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CULTURAL EROSION: POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE IN ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the erosion of cultural identity of Igbo society as a result of British colonization. It also looks at the colonial hegemony enforced by institutions of the church, judiciary, medical system, and education in Igbo society. The peaceful Igbo village descends into chaos as the protagonist's son disobeys his father and mocks the idea of brotherhood by converting himself into Christianity. The impact of colonialism and the supremacy of European culture destroys the social harmony of Igbo society. As a result, despite the struggle and sacrifice of true lover of original culture, the rich cultural legacy continues to collapse. A post-colonial social narrative raises questions to the aboriginal Igbo culture that was originally shaped by a variety of cultural ethos. The community experiences a significant transformation while the true followers original culture struggle with the shifting dynamics of relationships. The traditional lifestyle of the Igbo people is disrupted and challenged by European civilization. As they resist the changes imposed by the colonizers, the indigenous people's identity changes.

Keywords: Colonizer, Colonized, Postcolonial, Oriental, Hegemony, Resistance, Transformation, Discourse

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a well-known postcolonial novel. It looks at how British colonization affected Nigerian Igbo society. The experiences of Okonkwo, the main character, and his village, Umuofia, are used to tell the tale. The cultural struggle between the Igbo way of life and the increasing effects of European colonization is depicted by Achebe. Achebe examines the negative effects of colonialism as well as the internal struggles the Igbo community suffers in adjusting to the changing sociopolitical climate. By providing an indigenous perspective on the depth and complexity of pre-colonial African cultures, Achebe challenges Eurocentric narratives with a nuanced point of view.

Things Fall Apart emphasizes the destruction caused by colonial invasion, the loss of local customs, and the imposition of alien cultural norms from a postcolonial point of view. Achebe depicts how the Igbo people's ancient customs, religious rituals, and societal systems disintegrate as British colonial powers assert their dominance. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the novel challenges the Eurocentric prejudices in historical narratives and acknowledges the flexibility and complexity of African societies prior to colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* stands as witness to the long-lasting repercussions of colonialism on the African continent as a critique of the dehumanizing impacts of imperialistic ideologies.

The Social Narrative from a Post-Colonial Perspective

Modern age began with colonial encounters and after independence, it is dominated by post-colonial ideology. Colonial discourse had dominated and controlled colonized society through the means of guide book, travel book, narrative of journey, research paper, leaflet, literary piece, and treaties that emphasized ruling ideas. Postcolonial theory challenges the dominant ideologies of colonizers and draws attention to their brutal acts and colonial experiences, portraying them as being almost criminal or animalistic in nature. Frantz Fanon writes in his book The *Wretched of Earth:* "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all from and content. By a kind of the perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (170). Colonialism takes indigenous people in its grip and empties their original thoughts and feelings. It also turns to the past of oppressed people and instigates them against their aboriginal culture, tradition and social values.

In 1978, Edward Said published Orientalism, which exposes the harsh reality of the colonial division between oriental (eastern) junior and occidental (western) senior. This book marks the official beginning of post-colonial philosophy. Thus, in order to defend the colonists' colonial history, this thesis exposes the unfairness and animalistic nature imposed on the aboriginal people. In her work Colonial and Post colonial Literature, renowned post-colonial author Elleke Boehner writes:

… the naming of other people as irrational, barbarian, Indian, animal like was simultaneously an act of evaluation usually of downgrading. In certain Post-colonial descriptions of course the presence of native peoples was entirely erased from the land they occupied time and again, the derogation of other cultures was used to validate the violence of invasion. (80)

Colonialists label people as barbaric and irrational to dehumanize and put them down. Indigenous people are completely ignored in many post-colonial narratives. They try to justify their acts of invading and taking control over native people's countries by criticizing and disapproving their customs.

Michael Foucault, a well-known post-structuralist writer, is credited with developing discourse, a crucial viewpoint in post-colonial theory that addresses the relationship between power and knowledge. He believed that "all speech, whether it be written or spoken, is discourse and the foundation of the establishment of authority" (1138). Knowledge produced by discourse has an impact on power. Truth or knowledge is therefore power-driven. Since everything is dynamic or evolving, there can never be an objective truth. A society's social and political power structures are based on discourse. Through their discourse, the colonists began to impose their will on the native population. Home K. Bhabha writes in his book, *The Location of Culture* as*:*

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate type on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction… Therefore, despite the 'play' in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other 'and get entirely knowable and visible. (70-71)

Colonial discourse attempts to depict the colonized as racially inferior in order to legitimize invasion and establish control through administrative and educational structure. Colonial discourse is made to give the impression that the colonized are the 'other' in social reality.

Post-colonial theory represents the voice of voiceless, oppressed marginalized people who are ready to die for the sake of their cultural and social values which have been subjugated by the powerful ruling class. Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak raises the voice of undermined people by stating that if opportunity is given, the subaltern can speak and assert their rights. However, cultural hegemony and anti-colonial resistance are powerful tools of post colonial thematic discussion that evokes the colonial experience of injustice and barbarism leading to downfall of native norms and values as in *Things Fall Apart*. While depicting animalistic character over Negro, the whites justify themselves having such nature that leads to antagonistic relationship between the ruler and the ruled. In this context, Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of Earth*, states:

The violence with which the supremacy of White values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values are over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when western values are mentioned in front of him. (35)

Native Americans laugh mockingly when Western standards are brought up in front of them as retaliation for the brutality used to uphold White supremacy and the aggression that has infiltrated White values' victory over Native American ways of life and thought.

Culture as Artifact

Culture is simply the set of customs, rules, and values that define our identity and sense of place in the world. On the other hand, all human activities from life to death are solely or partially concerned with cultural heritage. Culture is viewed as 'a way' of life by Mathew Arnold as he states, "Culture is an essential element of the history of people. Culture is perhaps the product of this history just as the flower is the product of plant" (qtd. in Ashcroft160). From a political perspective, culture as an artifact supersedes other cultures by rejecting the legitimacy of differences, so solidifying its position as the permanent culture in the eyes of the native people. Mathew Arnold conceptualized a reactive view towards working-class people, women, Indians, and Jamaicans in the empire. He also defended a new secular culture of critical discourse and suggested a secular and humanistic approach to culture that could serve as an integrative function in establishing and tying together an emerging civil society and colonial state. He regards culture as a tool used by

European, masculine, and bourgeois people. David Daiches writes in his literary work, *A Critical Survey of English Literature* as:

> The people who believe most that our greatest and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thought to the accumulation of wealth, often subscribe to the notion that material success is the ultimate measure of personal achievement and societal well-being. (47)

Material prosperity is often seen as the ultimate indicator of both individual success and society well-being by those who think that their greatest achievements and welfare are demonstrated by their extreme riches. So they focus most of their lives and minds on acquiring wealth.

Using White culture as a weapon, the European world attempts to weaken the colonized area not only militarily, politically, and economically, but also culturally. To fit inside their ideal framework, they amplify their cultural supremacy. Hegemonic relationship occurs between the dominant west and the subjugated native. People from the colonized world adopt Western culture, customs, and values, whether they realize it or not. Culture is seen as the return of another person's notion or thinking to ourselves, and it serves as an objective illusion to confine us within a particular imposed culture because of power dynamics. The false objectivism and optical illusion of the intricate historical relationships are rendered by culture. Culture as a set of signs is enforced into the alien mind by teaching religious belief, a part of culture. In this context, Frederic Jameson states culture as the "ensemble of stigmata one group bears in the eyes of other group and vice-versa" (271). Though, culture appears static and inflexible, it gets relentlessly threatened by dissolution.

Decoding Power: Orientalism, Hegemony and Discourse:

Orientalism has a prominent position among several notions of post-colonial theory including culture, hybridity, subaltern, imitation, diaspora, displacement, and anti-colonial resistance. The projection of the relationship that exists between Westerners and non-Westerners is known as orientalism. It discloses explicitly the pre-occupied psyches of colonizers over native people regarding later as oriental or other. With the publication of Orientalism in 1978, Edward Said challenges the attitudes or prejudices held by Westerners. Simply orientalism refers to western style of dominating and under mining or restructuring

the orients through their lenses. It is the product of the dominant western thinking and ruling mind.

Edward Said puts forth his view in his introduction of *Orientalism* as, "The orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance exotic beings haunting memories and landscapes remarkable experience" (1). Furthermore, he goes on to make it clear stating as:

> *Orientalism* can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with orients, dealing with it, by making statements about it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient. (3)

Orientalism is a western approach to controlling, reorganizing, and exerting power over the orient. It may be examined and analyzed as a corporate institution for dealing with orients. The westerners regard Asia, Africa, or Latin America as places of fun, thrilling, exotic and haunting outside modernity and civilization.

Regarding colonization, European explorers travelled to many regions of the world and began to write books, periodicals, travel guides, etc referring to the native people as those who still lived in a prehistoric stage of life. They try to justify colonization as the fundamental need for the aboriginal people. European expansion is considered an example of orientalism, in which Europeans use hegemony to project an image of superiority over native people. Said remarks:

> The idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European people and culture there is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the orients themselves reiterating European superiority over oriental backwardness. (7)

The prevalence of European beliefs about the Orients themselves reinforces European superiority over Oriental backwardness, further reinforcing the sense of European identity as superior to all non-European people and cultures.

According to Edward Said, Orientalism began with Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798. British and French Orientalism influenced a century and a half until the Second World War. It believes that Christianity is the universal religion and all other religions are only imitations. The other gods have ceased to exist, and their God, Christ, is the sole God.

Orientalists claim that their culture, religion, customs, and ideals are genuine everywhere they go, but nothing else, as illustrated in *Things Fall Apart*. According to post-colonial ideology, writing back involves exposing the bias in the western worldview. Said himself refers to orientalism as antihuman because it appears to be able to reveal the harsh and inhumane ways in which Europeans have ruled over local people.

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramci is credited with coining the phrase 'hegemony', which refers to domination by consent. After an extensive research, Gramci concludes that hegemony helps the ruling class succeed in promoting and dominating its goals over the ruled ones. Acceptance of colonial imposition through concept and discourse is associated with hegemony. In this context, Gareth Griffiths, Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin state in *Key Concepts in Post- colonial Studies:*

> Fundamentally hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. Domination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion but by more subtle and inclusive power over the economy and over state apparatus such as education and media by which the ruling class' interest is presented as the common interests and thus comes to be taken for granted. (116)

Hegemony is the ruling class's ability to persuade other classes that their goals are the interests of everyone. Hence, dominance is exercised not so much by active persuasion as by force, but rather by a more subtle and all-encompassing power over the state apparatus, including the media and educational system, and over the economy.

The basic definition of hegemony in Greek is 'rule' or 'leadership' exercised by a dominating group over a subordinate one, specially observed in capitalist society. Marx argues that the ruling class always asserts its own ideas, and the colonizers used these beliefs to defend imperialism as a basic need. Hegemony is the process of convincing the majority of people that the ruling class in a far-off area is legitimate in order to exercise moral, intellectual, economic, and ideological influence. The colonizers achieve their aim when native people spontaneously and naturally accept the institutions and self-created hierarchies as fundamental needs.

Resistance against Colonialism

Resistance is generally defined as a revolt or revolution against a certain injustice and exploitation. The position of resistance in indigenous issues is taken from the pit of dominance and universal intervention. Revolt is the outcome of colonialism and imperialism which had played very notorious role against the spirit and values of African people. Colonialism concerns with the policy of occupying other's territory and exploiting its natural resources physically, militarily or epistemologically. It brings either modification or devastation in native religion and pedagogy by undermining native's indigenous cultural norms and values. K. Asare Opoku in his essay "Religion in Africa during the Colonial Era" writes:

The missionaries taught their converts that life could be separated into spiritual and secular spheres, a teaching which ran counter to the fundamental basis of African culture namely the unity of religion and life. Missionary teaching thus attempted to attack the cement which held African societies together. The danger signals were picked up early by many perceptive African rulers who initially resisted missionary penetration into their societies, seeing it a challenge and a threat to traditional pattern of authority. Missionaries and colonial administrators alike preached against belief in spirits and supernatural forces and gods, witchcraft, sorcery, sacrifices and rituals, taboos and veneration of ancestors and thus weakened the influence of African traditional and ritual leaders such as priests, priestesses, magicians, rain makers and divine monarchs. (513-514)

African culture is based on the idea that religion and life are one and should not be separated. The missionaries taught their converts that life could be divided between spiritual and secular domains. Thus, the goal of missionary preaching was to undermine the connections that bound African cultures. Many astute African monarchs caught the warning signs early and opposed missionaries' initial attempts to enter their communities because they saw it as a challenge and a threat to established hierarchies.

Historically, colonialism began with the expansion of the Roman Empire and progressed to Spanish, French, and British imperialism in a coherent manner until the middle of the 20th century. British imperialism in Africa began in 1885 and continued for more than 70 years, managing state affairs. Nigeria was colonized by the British Empire throughout its early expansion and gained independence in 1960 following a notable revolution. As the culture has been dominated by Christianity, Africans applied religion as a means of 'tit for tat' to

fight against colonial force. Native people except the conversions fought against the British Empire. K. Asare Opoku in his essay "Religion in Africa during the Colonial Era" writes as "African used their religion as weapon to resist colonial rule and often relied on magic and intervention of their ancestors and gods in their fight against colonial oppression" (514). Africa's religious resistance to colonial control was fueled by their faith, and they frequently turned to magic and the help of their ancestors and gods to help them overcome colonial persecution.

The Orientalist Ethos: A Socio-Cultural Criticism

Things Fall Apart supports the practical perspective of the literary movement, which views literature as a mirror or a reflection of society. The novel is set in the peripheral of social events and occurrences driven by cultural values and the collapse of Igbo culture as a result of colonialism. The Umuofian civilization in which the story is set is shaped by culture. As a significant component of Igbo civilization, culture has a direct bearing on how society is run in terms of morals and discipline. According to the narrator, the prestige of society is based on physical power or strength, labour and hard working. The main character of the novel, Okonkwo wins wrestling matches and is awarded with honour. 'Harmattan' means clash and wrestling. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, on the other hand, appears to be the exact opposite- lazy, overly indebted, and a disregarded Igbo figure who dies without a title. The narrator portrays Unoka's pathetic moment in the novel as, "When Unoka died, he had taken no titles and was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that was his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him" (50). He seems to be just vice-versa to his son, Okonkwo.

Umuofian society is based on human sacrifice in case of punishment as compensation. So human sacrifice is considered a ritually validated and socially accepted practice. Ikemefuna becomes a victim of that inhuman practice due to murder of a daughter of Umuofia committed by villagers of Mbaino. It means punishment is concerned with the phrase 'eye for eye' in legal terms. The narrator puts forth:

> As the man who had cleared his throat drew of and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'my father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. (53)

The practice of punishment is not only limited in human sacrifice but also exile faced by Okonkwo on the accusation of shooting a young boy of dead Ezedu accidently leading him to underground .The narrator remarks:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land …. He could return to the clan after seven year. (110)

Okonkwo is a respected warrior and leader in the Igbo society. His exile occurs after he accidentally kills a clansman during a funeral ceremony. This accidental killing goes against the clan's customs, and Okonkwo is forced to leave his village, Umuofia, for seven years as a form of punishment.

Culture gives people their sense of self and defines society. It is made up of the various ways in which people live their lives and learn how to live perfect lives. It is a mirror or reflection of the society that adheres to different customs, laws, norms and ethics. By using Christian culture as a weapon, colonial power erases and tortures native indigenous cultures. The native people do have strong commitment to their culture and are prepared to fight against colonialism. One of the main characteristics of Igbo society is coordination between the living and the dead, or ancestral spirits. These spirits often work together and share the happiness and sorrows of the local living people. Under Evil Forest's direction, there are nine ancient spirits that stand in for the nine Umuofian settlements. In the book, the narrator describes:

> The land of living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them especially, at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought in nearer and nears to his ancestors. (108)

Native people believe that a man's life consists of a succession of transitional ceremonies from birth until death, that draws them closer to his ancestors.

Umuofian civilization is dependent on traditional agriculture since they prefer to cultivate solely for subsistence using antiquated methods based on seasonal variations that negatively impact agriculture due to draughts. The main crops include cotton, yam, pumpkin, melon, bean, kernel, and maize with palm oil. "Yam" symbolizes a woman who is manly enough to cultivate other crops. Prior to farming, the Umuofian people observe the Week of Peace, a

time when no one can injure or disparage another person. In addition, before harvesting crops, people traditionally honor their ancestor spirits and the soil goddess of fertility, Ani, by holding a celebration. For instance, Okonkwo invites all in laws, relatives and enjoys the feast with his kins very enthusiastically –eating and drinking till night.

Umuofian society is guided by patriarchal norms and values. a man is allowed to have more than one wife as Okonkwo has three wives but women are expected to be subservient. The male leaders of Umuofia who have titles control the whole social structure and governance system; women do not have this kind of authority. Instead of a king, the leader of a clan leads the community. When British people enter such a culturally controlled community, all of the cultural norms and values crumble.

Cultural Conflict in *Things Fall Apart*

Cultural conflict is the dominant theme of the novel *Things Fall Apart*. Cultural conflict occurs between within Ibgo community and colonized group. The conflict can be observed between two diametrically opposed human spirits. In Igbo society, there is a clear contrast between being industrious and being lazy, or active and inactive. Society praises a person's inner strength, effort, and accomplishment rather than failure. The narrator portrays conflict between Unoka, the lethargic father, and Okonkwo, the active son as:

When Unoka died, he had taken no titles at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately among these people, a man was judged according to his worth not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for the great things. He was still young but he has won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy father and had two barns full of yams and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible power in two inter- tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. (5)

Unoka had no titles at all and was deeply in debt when he passed away. So his son Okonkwo felt embarrassed by him. Hus value was determined by himself not by the value of his father. Despite being very young, he has gained recognition in his community.

The conflict is not limited only with father Unoka and son Okonkwo but it spreads from generation to generation. For instance, there is a misunderstanding between Okonkwo and

his son Nyoye, who was converted into Christian by colonialism. He is the representative of Igbo cultural society that has been gradually converted into Christianity by colonizers. The Britishers have used Christianity as a means of subjugating other religions. Christianity has created a clash between first and second generation of Igbo cultural society. Anti-colonial resistance commences from the very preliminary plot of colonizers who have sent a white man riding on a horse. The villagers get together and decide to kill him due to a potential British imperial attack.

The conflict also creates a harsher climate when the colonizers arrive and grow their business and industry. Their aim is to introduce European economic policies into indigenous cultures. All of sudden, the white people wage a massacre by shooting in a crowded market place blindingly leading the whole clan dead. By creating bloodshed, they might have returned the sense of retaliation. But even innocent people get victimized from this massacre due to blind gun-firing. It justifies the practical disregard for human rights held by hypocritical, irrational and blood sucker colonizers. By using culture as a tool, colonizers convert the uneducated mass into Christianity.

As a result, the conflict occurs between the converts and lover of native religion. The narrator evokes the picture of seriousness of situation as:

> The women had come to church with empty water-pots. They said some young men had chased them away from the stream with whips. Soon after, the women had gone for red earth returned with empty baskets. Some of them had been heavily whipped … 'The village had outlawed us'… They want to ruin us. They will not allow us into the markets. (140)

The aforementioned argument is a fitting illustration of resistance against colonialism, as the pursued converts are the outcomes of colonialism. The women's exclusion from the stream, market, and the village itself displays a bitter reality of systematic marginalization. Their story lay emphasis on the urgent need for societal reform to ensure equal rights and protection for vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

In "Things Fall Apart," Achebe looks at the post-colonial conflict that exists between Western missionaries and Umuofia's traditional society. The westerners subjugate the native norms and values by rejecting native gods and erasing the ancestral spirit and divine power of cultural society Umuofia. Missionaries claim the superiority of Christianity and laugh at the local beliefs. This conflict represents larger post-colonial struggle in which societies struggle for preserving cultural autonomy in the face of the imposition of foreign ideologies. The novel points out the breakdown of indigenous social structures, ideologies and customs. Once a symbol of traditional strength, Okonkwo struggles with the changing dynamics of relationships, the community undergoes a significant transformation. The traditional life style of the Igbo people is disrupted and challenged by the interference of European culture. It causes a significant change in the people's beliefs, practices, and social structures. As the native people struggle against the changes brought about by the colonizers, the indigenous sense of identity is reshaped.

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