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The Portrayal of Colonialism and its Impact in *Things Fall Apart*

Sunil Kumar Pandey
Lecturer
Department of English, Shaheed Smarak Government Degree College, Yusufpur Mohammadabad Ghazipur Uttar Pradesh

Abstract
Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) stands as one of the most researched texts of postcolonial literature because its narrative strength demonstrates the complete effects of colonialism on African societies through its detailed account of colonialism's entry into their territories. The article demonstrates how Achebe uses his novel to show how colonial powers operated through their control of religious beliefs and political systems and linguistic heritage and societal traditions which affected the Igbo community's daily life in southeastern Nigeria during the early 1900s. The article analyzes how colonial powers used their imperial control to destroy indigenous systems of authority through their evaluation of Okonkwo's tragic journey which serves as their central investigation. The discussion examines the novel's historical framework while showing how Achebe's choice to respond to European literature which had silenced African voices functions as an active form of resistance. The article argues that Things Fall Apart is not simply a story about one man's fall; it is a meticulous indictment of colonialism told with extraordinary restraint and moral clarity.
Keywords: *postcolonial literature, Things Fall Apart, Igbo culture, resistance, colonialism, Chinua Achebe, cultural displacement*

I. Introduction

The book Things Fall Apart which first appeared in 1958 brought something completely new to the world because it existed at that time before Nigeria achieved independence. The novel presents itself as an African work which uses English language but maintains its African identity through its native voice and African settings and African cultural elements. Achebe did not write with apology or translation anxiety. He wrote about the Igbo world exactly as it existed while presenting colonialism because he showed its actual progression from silent beginnings to sudden full scale invasion.

The book takes place during the late 1800s in Umuofia which consists of nine villages located in what presently makes up southeastern Nigeria. The story follows Okonkwo who represents both the highest and lowest values of his culture through his strong work ethic and deep need to show power and his struggle against anything that might show weakness. The arrival of Christian missionaries followed by British colonial officials leads to the destruction of everything Okonkwo considers as his own identity. By the end of the novel, both his world and his character have disappeared from the story.

The novel provides an engaging study of colonialism because Achebe depicts the conflict between different cultures as a struggle between good and evil which he makes impossible to resolve. The Igbo society he presents to readers functions in a dynamic manner because it possesses distinct moral values and spiritual beliefs and judicial systems and internal conflicts. The novel does not depict colonialism as an unstoppable historical force that took over an unprepared population. The process developed through planned steps which used existing splits between groups to convert individual people into members of church institutions before foreign systems took control of native organizations.

This article explores those dynamics across several dimensions: the cultural and historical context Achebe drew from, the religious and administrative machinery of colonialism, the figure of Okonkwo as symbol, and the gendered dimensions of colonial disruption. It closes with a discussion of the novel's enduring relevance as both literary artifact and political document.

II. Achebe's Historical and Literary Context

2.1 Writing Against Conrad

To understand what Achebe was doing in *Things Fall Apart*, you have to know what he was writing against. In his famous 1977 essay "An Image of Africa," Achebe took direct aim at Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, arguing that Conrad's novella reduces Africa to a backdrop — a place of primordial darkness that

exists only to illuminate the European psyche. Africans in Conrad's text, Achebe pointed out, are barely human. They grunt, they gesture, they exist as atmosphere.

Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* partly to answer that image. He wanted to show, as he put it, that Africa had a history, a culture, and a sense of dignity before Europeans arrived — and that colonialism destroyed something real, not something primitive. This is why so much of the novel's first half is devoted to Igbo life before the Europeans come. Achebe spends pages describing the Week of Peace, the wrestling matches, the elaborate rituals of marriage and burial, the hierarchies of title and respect. He is not romanticizing. He is documenting.

2.2 The Historical Moment

The novel is set roughly between the 1890s and early 1900s, during the height of Britain's colonization of what would become Nigeria. The Royal Niger Company had been operating in the region since the 1880s, and the British government was actively consolidating control through both military force and administrative reorganization. The missionaries who appear in the novel — led by figures like Mr. Brown and the more aggressive Reverend Smith — are historically accurate in their methods and sequencing. Real missionary societies did precede formal colonial governance, and real communities were internally divided by conversion before administrators ever arrived to formalize the colonial structure.

Achebe drew heavily on his own family history and on the oral traditions of the Igbo people. His father had been one of the early converts to Christianity, and Achebe grew up navigating both worlds — the traditional and the colonial-Christian. That dual perspective is visible on every page of the novel.

III. The Colonial Encounter: Religion, Language, and Governance

3.1 The Missionary Invasion and the Logic of Conversion

The missionaries arrive in Umuofia not with guns, but with a song and a story. This detail matters. Achebe shows that the first instrument of colonialism is not violence but narrative — the Christian story offered something the existing social order could not provide to those it marginalized.

The missionaries specifically target the outcasts, the osu (untouchables), the mothers of twins (who, following custom, had been forced to abandon their babies in the Evil Forest), and young men who felt blocked from advancement within the existing hierarchy. Mr. Brown, the first missionary, is a patient man who learns the local language and engages in genuine dialogue with village elders. He does not attack Igbo beliefs head-on. He builds a school, a hospital, and uses education as his real weapon — knowing that whoever controls a community's children controls its future.

Achebe's most sharp analysis of colonial strategies appears in this observation. The school exists as a present which we need to accept. Nwoye, who is Okonkwo's son, becomes attracted to Christianity because of his emotional requirements rather than any logical proof. The church provides him a system of compassion which he could not obtain from his traditional society because he experienced guilt for killing his adopted brother Ikemefuna. Achebe demonstrates that colonial powers achieved their goals through violent means while they manipulated authentic community distress to their advantage.

As shown in Figure 1, the development of colonial power in Umuofia started with cultural and religious penetration followed by European administrative takeover and ended with the complete replacement of local systems.

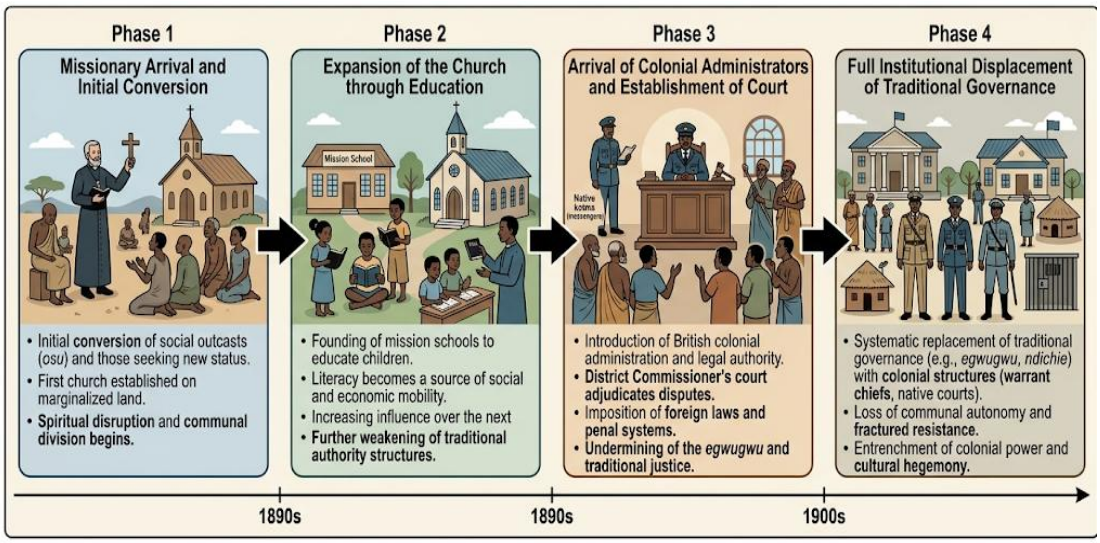

Figure 1: Stages of Colonial Penetration in Umuofia as Depicted in *Things Fall Apart*

This figure presents a conceptual timeline-flowchart tracing the sequential stages of colonial encroachment in the novel's fictional Igbo community of Umuofia. The horizontal axis represents time from roughly the 1890s to the early 1900s, divided into four phases: (1) Missionary arrival and initial conversion of social outcasts; (2) Expansion of the church through education and the founding of schools; (3) Arrival of colonial administrators and establishment of the District Commissioner's court; (4) Full institutional displacement of traditional governance structures. Arrows connecting each phase indicate acceleration rather than linear progression — each stage enabled and hastened the next. The key insight is that by the time formal colonial governance was imposed, the community had already been internally fractured, making organized resistance significantly harder.

3.2 Administrative Machinery and the Destruction of Indigenous Law

When the District Commissioner and his local court messengers arrive, the groundwork has already been laid. The traditional legal and spiritual institutions of Umuofia — the egwugwu masked spirits who adjudicate disputes, the elders' councils, the collective decision-making processes — are systematically dismantled and replaced with colonial courts that few people understand and fewer trust.

The episode where the egwugwu are unmasked and humiliated is one of the novel's most powerful passages. The colonial administration does not just replace indigenous law; it desacralizes it. When the masks come off, something metaphysical collapses. The spiritual authority that had held the community together for generations is exposed as human and therefore dismissible. Achebe describes this not with polemic but with grief.

The court messengers — African men working for the colonial administration — are perhaps the most disturbing element of Achebe's portrayal. They are contemptuous of traditional authority, corrupt, and brutal. They represent something colonialism did everywhere: it created a class of intermediaries who enforced the new order with greater aggression than the colonizers themselves, because their power depended entirely on maintaining that order. When Okonkwo kills one of these messengers in a final act of defiance, it is a gesture so out of step with his community's will that it seals his fate.

IV. Okonkwo: Resistance, Rigidity, and the Limits of Tradition

Okonkwo is not a simple hero, and Achebe makes sure of that. He is a man who has built himself entirely against the image of his father — Unoka, a gentle, debt-ridden, music-loving man who Okonkwo considers a failure and a coward. Every decision Okonkwo makes is filtered through the fear of resembling his father. He is physically powerful, financially successful by village standards, and deeply admired. He is also rigid, violent in his family life, and incapable of showing love in ways his community actually values in a leader.

This internal contradiction is central to how Achebe handles colonialism. Okonkwo represents one response to the colonial encounter: total, unyielding resistance. He refuses to engage with the missionaries, refuses to accept any part of the new order, and calls on his people to fight when they have already decided not to. His tragedy is not just personal — it's political. The very qualities that might have made him a great leader in times of stability make him a disaster in times of change.

Achebe seems to be asking something difficult here: can a society resist colonialism from within its own value system, or does effective resistance require a kind of flexibility that traditional structures do not always permit? This is not an indictment of Igbo culture. It is an honest reckoning with the conditions that made colonial takeover possible — and a subtle critique of the kind of masculine rigidity that, across cultures, tends to mistake stubbornness for strength.

V. Gender, Identity, and Colonial Disruption

5.1 Women, Power, and the Chi

Igbo society in the novel is patriarchal, but Achebe portrays women's roles with care and specificity. Women are not simply background figures. The earth goddess Ani is the most powerful deity in the Igbo cosmological order — the source of fertility, morality, and communal law. The priestess Chielo, through whom Agbala speaks, holds enormous spiritual authority. Women mediate the sacred.

What colonialism does, among other things, is replace a cosmological order in which female power was structurally embedded with a Christian order in which it is not. The missionaries' God is male. The administrators' legal system is male. The school initially trains boys. The entire colonial apparatus narrows the avenues through which women could exercise influence, often without anyone explicitly intending to do so.

Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, is one of the most fully realized characters in the novel. Okonkwo famously wishes she had been born a boy — because she has the qualities he values in a man. This is often read as a simple statement of patriarchal limitation. But it also points to something more: Ezinma embodies an ideal

that the existing gender structure cannot fully accommodate, and the colonial order that arrives will accommodate it even less.

5.2 The Question of Who Gets to Tell the Story

The novel's title comes from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" — "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." It's a deliberate inversion. Achebe is not only telling the story of Igbo society's collapse under colonialism; he is reclaiming the right to tell that story on African terms. The District Commissioner who appears at the novel's close is writing a book about Africa — planning to devote, he thinks, "perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph" to Okonkwo's story. The casual condescension of that detail is devastating. It shows, in a sentence, how colonialism erased African subjecthood: by making Africans into data points in European narratives.

Achebe's novel is the corrective. It gives Okonkwo and Umuofia the full chapter — hundreds of pages of rendered interiority, social complexity, and cultural texture — that the District Commissioner would never think to write.

	Pre-Colonial Umuofia	Colonial Umuofia
Legal Authority	The *egwugwu* (masked spirits representing ancestors) adjudicate legal disputes and dispense justice are justice in the *ilo* (village square). The process relies on community consensus and ancestral wisdom.	A British District Commissioner's court, with *kotma* (messengers) and formal European-style trials, supersedes the *egwugwu*, enforcing foreign laws.
Spiritual Leadership	The priestess of Agbala (the Oracle of the Hills and Caves) holds supreme spiritual authority, interpreting divine will and guiding community actions. The *ndiichie* (elders) also hold ritual significance.	Christian missionaries establish churches and schools, redefining spiritual authority around biblical doctrine and challenging traditional belief systems. Conversion undermines indigenous practices.
Economic Organization	Yam farming is the central economic activity, following seasonal and communal rhythms. A barter system and trade networks exist, but subsistence is primary.	A colonial trade economy is introduced, prioritizing cash crops and access to European goods through trading posts. Subsistence agriculture is increasingly marginalized by market demands.
Education and Knowledge Transmission	Oral tradition, including folktales, proverbs, and rituals, is the primary means of passing down history, values, and knowledge to younger generations.	Mission schools are established, focusing on reading, writing, and arithmetic, effectively replacing oral transmission and introducing European cultural norms.
Gender Roles	Men hold overt political and titled authority, but women maintain critical domestic and ceremonial roles, including controlling their own crops and participating in specific rituals (e.g., the *ndichie*).	Women's roles are further constricted and redefined under Christian gender norms, which often impose strict European domestic expectations, marginalizing their public and economic influence.
Community Decision-Making	Decisions are reached through open community assemblies (the *ndichie* meeting with all adult men) based on consensus and respecting the voices of elders and titled men.	Colonial administrators bypass traditional systems of communal consent, imposing directives top-down and relying on the native court and appointed warrant chiefs.

Figure 2: Comparative Table of Power Structures Before and After Colonial Contact in Umuofia

This comparative table presents two columns — Pre-Colonial Umuofia and Colonial Umuofia — organized across six categories: legal authority, spiritual leadership, economic organization, education and knowledge transmission, gender roles, and community decision-making. Pre-colonial entries reflect the novel's depiction: the egwugwu adjudicate legal disputes, the priestess holds spiritual authority, yam farming and trade follow communal rhythms, oral tradition transmits knowledge, women hold ceremonial and domestic authority, and community assemblies resolve collective issues. Colonial entries show systematic replacement: a District Commissioner's court supersedes the egwugwu, Christian missionaries redefine spiritual authority, colonial trade economies displace subsistence agriculture, mission schools replace oral transmission, women's roles are further constricted under Christian gender norms, and colonial administrators bypass communal consent. The key takeaway is that colonial substitution operated simultaneously across every domain of social life — making resistance to any single element insufficient to preserve the whole.

VI. Conclusion

More than sixty years after its publication, *Things Fall Apart* has lost none of its power. It remains the most widely read African novel in the world, taught across high schools and universities on every continent — often, ironically, by educational systems whose existence can be traced to the very colonial networks Achebe was critiquing.

The novel's portrayal of colonialism is not a polemic or a grievance list. It is something harder to argue with: a full and truthful rendering of a world that existed, and the careful, methodical destruction of that world by forces that never bothered to understand what they were destroying. Achebe's achievement is to make that loss legible — not just to Igbo readers recognizing their own history, but to anyone willing to pay attention.

What Achebe ultimately asks is not for sympathy but for recognition. That the people of Umuofia were fully human, with full and complex lives, before any European arrived. That what was lost mattered. That the story of colonialism cannot be told honestly from the colonizer's perspective — because the colonizer, by definition, was not paying the same kind of attention.

The District Commissioner got his paragraph. Achebe wrote the rest.

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