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NARRATING THE NATION: POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's constitutes a seminal work of postcolonial literature and provides a resounding response to the ubiquity of colonial narratives about Africa. In this article, I discuss in which ways Achebe establishes a complex picture of Igbo society and identity before, during and after the interference of British colonialism. By telling the story from an indigenous point of view, Achebe returns agency to African voices that have been historically marginalised in colonial rhetoric. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, signifies the conflict between the old and the new, the individual and the social, and the history and the present, and even embodies the breakdown of the human assimilative process under the impact of colonial rule at last. The analysis focuses on Achebe's use of language, myth, folktale, and Igbo tradition to create an accurate portrait of pre-colonial Africa, and to counter the Eurocentric image of Africa as dark, savage and backwards. "Closer Look" readings of specific passages also reveal the ways in which the novel allegorises the violence the culture of Christianity and colonial administration wreaks on the culture of the character, the personal and communal divide they create. Achebe's English, enriched with Igbo idioms and proverbs, similarly reiterates the hybrid and ambivalent nature of the postcolonial self.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, Igbo Culture, Colonialism, Identity, Resistance, Nation-Narration, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The story of a nation is rarely told by its own people when that nation has lived under the shadow of conquest. For centuries, Africa's voice was muffled—its civilisations caricatured, its traditions dismissed, and its histories overwritten by those who came not to understand but to dominate. It is within this historical and literary silence that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) speaks with transformative urgency. More than a novel, it stands as a bold act of cultural reclamation: a work that reclaims narrative agency, reasserts African subjectivity, and reimagines the nation from within. By chronicling the rhythms and ruptures of precolonial Igbo society through its own idioms and logic, Achebe disrupts the imperial lens and restores complexity to a world long flattened by colonial misrepresentation. Written on the eve of sweeping independence movements across Africa, the novel arrives at a moment of collective reckoning. It confronts not only the political residue of empire but the deeper psychic fractures left by years of cultural denigration.

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Centred on the tragic figure of Okonkwo, the story transcends the personal to become emblematic: his struggle mirrors that of a society wrestling with the seismic impact of foreign domination. Okonkwo's fall is not simply a man's undoing—it signals the unravelling of an entire cosmology, charting the slow erosion of identity, tradition, and communal coherence under colonial pressure.

At its core, *Things Fall Apart* serves as a rebuttal—a literary counter-punch to the sweeping generalisations of colonial writers like Joseph Conrad, who famously cast Africa as a "dark" and unknowable place. Achebe's narrative refuses that erasure. With precision and empathy, he reconstructs the texture of Igbo life: its moral codes, its rituals, its internal contradictions. Through this, he reveals not a cultural void, but a richly layered society with its own logic and dignity. His choice to write in English, inflected with Igbo proverbs and speech rhythms, is itself an act of linguistic resistance, retooling the coloniser's language to carry indigenous truths. This study examines *Things Fall Apart* as a pivotal text in postcolonial literature, examining how Achebe narrates the nation by restoring cultural memory and confronting historical silences. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon, this study investigates how Achebe engages the themes of cultural dislocation, hybridity, resistance, and the psychological toll of colonialism. The novel, this paper argues, is not merely a record of a vanishing world but a reimagining of what could emerge in its wake—a vision grounded in African realities rather than imperial fiction. In the end, Achebe speaks with and for a people whose stories had long been told by others. By reconstructing a fractured past and pushing back against imposed narratives, *Things Fall Apart* helps redefine what it means to be African in a postcolonial world. This research will examine literature's power not only to remember, but to resist becoming a living archive of identity, voice, and survival.

Obierika captures the subtle yet devastating impact of colonial incursion on indigenous cultural unity and postcolonial identity. The lines encapsulate one of the novel's central themes: how colonialism infiltrated African communities not through immediate violence, but through ideological manipulation and gradual cultural disintegration. It serves as a critical focal point in understanding how Chinua Achebe narrates the nation, not as a monolithic, static entity, but as one internally contested and externally destabilised.

Obierika's reflection is marked by a tone of bitter hindsight. The initial "peaceable" entrance of the missionaries was met with amusement by the Igbo, who underestimated the ideological potency of religion as a colonial tool. What they perceived as foolishness masked a deeper strategy: Christianity operated not only as a spiritual doctrine but as a mechanism of sociopolitical division. The missionaries appealed to the marginalised within the Igbo community—those who had been ostracised or oppressed by traditional norms. In doing so, they fractured the communal cohesion that once held the clan together. Obierika's line, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one" (Achebe, 176) signals the internal rupture colonialism caused—not only between coloniser and colonised, but among the colonised themselves.

In the framework of postcolonial identity, this moment in the novel is a powerful articulation of hybridity and dislocation, themes emphasised by scholars such as Homi Bhabha. The clan's inability to "act like one" reflects a crisis of identity, wherein traditional structures have been compromised by new allegiances and belief systems. Achebe uses this fragmentation to critique both the loss of sovereignty and the erosion of collective cultural memory, central concerns in any attempt to narrate the postcolonial nation.

Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the quote demonstrates a shift from passive observation to a recognition of loss. The clan's initial reaction—"We were amused at his foolishness"—reveals the danger of cultural arrogance or overconfidence in the perceived

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permanence of one's traditions. Achebe subtly critiques not just colonial aggression but the complacency that allowed ideological colonisation to take root. In narrating the nation, Achebe deliberately positions this moment as a turning point, not just in the plot, but in the psychic life of the community. It dramatises how colonialism disrupted not only political autonomy but also the narrative coherence of African identity. The fractured clan becomes a metaphor for the fractured nation: a people no longer unified by shared language, belief, or memory. Ultimately, these lines lay bare the psychological violence of empire, which often precedes its physical force. Through Obierika's lament, Achebe conveys that the true conquest of Africa began not with the sword, but with the cross—and with it, the slow unravelling of a once-cohesive world.

The white man is very proud, and he does not understand our ways. He says that our customs are bad, and our gods are false. He has brought a religion which teaches that the brothers should not fight one another. Yet he comes with his guns and his court messengers. (Achebe, 144.) It shows the profound hypocrisy and cultural dissonance at the heart of colonialism, particularly the version imposed under the guise of Christianity and "civilising missions." Spoken by a member of the Igbo community, the observation underscores the paradox of a colonial order that preaches peace, unity, and morality while simultaneously relying on coercion, violence, and institutional domination. This duplicity becomes a crucial narrative tool through which Chinua Achebe critiques not only the actions of the colonisers but also the moral justification they use to legitimise their rule. The "proud" white man is not just unaware of Igbo customs; he actively judges and devalues them. His labelling of indigenous traditions as "bad" and "false" echoes what Edward Said termed "orientalist discourse"—a Western tendency to define colonised peoples through a lens of inferiority and otherness. In doing so, Achebe highlights how colonial narratives worked not just through physical conquest but through discursive erasure, painting African religion and customs as illegitimate.

The irony of a religion that teaches nonviolence while arriving "with his guns and his court messengers" underscores the contradictions of colonial rule. The juxtaposition of spiritual ideals with military force reveals how religion served as both a moral pretext and a strategic tool for political domination. Frantz Fanon wrote extensively on this point, arguing in The Wretched of the Earth that colonialism depended on undermining indigenous belief systems while imposing new structures that seemed righteous but were ultimately violent and alienating.

Achebe reflects this duality in how Christianity, while outwardly pacifist, becomes a mechanism for suppressing traditional authority and enforcing colonial law. From a postcolonial standpoint, this moment in *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies how colonialism fractures the identity of the nation it invades. The religious intrusion not only delegitimises traditional customs but also sows moral confusion and cultural hybridity—themes that Homi Bhabha explores through the concept of "mimicry." Colonised subjects may adopt the symbols of the coloniser's culture, but this only deepens their alienation from their own. In narrating the nation, Achebe deliberately includes voices that resist and expose colonial contradictions. This quotation functions as more than a critique—it becomes a form of narrative resistance, a reclaiming of perspective from within the colonised community. By articulating the hypocrisy and arrogance of the white man, the speaker affirms the value of Igbo culture, even in the face of its attempted erasure. "Does the white man understand our custom about land?" "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (Achebe, 176.)

The exchange between Uchendu and Okonkwo in Chapter 20 of *Things Fall Apart* encapsulates the central crisis of colonialism: the erosion of indigenous belief systems and the resulting internal division within colonised societies. Uchendu's rhetorical question—"Does the

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white man understand our custom about land?"—highlights the fundamental cultural disconnect between the coloniser and the colonised. The British imposition of foreign governance, religion, and land ownership systems operates on a complete disregard for Igbo traditions, rendering meaningful dialogue impossible. This moment crystallises Achebe's broader critique of colonialism as not merely an external force of domination but as a corrosive agent that fractures communities from within.

The white man's inability to "speak our tongue" symbolises the broader failure of colonial powers to engage with African societies on their own terms. Colonialism operates through enforced ignorance—the refusal to learn local languages, customs, or histories—while simultaneously declaring those very customs "bad." This reflects the Eurocentric worldview that positioned Western civilisation as inherently superior, justifying the dismantling of indigenous systems. Achebe's narrative exposes this hypocrisy: the coloniser condemns what he does not comprehend, replacing complex social structures with rigid, alien institutions. The land, a sacred and communal entity in Igbo culture, is reduced to a commodity under British rule, illustrating how colonialism disrupts not just political autonomy but the very fabric of cultural meaning.

The more devastating consequence of colonialism, as Uchendu notes, is the betrayal by "our own brothers who have taken up his religion." The spread of Christianity creates a schism within Igbo society, turning kinsmen into collaborators. This internal division weakens resistance, as colonialism's most effective weapon is not just military force but ideological conquest. Characters like Nwoye, who embraces Christianity, represent the psychological colonisation that accompanies imperial rule—the internalised belief that one's own culture is inferior. Achebe does not vilify these converts but demonstrates how colonialism exploits existing social tensions (such as the ostracisation of Osu, or outcasts) to fracture communities. The tragedy lies not only in foreign domination but in the disintegration of shared identity.

Uchendu's despairing question, "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" forecasts the inevitable collapse of unified resistance. Colonialism does not merely impose external rule; it dismantles the very notion of a cohesive "nation" by creating new loyalties. The Igbo, once bound by collective customs, are now divided between traditionalists and converts, weakening their ability to confront oppression. This fragmentation mirrors the broader postcolonial dilemma: how can a people reclaim their identity when colonialism has rewritten their social and spiritual frameworks? Achebe suggests that the struggle is not just against the coloniser but against the lingering effects of cultural alienation.

Achebe's central argument in *Things Fall Apart*: colonialism's greatest violence is epistemic. By devaluing indigenous knowledge, dismantling social cohesion, and fostering self-alienation, it ensures that even after political independence, the psychological and cultural damage persists. The novel thus becomes a counter-narrative, restoring agency to the Igbo by depicting their society as complex and sovereign before disruption. In the context of postcolonial identity, Achebe's work challenges readers to confront the enduring legacies of colonialism, not just as historical exploitation but as an ongoing crisis of cultural memory and self-definition. *Things Fall Apart* is a foundational text in postcolonial literature, one that not only narrates the nation's pre-colonial past but also interrogates the fractured identities left in colonialism's wake. Through dialogues like this, Achebe compels readers to recognise the depth of colonial violence, not just in the destruction of systems, but in the silencing of voices and the turning of brother against brother.

Conclusion:

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* endures not just as a literary cornerstone of postcolonial discourse but as a deliberate reshaping of how African identity and history are remembered and retold. By anchoring the narrative in the lived experience of the Igbo people and refusing to flatten

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their complexity, Achebe disrupts long-held colonial myths that rendered Africa as silent or uncivilised. Through the uncompromising strength and eventual unravelling of Okonkwo, alongside Obierika's measured reflection, the novel lays bare the psychological and communal ruptures wrought by colonial intrusion. Achebe's stylistic choices—his deft fusion of English with Igbo expressions, proverbs, and oral traditions—do more than stylistically enrich the text; they reveal a layered identity negotiating its place between worlds. In this way, the novel becomes more than a story of cultural erosion—it emerges as an act of reclamation, a literary resistance that asserts voice where silence once prevailed. Thinkers like Fanon, Said, and Bhabha remind us that the struggle for postcolonial self-definition is fought not just on political fronts, but within the narratives a people tell about themselves. *Things Fall Apart* doesn't simply chronicle what was lost—it actively reshapes how that loss is understood. Achebe writes not just to mourn a fallen world, but to preserve its dignity and to imagine a future rooted in the authority of its own past. In giving language to the silenced, he doesn't just record a nation's collapse—he helps write it into being.

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