

Analyzing the Loss of Cultural Identity in Reference to Language and Tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Anubhuti Mamoria¹, Devendra Kumar Sharma²

¹Research scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages,
Banasthali Vidyapith, Tonk, Rajasthan
anubhuti21.am@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages
Banasthali Vidyapith, Tonk, Rajasthan
devendra999iitr@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of “African identity” is intricate and multidimensional, encompassing a wide variety of African cultures, ethnicities, languages, histories, and experiences. Language pertains to an important aspect of culture. With almost 2,000 different languages spoken there, Africa has enormous linguistic diversity. Multilingual Africans frequently speak multiple languages within their communities. The paper intends to examine the intricacies of cultural conflict in lieu of language and tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the light of the most dominant community of Africa, Igbo. The importance of culture and tradition in a society like Igbo played a crucial role in forming the identity of the African people with which they related to the most and became the main reason for their retaliation against the colonizers. The study garners an eclectic approach which further relates to the concept of colonialism in the realm of African society and culture as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: African identity, Culture, Linguistic diversity, Igbo society, Colonialism.

Introduction

National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped countries, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging.

(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961:168)

Things Fall Apart (1958) explores how varying personalities become affected by the possibility and actuality of change in a society that is poised to undergo significant transformation. The conflict over whether tradition should be given priority over change frequently centers on issues of social standing. The beliefs, social system, and values that have been present in the Igbo society formed a backbone of their culture and beliefs. In the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the Igbo culture in its truer sense has been projected without the interference and manipulation of the Whites. For example, Okonkwo feels that he should oppose the new religious and cultural systems in order to save his masculinity. He also

believes that these new orders are not manly. He refuses to be a part of anything remotely related to change or modernity as that will threaten his power and control over the people. To a certain degree, Okonkwo's reluctance to embrace cultural change stems from his anxiety over losing his social standing. The value that he attaches to himself is depended on the conventional measures used by society to evaluate him. The power struggle in the Igbo society embodies the value and importance of culture connected the people living in the society with the same thread. Numerous misfits within the clan are encouraged to convert to Christianity by this system of self-evaluation. After being rejected for a long time, these misfits find safety from the regression they faced in the Igbo society for years in the new and modernized Christian system. Almost the exact way the Christian missionaries in India manipulated the lower castes and exploited their despicable status in the caste system. They diverged them from their native culture and beliefs and gave them a higher position in their new community, which further strengthened their trust and belief in the Western culture. The Igbo culture comprises of wrestling matches, less clothing, and absence of an official ruler. These were a few factors that set them apart from the Whites and made them to be labeled as uncivilized and uncultured. The Umuofia people use their traditions as a way to honor the gods or the family. Their fortune and misfortune depends on whether they follow their age old traditions accordingly or not. For them the existence of their identity depends on the existence of culture and traditions. The decline of Umuofia traditions and practices can only be attributed to the arrival of the Christians. The Christian missionaries brought with them the tactics of convincing and manipulating the people in against their native identity and culture. Their persuasion of them being the superior race and culture made the Africans question themselves and their beliefs. *Things Fall Apart* is a narrative about conflict as well as individual convictions and traditions. The Igbo people struggle with family, culture, and religion, all of which are influenced by divergent personal ideologies and cultural practices. This change isn't always shown to be negative but had a positive impact too. In the novel, Nwoye is a prime example of a positive outcome from a collision of cultures because his conversion to Christianity significantly enhanced his mental well-being and preserved his physical health. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo continuously abuses his kid to satisfy his need that Nwoye be ridiculously manly. Nwoye was in dire need of emotional closure as he struggled with his internal battle between morality and gory cultural customs. When Christianity arrived in Umuofia, Nwoye was greeted with a community that shared his ethical standards and a strange but kind spiritual figure. Achebe suggests through Nwoye's character growth in *Things Fall Apart* that a cross-cultural encounter has the power to change a person's life for the better. Nwoye disagrees with two characteristics of Ibo culture: needless killing and justified injustice. Ultimately, we witness how everything breaks down when the white missionaries challenge these traditions and beliefs. Chinua Achebe is a hybrid of European and native African cultures. Achebe has been able to portray both the African and European perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture thanks to his exposure to European norms and English schooling. Being a native, Achebe is able to aptly show the intricacies of both the cultures and this has a significant impact on the construction of the novel. He does not present African beliefs and culture as barbarous. He only recounts the events as they occurred. According to Chinua Achebe, the cultures were just different in their ideas rather than being inherently evil.

As quoted in the novel "Perhaps down in his heart, Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw" (68). The weakness of Okonkwo of being fearful is compared to that of the fear

experienced from God and other things that were dominant in their culture and religion. The foremost thing that mattered to these Igbo people was their culture and their practices that they valued the most. Their weaknesses as well as fears were related to their religion which was essential for them. As Ernest N. Emenyonu in his paper “Tradition vs. Change in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*” (2002) claims that *Things Fall Apart* is a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and what happens to the rest of humanity when a belligerent culture or civilization decides to invade another culture or civilization out of sheer ethnocentrism and arrogance” (84). The brutality inflicted upon the colonized by the colonizers not just physically but psychologically too led to their mistrust on their own tradition and practices. The superiority of the colonizers attacked not just the culture of the colonized but also affected their confidence and self-esteem that they had developed in the society as a whole. They were forced to question their beliefs and traditions by forcing them, mocking them or simply persuading them with misleading and distorted facts. There was no factual basis behind the arrogance of the colonizers over their culture being domineering than the others. Their superiority had no credible source or logic that would set them apart, they simply considered the Easterners as lowly and inferior on the basis of their culture being different from that of the colonized.

Diana Akers Rhoads in her paper titled “Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*” (1993) explicates how the White man was more violent and intolerant than the Igbo people, how he was responsible for creating rifts between the native tribes and villages that resulted in war and bloodshed. “The Christian missionary in Mbanta objects to the Igbo god on the belief that they tell the Igbos to kill each other (135)” “in fact, the gods are invoked in the fighting of wars against a village--though not indiscriminately, only when the war is just. At times the oracle forbids the Umuofians to go to war (16).” “Europeans in *Things Fall Apart*, however, kill far more in the name of religion than the Igbos: the British, for example, wipe out the village of Abame in retaliation for the killing of one white man.(129)” “appropriate in an aristocracy or an oligarchy (11).” Within this system the, Achebe portrays the Igbos as more tolerant and respectful of other cultures as compared to the Whites who merely deem them as uncivilized and uncultured according to the European standards. In other words, the Igbo are in some ways superior to those who come to convert them. Uchendu, for example, is able to see that “what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (129), “but the white men tell the Igbos that Igbo customs are bad and that their gods are not true gods at all”(135, 162). Unlike the Europeans, the Igbos believe that it “is good that a man should worship the gods and spirits of his father’s even if these gods are not the Igbos' gods”(175). In the European tradition there is no restriction on killing their own men, on the other hand the Igbo tradition forbids one to do so and looks down upon the people who do it . Further, the long history of Crusades and holy wars and of religious persecution in Europe occurs because men can fight for gods, but it is not the Igbo “custom to fight for [their] gods.” The Igbo people prove to be more tolerant and respectable towards the culture and religion of the West as compared to the Westerners. Perhaps the quality of being tolerant and acceptable cost them their valued culture and identity that was brutally belittled and criticized by the arrogant colonizers.

The White people are very cleaver as Achebe mentions “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. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (48) he reflects the fact that how the Whites were clever enough not to use their hard power when they could have easily used their identity against them. The Whites used minimal violence and force by using various strategies one of the infamous one being ‘divide and rule’

that made the natives question themselves and their own people under the influence of the Whites. The power of the colonizers increased rapidly and did not stop until they had fully controlled the land and psyche of the people that they needed to do in order to control them.

In general, the villagers struggled with the advent of change and transformation, they felt trapped between opposing it and accepting it. The missionaries' new methods and opportunities have many of the villagers buzzing with excitement. But this impact from Europe poses a threat to the necessity of knowing how to do traditional building, farming, harvesting, and culinary techniques. The innovations brought about by the colonizers were completely alien and different for the Africans. Their limited knowledge of the world forced them to believe anything and everything fed by the colonizers. These age-old techniques, which were formerly essential for existence, are now, in different ways, optional. "Every year," he [Unoka] said sadly, "before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear..." (3.6) The following quote suggests the tradition that was ardently followed by the people of the Igbo society. When sowing crops, it is common to offer sacrifices of animals to the soil goddess. Once more, ceremony is employed to show reverence—this time, to the soil goddess who governs the yams' success. This served as a practice that used to authenticate their labour as well as hope of a good harvest year. The belief that they had on the power above all used to be justified and validated by such practices and rituals.

As quoted in the novel, "Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally"(14). Although language is never apolitical or ahistorical, it takes on particular significance in post-colonial settings. Institutions of higher learning, government, and religion had been operating in the colonies using the colonizer's language. Speaking it would frequently grant privileges, while speaking solely African languages may, at best, result in financial hardship or, at worst, bodily harm. Language comprised as a crucial aspect of the culture of the Igbo people. They were connected with each other through language the most. They could share ideas and opinions with each other through language. The only thing that made them powerful than the Whites was that they could communicate with each other using their indigenous language which used to be their backbone. The interaction between the significant men of the village consists of a plethora of proverbs and fancy words that reflect the superior nature of the important people of the village and the society. We "know" our surroundings and ourselves through the names, value systems, and discourses that language gives us. Our reality is constituted by the terms of a dominating language. Prioritizing writing and reading in European languages could help to maintain colonial systems after independence by defining again who was allowed to talk, how they were allowed to speak, and how African writers were to be evaluated. On this matter, opinions were divided. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan playwright and scholar who was a Makerere University student at the time, thought that mother tongue rehabilitation was essential to the preservation of cultural memory. Ngugi, a prominent figure in African literature who mostly works in Gĩkũyũ, contended that people would perpetually adhere to external moral, ethical, and artistic standards if they didn't undergo this "decolonization of the mind". By showcasing the creative, frequently formal Igbo language, Achebe emphasizes that the picture of Africa as a silent or unintelligible continent that novels like *Heart of Darkness* (1899) portray it is not real. Rather, Achebe demonstrates that the Igbo language

is too complex for a straight translation into English by interspersing Igbo terms throughout the novel. In a similar vein, Igbo culture cannot be comprehended in terms of European colonialist principles. Achebe also focuses on the various languages that are spoken widely in Africa. For example, the Umuofia villagers mock Mr. Brown's translator due to a minor difference in his language as compared to theirs. Achebe emphasizes that Africa is not the silent or unintelligible continent that books like *Heart of Darkness* portray it as by exhibiting the imaginative, frequently formal Igbo language.

Things Fall Apart's chapter twenty highlights the intimate relationship between language and culture through a dialogue between Okonkwo and Obierika:

Does the white guy comprehend our land-related customs? "How can he when he doesn't even use our language?" However, he claims that our traditions are evil, and our own brothers who have adopted his religion agree. He arrived with his faith in silence and harmony.... He's placed a blade on the things that united us, and now we are disintegrating. (160)

As we can see, Obierika appears to be echoing Achebe's views on colonialism and the inability of white conquerors to comprehend Igbo culture without knowing their language. These invaders were intelligent enough to convey their language through instruction in a systematic manner to impart their beliefs and transform African Americans. Their grooming of good, educated submissive slaves start from giving education to them and convincing them that they are uncultured and uncivilized who need to be educated the way the Whites dictate in order to have an equal standing with them, which the Whites themselves deemed impossible. The few times the colonized people used to realize the cunning tricks of the Whites they were brutally silenced using any means necessary.

Instead, by sprinkling Igbo phrases throughout the text, Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for a literal translation into English. In the paper titled "The Politics of Language: Decolonization of Indian English" Devendra Kumar Sharma, Dr. Pashupati Jha and Dr. Nagendra Kumar have observed:

"Culture cannot define history without the help of language. Language is a species, specific, differentiable, and a distinct tool for human existence. It reflects and refracts the consciousness and identity of a person. Language mediates between man and his environment. It does not only bring human beings together, it also brings them into relationship with the external world."(11)

Language plays a pivotal role in determining the importance of culture and its existence in the society as well. Similarly, it is impossible to understand Igbo culture within the framework of European colonialism. Achebe also highlights how different African languages are from one another. The Umuofia peasants, for instance, make fun of Mr. Brown's interpreter because their languages are not exactly the same. Achebe illustrates throughout the novel how reliant these customs are on language and storytelling, and how swiftly these customs could disappear if the Igbo language is replaced with English. He has also incorporated a lot many indigenous words and phrases of the African Igbo society. Their language is what teaches, motivates, and even conveys emotions. Proverbs are important in Igbo culture because they are a tool for mind-opening and presenting ideas from an alternative angle. Chinua Achebe used Okoye to explain and illustrate the significance of proverbs in Igbo culture. He wanted to prove that, contrary to what many people in the West believe, their culture is not savage. By writing and illustrating their culture, including these proverbs, he contributes to a greater understanding of Igbo culture. The saying "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," (57) as stated by Okonkwo, serves as an example from *Things Fall Apart*. Another adage that illustrates Okonkwo's two distinct emotions is "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (57). Achebe facilitated the use

of many indigenous words and phrases of the Igbo community like *nza*: meaning a very small bird, *nso-ani*: meaning a religious offence of a kind detested by all, literally earth's taboo, *umuada*: meaning where the daughters assemble for a family gathering in their birth villages and many more as he wanted to bring authenticity to the writing style and let the reader experience the real suffering of the Igbo people. The unique linguistic identity of the Igbo people is emphasized by Achebe's use of Igbo terms and phrases in the novel's plot. By using these untranslated expressions, the homogenizing effects of colonial language imposition are resisted and readers are given firsthand access to the subtleties and complexity of Igbo culture. Pramod K. Nayar in his *Contemporary Literary and Cultural theory* (2009) emphasizes that "The acceptance of English by natives in the colonial period created a politics of representation because the language was radicalized and gendered. English became a means of acquiring power for the native elites. This has resulted in a sharp divide between languages and literatures. Writings in native languages are (i) not easily published by the bigger publishing houses, (ii) not circulated, reviewed or accepted easily by the audiences, (iii) never acquire the prestige accorded to writing in English" (167). He not only portrays the effect of English on the colonized society but also asserts its impact on the present society which no longer stands under the shackles of the colonial rule. The colonized countries were with great struggle sacrificing their blood able to gain physical independence from the British colonizers but the colonizers had ruled more than their physical bodies and assets; they ruled their minds and psyche.

In a nutshell, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe highlights the sharp differences between the Western civilization that is rising and the traditional Igbo culture, especially as a result of European colonization. The forceful and manipulative nature of the conversion of the people made it all the more painful and agonistic. The scars of colonization made them doubt their own people and their cultural and religious beliefs that used to be their foundation. The pantheon of gods and spirits in the polytheistic belief system were the religious beliefs of the Igbo people. Their religious beliefs were centered on ancestor worship and a number of rites. They used to worship wooden idols which the colonizers deemed worthless just for being varied from their own system. The introduction of Christianity to the Igbo community by European missionaries challenges their traditional beliefs. One of the novel's major themes comprises of the conflict between the new Christian faith and the indigenous religious customs. Their social connections depend heavily on communication, and the Igbo language is fundamental to their identity whereas for the colonizers the English language always used to represent colonial power. English was used by missionaries and colonial authorities to enact rules and spread ideas, which created linguistic and cultural barriers. They tried and succeeded on making the colonizers feel inferior as compared to their own selves. Towards the end, Okonkwo meets a tragic end when he chooses suicide over that shameful life as a result of his opposition to colonization and loss of their customs. His children and friends also reject him. Black People's inability to coordinate a strategy to resist the colonizer results in the breakdown of their traditions, as seen in the novel.

Works Cited:

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann.1958.

Ernest N. Emenyonu, Tradition vs. Change in Chinua Achebe's "*Things Fall Apart*", Munich, GRIN Verlag, 2002.

<https://www.grin.com/document/23478>

Henries A. Doris Banks "Black African Cultural Identity." *Présence Africaine*, no. 101/102, pp. 119–28. JSTOR.1977.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24350265>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

Nayar, K. Pramod. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural theory*. Pearson. 2009.

Rhoads, Diana Akers. "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *African Studies Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 61–72. 1993.

JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/524733>. Accessed 27 Nov. 2023

Royanian, Shamsoddin & Sadeghi, Zahra. Loss of African Language, Culture, and Identity in *Things Fall Apart*. 2014.

Sharma, Devendra Kumar, Pashupati Jha, and Nagendra Kumar. The Politics of Language: Decolonization of Indian English. *MIT International Journal of Language and Literature* Volume 2 No. 1 (2015): 11-16. Print. (ISSN 2347-9779)

WriteWork contributors. "Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" WriteWork.com. WriteWork.com. 2006. Web. 2023.

Zéphirin, B. M., Serge, E. M., & Ngassaki, B. M. A Comparative Approach of the Portrayal of the Cultural Identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 6 no. 11, pp. 183–191. 2023.

<https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.11.22>