

The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* within a postcolonial discourse. While the majority of postcolonial critiques argue over indigenous identity, this study explores the deterioration of national identity in *Things Fall Apart*. Such deterioration is brought about by the spiritual and tentative defeat inherent in the failure of the protagonist, Okonkwo, to face the colonial whites. Ultimately, the protagonist's failure leads to a tragic death. In the novel's context, Achebe exhorts the fall of national identity and its pathetic aftermath. The deterioration in national identity symbolically correlates to the protagonist's personal irresolute experience which is at first physically powerful but in the end spiritually weak. The focus of this article is a textual analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, applying postcolonial theoretical concepts, especially aboriginality, hegemony, subaltern and identity. These concepts facilitate a smouldering conceptualisation of national identity as it is exterminated in the novel. Thus, these terms will be cited mainly with reference to Bill Ashcroft, Gayatri Spivak, and Laura Chrisman's postcolonial critiques.

Keywords: Aboriginality, Achebe, hegemony, identity, postcolonialism, subaltern

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on deteriorating national identity in Chinua Achebe's seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's fictional writing is seen to accost the national identity

of Nigerian society. His historical and cultural sense of colonisation gives him a distinctive place among those "original conceptions" promoted in his *An Image of Africa* (2010) in which he postulates an inclusive argumentation "on an appropriately positive note in which [he] would suggest from [his] privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages" (p.104). Consequently, Achebe's diction delves

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into European colonisation in the wake of global realignment after disastrous events, specifically the two world wars.

Things Fall Apart exhibits regenerative literary power. This relates to synthesising multifarious quality of Achebe's erudite fiction, which eludes imperialistic ratification through its minimal interpretive approximation. To support this last point, Achebe's formal efficacy asserts his mode as a recurrent national writer; or as Fagrutheen (2014) puts it: "Achebe, who never patronizes his own culture shows how rival priests function as political agents and have shallower roots than their rhetoric implies" (p.36). In this way, *Things Fall Apart* exteriorises Achebe's literary originality as a novelist examining national chauvinism.

Incontrovertibly, there are also capricious issues and conceptual contradictions associated with ethnicity. One of them is "congenial ethnic" tendencies. But for all that, all the domestic and imperial tensions support the fabrication of multiple racial ethnicities. Hence, ethnic levels of hierarchal communities reject a unified power and, consequently, the colonial agenda has ramifications. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* lays bare the international divisions of ethnic groups in a Nigerian context, so that "Achebe's novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. By unfolding the devastating effects of colonialism on the life of the Igbo people in *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe has successfully made a comprehensible demarcation between the pre-colonial and

the colonial Igbo land" (Alam, 2014, p.105).

There is a steadily growing body of fiction that deals with the depiction of national identity in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, duplicates the complex encounters between Whites and Blacks within a traditional Nigerian periphery. Achebe, being a conscious advocate of anti-colonial power, negotiates possible exits from the colonial influence. However, this exit confronts self-destruction, as exemplified by Okonkwo's unexpected suicide. In "Foregrounding Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Maryam Navidi (2011) 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).

The essential subjectivity of Nigerian national identity is constrained by colonial Eurocentrism. The divergent methods inherent in this intricacy emerge as a double encounter in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The first encounter is between British colonialism and its ramifications in Igbo, which is a fictional place in the novel. The second is with the Christian missionaries with different ideas of life and which clashes with the vernacular conceptualisation of life. The death of Okonkwo may have been hastened "due to his individual character weaknesses" (Nnoromele, 2000, p.146). Nevertheless, colonialism leads to

polarities affecting ethnic minorities in real society. Okonkwo's actions and discourse are entrenched in physical resistance to colonialism in all of its aspects but, he fails to authenticate his positivistic vision of a burgeoning and independent village.

The eugenic fundamentals of colonial enterprises had led to demographical fragmentation. Imperialism acts as an influential proxy on suppressed people. The oppressor is undoubtedly motivated by a desire to impose his power on the oppressed. The main objective of this article is thus, to explore the fall of national identity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The life of the protagonist will be examined through four postcolonial concepts, namely aboriginality, hegemony, subaltern and identity. These concepts will provide relevant critical insights into postcolonial discourse.

INDIGENOUS ABORIGINALITY IN THINGS FALL APART

Things Fall Apart centres on a brawny warrior named Okonkwo who is a descendant of the Umoufia clan. The novel is set in a nine-village consortium. Okonkwo is haunted by his father who had brought disrepute to the village. In challenging that, Okonkwo strives hard to improve himself and becomes a noble clansman extraordinaire. He develops a tremendous virility and gains Umoufia's attention and respect. Okonkwo brings fame and development to his tribe, as opposed to his father who made Umoufia unsettled with his reckless actions. Okonkwo "wins" a boy called Nwoye in a settlement with a

neighbouring tribe. Nwoye shows a lot of affection to Okonkwo as a father, though the latter neglects this. Gradually, he comes to love Nwoye because of his exceptional contribution and help during the locust attacks on the village farms. Okonkwo's village, Igbo, is later ransacked by British colonialists and Christian missionaries. Okonkwo resists these foreign invasions and is thus exiled. After returning from exile, he is summoned up by the leader of the white government for a court inquisition. The colonial government is stunned to find Okonkwo has hung himself, preferring death to what he perceived as a kangaroo court.

Okonkwo's story encapsulates Nigerian national identity. The conglomeration of events in nine connected villages typify the national collective desire for independence and welfare. Yet, his tragic suicide stirs the Nigerians' inert passion for communal prosperity. That being so, this national sense means a reconsideration of Nigeria as a site for the European conquering powers. Both the colonial expansion and Okonkwo's suicide happened in the colonial circuits. Different colonial categories crop up within fictional European dominions. The most distinct category is the geographical location where all the colonial manoeuvres take place. Geographical places are, typically, unequivocal components of ethnic aboriginality in *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Things Fall Apart*, there are nine tribal villages. They form a topographic element in the novel's spatial setting. All of them seem to be ignored especially in Abigail Guthrie's (2011) focus on "both

pre and post colonization, remains both an ideal aim and a source of cultural pride” (p.6). Guthrie emphasises the Nigerian identity through tackling the linguistic peculiarities of the novel’s discourse and thus, the topographic dimension is not well regarded. The focus of this study is on this neglected area and to do so from the vantage point of the present author’s perspective on authentic ethnic groups and aboriginality. Before embarking on an in-depth analysis of the formal and artistic characteristics of aboriginal people in *Things Fall Apart*, it is first necessary to note some of its basic aspects.

Hence, a first point is the anthropological proponents of finding, identifying, allocating, inspecting and appraising a growing body of knowledge on indigenous identity. This falls under the rubric of “ethnic aboriginality”, entailing a topographical verification of the novel and asking questions about the author (Achebe) who produces its context. In *Postcolonial Liberalism*, Duncan Ivison (2002) approaches the motif of the “association” of different human groups in certain circumstances. Ivison claims “the terms of association would have to be ones acceptable to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples – and therein lies the challenge” (p.72).

This recurring motif is reminiscent of Achebe’s spatial setting in *Things Fall Apart*. I refer specifically to the Igbo scene with Okwonko and his people who have forsaken their true authenticity through regional devotion. Instead, they pursue empty dreams and become a lonely

embittered clan. Achebe employs his art to evoke the place-cursed pathos of human existence. Throughout the novel, the shadow of death looms as an omniscient narrator that deprecates the natives with tribal origins. For example, the clan elders direct Okwonko to take care of Ikemefuna in an overwhelmingly indigenous sense: “the elders of the clan had decided that Ikemefuna should be in Okonkwo’s care for a while. But no one thought it would be as long as three years. They seemed to forget all about him as soon as they had taken the decision” (p.8). This vision of the native land, in accordance with national faithfulness, includes the novel’s persistent themes which forge patterns of aboriginal authenticity. National dedication in the form of fragments, explicit dialogues and abrupt subjective changes are also tackled. In fact, as with many of the writings of his counterparts, Achebe’s works document a national identity.

In *Postcolonial Contraventions*, Laura Chrisman (2003) contends that aboriginality is treated in ways related to colonial power. This power can change the cultural and geographical attributes of a colonised people. In the long run, these powers result in “canonical” fiction that addresses the conventions of colonial practices. In this regard, Chrisman argues that a critical appraisal of postcolonial theory and fiction provides a “profound” interpretation of aboriginal identity. Here, fictional critiques become a powerful means to treat current colonial practices, Chrisman comments “there is always a risk that critique will

be construed as an *ad hominem* attack, and indeed several critiques ... It is their profound intellectual substance, as much as their canonical power, or their typicality, that has prompted my critical engagement" (p.2).

Achebe depicts colonised people powerfully in *Things Fall Apart*. He engages in a multi-dimensional portrayal of the Igbo people and how they endure the hardships of colonisation. These are substantiated through Okika's speech. Okika and many others are imprisoned. He tries to liberate the others so they can go back to their clan. Here, the depiction of Okika and his companions' imprisonment typify Achebe's canonical fictional presentations: "the first man to speak to Umuofia that morning was Okika, one of the six who had been imprisoned. Okika was a great man and an orator. But he did not have the booming voice which a first speaker must use to establish silence in the assembly of the clan. Onyeka had such a voice, and so he was asked to salute Umuofia before Okika began to speak" (p.66). Additionally, Achebe presents a sensational perception of suppressed people in their aboriginal surroundings.

Suppressing aboriginal people is further addressed in postcolonial studies. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* (2000) discuss the effects of close encounters between aboriginal people and their colonisers who disapprove of authentic aboriginality is deprecated. Notwithstanding this, there are several periods before real colonisation happens. The colonisers approach lands to be colonized in successive raids and "describe the indigenous inhabitants of

places encountered by European explorers, adventurers or seamen" (p.4). Ashcroft *et al.*'s references to regional exploration and adventures propagate the advent of the "oppressor" as one "being considered by many to be too burdened with derogatory associations" (p.4).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo confronts the Christian missionaries and orders his people not to follow them. As a result, they "ostracise" the Christian missionaries and reject the Christians: "everybody in the assembly spoke, and in the end it was decided to ostracise the Christians. Okonkwo ground his teeth in disgust" (p.49). Okonkwo's resentment of the Christians provokes a national sense via his peoples' fanaticism. They are committed to ethnic aboriginality.

Aboriginality is also discussed in relation to the "accumulation" of the coloniser in the land of the colonised. Such accumulation brings violence and destruction of aboriginal belongings negatively affecting national identity. Every domestic attribute will deteriorate in parallel with a sequence of colonial settlements. Achille Mbembe (2001), 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).

Igbo's cultural customs are endangered by the arrival of white Europeans.

Correspondingly, Igbo people increasingly change. When Mr. Brown, a white missionary, begins paying them social calls, they become socially different. Accordingly, their social life becomes different. Their cultural customs change implicitly and they become accustomed to the white missionary traditions: “the Christians had grown in number and were now a small community of men, women and children, self-assured and confident. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, paid regular visits to them. ‘When I think that it is only eighteen months since the Seed was first sown among you,’ he said, “I marvel at what the Lord hath wrought’ (p.52). As such, the “small community” of whites epitomises Mbembe’s notion of the accumulation of the coloniser in suppressed, or colonised, lands.

Once the accumulation process takes place, national aboriginality steadily disappears. This is evident in the degrading of national authenticity in *Things Fall Apart* whereby aboriginal people could not maintain their indigenous social aboriginality. Yet, the spirit of their national adherence is preserved in the fortitude of the novel’s protagonist, Okonkwo. The residuals of national aboriginality are preserved in Okonkwo’s resistance to the whites and his regional faithfulness. This faithfulness is achieved through the preservation of his national identity. But this national identity confronts a great colonial hegemony in the novel. The following section will examine the relationship between aboriginality and colonial hegemony.

THE NOTION OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

In postcolonial theory, the concept of hegemony distinguishes colonial systems and their agendas as applied to colonised territories. In a broader sense, the concept refers to the coloniser’s ability to apply a suppressive methodology in order to occupy certain regional boundaries. In particular, it refers to a special process implemented by the coloniser in order to gain power over the colonised. In *Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis and Burton: Power Play of Empire*, Ben Grant (2009) tackles the racial aspect of colonial hegemony: “if the trope of a racialised space institutes clear borders between different races, the temporal nonetheless returns as an ambivalent factor in the institution of these boundaries: by positing the negro as inferior, by which is meant backward” (p.102).

Correspondingly, *Things Fall Apart* portrays different racial encounters between whites and aboriginal Igbo people. The notion of hegemony extrapolates the conquest of the Igbo by bringing education. The white colonisers essentially use culture and via education and new methods of learning, attempt to dominate the Igbo people. They construct schools and even include the women in educative disciplines. In the extract below, women are preparing for lessons. In essence, this is the first token of colonialism in Igbo. People first change their social customs, as dictated by Mr. Brown. Then they get involved in learning through the colonial educational system.

Hence, they progressively change adopting the colonial mentality and outlook:

It was Wednesday in Holy Week and Mr. Kiaga had asked the women to bring red earth and white chalk and water to scrub the church for Easter; and the women had formed themselves into three groups for this purpose. They set out early that morning, some of them with their water-pots to the stream, another group with hoes and baskets to the village earth pit, and the others to the chalk quarry. (p.56)

Introduction of a new form of education ensures implementation of the white Christian blueprint. The colonial power offers incentives like education to help conquer the Igbo and the rest of the nine villages. This colonial practice relates to the hegemonic prototypical enterprise pursued by the colonial power. By the same token, through hegemony, “the destabilizing process set in motion by colonial mimicry produces a set of deceptive, even derisive, ‘resemblances’ that implicitly question the homogenizing practices of colonial discourse” (Huggan, 2008, p.22). Huggan argues for the aftermath of hegemony in colonial literature.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the disabling effects of hegemony are obvious. A group of anonymous young men, for example, severely punish a few Igbo women for not bringing water-pots. Their identity is revealed through their growing number;

so that the young men are suspected to be Christians: “The Christians had grown in number and were now a small community of men, women and children, self-assured and confident” (p.52). Here, hegemony is concentrated in the hands of young men who have control over the women. They attack the women to serve the colonials: “the women had come to the church with empty water pots. They said that some young men had chased them away from the stream with whips. Soon after, the women who had gone for red earth returned with empty baskets. Some of them had been heavily whipped” (p.52). Most importantly, hegemony takes effect as one of the women describes the actions of other women, calling them “outlaws”: “‘the village has outlawed us,’ said one of the women. ‘The bellman announced it last night. But it is not our custom to debar anyone from the stream or the quarry’” (p.52).

The effects of hegemony can be seen in the women’s description of other women as outlaws. To some extent, disobedience is an effect of cultural hegemony. According to Shirley Chew (2010), hegemony approximates to the concept of a nation. This concept unilaterally refers to different nations and their amalgamation into one nation. The process of amalgamation specifically expands the European empires; Chew writes: “the concept of nation and the concomitant advocacy of various nationalisms have offered colonized peoples significant political and imaginative resources in contesting the authority and legitimacy of the European empires” (p.32).

Colonial hegemony reaches its peak when Okonkwo grows his last harvest in Mbanta: “it was going to be Okonkwo’s last harvest in Mbanta” (p.54). This is an indication that Okonkwo is no longer able to grow food in his own territory. The land has almost been conquered by the whites who exploit Igbo and other villages. The Igbo people become despondent and rely on the colonial power in their national affairs. In this way, they become subalterns.

SUBALTERN AND IDENTITY

The concept of subaltern is associated with inferiority. It indicates the subjugation of others via exploitation. It is generally connected to the treatment of women in an inferior way. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Okonkwo treats his wife, Ekwefi, in a harsh way. He orders her to manage domestic affairs. This inflicts a tremendous burden on Ekwefi as a housewife: “Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast he told her that it was not her affair” (p.54).

Women’s inferiority negotiates the theme of women as “subjects” of men. This leads us to another perception of women’s position, “If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away” (Spivak, 2003, p.73). Furthermore, women’s subjectivity is implied, especially in “insurgency” contexts, because “‘the subject’ implied by

the texts of insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an ‘object of investigation’, or, worse, yet, a model for imitation” (Spivak, 2010, p.82).

Okonkwo’s treatment of his wives implies his static personality. He does not change when the whites invade their villages. Here, he clings to his national identity and maintains his domestic responsibility towards his wives and children: “but it was a resilient spirit, and in the end Okonkwo overcame his sorrow. He had five other sons and he would bring them up in the way of the clan” (p.56). Okonkwo shows manly fortitude in maintaining his national customs in a “spiritual” quest for independence. Therefore, his national longing gives him the power to resist.

This power to resist resides in his individual stamina to accomplish independence. That being so, “resistance is the substitution, or offsetting, of one form of power by another” (Thiele, 2002, p.95). Okonkwo’s power is clearly depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. His power turns out to be negative, because it changes the traditional “moods” of his family. Such moods are an outcome of his subjugation of his wives and daughters. He forces them to engage in domestic and cultivation work: “Ekwefi [Okonkwo’s second wife] rose early on the following morning and went to her farm with her daughter, Ezinma, and Ojiugo’s daughter, Obiageli, to harvest cassava tubers. Each of them carried a long cane basket, a machete for cutting down the soft cassava stem, and a little hoe for digging out

the tuber. Fortunately, a light rain had fallen during the night and the soil would not be very hard (parentheses added)" (p.54). The domestic responsibility imposed on his wife and his daughters indicate Okonkwo's strict behaviour. He tries to keep his identity by inflicting heavy labour on his family. More specifically, he dominates his daughter Obiageli since he believes that she can perform strenuous work like boys: "I wish she were a boy," Okonkwo thought within himself. She understood things so perfectly" (p.56).

The critical nuances of identity in postcolonial theory relate to individuals seeking refuge from the advent of the "other". Thus identity involves a "desire" to preserve the national heritage. Consequently, the individuals' "nationalism may be due to the relatively stronger desire to define their cultural identity" (Talib, 2002, p.21). In *Things Fall Apart*, Oduche and other men from Okonkwo's villages are put in prison. But Oduche dies of sorrow and his friend Anedo is hanged: "he was imprisoned with all the leaders of his family. In the end Oduche died and Anedo was taken to Umuru and hanged" (p.57). These tragic events represent the powerful national resistance to the whites. Such resistance implies a national desire to maintain the aboriginal identity.

Preserving national identity requires a "flux" within the aboriginal circumference. This flux includes a complete change to the indigenous identity. In the long run, colonialism brings about "constant" change in colonised lands. Shirley Chew

(2010) argues that: "as a consequence, identities are also in a constant state of flux. Colonialism has been a major engine driving an accelerated pace of change, forcing different cultures into new forms, 'unfixing' what was thought to be solid, and creating new identities" (p.19). The flux of national identity in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, does not affect Okonkwo because he does not recognise the white colonial government. Before he returns from exile to his native land, he has affectionate memories of it: "Okonkwo's return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished" (p.59).

Okonkwo's return is a perennial reference to his nationalism. He does not undergo the colonial influx, whereby "replacing any earlier constructions of location and identity, is to establish at least partial control over reality, geography, history, and subjectivity" (Gilbert *et al.*, 2002, p.165). The new white government affects the lives of all indigenous people except Okonkwo: "the new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds" (p.59).

Okonkwo's resistance leads to deep bitterness in his spirituality. He cannot be affected by the colonial government. When he returns from exile, his people ignore him as they are only interested in the white religion and government. Peoples' constant change makes him agitated, as if he were at war: "Okonkwo slept very little that night. The bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of childlike excitement, before

he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile” (p.65).

The affirmation of national identity in the midst of western colonialism describes the absurdity of aboriginal individuality. By the same token, national identity reveals a “reinterpretation of colonial experiences influenced by local, national and international postcolonial contexts and circumstances” (Trovaio, 2012, pp.261-262). Notwithstanding this, maintaining national identity in colonial circumstances degrades the essence of identity. Okonkwo, for example, cannot change like the others. The idea of aboriginality is influenced by the white colonial power through their cultural expansion.

Okonkwo is the last indigenous man to keep his identity. But his resentment of both colonial power and his people’s “flux” alienated him. Almost all of his comrades have been killed or imprisoned by the whites, so he becomes the last chauvinistic sentinel. Thus, he decides to commit suicide to escape the aboriginal disgrace. When the colonial leader summon him for trial, they find him hanging from a tree: “they came to the tree from which Okonkwo’s body was dangling, and they stopped dead” (p.68). Okonkwo’s tragic end portrays the collective fall of his people. Thus, Okonkwo represents the fall of the national identity of the Igbo people and their surroundings.

CONCLUSION

This article has studied the fall of national identity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall*

Apart. This study corresponds to “spatial and regional contexts, and especially in relation to social injustice, literary humour likely plays a more important and serious role than it would at first seem” (Juha, 2014, p.712). The study has focused on the aboriginal circumstances of a fictional setting composed of nine Nigerian villages. This land is invaded by colonial whites who subjugate the indigenous people.

The study discusses aboriginal qualities of the Igbo and the other villages during the advent of white colonial power. The new power instils a social, religious and military mentality into indigenous “trans persons, living authentically may or may not involve physical changes to their body” (Dargie *et al.*, 2014, p.60). Indigenous people gradually began to change after being influenced by the new colonial culture. As a result, different ethnic behaviours change in accordance with colonial agendas.

The result is that indigenous individualism adapts and there is “a growing awareness of the faultiness and conflict that characterise relationships between indigenous people and settler states around the world” (Maddison, 2012, p.696). Such awareness leads the protagonist, Oknokwo, to act according to his national identity. Hence, he inflicts “subaltern” treatment on his family, especially his wives. The white hegemony intensifies, and the national mood advocates eventually die or exiled. Oknokwo, being the sole national survivor, rejects colonialism and commits suicide. His individualism represents the remnants of the national identity of the Igbo and other

villages. Thus, committing suicide is but a token of national decline that is, Oknokwo's death embodies the fall of the Nigerian indigenous identity.

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