

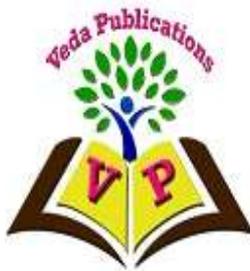


## A CRITIQUE OF COLONIALISM: ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*, *NO LONGER AT EASE* AND *ARROW OF GOD*

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### ABSTRACT



This paper attempts to examine different forms of Colonialism as a 'civilizing process', how different methods, for instance imposing the foreign language, religion etc. are adopted by the colonizers to subjugate the native subjects.

Postcolonial 'literature' is seen as putting together the experiences, circumstances, which the natives had to undergo at the time of colonization, consequently discovering the native ethics coming to a standstill. The purpose behind this endeavor is to portray the nationalist struggle against the oppressive colonial rule, in order to save the values and reconstruct the original identity of the African community.

For this study, the key texts taken into consideration include Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart', 'No Longer at Ease' and 'Arrow of God'. Through these texts, we look at how the ideals, perceptions etc. of the traditional social communities in Africa, change in due course of time, under the influence of European colonization. One can, therefore, agree with Makarand Paranjape, that post-colonialism can neither be accepted nor rejected fully, but, one has to defend oneself from its disastrous effects.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, European, African Community, National Identity, Traditions.

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An individual, apart from self, is related to a larger society, which he inhabits. But, under the influence of a colonial power, struggling to break free of its rule, a reassessment of his national identity occurs. The colonizers try to impose their 'civilized' values on the colonized, destroying their native culture, thereby replacing it with their own, by establishing institutions like schools, churches. There seems to be an implicit compliance of the natives to their colonizers, which highlights Antonio Gramsci's idea of "hegemony," as Ania Loomba suggests in "Colonialism/ Postcolonialism: The New Critical Idiom" that "Gramsci argued that the ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled".

In simple terms, "Colonialism" usually understood as a "civilizing process" implied the exploitation, imposition of policies by the colonizers onto the natives, thereby shifting power equations. Whereas "post-colonialism", a study of emancipation chiefly instigated by Edward Said responds to Colonialism in the form of resistance to colonial discourse and reconstruction of a new, independent identity through expression by the suppressed. It focuses on direct effects of colonization, clash of two cultures. In his essay "Postmodernism or post-colonialism today" Simon During calls it "the need, in nations, or groups which have been victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by Universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images." An African writer can use the colonizer's language to rediscover his lost identity, as long as it is accessible and able to articulate his experiences appropriately.

Postcolonial literature celebrates the "neglected or marginalized, bringing with it a particular politics, history and geography" as Dennis Walder suggests. The major themes include history, language of the colonizer, slavery, racism, altering identities in a struggle to come to terms with colonial 'other'.

Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' published in 1958 exhibits a traditional Igbo community of Africa in crisis, under the colonial rule. It struggles to maintain native originality; resisting inescapable change but also imperatively adopting and assimilating "new" ways of life, resulting in its

disintegration. As Frantz Fanon asserts in 'Black Skin White Masks' – "it is the unequal power relations between coloniser and colonised that create the structural relation of mutual degradation". Achebe proposes that "until the withdrawal of colonial rule, the colonized seemed to accept that they were always the objects of someone else's story, indeed, someone else's history". Subsequently, 'Things Fall Apart' rejects this supposition in an effort to retrieve their identity, history. Also, he retorts Conrad for portraying Africa "as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity", savage, lacking a sense of history, and degrading Africans, addressing them as "cannibals", "criminals", "black shadows of disease" in 'Heart of Darkness'. In an interview with Jim Davidson, Achebe affirms fulfilling the "historic need" of Nigeria, and a writer's "responsibility to remember what it was like before and to keep talking about it".

One observes the relationship between Igbo people and their land, invested in proverbs, customs, similes like Okonkwo's fame being compared to "a bushfire in the harmattan" in 'Things Fall Apart', Obi Okonkwo compared to "the young antelope" in 'No Longer at Ease', proverbs like "palm-oil with which words are eaten", "he who has people is richer than he who has money", social ceremonies – the first coming of Ulu, Idemili festival in Achebe's 'Arrow of God', breaking of the kola nut, white chalk. The presence of Igbo language, words like agbala, chi, ofo, ogene, udu, ndichie, obi were seen throughout his texts. Superstitions such as running over a dog brings "good luck", a duck considered taboo, belief in reincarnation, sacrificing a cock to 'ani' before sowing crops, throwing off newborn twins, man with swelling in the evil forest, and features like lack of centralized government were observed.

The protagonist of 'Things Fall Apart'- Okonkwo, struggles to "maintain the cultural integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule". His sacrifice of Ikemefuna, "afraid of being thought weak", is reminiscent of Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament. Subsequently, Okonkwo's fate was sealed at the funeral of Ezeudu, where, unfortunately, in the midst of the drums and dancing, the dead man's son became the target of Okonkwo's gun, firing the "last

salute". As penalty he "must flee from the land" for seven years.

While in exile, in Mbanta, he learnt of the arrival of "white man", an ill omen for destruction among the Igbo clan in Umuofia. The missionaries killed many, "built their church there, won a handful of converts..." Moreover, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye was captivated and stirred by the "poetry of the new religion". He contentedly took refuge in the new Christian religion and joined their Christian school, bewildered by the superstitions, past evil events in his clan- killing of Ikemefuna. The colonizers dissuaded the natives from worshipping their false wooden "gods of deceit", and induced them to worship the true god, in order to live forever in "his happy kingdom". Besides, a government to guard the followers of their Christian faith was established.

Returning to Umuofia, Okonkwo saw the Igbo culture declining as "an abominable religion" settled among them. The Igbo society, helpless, was increasingly being transformed as people drifted towards the religion of white man, negating their indigenous culture, ethics, kinsmen etc. "He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion...". Furthermore, a District Commissioner and his messengers were appointed in the court of the colonizers, to guard and treat the prisoners like slaves.

One could clearly infer that the natives were greatly influenced in adhering to new ways of life, unable to resist, conquer the overpowering colonial rule. The clever white man divided the clan, putting "a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" which shows violence and treachery of colonial encounter.

While, Mr Brown, the white missionary encouraged natives to join their school, Mr Smith saw things as black and white - conflict between children of light and sons of darkness. It seems that English language is inappropriate as per the perceptions of Igbo society and differentiating between Whites and Blacks was unacceptable to the black African society, which, as C.L Innes opines "affirms the values of tolerance and the belief that - wherever something stands, something else also stands".

Okonkwo swore vengeance on the white man, for the ill treatment he and the leaders of Umuofia received, under imprisonment for destroying the red-earth church. "If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well.", otherwise he would retaliate as "worthy men are no more". Furthermore, the white man obstructed the meeting where the decision to fight the colonizers "root out this evil...bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep" was being taken. Enraged Okonkwo, knowing that "Umuofia would not go to war", killed him. Later, one notices "Okonkwo's body was dangling" from a tree. He preferred to die in a struggle to reclaim his identity. Perhaps, he could not accept the changes and knowing the repercussions, did not wish to submit to white man's justice. Here, one agrees with Makarand Paranjape, that Post-colonialism can neither be fully accepted or rejected, but one has to defend oneself from its disastrous effects.

Thus, culture and language is replaced at the end of the novel when the commissioner planned to write atleast a paragraph about "the story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself" in his book titled - 'The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger' which incorporates a familiar stereotype of the African "primitives" vs. the "enlightened" English, as suggested by Anuradha Dingwaney Needham. It is the beginning of the colonialist narrative which relegates the heroic story of Okonkwo to a single paragraph of a European text. The oral narrative was then replaced by written, "seeking to celebrate and to further European conquest", as C.L Innes declares.

The struggle between old and new - native traditions and colonial influence continues in 'No Longer at Ease' where Achebe evokes dissatisfaction, estrangement of the western educated Nigerians, in the figure of Obi Okonkwo, who undergoes a trial for bribery, corruption after obtaining a job with Civil services. One notices Obi saying "the civil service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top". But it is mocking when he himself is caught accepting bribes from people for giving them scholarships for studying abroad, although only to those who qualified the minimum educational criterion. The people of his community-Umuofia had high hopes of becoming powerful with his help. He

was constrained to renounce his principles and accept bribes, unable to meet his financial obligations.

Although Obi's stance was that education can bring an end to corruption, "everybody wondered why" and how such a learned man became so corrupt that he was caught accepting bribes, thus submerging himself into the fraudulent system. Gareth Griffiths' proves correct that "the central theme of 'No Longer at Ease' is the distance between what is said to be and what is". Nevertheless, his people came to his rescue, "were prepared to fight to the last" as "anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone".

It was shameful that Obi, despite occupying a high European post, could not arrange much for his dead mother who "deserved a better funeral", as he was weighed down by western influence, depressing circumstances, lack of money. It is evident, then, to say that social, personal issues determine a person's destiny.

Moreover, he could not marry the girl of his choice, Clara, who had a "doubtful ancestry" because she belonged to a forbidden caste- 'osu' and he knew that "his family would violently oppose the idea of marrying an osu". Besides, Joseph poked fun at Obi by asking him "do you know what an osu is?", "but how can you know?" intent on implying that his western education, nurturing "made him a stranger in his country". Obi thought "it was scandalous" and the concept of 'osu' should be eliminated from Nigeria, as it was exposed to foreign ways of life, assuming that Africans would succumb to the new culture. In a sense, he was fighting against his traditions to marry an 'osu'.

He also committed adultery outside marriage by consummating with Clara, despite knowing that marriage was sacred in a polygamous Igbo society. One could observe the overpowering influence of western education and lifestyle on both of them. Acquiring western education does not stop men from satisfying their insatiable desires, as, in spite of loving Clara, Obi was seen making out with an Irish girl.

Hence, in order to imitate, internalize European ways of life, an overlap and ensuing abandonment of native culture takes place. Obi,

bothered and no longer at 'ease', ran after "sweet things of life". Disillusioned on his homecoming, he could neither fully reject native traditions nor dissociate from foreign culture.

The natives acknowledged that "Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune." One realizes that apart from the colonial influence, the natives were also socially, culturally responsible for their breakdown - "We have our faults, but we are not empty men who become white when they see white and black when they see black." Since "the African is corrupt through and through", colonialism could not have thrived completely, in Mr. Green's view. Thus, one approves Achebe's idea of African elites "lacking moral courage" to assume positions of authority.

Yet another novel by Achebe, 'Arrow of God', portrays the complexities and metamorphosis of traditional Igbo community under the European influences of religion, administration etc. As S.Khaiminthang opines in 'Chinua Achebe's novels: a tribal perspective' that internal conflicts within a clan "when played into the hands of more powerful external forces removed the power to control their own history".

The protagonist, Ezeulu, was the chief priest of the god of the village, Ulu. He preserved the customs of his community, considering himself "merely a watchman" for Ulu. His power was "no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his". In a combat between the regions of Umuaro and Okperi, Ezeulu refused to go against Okperi and when Mr. Winterbottom, a white man, resolved the conflict, he gave a true account of events, serving as white man's witness. However, the people of his village, Umuaro felt deceived by him for not supporting their side. Being honest in refusal to defend the actions of his village gained him the admiration of the British official.

Meanwhile, he decided to send his son, Oduche to school to study Christianity, in order to learn prudence of white men and to "be my eyes there", for delineating the peculiar conduct of the whites. While Ezeulu's friend, Akuebue opposed his decision of sending Oduche "to join strangers in desecrating the land", Ezeulu, unmoved, said "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it

well, you will not stand in one place". On being asked, Oduche proved his honesty to Christianity by attempting to slay the sacred python. One could infer that this evil act led to disruption of native traditions, culture. The white man's religion seemed to overpower Oduche, as he did not serve as his father's "eye", maybe because it served his own ends in gaining power through the white man's language, faith in new religion thereby rendering the native harmony, principles weak.

When Mr Winterbottom beckoned Ezeulu, to make him "a white man's chief", as part of a deviant policy for ruling the colonized, he rejected his offer, thereby inviting conflict by "making a fool of the British administration in public" as he said "Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief, except Ulu". Enraged, the white man imprisoned him.

Revolting against the whites and his own people for not defending him, he refused to announce the 'New Yam Festival' due to which yams could not be harvested and rot in the fields, resulting in a famine, as it was an offence against Ulu.

In a way, he challenged "those who have been poking their fingers into my face..." and likewise served the white man's religion, as natives now brought their offerings to the church, "harvested in the name of the son(Christ)", forsaking Ulu, Ezeulu and gaining protection, "promised immunity" under the new faith for survival of their clan. One agrees with Rose Ure Mezu's assertion in "Chinua Achebe: The Man and His Works" that the story is "an exploration of the limits of power as exercised by a ruler".

Another incident which proved "that no man however great was greater than his people, that no man ever won judgement against his clan", was the death of Ezeulu's son, Obika while performing at a funeral ceremony. His death was interpreted as a signal that Ulu "had taken sides with them" ultimately going against and deserting his obstinate priest, Ezeulu. It was a result of the battle between Ezeulu, his clan members and colonizers.

Thus, struggling to preserve the ideals, hold power, repudiate corruption in the wake of colonialism, the society was doomed, subsequently investing their faith in the new Christian religion: – "as daylight chases away darkness so will white man

drive away all our customs". The novel therefore, as stated by David Cook, "searches into the limits of individual power in a system controlled by tradition".

In conclusion, one might say that eventually, maybe the yearning for evolution incited the natives to barter their customs and yield to the colonial order in terms of religion, education, culture, perceiving its significance in fastening together the crumbling communities. Therefore, one agrees with Anthony Daniels' statement in 'The Spectator', that Achebe "has been able to illuminate two emotionally irreconcilable facets of modern African life: the humiliations visited on Africans by colonialism, and the utter moral worthlessness of what replaced colonial rule", consequently responding to the notion of tradition in opposition to change and individual as against his community.

Hence, this study critiques European colonization as a "civilizing process", by depicting how the overpowering colonial rule led to disintegration of communities in Africa. And, what's more, Africa, even after gaining independence, is lurching and struggling against the attack of neo-colonialism and modern standards of living. Therefore, post-colonialism is appalling since it allows control over history of the colonized.

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