

Colonial Encounter and Indigenous Resistance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Moumita Biswas

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharani Kasiswari College , Kolkata

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the colonial encounter and resistance of the indigenous people in *Things Fall Apart*, written by Chinua Achebe, and is centred on how the Igbo society reacts, in a complex manner, to the intrusion of the British colonial rule. Instead of showing colonialism as something abrupt and violent, the novel demonstrates how the imperial authority works through religion, administrative bureaucracies, and cultural reorientation. According to the study, Achebe attributes indigenous resistance to being multifaceted and multifracted, and he goes a notch higher to include the cultural salvaging, communal ethics, and assertive narration. The paper reveals the ways in which traditional belief systems, kinship structures, and collective memory as means of resistance to colonial domination are observed through a close textual reading based on postcolonial views. Specific focus is put on the nature of the character Okonkwo, whose unyielding resistance is a symbol of the acuity as well as of the constraints in personal resistance to the changes of history. The tragic end of his life highlights the criticism of strict masculinity and the solitude of rebellion Achebe is expressing. The article also reveals that lack of cohesion in Igbo society, which was the result of intra-communal conflicts and the attractiveness of colonial institutions, helped to consolidate the colonialists. Finally, the current question is that the novel *Things Fall Apart* provides a subtle view on the idea of resistance and its ethical power along with the historical limitation and establishes the importance of the novel as a starting point in the history of postcolonial African literature.

Keywords: Colonial, Indigenous, Communal, Resistance, Cultural

Introduction

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is a novel that shifted a groundbreaking text in the perceived academic and popular view of pre-colonial African cultures and their struggle with European imperialism. The work was the brainchild of a strong counter-argument to a hundred years of colonial distortion, with the specific target being Eurocentric images that minimised Africa to a dark continent without history, culture, or complicated social organisation. This system of representation that Achebe develops in his work dismantles reductive and prejudiced representations that we can find in the colonial literature, most prominently in the work of Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, by creating a vivid, authentic, and multifaceted image of the Igbo society. The colonial invasion in Nigeria is not described as a simple imposition of order, but rather it is a source of destabilisation that has been undermining the complex local systems of governance of the Igbo. The coming of British colonial rule, which initially came in the guise of missionary work and was later institutionalised by administrative means, effectively destabilised

traditional belief systems, kinship groups, legal systems and communal governance to such an extent that it led to a gradual and irreversible breakdown of the society.

The main goal of Achebe in creating things fall apart was to write back to the colonial discourses, thus reapproving African history, culture and identity following the colonisation era. The author made an attempt to provide a platform of African voices, and that prefigured the ambiguity, vitality and strength of Igbo society prior to and during colonial incursion (Juma). Making a painstakingly detailed portrait of Umuofia, Achebe proves that African communities are gifted with advanced political, social, and religious organisation, thus challenging the colonial history of a moral civilising mission. This paper will assume that the novel is a manifestation of the colonial experience, not as the sudden or purely violent breakage, but as a systematic destabilising process that manifests itself through religious, administrative, and cultural mechanisms. As a result, our thesis statement will claim that the novel represents colonial encounters as something that causes instability and indigenous resistance as something that is multifaceted (both in terms of preserving the culture and defying it directly), but ultimately it is restricted by the internal faults.

To support this point, the Introduction that follows will initially put Achebe and his work in the framework of the broader post-colonial literature. The Literature Review will then list the existing literature on Things Fall Apart, with further reference to colonial issues, identity, and resistance. The Methodology will outline the analytical framework that will foreshadow an intensive engagement with the text based on the post-colonial theory. In the Results section, specific examples of colonial destabilisation and various types of indigenous resistance in the story will be examined. In the Discussion the complexities and limitations of this resistance will be assessed with a particular focus made on the tragic hero Okonkwo. Finally, the Conclusion will sum up these results and highlight the relevance of the novel as a classic source of understanding the complexities of colonial encounters and indigenous reactions.

Literature Review

Things Fall Apart has received a lot of academic attention, and mostly it is the incisive analysis of the colonialism and its subsequent outcomes by Chinua Achebe. The novel is given by critical consensus as a foundational text that essentially upset Eurocentric representations of Africa. Many critics consider the novel a necessary recovery of African memory of the past. Achebe carefully creates a rich and multifaceted pre-colonial Igbo society, thus destroying the myths which were created in the colonial discourse. His writing acts as a literary reclaiming of African legacy, which brings a true picture that rebels against the idea of a continent that lacks culture or history. By this portrayal, the abundance of the native life prior to the European invasion can be predicted, overturning historical misrepresentations previously. The novel is also a scathing response to the discourse of the colony. Achebe challenges the Eurocentric interpretations, particularly those that define Africa as primitive, which is the case in Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. He is out to offer a different account that reveals the racial prejudices inherent in colonial thinking and which demonstrates the destructive nature of the colonial project on the ancient institutions and culture.

Furthermore, the critics often define Things Fall Apart as a tragic story of cultural collision. The destructive nature of the impact of European incursion has also been vividly described in the text, highlighting the systematic destruction of the Igbo identity, the decline of the communal systems, and the cultural confrontation. The unfortunate death of Okonkwo, especially his suicide, is commonly interpreted as a symbolic image of the disintegration of the traditional African society and the loss of its culture under the pressure of the new forces. Arguments about Okonkwo as a resistant character prevail in the critical

reception of the novel. His very stern resistance and the resulting suicide case is often viewed as an opposition to the colonial oppression. Still, researchers question the weaknesses of his individual approach and violence. The strict interpretation of the tradition combined with his inability to adjust to the situation and mobilize his fellow countrymen to act in such a manner leads to the eventual seclusion and downfall of Okonkwo. His opposition, though passionate, is always found to be inadequate to face the insidiousness and omnipresence of colonial destabilisation.

This paper has found a gap in the critical literature on resistance apart from the violent resistance of Okonkwo. Although the resistance of Okonkwo is of great importance, our work is involved in the multi-layered manifestation of indigenous resistance, i.e., preservation of the culture, communal values, and indirectly narrative resistance, which often goes beyond open rebellion and represents a more complicated reaction to the colonial oppression.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses the post-colonial theory as its major analytic framework to question the complexities that form the basis of colonial experience and aboriginal struggles in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The post-colonial theory provides a solid analysis of the cultural, political, and social effects of colonialism, particularly its long-term impact on the colonised communities and their histories (Singh). In this perspective, we can critically dismantle these power dynamics that inform the colonial relationships and identify the various reactions of the indigenous peoples.

One of the main concepts of post-colonial theory is the concept of colonial discourse and power that implies the system of representations, knowledge, and ideology which legitimised and maintained the colonial rule and in most cases portrayed colonised people as inferior, primitive, and requiring civilisation. We will also discuss how this discourse is challenged and, by extension, undermined in this novel by Achebe, through the creation of an abundant and diverse Igbo community, challenging the validity of the colonial project. The framework also allows cultural imperialism – a term applied to explain this process of imposing the cultural values, the religious beliefs and the education system of the coloniser on the colonised that has led to the erosion of the local traditions and beliefs. An example of such a process is the entry of missionaries and the establishment of colonial rule in Umuofia, which is an example demonstrating how Achebe rejects the psychological and sociological fragmentation caused by such cultural hegemony.

Most importantly, the post-colonial theory also provides conceptual instruments to examine hybridity and resistance. Hybridity recognizes the fusion of cultures that arises in the context of encounters between colonisers creating new cultural forms and cultural identities. At the same time, it also educates us about resistance, which does not necessarily have to be open or violent. Resistance in a post-colonial setting may take the form of cultural preservation, asserting traditional values, small-scale forms of resistance and the literal writing back to the stories of colonialism. These ideas enable us to question the representation of the devastating power of colonial rule as well as the many-layered ways in which the Igbo people reacted and maintained a sense of identity under the massive external forces and internal divisions.

Colonial Encounter: Formations of Domination

When European missionaries and colonial officials arrived in Umuofia, it initiated the process of domination that became organised and multifaceted, which Chinua Achebe carefully depicts as being executed by the institutions as opposed to pure force. This was not a sudden disruption but a slow erosion

of local Igbo traditions and social unity, as it proved how the power of the empire was very subtly threaded into the fabric of day to day existence.

At the centre of this oppression was the use of religion as a means of control. Introduced missionaries constructed churches and aggressively recruited converts, with a strategic focus on those who were marginalised to the Igbo society, including the efulefu (worthless men) and otherwise title-less people. Christianity was a direct threat and oppression of the Igbo old religion of the ancient times, which was deeply embedded in the communal life, ruling the morality, behaviour, and social order. The new religion made people internal divisions, converts were not afraid of breaking the old ways and split families and communities. A thesis focussed on the evils of colonialism makes Achebe spend an enormous part of his novel explaining the cultural background, as explained by Benedict Njoko in a dissertation about the writing style of Achebe: *“Things Fall Apart expresses the author's nostalgia for the traditions and beliefs of Igbo before European colonialism. It points out that Africans in general had a high level of value system before the advent of Christianity.”* (23) Achebe depicts how the seemingly innocuous religious conversion was actually an orchestrated plan of so-called religious imperialism which tore the society asunder and caused its disunity thus leaving it vulnerable to foreign oppression.

At the same time, the introduction of law courts and the British colonial rule systematically disorganized the well-established Igbo system of justice. The British also established their own court the head of which was the District Commissioner who ruled in a court without understanding Igbo traditions and values . Such a legal structure substituted customary forms of conflict resolution and justice which usually resulted in miscarriages of justice and arbitrary treatment of Igbo people. These courts were used by the colonialists to take advantage of the locals and exploit them fining and assuming political power in the name of bringing about a peaceful government and justice. The fact that the leadership of the indigenous people was replaced with so-called warrant chiefs who served the interests of colonial powers further weakened the communal decision-making processes and put the Igbo people at a distance of their own systems of governance.

Additionally, language and education became a great tool of colonial hegemony. Western schooling replaced traditional Igbo education which was done through oral narratives and communal learning. Such missionaries as Mr. Brown planned strategically, knowing that in the future the leader of the land will be men and women who learn to write and read. This educational transformation created a reliance on the Western systems and removed younger generations of the touch with their cultural heritage, which, in fact, had formed a new generation of educated Africans, who would act as messengers in the court or clerks towards the colonizers:

“Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia labourers went forth into the Lord's vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them from the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand.” (Achebe.164)

By this, colonial authority had not only been at work violently, but also subtly and institutionally, and by slowly wearing away the roots of Igbo identity and culture by assimilating its young people and colonizing their worldview. These foreign systems of Christianity, western education, and centralized ruling and so fractionated the community internally rendering it more susceptible to the greater project which was colonialism.

Okonkwo and the Limits of Individual Resistance

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is a giant, although tragic, figure of resistance against the colonialism imposed by the foreigners in Chinua Achebe. His personality is firmly embedded on the Igbo culture especially masculinity, honour and success that he struggles diligently to maintain despite being majorly motivated by the fear to be seen as a symbol of perceived weakness of his father. It is this impulse that makes him so vociferous towards any attempt by some power to interfere with the established order of Umuofia.

One of the traits of Okonkwo is his refusal to change. He is presented as being more hard-core in his observance of tribal norms and traditions, which is any form of deviation as a weakness or femininity. The fact that he cannot adjust makes him feel alienated by his own people, who, though initially opposed to the colonialists, slowly start to settle in the new reality. Okonkwo is so conservative that he is not able to comprehend or even tolerate the gradualness and insidiousness of destabilisation that colonialism exerts on the Igbo people, which does not happen via a direct and overt war, but through the subtly corrosive methods of destabilisation. His reaction to the missionaries can be described as hostile and scornful. He sees their presence and the conversion of his people including his own son Nwoye as a direct attack on the very fabric of Igbo identity and independence.

Okonkwo is a man of action and he desires a direct open fight against this alien invasion. In situations where the community, which has been torn apart by internal differences, and the attractiveness of the new religion, finds itself unable to come together in such a challenge, Okonkwo is further left isolated in his resistance. The last resistance of Okonkwo, killing a colonial messenger and committing suicide is also a strong though rather symbolic resistance. It is a question of individual desperation, denial of being subjected to the subaltern status, which the colonising authority forces them to be. To others, he commits suicide not only as failure to adapt but as rebellion aimed at reminding his people about their traditions and stimulating resistance. But this, though personally decisive, does not start the mass rising he sees. Rather, it even alienates him further because his suicide is viewed as an abomination in the Igbo society, according to which no clansman should even touch his body.

Achebe is very critical on the failure of Okonkwo to resist. His failure is symbolic of the wider implications of cultural rigidity and failure to keep up with the increasingly fast moving world. The high level of masculinity exhibited by Okonkwo, who seeks strength and dominance all the time, isolates him out of his family, and ultimately out of his community, which would not allow him to establish the collective resistance he desired:

“Lets us not reason like cowards? Said Okonkwo. If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see... This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in my fatherland, Umuofia.” (Achebe. 127)

His "isolated rebellion" is insufficient against a colonial power that operates institutionally, gradually eroding communal solidarity rather than relying solely on brute force. Achebe thus critiques not only the devastating impact of colonialism but also the vulnerabilities within indigenous cultures, particularly how rigid adherence to a narrow definition of masculinity and an individualistic approach can undermine effective collective action (Abenaya and Jhon). Okonkwo's tragedy underscores the complexities of identity, showing how personal expectations intersect with historical forces, ultimately leading to his tragic end as an "anachronism" in a world that has moved beyond his capacity to comprehend.

Fragmentation and the Failure of Unified Resistance

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* vividly illustrates how the success of colonial domination in Umuofia was critically enabled by pre-existing and exacerbated internal divisions within Igbo society, leading to the failure of unified indigenous resistance. The novel meticulously portrays how these fractures, rather than external military might alone, paved the way for colonial consolidation.

One significant source of fragmentation was the emergence of **converts** to Christianity. Missionaries strategically targeted the marginalized—the *efulefu*, those without titles, and even outcasts—offering them a new social status and a sense of belonging. These converts, embracing the new religion, openly rejected traditional Igbo customs and created deep schisms within families and the wider community. This new religious identity fostered disunity, turning Igbo against Igbo and fundamentally weakening the collective will to resist external interference.

Furthermore, **generational conflict** played a role. Younger generations, particularly those drawn to the colonial education system, began to distance themselves from traditional ways. The promise of new opportunities and literacy offered by the missionaries and colonial administrators lured the youth away from the wisdom of their elders, contributing to a cultural chasm between generations. This disjunction meant that the very individuals who might have inherited and upheld Igbo customs were instead being co-opted into the colonial apparatus, further eroding indigenous structures.

The **fear of colonial reprisal** also paralyzed concerted action. While individuals like Okonkwo advocated for violent defiance, the community as a whole, witnessing the punitive actions of the District Commissioner and his court messengers, became increasingly cautious. The effectiveness of the colonial administration in punishing those who challenged its authority instilled a pervasive fear that stifled unified resistance. This created an environment where communal solidarity faltered, leaving figures like Okonkwo isolated in their attempts to rally the people. Achebe's realistic portrayal of historical change argues compellingly that colonial success was not solely a matter of European superiority, but equally a consequence of this **indigenous fragmentation**. The novel demonstrates that the gradual, institutional nature of colonial power, operating through religion, law, and education, exploited these internal weaknesses. By sowing discord and undermining communal bonds, the colonizers effectively prevented a cohesive and unified response, leading to the eventual "falling apart" of Igbo society. Achebe thus provides a nuanced and complex view of history, acknowledging both the external pressures of colonialism and the internal vulnerabilities that facilitated its dominance.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* remains an enduring testament to the profound and often tragic impact of colonialism on indigenous societies. This paper has argued that the novel masterfully portrays the colonial encounter not merely as a sudden violent rupture, but as a systematic and destabilizing force that gradually erodes traditional Igbo structures, while simultaneously showcasing indigenous resistance as multifaceted—ranging from cultural preservation to open defiance—yet ultimately constrained by internal divisions.

The colonial encounter fundamentally reshaped Igbo society through the insidious imposition of foreign systems. The arrival of missionaries utilized religion as a potent tool of control, fracturing spiritual unity and family bonds. The establishment of British law courts and administrative structures systematically dismantled indigenous governance, replacing communal justice with arbitrary colonial rule. Furthermore, Western language and education subtly undermined traditional knowledge and created new hierarchies,

effectively co-opting a generation into the colonial project. These institutional methods of domination, operating with deceptive gradualism, profoundly altered the social and cultural landscape of Umuofia. Achebe's genius lies in his nuanced understanding of resistance. He depicts it not solely through overt rebellion, but also through the resilient efforts to preserve cultural values, the assertion of an authentic narrative voice, and the quiet adherence to communal traditions. While Okonkwo stands as a powerful symbol of individual defiance, his rigid masculinity and inability to adapt expose the limits of isolated rebellion against an institutionally pervasive power. The novel powerfully illustrates that the failure of a unified Igbo resistance was less about a lack of courage and more about deep-seated internal divisions, generational conflicts, and the fear of overwhelming colonial reprisal. These fractures, meticulously portrayed by Achebe, allowed colonial consolidation to take root.

Ultimately, *Things Fall Apart* continues to be immensely relevant to postcolonial studies today. It serves as a foundational text that challenges Eurocentric historical narratives, offering an authentic African perspective on colonialism. The novel's enduring power lies in its role as an act of narrative resistance, reclaiming cultural memory and demonstrating the critical importance of self-representation. Achebe's work ensures that the stories of those who fell apart are not forgotten but rather stand as a powerful reminder of the dignity and complexity of colonised peoples.

References

1. Abenaya, S., and Soumya Susan Jhon. *Decolonization and Cultural Identity in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Critical Examination*. Mar. 2025.
2. Al-Ghammaz, Saif Al-Deen. "Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Case of Postcolonial Discourse Analysis and Reexploration." *World Journal of English Language*, vol. 16, no. 1, Sept. 2025, p. 375, <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n1p375>.
3. Ali, Md Equb. "A Study of Colonial Confrontation in The Things Fall Apart." *International Journal of Applied Educational Research (IJAER)*, vol. 2, no. 4, Aug. 2024, p. 261, <https://doi.org/10.59890/ijaer.v2i4.1973>.
4. Andindilile, Michael. "You Have No Past, No History : Philosophy, Literature and the Re-Invention of Africa." *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 8, July 2016, p. 127, <https://doi.org/10.5897/ijel2015.0729>.
5. BEKLER, Ecevit. "WRITERS AND THEIR WORLDS: HEART OF DARKNESS BY JOSEPH CONRAD AND THINGS FALL APART BY CHINUA ACHEBE." *DergiPark (Istanbul University)*, July 2022, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/diclesosbed/issue/76043/1145508>.
6. Chifane, Cristina, and Liviu-Augustin Chifane. "Reflections on Cultural Specificity and Dystopian Standardization in Chinua Achebe's Novels." *Linguaculture*, vol. 10, no. 1, June 2019, p. 69, <https://doi.org/10.47743/lincu-2019-1-0136>.
7. Chukwumah, Ignatius. "The Figure with Recurrent Presence: The Defiant Hero in Nigerian Narratives." *Acta Scientiarum Language and Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1, Mar. 2014, p. 73, <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascilangcult.v36i1.18180>.
8. Dr., Pooja. *A Study of Colonial Confrontation in The Things Fall Apart of Chinua Achebe's*. Apr. 2022.
9. Friesen, Alan R. "Okonkwo's Suicide As An Affirmative Act: Do Things Really Fall Apart?" *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 2, no. 4, Nov. 2006, <https://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/453/354>.

10. Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire*. 2004, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203482810>.
11. Guemide, Boutkhil, and Amir SAMIR. "Colonial Disruption and Cultural Transformation: An Analysis of Igbo Society Before and After British Colonization in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *İSTANBUL AYDIN ÜNİVERSİTESİ INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MEDIA CULTURE AND LITERATURE*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2015, p. 79, https://doi.org/10.17932/iau.ijmcl.2015.014/ijmcl_v011i1005.
12. Guemide, Boutkhil, and Amir Samir. "Sömürgeci Bozulma ve Kültürel Dönüşüm: Chinua Achebe'nin *Things Fall Apart*'ında İngiliz Sömürgeciliği Öncesi ve Sonrası İgbo Toplumunun Analizi." *DergiPark (Istanbul University)*, Sept. 2024, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijmcl/issue/93450/1553394>.
13. İjem, Blessing U., and Isaiah I. Agbo. "Language and Gender Representation in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *English Language Teaching*, vol. 12, no. 11, Oct. 2019, p. 55, <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n11p55>.
14. Juma, Benson Wabwile. "Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *Jumuga Journal of Education Oral Studies and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)*, vol. 8, no. 1, Apr. 2025, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.35544/jjeoshs.v8i112>.
15. Miah, Jony, and Dr. Md. Abdul Halim. "Impact of Christianity as an Ideological Instrument in the Way of Colonization: A Postcolonial Insight to Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*." *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, Nov. 2024, p. 130, <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.1888>.
16. Salami, Ali, and Bamshad Hekmatshoar Tabari. "Things Fall Apart and Chinua Achebe's Postcolonial Discourse." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 3, Jan. 2018, <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0603004>.
17. Sangeetha, M. G. "Dissecting Cultural Transition: A Deep Dive into Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *International Journal of Environment Agriculture and Biotechnology*, vol. 8, no. 5, Jan. 2023, p. 50, <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijeab.85.8>.
18. Singh, Hardeep. "Exploring Chinua Achebe's Impact on African Literature and Post-Colonial Discourse: A Critical Analysis of Themes, Style, and Cultural Representation." *International Journal of Research in English*, vol. 4, no. 2, Jan. 2022, p. 35, <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2022.v4.i2a.133>.
19. *İSTANBUL AYDIN ÜNİVERSİTESİ INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MEDIA CULTURE AND LITERATURE*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2015, https://doi.org/10.17932/iau.ijmcl.2015.014/ijmcl_v011i1005.