



Exploring Chinua Achebe's impact on African literature and post-colonial discourse: A critical analysis of themes, style, and cultural representation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2022.v4.i1a.133>

Abstract

Chinua Achebe, a prominent Nigerian author made a significant impact on African literature and post-colonial discourse through his groundbreaking novel *'Things Fall Apart,'* published in 1948. The book challenged western stereotypes of Africa and offered a nuanced portrayal of Igbo culture during colonialism. The writings of Achebe contributed to the broader postcolonial discourse by highlighting the need to address power dynamics, cultural representation, and the lasting consequences of colonial rule. Through his narratives, Achebe highlights the multifaceted ways in which colonization disrupts and undermines African cultures and traditions. He portrays the complex interplay between the indigenous cultures and the forces of colonialism, shedding light on the enduring legacy of the historical period. His works helped establish a distinct African literary voice, inspiring other writers to explore their own cultural identities and histories. His writings contributed to the decolonization of African minds and highlighted the complexities of colonialism's effects, sparking discussions on cultural heritage, power dynamics, and identity in the postcolonial world. The aim of this study is to critically examine from postcolonial point of view how the so-called modern Christianity displaced the primitive Igbo religion, its history and culture in the process of pacification by European powers as depicted in Chinua Achebe's works.

Keywords: Decolonization, identity, stereotypes, discourse, Eurocentric, self-degeneration

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's impact on post-colonial discourse is substantial. Through his works especially *'Things Fall Apart,'* Achebe challenged the Eurocentric narratives and provided a platform for African voices. He advocated for the reclamation of African history, culture, and identity in the aftermath of colonization. Achebe portrays the spread of Christianity as a tool of colonization that challenges indigenous belief systems. He was able to capture the anxieties of a lot of African readers in the 1950s through the struggle of Okonkwo "to maintain the integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule" (Gikandi, Simon) ^[5].

The conversion to Christianity resulted in the erosion of traditional spiritual practices and rituals. The colonizers not only adversely affected the traditions and customs of Africans, they had a direct effect on their economic affairs also. The colonial powers exploited African resources and labor, leading to economic dependency and the disruption of traditional economic systems. Achebe's characters often seem to grapple with this exploitation on economic front. As Cindy Avene Ezeugu avers, "In Achebe's urban novels, the society is basically represented as a rural society, rapidly being urbanized under the influence and pressure of colonial culture. (p.323) The introduction of colonial rule often leads to social conflict within African communities. Aspects of the traditional social fabric are dismantled, leading to tensions between generations, clans, and individuals who embrace or reject the changes. For the Hypothetical statement of the present study, we hold that the primitive

Igbo history and culture was in a form of developing, democratic and in a state of balance. This was not inferior in any way in comparison to that of the colonizer. Given the chance, the Igbos could have developed equally to a 'modern' and evolved culture and religion in due course of time. The European cultures were also primitive at one point of time. These cultures developed in course of time only with varying degrees.

Achebe's emphasis on portraying the complexity and agency of African characters paved the way for more nuanced discussions around the effects of colonization and the importance of decolonizing literature. The works of Chinua Achebe often explore themes such as cultural identity, colonization, tradition versus modernity, power dynamics, and the clash of cultures. His novels including *'Things Fall Apart,'* *'No Longer at Ease,'* and *'Arrow of God'* delve deep into the complexities of these themes, highlighting the struggles and challenges faced by individuals and societies as they navigate through changing circumstances and external influences. Through his storytelling, Achebe often critiques the impact of colonization on the African societies, while celebrating the richness and the resilience of the African culture. His writings spurred discussions about identity, culture, and the effects of colonization, shaping postcolonial literary theory and inspiring generations of African writers to reclaim their narrative.

Before heading forward with the study, a brief definition of the post-colonial literature is a must. Postcolonial literature and postcolonial writings can be defined as the literary

processes through which formerly colonized people seek to assert their difference from, resistance to, and negotiation with European colonial master and their culture which falsely propagated the native's culture, society, custom, religion and sensibility. The Post - colonial Literature and theory seeks to probe what happens when two cultures clash and one of these cultures, with accompanying ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other. "The writers of *Empire Writes Back* use the term 'post-colonial' to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ohadike, iii – iv) ^[8]. Achille Mbembe (2001) ^[6], in *On the Postcolony*, contends that colonial violence affects all the cultural customs of the colonised: "the violence insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness. It does more than penetrate every space: it pursues the colonized even in sleep and dream. It produces a culture; it is a cultural praxis" (p.175). The term post-colonial was well defined by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, who said, "We use the term "post-colonial to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggressions." (1989:2).

Chinua Achebe is known for his culturally rich works that provide insight into the Igbo culture and broader African perspective. His most famous novel '*Things Fall Apart*' portrays pre-colonial Igbo society, its customs, and the impact of European colonisation. Achebe's writings emphasise the importance of cultural identity, challenging stereotypes, and presenting diverse perspectives from Africa. As a matter of fact, *Things Fall Apart* may provide a proper space to probe the prevalent features of Achebe's anti-colonial discourse and what has turned out to be known as "Achebeism" in African Literature (Egejuru, 24) ^[3]. Through his works, Achebe tried to show the world that rites, rituals, culture, customs, religion, the socio-cultural mores, and native beliefs of the colonized people can be made alive again. He infused confidence in his people so that they might be able to discard the inferiority complex that lasted as a hangover of the colonial rule. With an aim to instil moral values and to inspire his people, Achebe not only wrote novels but also encouraged his people to shed off the racial inferiority they had in them. He once said, "Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of denigration and self-denigration." In "Foregrounding Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," Maryam Navidi (2011) ^[7] discusses fundamental consciousness present in Achebe's anti-racial tone. Achebe's magnanimous sensibility, argues Navidi, is projected, so that, "into this new African world of literariness comes Chinua Achebe, a conscious artist, who as a native of Africa, penetrates through the root cause of the problems of his native fellow beings" (p.10).

Achebe created his own style for writing novels using his native Igbo myths, legends, folksongs, proverbs, traditions, customs, and beliefs. This method not only popularized his novels, spread knowledge about Igbo culture worldwide but also challenged the derogatory image of the African as set in the mind of people from other nations and exposed the European attitude about the African. Achebe culturally represents Africa in his works by showcasing the rich

diversity, traditions, and complexities of African societies. He often challenges Western stereotypes and provides an authentic portrayal of African life. Achebe's use of language, story-telling, and characters allow readers to connect with the cultural nuances and historical contexts of his stories, fostering a deeper understanding of the African experience. Through his works such as '*Things Fall Apart*,' Achebe addresses the impact of colonisation, the clash between the old and the new and the buoyant spirit of the African natives. His writing serves as a tool to counter misrepresentations and offers a more accurate depiction of African cultural heritage.

Achebe illustrates the impact of colonization on African tradition and culture in an effective way. He depicts in his works how the colonization disrupted and eroded the traditional values, customs, social mores of African societies. This is exemplified in the clash between Okonkwo's traditional Igbo values and the new order imposed by the powerful colonizers. Achebe shows how colonization led to a loss of cultural identity and infused a sense of inferiority among the native Africans. The imposition of European norms and values on the unwilling Africans led to a rejection of native traditions, customs, language, and rituals causing a disconnection from their heritage. We all know that language is a crucial aspect of culture. Achebe emphasizes how the imposition of European languages and suppression of native languages affect communication and cultural transmission. The dominance of English, for instance, impacts the preservation of oral traditions and native story-telling.

Many other post-colonial writers wrote their works without any link to the works they previously wrote. Unlike them, Achebe wrote all of his novels in a sequence which project the early happy climate of the Africa, then the social, political and religion turmoil during colonization and finally the aftermath leading to the disastrous effect of neocolonialism which the present postcolonial countries struggle. The novels of Achebe can broadly be divided into two categories. While *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* represent pre-colonial Igbo culture struggling against the entry of the Europeans, the novels such as *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* have been written on the issue of identity of people and economic crisis arising out of Postcolonialism and neocolonialism. Thus, we see that Achebe has written all of his novels in a coherent manner to make his people aware of the political and social situation as created by colonization. Achebe had a profound impact on African literature and post-colonial discourse. Achebe's writings highlighted the complexities of identity, culture, and power dynamics in the wake of colonialism, paving the way for more diverse and inclusive perspectives in literature and academia. His contributions continue to shape discussions on colonisation, cultural representation, and the legacy of colonialism in modern African societies. He offered a counter narrative to colonial depictions of Africa, portraying African culture, history, and perspectives with authenticity. His writings emphasised the complexities of postcolonial identity, the effects of civilization and the clash between traditional and western values. Achebe's contribution has been instrumental in fostering discussions about power, representation, and a decolonisation in literature and beyond. Achebe criticizes the colonizer's idea that "England's most valuable contributions to its colonies" was "promising to institute a

legacy of reason and tolerance in a context that the British saw as utterly chaotic” (Reichman 55)^[9].

For Achebe, the expectations of the writer from his society mattered less in comparison to the expectations of the society from its writers, especially in the postcolonial world because in that world, people struggle to assert their identity and equality under the unstable socio-political conditions created by the colonisers. His works were more of an applied literature type as he took up writing to cater to the needs of his community. He used his writing as a weapon with a view to leading his society from a point of ignorance to that of enlightenment. According to Achebe, the aim of writing should be the radical reorientation and emancipation of a colonial society from the ineptitude, the lies, and the creation of colonialism. He desired to build a new Nigeria with full of self-governing and self-control. For that purpose, he was ready to sacrifice his life even. He once said: “The country will perish unless somebody comes forward to save them. Somebody who is prepared to risk his own life for the sake of his fellows. And so, I decided that person had to be myself. (1988-16)

Achebe was of the firm opinion that the reform cannot be brought through political rhetoric only. For that a change at the level of the individual’s consciousness is required. He requested the writers not only to provide answers but to pose appropriate question. To the people, he says “No I cannot give you the answer you are clamouring for. Go home and think I cannot decree your pet, textbook revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives, because as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living, as a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination” (*Anthills of the Savannah*,188)

Achebe’s works explore the impact of European colonialism on African societies, highlighting the clash between indigenous cultures and the forces of colonization. He delves deep into the complexities of cultural identity and the tension between preserving traditional values and adapting to change. Many of his works examine the power-dynamics within societies and the conflicts that arise as a result. These conflicts can be internal, within a character’s mind, or external, involving larger societal forces. Thus, his writing is known for giving voice to the colonized and shedding light on the power dynamics and cultural clashes brought about by colonialism.

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