

Igbo Identity: Chinua Achebe's Readings on British Colonial Literature

Sonia Varghese

*HSST English, Government Model Higher Secondary School, Cheeral,
SulthanBathery, Wayanad*

Abstract

The continent of Africa had been synonymous with abstractions as darkness, fear and fright; such an estranged identity had in fact been stitched and constructed by the invading west, whose innovative and strategic dissemination of thoughts had pulled Africa into unimaginable marginal depths. Decades of exploitation had denigrated the African colour, race, language, literature and culture to a position occupying below the mediocre rungs. The independence movements in the early 1950's and subsequent induction of liberal education had in fact created a sturdy platform for African writers to voice themselves. Nigerian literature had carved a unique enclave amidst the vast panorama of African literature, for it abounds not merely in exhibitionism of its once vibrant culture, but also the challenges it faced in the post colonial era. Chinua Achebe, though belonging to an earlier generation of Nigerian writers, still content a position for ethical research, for he helped construct not merely an African identity (which was shredded and disseminated by colonialism) but also helped reinterpret the African past from an African point of view, which had indeed proved a marker for the later and contemporary writers. This paper attempts to re read through the lines of the seminal essay by Achebe- An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. One of the prime objectives of the paper will be to highlight the marginalizing, tarnishing and most aptly the racist tendencies, as mentioned in the essay. The paper would also intend to discuss and remind the readers of the significance of Achebe in establishing the colossal African literature.

Keywords: *Tarnish, racist, Africa, Igbo, Colonialism*



Literature as a discourse with its imagined and fictitious representations had portrayed reality, chartered human pathways of enlightenment and had even celebrated the glory of life. Seeing the pristine side of the literary texts, one should not forget the sinister and rather a vulgar countenance, wherein it had played a role in cementing the bricks of false historical narratives to firmness. Perspectives and dominant hegemonic thoughts play a vital role in the creation and dissemination of historical events. Literature too plays a similar role in ingraining perspectives for it seeps in to the readers through the pallet of aesthetics. Colonialism is a discourse that is smudged by motifs of prejudice and greed. Much of the countries who had to bear the brunt of the tag as a colony were stamped as cultures earmarked as uncouth, primitive and savage, upon whom the white supremacy could alone bring order and enlightenment. Much of these thoughts permeate the British colonial literature and no wonder Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, won an easy entry into the western canon of classics. With the shift of times and spread of an ever-pervasive education the writers of the erstwhile colonies had started to question and even challenge the norms, policies and perspectives in colonial discourses. Chinua Achebe, had forever tried to tilt this balance in favor of the indigenous demarcating the invading culture of colonialists as prejudiced, imperceptive, unnecessarily bureaucratic and emotionally impotent. His essay, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, puts to dissection Conrad's perspective as presented through the narrator of the canonical novel.

The seminal content of the essay, says Chinua Achebe was occasioned in the fall of 1974 by the two passing remarks he received, the first while on a walk in his place of work- the University of Massachusetts- and the second on a letter. An aged man had asked what he taught at the university and found the man taken aback in learning that he taught African literature, which according to the stranger would never have existed. Quite contrary to this response, Achebe mentions a letter

delivered from a high school in Yonkers, New York, appreciating his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The author also takes it an opportunity to unveil the fact that even the erudite British historian and Oxford Professor, Hugh Trevor, had remarked on the nonexistence of an “African history”. Taking the point, the author argues that the western perspective had always viewed Africa as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar. To counter this age set notion, he relies on a work of fiction, one that is treated as among the half a dozen greatest short novels in the English language- Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. “Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully ‘at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.’ But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of Thames. The river Congo is quite decidedly not a river emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that ‘going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world.’ (Achebe,3) Achebe reminds the contemporary readers to be wary of the fact that Thames too had been one of the darkest places on earth, however it could conquer the darkness and no wonder it is in daylight and at peace.

The author having brought to the attention of the readers to Conrad’s stylistic evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*, moves on to highlight two sentences in the novel that express an incomprehensible mystery: ‘It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.’ (*Heart of Darkness*48) ‘The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.’ (*Heart of Darkness*4). The author points out how F.R Leavis had made a note on Conrad’s excessive use of adjectives to colour upon the inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery in Africa. Interesting enough, Achebe notes the representation of the people of colour as seen by the representatives of Europe in a steamer cruising down the River Congo. “But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. (*Things Fall Apart*6) However Achebe is of the opinion that not everything in Africa is out of place in Conrad’s vision, he cites two instances that in fact celebrates the ravishing beauty in Africa. The first is seen in the very beginnings of the novel, wherein we find a description of the Congo river mouth: “Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see them afar the white of their eye balls glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks- these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast... they were a great comfort to look at.” (*Things Fall Apart*7) Such a seductive charm offered to Africa and its inhabitants are also found in the savage charm attributed to an African woman, considered to be the mistress to Mr. Kurtz, whose absence had brought the protagonist to embark on a search of him. Strangely enough, the readers of the novel would find that the description of her savage beauty serves as a mere structural contrast to a European replica, which in fact act as a symbol of refinement and a

mature self. She is none other than Kurtz's English wife: "She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in morning... she took both my hands in hers and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming' ...she had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering." (*Things Fall Apart*8) Achebe draws our attention to these two women, apart from their plain descriptions – Conrad bestows human expression to the latter and with holds it from the former. Conrad is accused of sparingly conferring language on the rudimentary souls of Africa, who is befit to have expressed through a violent babble of uncouth sounds and short grunting phrases, which is expressed at moments of frenzy.

Having highlighted these inadequacies in Conrad, Achebe terms him as a thorough going racist. In fact, he questions the entire colonial discourse for having treated Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at peril. He questions the perverse arrogance and the dehumanization of Africa and Africans fostered in colonial discourses. "The question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art." (*Things Fall Apart*13) He is of the opinion that Heart of Darkness is indeed a work with insight into the colonial mind, but the point of racism needs to be addressed. Conrad's colonial perspective and his presentation of Africa had sparked the interests of psychoanalysts, especially by Dr. Bernard C. Meyer. Unfortunately, the western psychoanalysts considered the racism displayed by Conrad as perfectly normal, in spite of the presence of the studies on racism by psycho analytic critic, Franz Fanon. In spite of these shortcomings he attributes to the novel, Achebe wonders how come it is a commonly prescribed novel in the English departments of American universities. Achebe foresees two criticisms in discontent to the earlier mentioned statement:

1. It is not the concern of fiction to please people about whom it's written. However, he counters the above-mentioned argument with the opinion that it is not a matter about pleasing people, instead it "is about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a selection of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today." (*Things Fall Apart* 16)
2. Secondly, he could be challenged based on the fact that Conrad's fiction is based on an actual travel to Congo. Achebe disagrees, for he cannot trust the words of a prejudiced man as Conrad! To this he cites Dr. Bernard C.Meyer's comment on Conrad being "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history." (*Things Fall Apart*17) he cites the example of Marco Polo who after his visit to China failed to record its two great achievements, the first being the printing technology which was already in full bloom in China and the second being the narration on the great wall; this aptly proves that travelers can indeed be blind in recording greatness!

Achebe however points out that Conrad is not to be blamed for originating a denigrated image of Africa, but the western imagination and thoughts ingrained into his perception made him so. According to him, "the west seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant

reassurance by comparison with Africa... Africa is to Europe a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate.” (*Things Fall Apart*18) The west needs to rid of its mind of old prejudices and begin to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions, but instead see it as a continent of people gifted enough to lead a strikingly successful and enterprising life.

Depiction of Igbo Identity in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe, through his novel *Things Fall Apart*, presents a clan of Igbo people and their way of life during the beginning of colonization in Africa. Through the representation of the Igbo peoples’ way of life and their reaction to the colonizing forces that enter their villages, Achebe presents themes of identity as a group of African people with a past and heritage to be honoured. This reoccurring theme of identity in the sense of an African people can be traced back to Achebe’s background as a native of the Igbo people in Africa.

Things Fall Apart investigates aspects of identity through its main character Okonkwo’s views of what it means to be a man and what it means to be African. When the white Christian colonizing forces invade his village he sees this as a threat to his and his people’s way of life, and as a result to their identity as Africans. The English bring with them new religion, new language, and new forms of government, that threaten to breakdown the previously established culture that Okonkwo and the other villagers who resist the change have become accustomed to, probably because they see these changes as a threat to what makes them who they are as African people. Evidence of this can be seen at the end of chapter 20 in *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo’s friend Obierika visits him to discuss the changes that have occurred in Umuofia since Okonkwo was banished. Obierika explains the white man in Umuofia “says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. 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”, illustrating the men’s feelings of despair and fear at the changing landscape of their culture and tribesmen (*Things Fall Apart*940). This threat on Okonkwo’s identity that comes from the invasion of the Europeans is additionally seen when Okonkwo returns to Umuofia to see these changes himself. Here the narrator expresses that “The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people’s eyes and minds. There were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else...” (*Things Fall Apart*493). The text explains that Okonkwo was “deeply grieved” by the changes that had taken place in his village, and that his grief was not only for himself, but that he also “mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (*Things Fall Apart* 943).

Much like Okonkwo, Achebe’s parents, living in an Igbo village during the colonization and creation of Nigeria, saw firsthand many of the changes that were occurring in their homeland and culture and the alienation this caused between tribesmen. Ezenwa- Ohaeto, in his book *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*, explains

that when Achebe's parents returned to Ogidi in 1935 with their family, the cultural crossroads faced by their society was plainly apparent in that "The storytelling sessions of the oral tradition existed side by side with book-reading sessions in the schools. The hymn-singing, Bible reading members of catechist Achebe's family, on one side, faced his traditionalist kin on the other", clearly illustrating the clashing cultures present in their village at the time and the divide it created between members of the Igbo (Ohaeto 8). As this quote also suggests, much of this cultural change came from not only the introduction of the European religion and government but also from their school system which was "intended to transplant on African soil what established academic circles in England regarded as the best features of English universities, without much regard for the special needs of the countries where they were set up", bringing not only the native people of the Igbo tribes further away from their own oral literary traditions but also enforcing an idea that these European texts and methods were superior (Booker 2). This separation from his native culture and the introduction to European culture caused Achebe to face many of the feelings of identity crisis his characters encounter in *Things Fall Apart*. In an interview he explained that the cultural limbo he experienced caused him to feel like a "bat in the folk tales- neither bird nor mammal- and one can get lost, not being one or the other" (Cott 21).

Along with the effects the English colonization of the Igbo had on the education and oral literary traditions of the Igbo people, their influence was equally effective in their disintegration of the Igbo people's religious traditions. The attack of the English on the Igbo culture and religion was so effective in fact that "before the natives realized what had happened, their land, their culture, their wealth, their gods and goddesses, and their own people had been won over by the alien agencies. Hence it became very difficult for the Nigerians to counterattack their white enemies effectively without harming their fellow clansmen" (Ogbaa 55). This attack on the Igbo culture was especially successful in the religious field, evidence of which can be seen in that the majority of Igbo people have left their own gods and goddesses for the Christianity introduced through their colonization (Booker 110). In fact, the time of crossroads of culture that came as a result of the colonizing forces in Nigeria created parallels can be made between the historical attempts against the Igbo religion and the similar fictional attacks in *Things Fall Apart*. For example, an Igbo historian and one of Achebe's childhood friends and classmates recalls an event in which a masquerader, or someone in costume for the Igbo religious festivities, was "killed" (only literally knocked down however) in frustration by someone who adapted the new religion of the English (Ohaeto 10). The account continues to state that "It was an abomination to desecrate a masquerade and the news spread throughout the district. From every quarter mighty masquerades came out, by day and by night, to mourn in a ritual called *IbeOye*" (Ohaeto 10).

This can be compared to the similar event that occurred in Okonkwo's village with the intentional unmasking of an *egwugwu* during the annual ceremony to honor the earth deity by a Christian convert, which to the Igbo was seen as an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The text explains that "one of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated", illustrating just how divided Okonkwo's tribesmen were through the introduction of

the new religion (Achebe 944). Like Achebe's own experience, his characters in *Things Fall Apart*, were being pitted against each other with the introduction of Christianity and the other cultural forces of the English. In this way, they were unable to stand together as a united African people under a shared religion as they had in the past.

In general, the message presented by the British was one in which "their own society was superior, and also that conversion of the local people would have to be not only from the traditional religion but from the whole way of life which was intertwined with it and supported it", which resulted in their effort to change everything about the native Igbo culture (Crowder). The effects of this can be seen throughout Achebe's fictional work *Things Fall Apart*, as well as his recorded biography. Through adaption of English culture and religion by the Igbo many of their aspects of identity were sacrificed, in terms of their abandonment of their own cultural heritage and the separation between clansmen who chose to adapt to the new culture and those who kept to the traditional ways. Achebe's firsthand experience of this attack on his identity is presented in *Things Fall Apart* through his character Okonkwo's inability to cope in his changing environment. The language that Achebe uses to describe the locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like "settled" and "every" emphasizes the suddenly ubiquitous presence of these insects and hints at the way in which the arrival of the white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. Furthermore, the locusts are so heavy they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. Perhaps the most explicit clue that the locusts symbolize the colonists is Obierika's comment in Chapter 15: "the Oracle . . . said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts" (*Things Fall Apart* 947).

References

1. Achebe, Chinua. *An Image of Africa*. London: Penguin, 1983. Print.
2. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.
3. Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Claremont: Cayote Canyon, 2007. Print.
4. Ogbaa, Kalu. *Understanding Things Fall Apart: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999. Print.