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# Locating African Identity in Postcolonial African Discourse: A Postcolonial Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

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#### **Article Info**

# Article History: Received 17 January 2024 Revised 30 January 2024 Accepted 6 February 2024 \*Corresponding author: (Z. Abbas) zahidabbas0@gmail.com

#### **Keywords:**

African identity, African Literature Chinua Achebe, colonialism, post-Colonia discourse, Things Fall Apart, An Arrow of God

#### **Abstract**

The study analyses the African identity portrayed in Achebe's novels *Things* Fall Apart (1958) and An Arrow of God (1964) from the vantage point of the postcolonial theoretical perspective or Postcolonial African identity Discourse of Frantz Fanon. Twenty-first-century Africa is a diverse continent especially when looked from the perspective of post-colonialism where diverse groups of people exist. Because of past colonial residue and experience, the governments in the region are still divided and people live with fragmented identities. The continent has undergone drastic changes before and after its independence. In this regard, the study of post-colonial African literature seems to be incomplete without the study of the African colonial past and the ideologies emerging from this part of the world. In this regard, Chinua Achebe is one of the prominent writers of African literature who presents the glaring picture of African culture by celebrating its identity as self-sufficient. He introduces the reader to the important contextualising historical and cultural perspectives of African history and identity. The novels written by Achebe do not only depict the history and culture of Africa but also serve as a direct response to the whole canon of Eurocentric writings in which African race, history, culture, religion, and society have been misrepresented as inhuman and savage which are nothing but false constructs when viewed from postcolonial perspective. His novels, particularly Things Fall Apart and An Arrow of God paint a grim picture of the colonisation of Nigeria in particular and the African continent in general. He illustrates various ways of representing the self-sufficiency of African nations with a strong sense of African identity.

## Introduction

Identity is one of the most prominent themes of the postcolonial literature. There are multiple cultures forming individual identities of the different nations and races of the world and all those races are eager to be recognised individually. The people in every culture share compatible rules and values that provide a sense of belonging to the inhabitants of that culture and society hence attributing an identity that further makes the individual a unique personality in existing cultures. All societies are full of personalities and most of them live according to the rules, norms and cultures to which they belong to. Similarly, there are people who do not adapt to the change occurring in their culture and even they are not willing to shift those changes to the next generation as they think that the changes in the existing cultural norms mean a threat to their prevalent old culture. The act of colonisation provides all grounds where alien cultural norms sprout without any hurdle and check. A postcolonial reading of Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *An Arrow of God* shows the same trend of thinking and ideology when the novels are read from a postcolonial African identity perspective. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's debut novel written in 1958. Here the novelist has used the native tongue called Igbo. The part of this concept using Igbo culture and tongue is to celebrate the local identity of being an African and finally feel proud of it. The local community, faith, customs, norms and much more that is local African in the true sense of the word is celebrated. Achebe uses the African Nigerian language in its original sense and words are un-translated with the purpose to celebrate and maintain his Nigerian Igbo African

identity. This bent of mind reflects the idea of Ashcroft where he claims, "Ultimately the choice of leaving words untranslated in the postcolonial text is a political act" (Empire Writes Back, 2000 p. 34).

An Arrow of God is a novel where two opposing cultures have been portrayed confronting each other. The novel is a sequel of *Things Fall Apart* that depicts the effects of colonialism after the arrival of missionaries in African territories while *Things Fall Apart* represents how missionaries entered African regions and distorted different realms of African regions. Achebe, in his novel An Arrow of God presents the disrupting effects of externally imposed power system on the internal system of the Igbo people that resulted as disastrous to the Igbo society. Assimilation of western values was inculcated resulting loss of Igbo identity. The novel also depicts how the socio cultural, religious and political identities were affected and remained at stake and how colonial invasion affected the local indigenous masses.

# **Objective of Study**

- 1. To analyse African identity portrayed in Chinua Achebe's works *Things Fall Apar*t and *An Arrow of God* **Research Ouestion**
- 1. How does the colonized writer Chinua Achebe portray African identity in his works *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*?

#### **Literature Review**

Adama (2012) asserts that Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *An Arrow of God* portray African identity in terms of language. He argues that the writer of the novels uses inflected language which originally describes the lifestyle of his characters mainly describing the lifestyle of the common people of Africa. At the same time, both novels, *Things Fall Apart* and An *Arrow of God* are filled with African proverbs which have been translated into English and the purpose of these African proverbs is to celebrate African identity. In this regard, it is not out of place to consider that both novels selected in the study reflect African identity.

Hart (2007) is of the view that the novel *Things Fall Apart* can be studied on multiple strands where the core issue is to locate the African identity that has been portrayed with reference to the character of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel. The writer describes that the people of the clan are very excited to convert to Christianity thinking that it is the only way to escape from their own religion and Okonkwo's son Nwoye is one of those leaving their religion and converted to Christianity (Things Fall Apart, 107). This is the decision that came after the sacrifice of Ikemefuna who was almost the brother of Nwoye. Igbo decided to kill him and Nwoye was against this decision. He protested against it after conversion to Christianity and his father Okonkwo was never pleased with his son converting himself to Christianity and mingling with the missionaries. But from the beginning, he was aware that his son was "weak and woman-like" (*Things Fall Apart*, 41).

Sijo (2019) is of the view that the novel *An Arrow of God* is a successful exploration of Igbo culture and society. Like other novels of Achebe, it also explores the intersections of Igbo cultural norms and traditions. The novel is set basically in the village of Umuaro at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is the story of a character named Ezeulu who is the central character of the novel and is led to a tragic end.

Udofia (2014) asserts that *An Arrow of God* is a political and cultural novel set in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. This is a novel where cultures confront their differences. The novel presents disrupting effects exerted by colonialists upon the Igbo society which disintegrates from within and ultimately reorients itself to Christianity. The novel may be termed an exploration of the eventual loss of Igbo cultural identity. The homeland of the Igbo people was divested by the arrival of European colonisation even to the extent of irreparable and it is substituted by a hybrid culture and vision of life.

#### Methodology

The undertaken qualitative study has been conducted to locate African identity in *Things Fall Apart* and *An Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe from the perspective of postcolonial African identity theory. The data have been reviewed from the text of the novels with the help of close reading.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The undertaken research study is conducted in the light of the postcolonial African identity theory presented by Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1963). Generally, Post-colonialism is literary theory that deals with the approaches towards literature and culture of native people as its subject matter (Rana, 2021). Moreover, theory deals with the binaries between the Europeans and non Europeans where the west is taken as centre. On the contrary, other than Europeans are taken as periphery. In this context the theory presents binaries between the Europeans and non Europeans where the positive adjectives such as educated, moral, rational, progressed, self and civilised are meant for European white races and in contrast the adjectives such as uneducated, immoral, irrational, unprogressed, uncivilised and other are meant for blacks or non Westerns. These aspects of postcolonial theory are also applied to the African nations when peeped through the lenses of post colonialism. Fanon is a postcolonial theorist and his book *Black Skin White Masks* primarily theorizes the issue of black African identity where Fanon conceptualizes how the culture of the colonizers affects the colonized Africans and the latter assume the culture of

colonisers as a sign of prestige and privilege. Moreover, Fanon's theory portrays how Africans feel an inferiority complex with their identity when they are confronted with coloniser.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon offers a potent philosophical, clinical, literary and political analysis of the deep effects of racism and colonialism on black people's experiences, lives, minds and relationships. Fanon argues that the Africans are labelled with Eurocentric constructs such as immoral, uneducated, sinner, dark, uncivilised, unprogressed and savage. Due to these constructs, a strong sense of self-loathing emerges in blacks against their own culture and history which further blur the very Self of Negro as Fanon asserts, "The first impulse at the arrival of awareness is self-loathing: as I begin to recognise that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating Negro" (Fanon, 1963, p. 15). Fanon wants the black Africans to liberate themseselves from these constructs and he adds, "Liberation begins by recognising these constructions for what they are" (Fanon, 1963, p. 15). He is aware that the constructs have nothing to do with reality and they are meant to exploit the very self of Africans. In addition to exploitation these constructs engulf the black African identity as well, so the Africans need to understand these constructs and liberate themselves.

Fanon's claims that white civilisation is racist in its nature and the black Africans are the victims of racist ideology. This racist is evident in European discourse. Fanon asserts, "If Western civilisation and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure then we should not be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourse of knowledge that emanates from this civilisation. The western civilisation works to ensure its structural dominance" (Fanon, 1963, p. 15). Moreover, Fanaon approves the postcolonial idea that Eurocentric constructs give the white man central position and in contrast to it black Negros are marginalised and periphery. Fanon asserts that White categorises Negro into two groups idealised vs. unidealised. For white, idealised Negro are those who abide by the rules of white man and obey them whereas the unidealised Negros are those who stand against the white norms culture, identity, religion, and civilisation. Fanon asserts, "The idealised Negro is equally a construction of white man. He represents the flip side of Enlightenment (Fanon, 1963, p. 14)". As a result, the idealised Negros get accepted by the white whereas unidealised Negro remains marginalised and is finally discarded.

Fanon's postcolonial identity theory refers to the emergence of feelings of inferiority among African people and feelings of superiority and arrogance among the white European nations. Fanon's postcolonial view of African identity refers to the self-dignity and self-identity of Africans when he asserts, "dignity is not located in seeking equality with the white man and his civilisation: it is not about assuming the attitude of the master who has allowed his slave to eat at his table. It is about being oneself, with all the multiplicities systems and contradictions of one's own ways of being, doing and knowing, it is about being true to oneself (Fanon, 1963, p. 6)".

Fanon's postcolonial identity theory is focused on European constructs like cultural superiority of white and inferiority of black that creates sense of self-loathing in black Africans due to their self-awareness of being inferior. Theory also deals with concept of "self against other" that keeps the Europeans at vantage point and attaches the negative clichés with African identity and finally African's quest for identity.

## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

# Superiority of European culture in Arrow of God and celebration of African cultural identity in *Things Fall Apart*

In both novels Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God there is presented cultural superiority of Europe. The arrival of missionaries reflects a quest of control on local indigenous resources. Close reading of the novels reflects that the goal of the missionaries was to overtake indigenous culture, control the masses and resources and finally to convert them and own them as their own. To gain this goal they do not only influence the religion of community but also their views, actions, and practices as well. The conversion of the indigenous things was not on superficial level rather it was deeper social and traditional level. The missionaries made the people aware that whatever is being practiced in the culture and religion, it is nothing but a myth that has nothing to do with reality so these practices should be omitted. There are certain examples as in African culture those females were scorned who gave birth twins, but the missionaries negated these norms and they welcomed such women so were idealised by Africans. Moreover, almost those practices were regarded to be myth by missionaries which were being practiced they were welcomed in Umofia and Umuaro when they claimed, "We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die" (Achebe, 1964 p. 145).

African cultural identity is depicted in the novel *An Arrow of God* where Ezeulu is the chief priest of the village, and everyone is obedient to him. Igbo religious actions are taken as sacred in the village of Umuaro and no one is thought to be capable enough to give a deaf ear to those religious actions. One such example is depicted when Oduche kills the python which is omen in the Igbo African culture and religion. In African cultural ceremonies the python is very much related to the devotion of deity of Idemili and nobody is allowed to kill python. The missionaries convince Oduche to kill python by saying, "You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the

inguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake" (Achebe, 1964 p. 47). Oduche killed python out of fear because he thought his own culture inferior and the culture of missionaries as superior.

Meanwhile, *Things Fall Apart* is a postcolonial text by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. The text represents an African village named Umoufia under colonial rule. Almost every character of the novel portrays his quest of African identity in a different way but the common thing among them is that they are stuck with their indigenous African identity. One of those characters is the protagonist Okonkwo who has little inclination towards the new culture and identity. For him adapting the new culture and identity of missionaries is tantamount to leaving a competent and just culture of his own. He never wants his culture and norms to let them go. Okonkwo is the only man who remains true to his cultural identity and never goes against the Igbo customs and hence celebrates the identity of being black African. There are a few glaring examples that prove him as a lover of his own culture, religion, and norms as he leaves his village according to the African cultural rules and does not have any objection. He feels alienated at the time of his arrival when he finds his fellow tribal men affected by the colonial culture. After his banishment he finds that they have adopted the culture of the missionaries. He is the only character who stands alone against the whole and in this way, he is microcosm of whole Africa.

# Rebutting Eurocentric Constructs of African Black Identity in Selected Novels

There are Eurocentric constructs against the black Africans. Even the word "Negro" is a construction of the white man which is further divided between idealised and un-idealised Negro in the words of Fanon. The novels portray that eurocentricism is the present reality that label all Africans as savage in the strict sense of the word. Moreover, if the literature is peeped through Eurocentric angle the European societies are privileged and valued over the other societies. Similarly, from Eurocentric point of view all Africans are depicted as exotic, immoral, uncivilised, uneducated, primitive, dark from inside as well as stereotyped. In selected novels Achebe has put his efforts to remove these labels and reflects that Africans are not uncivilised or savage but they are members of very hierarchy society that is self-sufficient in all respects. In this regard the character of Okonkow in Things Fall Apart and Oduche, the son of Ezeulu in Arrow of God are clear depiction of both idealised and un-idealised Negro. When the character of Okonkwo is peeped through this lens, he does not seem to be an idealised Negro but a rebel. He prepares to stand and prove himself as a man of strong nerves. He prepares even to end up his life by committing suicide but is never willing to adapt the culture and religious norms of missionaries and intruders. If the Igbo identity is there under threat, it can never be compromised even at the cost of personal life and in the novel Achebe presents the issue as such, "it is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen" (Things Fall Apart, 151). The presence of intruders means a great threat to his Igbo African identity that is never acceptable to him. Okonkwo is the harbinger of African identity in the novel and at places; it may be asserted that he is the mouth and voice of Achebe himself when it comes to celebrating the African identity. It is obvious through the portrayal of this character that Achebe aims to convey the world the self-sufficiency of his African identity, cultural beauty, value, and its great depth. African culture has significance and dignity of its own that is never meant to be defined from Europe.

However, Oduche in *Arrow of God* stands at another extreme. The novel shows the struggle for power between the missionaries and Africans as well as within the Igbo African clans. The title of the novel has been taken from an Igbo proverb where an even or a person is said to be representative of God's will so he owes that power. Ezeulu is the chief priest of the clan who interprets will of God to the people of Umuaro about festivals of pumpkin leaves and the new Yam. Douche is his son and he is proud to be his father's "eyes and ears" in the white man's culture as he attends church and school. Soon he is converted to the culture of missionaries and chooses church on his father and is declared as rebel by his father and thus becomes an idealised Negro. At first he locks the python in his box hoping that it will arouse the anger of God and then he will die. This moment is very important as Oduche tests the African social and cultural taboo which he finds is altogether wrong. He starts accepting the religion and culture of missionaries and finds himself misfit in the culture and religion of his own and thus becomes an idealised Negro according to the definition of Whiteman.

# Negro's Self-loathing in Africans and White Supremacy Depicted in Selected Novels

Things Fall Apart where white man is thought to be centre of the universe as well as clever being. He is there to bring civilisation and in contrast to it, Africans do not have those potentials which the European missionaries have brought with them. The assertion, "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. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe, 1958) can be regarded as declaration of the supremacy of white nation and their ways and means as superior to the Africans. The concept of self-loathing becomes clear when it is seen from the perspective of Nowye who abominates his culture and religion. In the novel his internal journey is reflected as "Although Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the very first day, he kept it a secret. He dared not go too near the missionaries for fear of his father" (Achebe, 1958).

Self-discovery was a big thing for Nwoye. Nwoye's sense of identity was majorly impacted by the introduction of Western ideas into the Igbo culture. Nwoye was one of those who took in the new Western ideas. He took to them very well and loved the idea of a different life. Nwoye went through challenges on his journey through self-discovery including his father, being forced to move to another village for seven years and losing Ikemefuna. He hates his culture relates him towards self-loathing.

Same mentality is represented in the novel *Arrow of God* where the Ezeulu and his son Oduche abominates his culture and religion and joins the religion of missionaries. Ezeulu is the chief pries but he innerly likes the supremacy and positive aptitude of the missionaries religion and culture. In the novel Arrow of God this mindset is presented as, "at first he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the way of his deity. That was shy he had agreed to send his son douche to learn new ritual. He also wanted him to learn the Whiteman's wisdom (Achebe, 1964)." This is how the protagonist of the novel shows his inferiority complex and the white supremacy through his own character. It is obvious from his actions that there is some sort of hate, abomination, and self-loathing in his character.

# African Quest for Identity and Self-sufficiency Depicted in Selected Novels

Achebe portrays the quest for identity, self-sufficiency of African culture and religion and feeling of dignity in Igbo culture through the character of Okonkwo and Unachukwu. Achebe presents a great deal of resistance in the local characters who are never willing to accept the culture and identity of the missionaries. The greatest resistance is presented in the character of Okonkwo who is an opposing force that may abolish the new arriving cultural norms of the intruders. His inclination is very vivid that if the local culture is threatened it would mean the local identity is abolished that may alienate the local people of Umoufia from one another. So, Okonkwo as a protagonist of Achebe's novel resists and wants to maintain African identity, education, norms, race, culture and much more that is African in true sense of the word and further which are the part and parcel of African identity. He peeps into the nature of Umoufians and feels much grief while finding an inclination to the missionaries. At times he starts questioning "what is it that has happened to our people? Why did they not fight back?" (Achebe 1958, p. 128). He resists till the last breath in his body and when he is left alone all his hopes vanished. The resistance ends at his committing suicide. There is depiction of political identity in the novel An Arrow of God that is represented in the form of individuality or liberty and independence. The Igbo society had its own rules to follow and customs to observe as well as traditions to obey. Although, these customs, traditions and rules may be taken as obsolete, primitive, and insufficient for people who do not belong to this culture, but they are part and parcel of their identity and Achebe portrays these facts without any sense of inferiority. Since the novel represents the aftermaths of the colonial rule so identity is almost lost but characters like Ezeulu observe them even in the presence of white men while saying, "and tell you white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me, he must come here" (Achebe, 1964 p. 139).

So far as the quest of identity in *An Arrow of God* is concerned it is portrayed with great concern. It is presented with its sense of the past having a unified sensibility and having a synchronic approach towards time. The characters in the novel are under threat of losing their local things as they have become aware that there is no escape from missionaries. The local people must work without any payment under the colonial rule. The local indigenous masses are also aware that they are in trouble as they are about to lose their indigenous identity as well as liberty. Therefore, the assertion of Unachukwu is quite apt when he threats his local people depicted in the novel as "...and I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man. He has come. When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that" (Achebe, 1964 p. 84). They are under the threat that they may lose their local customs which seems to them as costly due to their affiliation with it. Their local customs, whatever the feelings the missionaries have about them are very much important for Igbo people as they are tokens of their identity, and they have to live with them. Unachkwu at another place warns the local indigenous Igbo people in the best possible words as he feels the missionaries are nothing but a threat to their customs. He asserts, "As daylight chases away the darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs" (Achebe, 1964 p. 84). This is fear of the characters that they may lose their African identity as arrival of missionaries is a serious threat to their culture and religion.

## Conclusion

After the analysis of text, criticism, and the postcolonial theoretical perspectives it is observed that the novels in hand reflect African identity at their fullest. The novels are the exploration of Igbo social, political, religious, and cultural norms which are celebrated in the novels. Achebe as a writer of African race does not feel any inferiority by representing them and he never feels that Igbo rules and norms are inferior to the other races of the world, but they are different, and they must be dealt as such. The characters like Okonkwo, Nwoye, Ezeulu and Oduche reflect African identity although at times they become ambivalent. the writer, through these characters reflects an idea that although the colonised cultures is under threat but still the characters like Okonkwo are reluctant to absorb a hybrid identity

and sticks to it till the last breath or unless he is left with no choice. He does not absorb hybrid identity and does not accept the changes occurring in the colonised Igbo culture. It is not merely limited to the character of Okonkwo but also other characters of the novel such as Nwoye, Enoch as well, who show the same mentality and bent of mind towards the Igbo black African identity although they are caught up with the societal changes, but they show a negative response to those social changes. They represent celebration of their own African identity and do not have any sense of inferiority regarding their culture and identity. Although it is represented in the end that Nwoye shows his bent of mind towards the new culture and religion, but he remains ambivalent whether to adapt the changes or to remain true to his Igbo identity and remains reluctant. Okonkwo is the protagonist of the novel, and he reflects his bent of mind towards Africanism and indigenous Igbo identity and thus he becomes an alienated character. He is at ease while celebrating his indigenous culture and identity.

Moreover, Achebe presents the characters with a great deal of resistance and this resistance of characters is to maintain their identity, culture, religion, race and much more that is African in true sense of the word. Achebe as an African celebrates the African identity through the mouth of Okonkwo who does not feel any sense of inferiority. The African style of living, people living in Igbo culture, the religious norms, language, and colour are things which should never be taken as inferior rather they are different and in this binary Igbo African identity should never be taken as periphery. On any human grounds the Igbo culture and identity is never inferior to the identity and culture of the missionaries and almost there is no acceptance when analysed from the perspective of Okonkwo. He is the character who never accepts any change in African society as it means a serious threat to his African identity. He is the man who thinks alike Fanon giving importance to his African identity and to maintain it. Fanon's illustration for a man striving for identity is never less than an attempt to survive and to breathe the air of liberty.

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