteenth century, “Africans had been bereft of their humanity, culture, development and consequently, their history” (p. 50) [1].

Paradoxically, despite their extensive involvement on the continent, many European explorers appeared to possess limited or deliberately superficial knowledge of African societies and traditions. For example, Western history textbooks of the 1980s provided minimal engagement with Africa and its people. When mentioned, Africa was often confined to brief and generalized sections under headings such as “Discovery,” “Imperialism,” and “Decolonization,” offering only fragmented and oversimplified accounts, as noted by Tiemann (1982) [2].

Furthermore, a number of European travelers and writers produced exaggerated or fictionalized narratives of their encounters, often intended to entertain audiences in their home countries. As Edward Said, cited by Mary Klages (2012), explains, “Western European explorers went to a place they called ‘the Orient’ and wrote descriptions of what they found there; Western European readers read these descriptions and understood ‘the Orient’ as something other than their own country and civilization” (p. 61) [3]. Over time, such imaginative and often demeaning portrayals accumulated, contributing to persistent distortions of African realities. Some of these accounts were transformed into literary works that received considerable acclaim in Europe.

Notable examples of such representations include *Mister Johnson* (1939) [4] by Joyce Cary, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) [5] by Joseph Conrad, and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) [6] by Graham Greene, among others. Cary’s *Mister Johnson* was once described as “the best novel ever written about Africa” (Achebe, 2003, p. 12) [7], despite its evident bias in depicting African life and character. Similarly, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* presents Africa and its people through a deeply problematic lens, reinforcing images of primitiveness and otherness. Such portrayals, though influential, have been critically challenged by later scholars and African writers for their role in shaping misleading and reductive perceptions of the continent.

Writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary, among others, contributed significantly to the construction of a dehumanized image of Africa and its people. In many of these narratives, Africa and Africans were depicted through derogatory labels such as savage, dark, cannibalistic, demonic, childlike,

cultureless, unattractive, and merely pleasure-seeking. In essence, such works by non-African authors offered a deeply distorted representation of the continent, which in turn provoked the justified resentment of the first generation of committed African writers. These writers recognized the urgent need to reclaim their image through self-representation—the need to produce literature about Black people, authored by Black writers, and grounded in an authentic African perspective. Deeply affected in their sense of identity and dignity, they turned to writing as a means of cultural and intellectual resistance.

In this context, one of the pioneers of Anglophone African literature, Chinua Achebe (1930–2013), published *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 [9]. According to Alam (2010), Achebe’s primary objective in writing this novel was to “correct a whole history of misrepresentations of his people and country in occidental discourse” (p. 40) [10]. Similarly, Salami and Tabari (2018) argue that in *Things Fall Apart*, “the novelist has managed to provide an alternative discourse in order to attack the discursive dominance of the British colonizers [...]” (p. 21) [11].

The present study seeks to demonstrate that colonial novels not only projected a misleading image of Africa and its inhabitants but also indirectly stimulated the emergence of the first wave of postcolonial literature, including *Things Fall Apart*. This literary response played a crucial role in asserting African cultural identity and making its traditions and values more widely recognized across the world. The analysis is grounded in key theoretical frameworks such as Orientalism, Otherness, and postcolonialism, which together serve as the foundation for understanding these dynamics.

Review of Literature

The corpus of scholarship on cultural appropriation within postcolonial literature is extensive, reflecting a global recognition of the complex consequences of colonial encounters. As a distinct and well-established literary field, postcolonial literature encompasses the voices and lived experiences of writers from formerly colonized regions, including India, Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world. Foundational theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have significantly shaped the theoretical framework for understanding cultural imperialism and the construction of the colonized “other” within colonial discourse. In particular, Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) marked a turning point in postcolonial studies. Through a critical examination of European imperialism, Said demonstrated how Western narratives constructed and misrepresented non-Western societies, thereby encouraging further scholarly inquiry into how formerly colonized peoples represent colonialism and its enduring effects in their own literary productions (Said, 1979).

Postcolonial literature emerges directly from the historical experience of colonial domination and its aftermath. It addresses central themes such as identity formation, cultural hegemony, racial discrimination, inequality, and hybridity. Colonial rule often resulted in the erosion of indigenous traditions and imposed the assimilation of Western languages, cultures, and social practices. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Salman Rushdie have played a pivotal role in shaping this literary tradition. Their works challenge colonial stereotypes, seek to reclaim cultural identity, and advocate for

social justice. Despite political independence, many postcolonial societies continue to experience the lingering effects of colonialism in their educational systems and social institutions. Prominent African writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Bessie Head, and Buchi Emecheta have further contributed to this discourse by reinterpreting history from indigenous perspectives and challenging structures of racism and marginalization (Bonnici, 2004).

Language occupies a central and complex position in postcolonial discourse, functioning both as a tool of domination and as a medium of resistance. As Angela Carter (2000) observes, “Language possesses the ability to exert influence, shape existence, and serve as the tool of civilization, both for exerting control and achieving freedom.” This perspective underscores the dual role of language as both an instrument of power and a means of liberation. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and John Tomlinson (2006) argue that language is not merely a communicative tool but a force that shapes perception and constructs reality.

The debate over language use in African literature has generated significant scholarly discussion. Ebi Yeibo (2011) categorizes African writers into three groups based on their approach to colonial languages: accommodationists, gradualists, and radicalists. While some writers support the continued use of colonial languages, others advocate for their indigenization, and a more radical group calls for their complete replacement with indigenous African languages. Scholars such as Obi Wali and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o strongly promote the use of native languages as the primary medium for African literary expression (Yeibo, 2011).

In contrast, Chinua Achebe adopts a strategic use of the English language to engage with and challenge colonial narratives. By incorporating elements of indigenous oral tradition—such as proverbs, folktales, myths, and idiomatic expressions—Achebe develops a localized form of English that reflects African cultural consciousness (Brown & S., 2022). Meanwhile, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad presents Africa as fundamentally “other” in relation to Europe, thereby reinforcing entrenched colonial stereotypes (Conrad, 1899). In response, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* seeks not only to expose the limitations and contradictions within indigenous societies but also to restore dignity and historical depth to African cultures.

Achebe’s critique of racial prejudice and the destruction of indigenous traditions highlights the necessity of a nuanced understanding of postcolonial literature. His rejection of Eurocentric philosophical views, including those associated with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and his reconstruction of African history and culture challenge the colonial erasure of African identity. His works function as acts of resistance, confronting narratives that undermine the legitimacy of indigenous traditions. Like much postcolonial writing, Achebe’s literature engages with themes of identity crisis, cultural dominance, racism, and social inequality. Furthermore, Emmanuel Obiechina (1992) emphasizes Achebe’s use of oral tradition as a means of countering the restrictive influences of colonial education. Oral literature, rather than

disappearing, continues to thrive within both traditional and modern contexts, demonstrating the resilience of indigenous cultures.

While previous scholarship has extensively explored the broader postcolonial themes in *Things Fall Apart*, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific issue of cultural appropriation and the forms of resistance it generates. This gap highlights the need for further critical engagement with this aspect of Achebe's work.

Historical Antecedents

For a long time, Africa was regarded by many Western scholars as a continent devoid of civilization and historical significance. Hugh Trevor-Roper of the University of Oxford clearly expressed this view in his lecture entitled *Africa and the West*:

“Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not the subject of history. There is only the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the Globe” (Lawal 2009, p. 2) [12].

Similarly, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1956) divided humanity into “historical” and “non-historical” peoples, arguing that only the former contributed to human progress. Within this framework, Africa was categorized as non-historical (p. 99) [13]. Echoing this dismissive attitude, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy (2007), during a visit to Senegal, controversially stated: “le drame de l’Afrique, c’est que l’homme africain n’est pas assez entré dans l’histoire” [14] (the problem with Africa is that the African man has not sufficiently entered into history, translation ours). Critiquing such perspectives, Marmer and Sow (2013) observe that “induced into the Western canon by Hegel, the notion of unhistorical Africa persists to the present day” (p. 49) [1].

However, these biased assertions have been challenged and largely refuted by archaeological and historical evidence. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the antiquity and significance of African civilizations. For instance, ancient civilizations flourished along the Nile River, which originates in the Great Lakes region, passes through Lake Victoria, and extends over 6,000 kilometers through countries such as Uganda, parts of Kenya, Sudan, and Egypt. Moreover, Africa—particularly ancient Egypt—made substantial contributions to the intellectual development of early Greek thinkers such as Thales of Miletus, Pythagoras, and Plato. In this regard, Roothan argues:

“The so-called ‘Greek miracle’—the idea that the ancient Greeks invented modern science and philosophy—is actually the result of Egyptian and other influences. Ancient writers themselves relate how Greek thinkers ‘travelled to Egypt to learn in its temples’—among them Thales of Miletus and Pythagoras, who studied in the temples of Heliopolis, Memphis, and Thebes. And Plato himself, the great ancestor of Western philosophy spent thirteen years as a

student in Heliopolis. Plato's vast influence on the Abrahamic, monotheistic theologies of the middle ages would then really be the passing on of ancient Egyptian (and hence black) theological views" [15].

Contrary to Hegel's claim that Africa lacks history, George G. M. James in *The Stolen Legacy* questions the idea of a purely Greek intellectual origin. Supporting this view, Urstad (2009) notes:

"James' aim in Chapter One is to try to show that all the Ionian and Italian philosophers – Pythagoras, Thales, Democritus, and so on – obtained their education from Egyptian priests or became familiar with the teachings of the so-called Egyptian Mysteries well before they settled down and published their philosophies. In effect, the author argues that what these philosophers were disseminating was really the thoughts and doctrines of these Egyptians" [16].

According to Lawal (2009), "many European writers, for a long time, were of the opinion that since African societies were mainly non-literate, they were not worthy of study because history could not be properly studied in these societies, hence they had no history at all. In fact, to this school of thought, the continent contributed little or nothing to civilization" (p. 2) [12]. Contrary to this assumption, Africa possessed early systems of writing. Bilé and Méranville (2017) emphasize that "l'Afrique noire précoloniale a connu plusieurs systèmes d'écriture..." (p. 68) [17], referring to indigenous scripts such as Nsibidi in Nigeria, Mende in Sierra Leone, Vai in Liberia, Bamoun in Cameroon, Amharic in Ethiopia, and Bété in Côte d'Ivoire (translation ours). Furthermore, Weissbach (1999) highlights the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Jean-François Champollion, which contained a decree dating back to 196 BCE under Pharaoh Ptolemy V.

Despite this rich tradition, African literature initially developed in oral forms, including proverbs, folktales, myths, legends, and songs [18]. The enduring influence of Egyptian civilization on global intellectual history has also led to the rise of Afrocentric thought, associated with Cheikh Anta Diop, who argued that ancient Egyptians were of African origin and played a foundational role in shaping world civilization [15].

The arrival of European explorers and missionaries, driven by both civilizing and expansionist ambitions, further complicated Africa's historical narrative. While some missionaries aimed to spread Christianity and combat the slave trade, they often encountered harsh environmental conditions, including unfamiliar climates and diseases such as malaria, which proved fatal to many. These challenges limited their understanding of African societies, resulting in incomplete and often distorted accounts. While a few explorers provided relatively accurate descriptions, many others relied on imagination and prejudice, producing literary works that bore little resemblance to reality.

It is important to note that not all non-African writers portrayed Africa negatively. Authors such as Nadine Gordimer (*July's People*) [19], Doris Lessing (*The Grass is Singing*) [20], and J. M. G. Le Clézio (*The African*) [21] offered more nuanced depictions. However, others, such as Henry Morton Stanley, reinforced negative stereotypes. In *In the Darkest Africa* (1891) [22], Stanley described the continent as a

mysterious and dangerous jungle inhabited by “cannibals” and uncivilized peoples. His imagery portrayed Africans as primitive and the environment as hostile, reinforcing Eurocentric biases.

As Terry Eagleton (2008) observes, the novel often blends fact and fiction (p. 1) [24]. Consequently, European novels about Africa frequently reflected imagined perceptions rather than lived realities. Similarly, Margery Perham argued that prior to European intervention, much of Africa lacked essential elements of civilization such as writing and structured history (qtd. in Lawal, 2009, p. 2) [12]. These misconceptions contributed to inaccurate portrayals of African societies.

Michael J. C. Echeruo (1973) notes that many European novels about Africa are characterized by exoticized settings designed to satisfy the expectations of Western audiences [25]. These narratives often function as imaginative reports shaped by the authors’ cultural biases rather than objective realities. Similarly, Gbaguidi (2012) argues that European travelers, influenced by stereotypes, portrayed Africa as a “heart of darkness” populated by savages and cannibals (p. 19) [26].

In *Heart of Darkness* [4], Joseph Conrad depicts Africa as an “other world,” fundamentally opposed to European civilization. As Mary Klages (2012) suggests, this aligns with the notion of the “Orient” as constructed by Western discourse [3]. The novel contrasts the calm and ordered Thames River with the chaotic and hostile Congo River, reinforcing a dichotomy between civilization and savagery. Conrad’s descriptions, such as “a God-forsaken wilderness” (p. 19) [4], contribute to the portrayal of Africa as a place of darkness and degeneration.

Furthermore, Conrad’s narrative frequently dehumanizes African characters, depicting them as “black shadows of disease and starvation” (p. 24) [4] and reducing them to subhuman status. Such representations reinforce the racial hierarchies that justified colonial domination. As Chinua Achebe (1977) later argued, Africa in such works functions as a negative reference point against which Europe defines its own superiority.

Similarly, *Mister Johnson* [5] by Joyce Cary presents a distorted depiction of Nigerian society. Cary, who served in colonial Nigeria, portrays the town of Fada as underdeveloped and unappealing:

“The station has no bungalows... as if some giant had tossed down a few scraps of old rotten hay on a mangy lion skin...” (Cary, 1961, p. 7) [5].

Such descriptions reflect a sense of disdain for African environments and reinforce stereotypes of primitiveness. Cary’s portrayal extends to his characters, particularly Johnson, who is described in exaggerated and demeaning physical terms. In contrast, female characters like Bamu are idealized physically but still framed within notions of savagery and cultural inferiority. Johnson’s assertion—“I will teach you to be a civilized lady...” (Cary, 1961, p. 5) [5]—reveals the internalization of colonial values. Cary’s treatment of African customs, such as marriage practices, further illustrates his limited understanding of local traditions. The depiction of bride price negotiations as a commercial transaction misrepresents the symbolic and cultural significance of such practices. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2007) note, postcolonial studies examine the cultural transformations resulting from

colonization (p. 168) [27]. Johnson's character exemplifies this transformation, reflecting the internal conflict between indigenous identity and colonial influence.

Moreover, Gbaguidi (2018) critiques the patriarchal dimensions of such narratives, arguing that they often reduce women to commodities (p. 45) [28]. The portrayal of marriage negotiations in *Mister Johnson* aligns with this critique, presenting African customs in a distorted and superficial manner. In light of these historical and literary misrepresentations, it becomes essential to reconsider the motivations behind *Things Fall Apart* and its role in challenging colonial discourse.

From Colonial Novels about Africa to *Things Fall Apart*

As previously discussed, early written representations of Africa were largely produced by non-African writers. According to Strong-Leek (2001) [30], the dominant voice in early African literature was shaped by European authors who portrayed Africa as a space of "negation." After reading works such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson*, Chinua Achebe became aware of what he termed the power inherent in narrative representation. Reflecting on Cary's novel, Achebe notes:

"What Mister Johnson did do for me was not to change my course in life and turn me from something else into a writer [...]. But it did open my eyes to the fact that my home was under attack and that my home was not merely a house or a town but, more importantly, an awakening story in whose ambience my own existence had first begun to assemble its fragments into a coherence and meaning [...]" (Achebe 2003, p. 38) [7].

Colonial novels about Africa, as Michael J. C. Echeruo (1973) argues, often function as "a confirmation of an attitude rather than an exploration of possibilities" (p. 8) [25]. A close reading of *Things Fall Apart* reveals that such colonial texts presented a distorted and prejudiced image of Africa and its people, frequently aimed at justifying colonization. Critiquing the disparaging portrayal of Africans in these works, Achebe observes:

"We were ignorant of the hundreds of years of sustained denigration we and our home had been subjected to in order to make our colonization possible and excusable. If anyone had asked me in 1952 what I thought of Joyce Cary, I probably would have been quite satisfied to call him the generic pet name, imperialist" (Achebe 2003, p. 33) [7].

Similarly, Padurang (2008) characterizes *Mister Johnson* as a "racist-colonialist representation of Africa" (p. 343) [31].

In response to such biased depictions, the period leading up to African independence witnessed a growing movement of cultural self-assertion. During the 1950s, emerging African intellectuals, deeply affected by

these misrepresentations, sought to reclaim their identity by producing literature grounded in African realities. Colonial narratives, therefore, inadvertently stimulated African writers to create “rehabilitative” texts that would present authentic images of their societies. These works enabled African readers to recognize themselves within their own cultural contexts while also informing Western audiences about the realities of African life.

For instance, an African reader of Cary’s *Mister Johnson* quickly realizes that although the setting is labeled African, its representation diverges significantly from actual African customs and social structures. Cary’s assertion that African leaders lack authority—“A chief in Africa can usually persuade his young men... but he can rarely keep them there” (Cary 1961, p. 101) [5]—demonstrates a limited understanding of African governance systems.

In contrast, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) presents a detailed and structured depiction of Igbo society prior to colonial intervention. The novel portrays a harmonious and organized community in which social status is determined by age, experience, and personal achievement, including success in farming, title acquisition, and prowess in wrestling or warfare. The protagonist, Okonkwo, exemplifies these qualities, earning a place among the *egwugwu*, the judicial authority of Umuofia. This institution reflects a well-established system of governance within the society.

Achebe’s representation of Umuofia reveals a complex socio-political hierarchy: the elders (Ndichie), the ancestors, and the gods occupy distinct yet interconnected roles. As Kenalemang (2013) observes:

“Achebe’s primary purpose of writing the novel is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* provides readers with an insight of Igbo society right before the white missionaries’ invasion... The invasion... threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society...” (p. 4) [32].

European colonial narratives often justified domination by portraying Africa as uncivilized and devoid of history. Achebe (2003) critiques this narrative dominance: “In the end, I began to understand there is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege... can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like...” (pp. 24–25) [7].

In *Mister Johnson*, the protagonist is depicted as a caricature—an African who behaves like a European yet remains disconnected from his cultural roots. His actions, such as independently negotiating his marriage and mishandling traditional customs, reflect cultural alienation. As Bill Ashcroft et al. (2007) note, such behavior illustrates the transformative impact of colonial contact on indigenous identities [27]. Achebe corrects these misrepresentations by depicting authentic Igbo marriage practices, where negotiations are conducted collectively by families rather than individuals. This contrast underscores the depth and coherence of African traditions prior to colonial disruption.

Achebe further illustrates the importance of narrative agency through a folktale recounted in *Home and Exile*. In this story, a careless chicken fails to attend a communal meeting and is consequently designated

as the primary sacrificial animal. The moral highlights the consequences of remaining silent in matters of collective representation. Achebe uses this allegory to emphasize that storytelling is a form of power—one that shapes identity and determines how communities are perceived. When monopolized by colonial voices, this narrative power silences African perspectives and reinforces systems of domination.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that European “narrative power” played a crucial role in shaping colonial discourse, often portraying Africans as inferior and uncivilized in order to justify imperial domination. Works such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson* constructed distorted images of Africa that reinforced colonial ideologies. However, these representations also provoked a powerful response from African writers, who sought to reclaim their identity through literature.

The analysis shows that colonial misrepresentations became a catalyst for the emergence of postcolonial African literature. Writers like Chinua Achebe responded by producing narratives that reflect authentic African experiences. Through *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe challenges the prejudiced depictions of Africa found in colonial texts and presents a nuanced portrayal of Igbo society, rich in tradition and cultural complexity.

Ultimately, the act of storytelling becomes a form of resistance. The creation of self-representative narratives is essential for cultural survival and recognition. While colonial literature attempted to marginalize Africa, African writers have actively worked to dismantle these stereotypes and assert their place within global literary discourse. Thus, colonial novels, despite their biases, inadvertently contributed to the rise of a vibrant and assertive African literary tradition.

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