

# Cultural Disintegration and Colonial Intrusion in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Critical Analysis of Igbo Society

P. Praseeba<sup>1</sup>, R. C. Sheila Royappa<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart provides an in-depth exploration of Igbo society, its customs, and the devastating effects of European colonization. This paper examines the foundational beliefs of the Igbo people, including their socio-political structures, religious practices, gender roles, and agricultural dependence, which shaped their identity and way of life. The arrival of Christian missionaries and colonial administrators disrupted these traditions, creating conflicts between generations, families, and societal structures. The introduction of Western education, legal systems, and monotheistic beliefs challenged the Igbo worldview, leading to a gradual cultural disintegration. Through an analysis of key events, symbolic elements, and character transformations in the novel, this study highlights the internal and external forces that contributed to the collapse of Igbo society. Additionally, a comparative perspective with Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is presented to contrast Achebe's authentic depiction of African identity with Western portrayals of imperialism. By examining both historical and literary perspectives, this paper underscores the broader implications of colonialism on indigenous societies, emphasizing the loss of cultural heritage, identity, and autonomy.*

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Cultural Erosion, Identity Crisis, Symbolism, Masculinity.

## Introduction

The foundation of humanity's cultures, traditions, and beliefs is deeply rooted in literature. Literature serves as a reflection of reality, characterizes a window to ideology, and prevails as a product of art. The narratives within literature capture societal happenings, allowing us to learn from, restore, and preserve historical and cultural knowledge (Widdowson, H. G., 2014). Good fiction delves into psychology and philosophy, with historical novels often requiring extensive research into period settings through journals, letters, and newspaper articles. These efforts aim to accurately depict key figures, dialects, attire, lifestyle, political status, and other cultural accoutrements of the era.

African literature, a diverse and dynamic field, encompasses narratives that document the continent's rich history, cultural experiences, and mythologies. Over the past century, African writers have produced works in multiple languages, illustrating their lives and the historical transformations they have undergone (Kaur, 2017). Many African writers have used literature to address pressing social issues, especially in the post-war and post-colonial periods.

One of the most prominent African writers, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, crafted one of the most celebrated novels of the 20th century, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). This novel encapsulates the tensions between traditional tribal ethics and colonial rule, highlighting the pressures of masculinity in patriarchal societies. Achebe was also a literary critic, particularly known for his critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which he condemns its portrayal of Africans, labeling it as racially biased. Cultural anthropologists emphasize that the loss of culture signifies an irreversible loss of humanity's heritage and indigenous diversity. However, due to selection bias, the absence of long-term data, and the endogeneity of culture, providing conclusive evidence remains challenging.

Lame Maatla Kenalemang (2013) analyzed *Things Fall Apart* to explore pre- and post-colonial Igbo society, showcasing the interactions between white colonizers and the Igbo people, highlighting both the positive

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Research Centre, Seethalakshmi Achi College for Women, Pallathur, Sivagangai, Email: [praseebafrancis@gmail.com](mailto:praseebafrancis@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English and Research Centre, Seethalakshmi Achi College for Women, Pallathur, Sivagangai, Email: [poorsheila@gmail.com](mailto:poorsheila@gmail.com)

and negative consequences of colonialism. Suhaib Majeed Kadhem (2018) argues that traditional African societies underwent a drastic shift from liberty to bondage, from simplicity to complexity, and from unity to downfall. He asserts that colonial missionaries aimed to erase African religions, cultural traditions, originality, and identity, replacing them with European ideologies and racial hierarchies. The Igbo, unprepared for the colonial impact, ultimately succumbed to its power. K. Jayapriya and D. Sangeetha (2018) examined post-colonial literature's critical and theoretical perspectives, discussing how race, religion, invasion, and pacification led to identity crises and cultural erosion.

Dr. Mohamed Fawzy El-Dessouky (2010) highlights how Okonkwo's struggles in *Things Fall Apart* symbolize African culture's resilience against British dominance. Even after Okonkwo's tragic demise, the novel suggests that African cultural identity endures in the hearts of its people. Abdalhadi Nimer A. Abu Jweid (2016) analysed Achebe's literary style, examining the post-colonial impact on native identities. The novel portrays the protagonist as physically powerful yet spiritually weakened by cultural conflict. Umami Kalthum Aminu (2019) explored Achebe's depiction of Igbo traditions and the collision with British imperialism.

Avisek Pattnaik and Prasanta Kumar Padhi (2020) critically compared *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*, examining their differing portrayals of Africa—one from the perspective of an outsider (Conrad) and the other from an insider (Achebe). Sonia Sharmin (2018) addressed racism in literature, arguing that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* covertly maintains European colonial bias. Dr. Khalil Hassan Nofal (2013) analysed Conrad's use of the term "darkness," noting how lexical choices reinforce mystery and ambiguity.

Dr. Tanmay Chatterjee (2020) described *Heart of Darkness* as an exposé of European exploitation and brutality in Africa, contrasting colonial discourse with its violent reality. He also noted that *Things Fall Apart* cautions against nostalgic idealization of the past, illustrating the internal contradictions within African societies before European colonial influence.

Despite extensive research on both novels, Achebe's response to Conrad remains a cornerstone of literary critique. In his essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, Achebe states, "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth."

### *The Downfall of the Igbo in Things Fall Apart*

Igbo culture serves as the backbone of Achebe's narrative, with the novel employing a third-person omniscient perspective. The narrator presents the thoughts of multiple characters while interspersing cultural commentary. Achebe's straightforward diction ensures an unbiased and clear presentation of Igbo traditions.

The novel introduces Okonkwo, a strong and respected leader, contrasting him with his deceased father, Unoka, who lacked wealth and status but possessed artistic and linguistic talents. The narrative vividly portrays Igbo society's structured way of life, governed by numerous traditions. While the story begins with Okonkwo's rise, it concludes with his tragic downfall. His masculine ideals, which initially earn him respect, ultimately lead to his demise. When a colonial messenger disrupts Igbo traditions, Okonkwo reacts with violence, only to realize his people will not support him. Overwhelmed by the loss of his cultural identity, he commits suicide, an act deemed dishonourable by his tribe. His body, considered cursed, is left for outsiders to bury, signifying the erosion of Igbo traditions.

Achebe meticulously highlights Igbo customs, such as the Week of Peace (Achebe, 31) and the New Yam Festival, which honours the Earth goddess (Achebe, 36). Igbo myths, such as the tale of the tortoise and birds (Achebe, 97) and the story of the mosquito and ear (Achebe, 75), reveal a sophisticated oral tradition that challenges colonial portrayals of Africans as primitive.

### *Achebe's Glorification of Igbo Culture*

Set in early 1900s Nigeria, *Things Fall Apart* intricately weaves Igbo customs into the narrative. Igbo religion serves as the moral, social, and political foundation of the community (Pala, 2017, p.1895). Proverbs play a crucial role, as reflected in the saying, "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 15). Speech patterns adhere to cultural traditions, emphasizing respect and wisdom.

The novel also highlights religious customs. The Feast of the New Yam, celebrated in gratitude to the Earth goddess Ani, underscores the community's deep connection to nature (Achebe, 38). Each deity holds significance, with Chukwu as the Supreme God and Chi as the personal deity. The Igbo follow divine commands conveyed through oracles and diviners, believing in their guidance without question. This faith often results in extreme acts, such as the abandonment of twins, deemed evil (Achebe, 147).

The arrival of Christian missionaries disrupts Igbo society, creating divisions between traditionalists and converts. The resulting internal conflict weakens Igbo unity, making them susceptible to colonial control. Achebe emphasizes that the cultural downfall stems not only from external colonial pressures but also from internal discord. The novel presents Igbo traditions with dignity, countering Western stereotypes of African societies as disorganized and primitive.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* remains a seminal work that preserves and celebrates Igbo heritage while critically examining the forces that led to its disruption. Through his intricate storytelling, Achebe immortalizes the resilience of Igbo culture, ensuring its legacy endures beyond colonial narratives.

#### *The Impact of Missionaries on Igbo Society in Things Fall Apart*

In Igbo culture, a man was considered strong and authoritative if he possessed multiple wives. Polygamy was a status symbol, representing wealth, masculinity, and social standing. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries challenged this fundamental aspect of Igbo identity by condemning polygamy. This attack on their traditional family structure threatened the very foundation of Igbo masculinity.

The missionaries also introduced monotheism, a stark contrast to the polytheistic beliefs of the Igbo people. They sought to replace the existing religious framework by dismissing Igbo deities as false, stating, "Your Gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm. They are pieces of wood and stone" (Achebe, 158). This assertion undermined the deeply ingrained spiritual system that had guided the Igbo for generations.

#### *The Collapse in Beliefs of Igbo Society*

The novel is set in Nigeria's Igbo land during the late 19th century, a time when European missionaries began encroaching upon traditional African societies. The Igbo people lived in a cluster of nine villages, bound together for protection and mutual support. The story unfolds in the fictional village of Umuofia, where geographical identity was deeply connected to lineage and gender. A man's "fatherland" was his patrilineal home, while his "motherland" was the village of his maternal relatives. This distinction was crucial, as Okonkwo's exile to his motherland was seen as emasculating, further reflecting the deeply patriarchal structure of Igbo society.

As European missionaries arrived, they introduced not only a new religion but also foreign ideologies, legal systems, and methods of governance. Their presence disrupted the established social order, creating tension between those who adhered to traditional customs and those who embraced change (Alimi, 121). The missionaries' efforts to convert individuals caused significant conflict, as religion was deeply intertwined with Igbo daily life, governance, and moral structure (Ogude, 116). While Igbo people revered nature and ancestors, they also valued strength and wealth as primary indicators of success. Okonkwo, for example, equated masculinity with power and viewed emotion, music, and conversation as weaknesses (Innes, 1979: 92). His rejection of gentler qualities ultimately led to his downfall, symbolizing the broader struggle of Igbo culture against colonial influence.

The Igbo people's belief system was rooted in a profound connection to nature. They considered themselves children of the earth, believing that their actions determined divine favor or wrath. Their laws, customs, and practices were upheld with strict adherence, fearing punishment from the gods and ancestors. Status was reflected through personal merit, hard work, and wealth, which were visibly marked by ankle bracelets denoting social rank.

By the late 19th century, Umuofia was a thriving and independent village governed by its own laws and customs. Social status was primarily determined by agricultural success, strength, and the number of wives a man possessed. A man who failed to meet these expectations was labeled "agbala," meaning womanlike or weak. However, despite their rigid structures, Igbo society maintained a balance of justice. Men could physically discipline their wives, but women retained the right to take grievances to the village court, ensuring some level of fairness (Syed Fagruheen, 2014, p.22).

Despite their structured society, certain Igbo customs, such as the abandonment of twins and sacrificial offerings, left some individuals vulnerable. The missionaries exploited this, attracting outcasts and those marginalized by traditional laws. These converts sought refuge in Christianity to escape their suffering, leading to a division within the community. The missionaries, operating under the assumption that Africans lacked a system of justice, imposed their own legal framework, establishing courts and prisons. Worse still, they enlisted native converts as court messengers, turning them against their own people.

### *Economic and Social Disruption*

Igbo society was heavily dependent on agriculture, with farming serving as the primary means of sustenance and economic stability. Farmers, traders, and craftsmen played essential roles in maintaining the village economy. Okonkwo, like all good farmers, followed the seasonal patterns religiously:

"Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned" (Achebe, 32).

This passage highlights the Igbo people's deep connection to nature and their resilience in the face of environmental challenges. However, the unpredictability of nature also brought despair. A poor harvest could mean starvation, as seen in the novel when devastating weather conditions ruined the crops, leading to immense suffering and even suicide.

"That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself" (Achebe, 33).

Despite the hardships, the Igbo were resourceful. For example, they turned a locust infestation into an opportunity for food:

"For although locusts had not visited Umuofia for many years, everybody knew by instinct that they were very good to eat" (Achebe, 66).

However, as missionaries offered material incentives such as singlets and towels to attract converts, more people abandoned traditional practices. Education, once limited to oral storytelling and folklore, was now replaced by Western schooling. The English language began eroding Igbo identity, as seen when older individuals joined schools to adapt to the new world order:

"More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels. They were not all young... Some of them were thirty years old or more" (Achebe, 196).

### *The Disintegration of the Igbo Family Unit*

Family was the cornerstone of Igbo society, with strict roles assigned to each member. Fathers were providers and protectors, while mothers nurtured and educated children through stories, songs, and cultural teachings (Egar, 36). However, with colonial influence, this structure began to crumble. The conversion of individuals like Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, to Christianity caused irreparable divisions:

"How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion" (Achebe, 191).

Symbolism plays a crucial role in illustrating the gradual collapse of Igbo culture. The arrival of the locusts, initially celebrated, foreshadows the arrival of the missionaries and the eventual destruction they bring:

"They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them" (Achebe, 66).

The cultural divide extended beyond religious conversion. Fire, representing masculinity and strength, was associated with Okonkwo. In contrast, his son, perceived as weak, was likened to ash:

"Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (Achebe, 167).

Similarly, the unmasking of an *egwugwu*, a sacred ancestral spirit, symbolizes the exposure and destruction of Igbo traditions by the missionaries:

"It seemed as if the very soul of the clan wept for the great evil that was coming – its own death" (Achebe, 193).

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a poignant and deeply insightful portrayal of the Igbo society, its cultural richness, and the tragic consequences of colonial intrusion. The novel encapsulates the intricate social structures, religious beliefs, and value systems that define Igbo life before the arrival of the European missionaries. Achebe meticulously presents the Igbo as a people with a well-established system of governance, a profound connection to their ancestors and deities, and a structured way of life that prioritizes honor, masculinity, and communal harmony. However, as the narrative unfolds, we witness the slow but inevitable disintegration of these traditions under the weight of colonial influence and religious conversion.

One of the central themes of the novel is the clash of civilizations. The Igbo, who have lived for generations by their own customs and traditions, find themselves confronting an alien ideology that not only challenges their belief system but also undermines their entire social fabric. The arrival of the Christian missionaries represents more than just the introduction of a new religion—it signifies the beginning of a new world order where the Igbo way of life is deemed inferior and outdated. This results in an internal conflict among the Igbo people, as some members embrace the new faith while others, like Okonkwo, vehemently resist change. The division created within the community ultimately weakens its foundation, making it easier for colonial forces to assert control.

Achebe masterfully uses symbolism to highlight the tragic collapse of Igbo society. The arrival of the locusts, which initially appears to be a blessing, foreshadows the destruction brought by colonial rule. Similarly, Okonkwo himself embodies the struggle of the traditional Igbo warrior, one who cannot adapt to the shifting realities of his time. His suicide, rather than being a personal act of despair, serves as a powerful metaphor for the larger demise of Igbo culture. Just as Okonkwo takes his own life in the face of irreversible change, so too does his society succumb to external forces beyond its control.

Furthermore, *Things Fall Apart* provides an important counter-narrative to the Eurocentric portrayal of African societies as primitive and uncivilized. Through his rich and nuanced storytelling, Achebe dismantles colonial stereotypes, illustrating that African communities had well-established traditions, laws, and

philosophies long before European intervention. By doing so, he reclaims the dignity of Igbo culture and, more broadly, African heritage.

The impact of colonialism in *Things Fall Apart* is not just historical—it resonates in contemporary discussions about cultural identity, globalization, and the lingering effects of imperialism. The novel invites readers to reflect on the consequences of forced cultural assimilation and the loss of indigenous traditions. It also raises critical questions about the nature of progress: is modernization truly beneficial if it comes at the cost of erasing entire ways of life? Achebe does not provide an explicit answer but leaves the reader to ponder the price of change. *Things Fall Apart* is not merely a story about one man's downfall; it is a broader commentary on the vulnerability of indigenous cultures in the face of imperialism. The novel serves as both a historical reflection and a cautionary tale, reminding us of the destructive power of cultural imposition. Achebe's work ensures that the voices of the past are not silenced, offering a powerful reminder of the resilience and complexity of African societies. Ultimately, the novel urges us to acknowledge and respect the diversity of cultures, understanding that the loss of one heritage diminishes the collective human experience.

## Conclusion

Igbo society was deeply structured, with customs and beliefs that shaped every aspect of life. They revered their gods, ancestors, and natural elements, believing in a delicate balance between humanity and the spiritual world. However, the arrival of missionaries disrupted this harmony. Unlike the brutality depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, which showcases imperialism through an outsider's lens, *Things Fall Apart* presents an internal perspective of colonialism's impact, highlighting the slow, insidious erosion of culture. While Igbo traditions emphasized community, fairness, and resilience, the introduction of foreign influences led to division, loss, and ultimately, the collapse of a once-thriving civilization.

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