The Colonized Fall Apart: A Postcolonial Analysis of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in Light of Frantz Fanon

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**Abstract**

Chinua Achebe’s novel on colonialism *Things Fall Apart* (1958) explores the encounter between the British colonizer and the African colonized in 1850s. This book has been examined from postcolonial perspective by various critics. However, little attention has been paid to the usage of the postcolonial African seminal voice like Frantz Fanon in examining Achebe’s work. This research will make an attempt to fill in that gap in the area of the Achebe scholarship. I have read Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and I have applied his observations to analyze Achebe’s novel. Achebe as well as Fanon thinks that the pre-colonial societies were not primitive. Achebe showcases the judicial expertise of this Igbo tribe. Africans can practice orature as well as dancing. The psyches of Africans are ravaged to such an extent that they adopt mimicry. Like Fanon, Achebe also finds that the Eurocentric gaze provides no status to the non-whites, the other. The District Commissioner and other Whites look down upon the Igbo tribe. This qualitative research will connect Fanon with Achebe’s novel and in this way, it will contribute and enrich the existing African, Caribbean and postcolonial literatures.

**Keywords:** colonizer, colonized, colonialism, Eurocentric, postcolonialism, mimicry

**Introduction**

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was born in Eastern Nigeria as Albert Chinualumogu. Achebe’s childhood is notable because his father was a converted Christian but his other family members used to follow traditional African Igbo religion. He reveals that the cross cultures of his childhood gave him advantages as a writer as he was moved by the poetry of Christianity as well as the thing that Christianity was attempting to suppress: the traditional religion (Rowell, 1990, p. 101). During his childhood, he used to side with the “smart and courageous” (Garner, 2015, p. 1) white explorers of his English books. Ibadan University was “the watershed, a turning point” (Rowell, 1990, p. 101) where he found that he is one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach (as cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xvii) in texts like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). That is why he views his role as a writer is to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement (as cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xi). His intention is to indicate his readers that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans (as cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xvii).

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Achebe criticizes Joseph Conrad in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" (1978) for his prejudiced representation of Africans in Heart of Darkness (1902). The projection of Africa as the "other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization (p. 3) and the depiction of the so-called bad Congo river with so-called good Thames river (p. 3) is disapproved by Achebe. Africans are misrepresented in Heart of Darkness as they make "violent babble of uncouth sounds among themselves" (p. 6) in place of speech. On the grounds of such partial African image, Conrad is a thoroughgoing racist (p. 9) to Achebe.

Things Fall Apart (1958)

Known as the magnum opus of African Literature, this novel revolves around the life of a brave, courageous, Igbo soldier called Okonkwo in pre-colonial Nigeria of 1850s. Because of his lazy father Unoka, he has not inherited any wealth and it is through sheer hard work that he has gained status in Umuofia. He acts extra brave as deep in his heart resides the fear that he will resemble his lazy father. Umuofian Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna, a boy given by the Mbaino villagers to him as a peace settlement for the killing of one woman of Umuofia. He commits this killing to prove his manliness. This causes his rift with his son Nwoye who is Ikemefuna’s best friend. Nwoye becomes upset with his father and the killing of twin children and thus he later converts to Christianity. Colonizers begin to convert Igbo people into Christians by giving them jobs and gifts. They wipe out the entire village of Abame when the latter kills one of their men. Crisis in Okonkwo’s life occurs as British administration and missionaries begins to tear apart the Igbo customs. To diminish the foothold of the proselytizing Christians who support the killing of sacred python, Okonkwo and five leaders of Umuofia burn a church. As a result, they are whipped, starved and arrested by the British force craftily. At the denouement, Okonkwo kills one of the messengers of the colonizers and when no Igbo members support his decision, he takes his own life. Although Igbo religion looks down upon suicide which contaminates the earth, Okonkwo prefers to die rather than being hanged by the trials of the colonizers. In a way the downfall of Okonkwo symbolizes the downfall of the Igbo society as there is no one now to protest against the colonizers. The novel ends when the District Commissioner decides to write a book on the Africans though he has no knowledge of the African society, culture, tradition, language, Literature and law.

Literature Review

To begin with, Things Fall Apart (1958) of Chinua Achebe has been examined by various critics. Twentieth century saw the analysis of the culture and ending
of this novel. For instance, Diana Akers Rhoads (1993) correctly points out the strengths and weaknesses like osu and killing of twin children of the Igbo culture. Her hypothesis is that the “democratic” (63) pre-colonial Igbo societies with “highly developed system of religion” (64) were fully destroyed by colonialism. One limitation to the study, however, is that this article has not used any postcolonial critic.

The twenty first century saw a lot of new approaches towards this novel. Linda Strong-Leek (2001) was the first one to connect feminism with Things Fall Apart. To her, Ekwefi who stands for “well of knowledge, love and fierce independence” (p. 30) has been mistreated by Okonkwo. What is particularly noteworthy in this article is that it has focused on women. In a similar vein, Syed Fagrutheen (2014) captures the understated condition of women throughout this novel. He further evinces that women as the bearers of children are actually nothing more than tools of reproduction. The fact that the number of wives affects social status of men hints that women are possessions of men (24).

Aside from these, Alan R. Friesen (2006) comments, -that “Okonkwo’s suicide can be seen the last attempt to remind the Igbo people of their culture and values in the face of impending colonialism” (6). Accordingly, Okonkwo is lamenting the villagers turn away from their traditional customs (6).

All the research findings unfold that the reading of Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958) has not been conducted by using postcolonial African writers like Frantz Fanon. How European colonial strategies like religion and indirect rule subjugated the society, culture, religion, mind, education and psychology of the Africans will be discussed in details. European force culminated to the othering of the natives in various ways and this research will provide the subaltern Africans with a voice and unveil that the Eurocentric gaze leading to the destruction of non-whites is distorted and false. Thus, this qualitative research will contribute and enrich the existing African, Caribbean and postcolonial literatures and come up with a new approach – The Postcolonial critical analysis of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958) in the light of Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1952) and The Wretched of the Earth (1961).

Frantz Fanon’s books

Aimé Césaire’s student, Marxist psychologist Frantz Fanon (20 July 1925 – 6 December 1961) was born in Martinique. His notable postcolonial texts are Black Skin, White Masks (1952) and The Wretched of the Earth (1961).
**Black Skin, White Masks (1952)**

Black Skin, White Masks (originally published in French as Peau noire, masques blancs) analyzes the colonial effects on the psyche of both the colonized and the colonizers. “Various attitudes that the Negro adopts in contact with white civilization” (p. 5) are explored in this book.

In the first chapter called “The Negro and Language”, Fanon notices that the colonized adopt the colonizer’s language to reduce their inferiority complex. They become mimic men. Professor D. Westermann says:

> The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (as cited in Black Skin, 1952, p. 14)

Fanon refers to some examples of the Eurocentric gaze. Gordon propounds that blacks have 14.8 percent inferior brain than whites. In a similar vein, Sir Alan Burns notes that black men are inherently inferior to the white (as cited in Black Skin, 1952, p.18). Césaire is reviewed by Charles-André Julien as “a Negro poet with a university degree” (p. 26) or “a great black poet” (p. 26) which shows that the emphasis is on colour and not on his talent.

The second chapter called “The woman of color and the white man” manifests that black women bleach skin and dream of magically turning white. They seek white men with blue eyes, blond hair and light skin (p. 29) as they think that black is a curse unlike white, the symbol of daylight, virtue and beauty (p. 31). One woman named Mayotte Capecia even feels proud that her grandmother was white (p. 32). The Negro women suffer from neurotic orientation as they hate black men as savages. Hence, both races suffer from neurosis according to psychoanalytic study. In “The man of Color and the white Woman”, black men marry white women, the emblem of white culture, white beauty, white whiteness (p. 45). It is not love but a way to elevate oneself and to get status quo to the white man’s level, the master illustrious race. It is a way to be subject, not the other (p. 55).

Fanon negates to the colonial gaze of M. Mannoni in “The So-called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples” who posits that the inferiority complex among Malagasyes are not high but Fanon counters it by highlighting that two hundred whites in Martinique consider themselves superior to 300,000 people of color and in South Africa there are two million whites against almost thirteen
million native people, and it has never occurred to a single black to consider himself superior to a member of the white minority (as cited in Black Skin, 1952, p.68).

In “The Fact of Blackness” Fanon shares his bitter experience when a white boy felt terrified after seeing him, a Nigger (p. 84). Negro is associated with an animal (p. 86) and cannibals (p. 91). Locked in an infernal circle, one Negro hates another. Fanon wants to bring an end to all such wrong myths regarding Negro which calls them savages, brutes, illiterate (p. 88). Fanon asserts “I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago” (p. 99). Thus, he points out that colonized class was a rich race.

The colonizers use literary devices such as writing to belittle the blacks. “The Negro and Psychopathology” monitors that colonizers release their aggression on the blacks through magazines, comic books and Tarzan stories where Negroes are shown as wolf, devil, evil spirit and the bad man (p. 113). Ironically, black children identify themselves with the explorer, the bringer of civilization. The occidentals are not correct as they say that in the collective unconscious of human beings, the black symbolizes darkness, immorality, wretchedness, death, war and famine (p. 148). The dichotomy is not true - justice, good, truth, virginity is white but Satan is black. A Negro is a victim of the white civilization who calls them a biological-sexual-sensual-genital nigger (p. 156).

Fanon in “The Negro and Recognition” captures the Negroes who want to be, to emerge and to elevate their ego and be recognized. Tearing off the blanket of the colonial gaze, they seek love, freedom, generosity, no degradation and no exploitation (p. 193). In the concluding chapter “By Way of Conclusion”, Fanon identifies that fighting against hunger, misery and exploitation is the only solution for sugar plantation workers. Voting for equality, his ultimate prayer is that “the enslavement of man by man cease forever” (p. 180).

The Wretched of the Earth (1961)

Firstly, Fanon upholds the thesis that decolonization which means the replacing of a certain species of men by another species of men is always a violent phenomenon (p. 27). He believes that as the colonized states were maintained through genocide and extermination it would take violence to reverse this power relationship. To the natives, their land is their survival and through rebellion they will free their land from the foreigners. Fanon adds “Europe is literally the creation of the Third world” (p. 81).
Secondly, Fanon thinks that within the natives there are the elite intellectual bourgeoisie who dress and speak like Europeans and they betray the national heritage by not putting their theoretical knowledge to the service of the Africans. These betrayers promote internal civil war to strengthen their power. Decolonization does not end the problems of the proletariat as bourgeoisie looks down upon their own race. Anti-democratic regime can be sorted if, Fanon counsels, policies are made for the masses. The party should be the direct expression of the masses as the land belongs to those who till it.

Thirdly, European historians propagate that colonialism came to lighten the darkness of the barbaric indigenous people. In order to turn aside such constructions, it is necessary to build up national consciousness. Thereby, African-Negro culture must uphold the people’s struggle for freedom, the “literature of combat” (p. 193). He urges all brothers and comrades of colonized countries “Let us decide not to imitate Europe” (p. 252). Fanon imparts the desire to create heritage, individuality and status of all the colonized nations of this world.

Analysis

Just like Fanon, Achebe thinks that the colonized people are not primitive. When we turn to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, we notice a representation of the African democratic society. All Umuofia villagers are asked to gather during a village meeting when one of their village women is killed by one Mbaino man. The elders of the village talk about this problem in front of all the villagers. That means that law and order of this society is not partial as well as corrupted.

What is more, Achebe focuses on the community feeling prevalent within the Igbo society. We see that the whole village participates in the wedding. Nwakibie helps Okonkwo with eight hundred yams so that Okonkwo can raise financially in spite of the fact that Okonkwo’s father lived in debt. So, Okonkwo is given opportunity to flourish in the Igbo community. Obierika and his mother’s family support Okonkwo during his exile from Umuofia to Mbanta. Okonkwo’s cousins do not abandon him during his crisis period. Hence, we can see that the members stood by each other in the difficult times.

Furthermore, the judiciary is impartial here and all accept the code of law. We can find that Odukwe accepts the decision of the clan. He begs his wife Mgbafo to return to him after he has beaten her as per the decision of the elders. Okonkwo also accepts the punishment for beating his wife during the sacred week. This manifests that law is not biased and it remains equal for all.
Aside from these factors, the Igbo have rich language which is passed from one generation to another. They have proverbs, epics, folk stories, songs, dances and other artistic devices which suggest that they are not primitive at all. The Igbo society practices orature. According to Anthonia C Kalu (2008):

The oral tradition is the backbone of African arts and letters. It is a living tradition that spans ancient and contemporary periods and all aspects of African life. It contains verbal and nonverbal forms such as poetry, oral narratives, riddles, proverbs, songs, festival drama, music and dance, sculpture, and different kinds of artwork made from various materials. (p. 2)

In Achebe’s opinion proverbs express the life of the people (Ogbaa, 1981, p. 5). He mentions in the novel that “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-wine with which words are eaten” (p. 5). Proverbs are frequently used to describe Okonkwo. Okonkwo is described as “a bushfire in the harmattan” (p. 1) because of his tall, huge bushy eyebrows, wide nose and his commanding personality. “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (p. 6) renders Okonkwo’s achievements. By the same token, “looking at a king’s mouth one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast” (p. 19) is about his courage and diligence. Igbo words like “gome, gome, gome, gome” (p. 7) create the African environment and Achebe writes “ten and one” (p. 37) to display their counting method. Through language we know about their superstitions like Ekwefi says “Is it me?” (p. 29) to answer calls from outside as it might be an evil spirit calling. Igbo words like agbala (p. 10), chi (p. 13), ozo (p. 48), ogbanje (p. 54), iba (p. 60), efulefu (p. 110), osu (p. 111) and many others depict the Igbo culture. These Igbo words are used along with English in such a way that the readers have no problem in understanding the meaning. The marriage, the wrestling and funeral songs are tools by which the writer unearths the poetic creative potentiality of the Igbo race. Women dance, plait hair and paint themselves with cam wood and paint huts with red earth. Through English, therefore, Achebe captures their sense of aesthetic art and beauty.

Orature is the key cornerstone of this Igbo culture. Kalu (2008) writes “For children, cultural education begins with learning core local narratives with simple plots” (p. 5) and these oral narratives entertain, inform and explore the universe, life, death, the value of kindness, courage, love, honesty, justice (p. 4) and so on of the Africans. Here, the story of the repentant snake-lizard killing his mother in Chapter Nine and the cunning Tortoise who is punished for his harmful actions in Chapter Eleven gives the message that they like peace and honesty. From one generation to another, these folk tales are passed which itself is the evidence that it has inherited rich linguistic art and passes it on to their children.
Kalu (2008) informs that Epics are descriptive narratives of long journeys, conflict and reconciliation and the brave and honest hero has difficult beginnings which he overcomes by valor, friends or combination of all these (p. 7). Okonkwo’s tale is written like an epic as he succeeds by hard work with the help of his clan members from his poverty-stricken family. He is also the sole voice of protest against the colonizers. In a nutshell, Okonkwo is an epic hero.

Fanon upholds the thesis that decolonization which means the replacing of a certain species of men by another species of men is always a violent phenomenon (Wretched, 1961, p. 27). Fanon wants colonized people to fight for their lands as violence is the only one way to decolonize themselves from the colonizers. When the Abame villagers attempt to kill one white man, it leads to the wiping out of their entire village by the Europeans. When Okonkwo senses that the British have brought abomination in their clan by fragmenting their religion and it has converted his own son Nwoye into Christianity, he is ready to go to war against them. We find Okonkwo as the sole rebellious Igbo voice. Fear has been instilled inside other Umu-ofian members in such a way that they cannot gather courage to fight their oppressors. They become “Phobogenic object” (Black Skin, 1952, p.117) or afraid of the British who overpowered their leaders in jail. Okonkwo kills himself as he does not want to die in the hands of the colonizers. He refuses to be a mimic man.

Eurocentric gaze in Things Fall Apart (1958) makes the ferocious unlawful Europeans wipe out the entire village of Abame on the pretext that the Igbo inhabitants have killed one of their members. More and more, they want to give bicycles, singlets, towels along with the jobs of clerks if blacks became Christians. In the land case, they give the land to “Nnema’s family” (p. 124) who has given money to the white man’s interpreters and messengers. We get to know that non-blacks have created prison cells to punish those who have offended against their laws and religion. This is utter dictatorship. When Okonkwo along with other leaders of Umuofia destroy the church, the British administrators invite them for discussion and craftily handcuff the Igbo leaders and later shave their heads and even beat them. Instead of trying to comprehend the point of view of the Africans, the District Commissioner lectures them:

We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of Law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people’s houses and their place of worship. This must not happen in the domination of our queen, the most powerful ruler of the world. I have decided that you will pay a fine of two hundred bags of cowries. (p. 137)
This speech pinpoints that whites do not want to know about Igbo culture. In contrast to the Igbo egwugwu members who have not killed Mr. Smith or the one Igbo judiciary associate who talks rationally “you can worship your own god” (p. 134), the colonizers have given shelter to Enoch though he has committed the Igbo sacrilege of unmasking an egwugwu in public. The cunning Europeans give feast of eating and drinking to Ogbuefi Ugonna, a prestigious Igbo who has embraced Christianity. They have hanged Aneto who has killed Oduche in the fight over the land instead of knowing about the judiciary customs of the Igbo land. They do not punish Okoli for killing the sacred python. They introduce trading system in Nigeria to use Igbo palm-oil and Kernel in England. Ironically, these non-Africans are lecturing Africans who are efficient enough to solve judiciary cases democratically. The Igbo Christian missionary tells the Igbo “we have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die” (p. 102). “Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake” (p. 108) says the Christian missionary Mr. Kiaga to Nwoye. The colonial false partial beliefs and trickery is evident in the figure of the District Commissioner who not only arrests the six leaders cunningly but also decides to write a book on the Africans. He wants to devote only one paragraph to Okonkwo and his book title is The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger (p. 148). Neither are the Igbo primitive nor do they need any pacification though they had no king or Queen in their acephalous society. Achebe has written a whole novel on Okonkwo to show the insufficient knowledge of the English imperialists who hardly try to gather any knowledge of the native laws plus customs. He undermines the Igbo languages as “superfluous” (p. 146) which in turn exposes his racist perspective. Just like the nameless Africans of Heart of Darkness (1902), the District Commissioner has no name. Achebe is here sarcastic of the discourse which is written by inept colonizers to misrepresent Africans as primitive savages.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, Fanon refutes the colonial gaze and Achebe exhibits in Things Fall Apart the false Eurocentric beliefs of the District Commissioner, the missionaries and other British colonizers. He has successfully shown that the colonized people are not primitive and savages as per the false notion of the Whites. It concludes that the colonial gaze does not give identity to Africans. Like Fanon, Achebe also admires the pre-colonial African past. Okonkwo commits suicide as he does not want to imitate colonizers and be a subservient mimic man. All-inclusive, Fanon correctly delineates the colonial mistreatment of the colonized and we find a fictional representation of Fanon’s ideas in Achebe’s novel.
References


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