

# Exposing the lies of Colonial Discourse, Espousing Native Culture and Life: A study of Chinua Achebe's novels

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## Abstract

The word African generally evokes an image of backward, shantily clad and lazy individual. These stereotypes were created by the colonial narratives and subsequently fostered by travel narratives. These stereotypes are still a part popular culture. Chinua Achebe was the first African writer to challenge the stereotypes. He started presenting a defence of his people with his first novel *Things Fall Apart* his first novel become a success and inspired the next generation of African writers. Chinua Achebe was a genius who did an excellent study of colonialism and colonial institutions. His novels could easily become a subject matter for sociological and anthropology studies. The current paper is a study of Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*.

**Key words:** *Igbo, Africa, Chinua Achebe, Culture, Corruption.*

Most of the scientists agree that human beings were evolved out of apes in Africa, a continent that was called Dark Continent by the colonisers. Human beings evolved in Africa and then moved from there to colonise the whole earth. In one of the most popular books, Yuval Noah Hariri writes:

On a hike in East Africa 2 million years ago, you might well have encountered a familiar cast of human characters: anxious mothers cuddling their babies and clutches of carefree children playing in the mud; temperament youth chafing against the dictates of society and weary elders who just wanted to be left in peace; chest thumping machos trying to impress the local beauty and wise old matriarchs who had already seen it all. (5)

Yuval Noah Hariri and other scientists have established that Africa is the cradle of humanity. This has been established on the basis of archaeological proofs that have been found almost in the every part of the continent.

Yuval Noah Hariri's books on the evolution of human beings are probably the most popular science books written on the subject. Cheikh Anta Diop wrote about the contribution of Africa much before Hariri. He also made the same point:

Humankind born around the Great Lakes region, almost on the equator, is necessary pigmented and black; the Gloger Law calls for warm-blooded animals to be pigmented in a hot and humid climate.

All the other races derive from the Black race by a more or less direct filiation and the other continents were populated from Africa at Homo erectus and Homo Sapiens stages; 150,000 years ago. The old theories that used to state that Blacks came from somewhere else are now invalid. (11)

Yuval Noah Harari and Cheikh Anta Diop confirm that Africa was indeed a cradle of humanity. The question that arises is if it was the cradle of humanity also. If readers go by the image of Africa portrayed by the colonial narratives then it can be safely concluded that Africa was not civilized when the White man arrived. According to the White projections the Africans “were joyfully cannibalistic” (Sherry 59). The image of African as a cannibal emerged in many colonial narratives like *King Solomon Mines* (1885) and several other children’s books. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* also dropped subtle hints that cannibalism was practised as a norm in Africa.

The image was getting consolidated further in the academic circles before the arrival of Chinua Achebe on the literary scene. He was the first writer to realise the importance of promoting the “historicity of Africa and humanity of African” (Zezeza 123). While claiming humanity for Africans, Achebe also exposed the “offensive and totally deplorable” (Watts 196) narratives like *Heart of Darkness*. He tells about his mission in an interview:

What I’m doing is presenting a total world and a total life as it is lived in that world, and you cannot do that in a vacuum; I cannot do it in a vacuum. I am writing about my people in the past and in the present, and I have to create for them the world in which they live and move and have their being. If somebody else thinks as some do, that this is sociology or anthropology, that’s their own lookout. It is the life of people I am writing about. (Ogbaa 1)

In another lecture in a conference on commonwealth literature, Achebe told:

Here, then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse-to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration. (qtd in Thiongo 51)

The motivation in case of Achebe is clear, he wanted to project the reality of his people and society, at that time it was an immense task because Achebe had no tradition to fall back on. Though Africa has a rich tradition of oral literature, the polemic writing used for answering back in a European language did not exist. Achebe accepted the challenge and picked up the gauntlet to answer back to the biased colonial narratives and produced a masterpiece in *Things Fall Apart*. He realised that in colonial narratives Africa was “projected as the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man’s vaunted intelligent and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe, *An image* 783).

Achebe had a job to do, a job to retrieve the African continent from the colonial narratives. In the process of doing so Achebe invented what is called African literature. In his writing, He projected different aspects African society in general and Igbo society in particular, but the aim remains the same; to project the reality.

One of the highlights of colonialism was the conversion of Natives to Christianity. The whites who arrived in Africa were convinced that Christianity in the only true religion; the Africans did not know about Christ and his gospel so they were declared heathens and worshippers of Satan. That is why the colonial armies were accompanied by the priests. The idea is clear:

One very important auxiliary in transforming men from savage to civilized life is the influence brought to bear upon them through the labours of Christian men and women as educators and missionaries. This I think, has been forcibly demonstrated among the different Indian tribes by the missionary labors of the various religious societies in the last few years. Civilization is a plant of exceeding slow growth, unless supplemented by Christian teachings and influence... In no other manner or no other means in my judgement, can our Indian population can be so speedily and permanently reclaimed from the barbarism, idolabory, and savage life, as by the educational and missionary operations of the Christian people of our country. (Prucha 157)

Though the above utterance is about the Natives of the African continents, it can safely applied to African situation. In Africa also the Whites used the Gospel of the the Christianity to save the Africans from metaphysical hell.

Chinua Achebe was the first writer in Africa to see through the designs of Christian missionaries. In his novel *Things fall Apart* he “confronts his issue directly, probing the enigma facing adherents of the old religion vis-à-vis the new” (Cushner 5). He questions “the Christians belief in a God who had a son but no wife” (Cushner 5). Achebe is critical of the Christian God who does not allow syncretistic tradition to flourish. On the other hand, Igbo religion is very open and accommodating. He remarked in an interview:

The Ibo’s religion did not fully understand the nature of Christianity. Even the next village had a different God, so they must have theirs. They simply thought this was another of same kind, but they were mistaken because this was a totalitarian religion. We used to talk about. The way, The Truth, The Light. But I think in the end, Ibo commonsense prevailed after the initial clashes. (Bonneti 77)

The Ibo’s maintained unity and peace despite having many Gods, but Christianity is a fractured tradition where Catholics are against Protestants. The drift between various denominations of Christianity is deep and wide. Achebe comment about this drift also in his novel *No Longer at Ease*:

Pal fruit eater, Roman Catholic teacher,

His misses a devourer of toads. (40)

This song sung by group of students shows that the Roman Catholics were hated by the Protestants. The Ibo on the other hand remain open minded. The do not face any problem in paying visit to the Church, In *No Longer at Ease* Achebe confirms that Christianity breeds inequality and creates rift amongthe people. In the novel, after the return of Obi when they want to break a Kola nut, Obi’s father stops them and says that

Kola nut “will not be used as heathen sacrifice in my house” (NLE 41). But the old man who is a follower of Ibo religion says that they will eat Kola nut in a Christian way:

He took the saucer, drew up his knees together to form a table and placed the saucer there. He raised his two hands, palms facing upwards, and said: “Bless this Kola nut so that when we eat it it will be good in our body in the name of Jesu Christi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end, Amen: Everyone replied Amen and cheered old Odogwu on his performance. Even Okonkwo could not help joining in Cheers. (NLE 42)

Through this old man, Achebe makes clear that followers of Ibo religion are pluralistic and open minded. They do not use derogatory words like “heather” for other traditions. Achebe further writes about Ogbuefi Odogwu:

He was not a Christian, but he know one or two things about Christianity. Like many others in Umuofia, he went to Church once a year at harvest. His only criticism of Christian service was that the congregation was denied the right to reply to the sermon. One of the things he liked particularly and understood was: As it was in the beginning, is now an ever shall be, world without end. (NLE 42)

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe comment on the difference between Christianity and Igbo religion. Achebe, through conversation between Mr. Brown and tribal Elder Akunna show that Igbo religion is based on sound philosophy. Ikenna tells Mr. Brown:

You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth. We also believe in him and call him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods. (TFA 131)

To this Mr. Brown says that “ Chukwu is the only God and all others are false” (TFA 131). Ikenna again clarifies:

Yes, It is indeed piece of wood. The tree form which it made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But he made then for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. (140)

In the above lines, Achebe brings out the fundamental difference between the Native beliefs and Christianity. The tree comes from Chukwu, the Supreme God so it has to be respected and preserved. Christianity, on the other hand, did not have any such respect for the vegetative world. Thus Achebe makes clear that the beliefs of Igbos were more inclusive because they maintained balance in the world.

Another important aspect of Igbo society discussed by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* is that it was a society in which money was non-existent. The economy was based on barter system so everybody could get things they wanted in exchange of the goods. They had. Amos Tutola’s novel *Palm Wine Drinkard* mentions this aspect of Nigerian society:

I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was as boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except COWRIES, so that everything was very cheap and my father was the richest man in our town. (qtd. in Bandele XI)

The Whites destruct this economy of the Igbos and introduce money into it. The effect of this money is seen in the Igbo land as the prices of commodities shoot up:

The White man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia. (TFA 130)

The impact of introduction of money is visible in the second novel of trilogy *No Longer at Ease*. The Igbos are corrupted (NLE 3) by money. The novel tells the story of Oknowo's grandson Obi who becomes a civil servant after studying in England. The society has westernized and the Igbos have started living in the urban centres, but the society is riddled with the corruption (NLE 3, 15, 16, 25 and 31). The proud Igbos who did not know about corruption are corrupted by money. The whites who introduced money among the Igbos call them a corrupt people. Irele while commenting an Achebe's novel points out: "What runs through all this literature is the feeling that it is within our traditional culture that we are happiest most at ease with ourselves, that there is a truest coincidence between us and the world: In other words, that our identity is located" (204). In his novel *No Longer At Ease*, Achebe points out that Obi's tragedy is the tragedy of de-culturation. Pal points out: "Christianity not only severs the ties with the community, but it is also responsible for severing the ties of family members" (153). In the novels of Achebe, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, readers find that Igbo culture is essentially communal where everybody has heightened sense of community. The remnants of this communal life are still visible in *No Longer at Ease*. The Igbos living in Lagos have made Umuofia Progressive Union. This Union even helps Obi by financing his study. Achebe points out about the members of the Union:

They return to Umuofia every two years or so to spend their leave. When they have saved up enough money they ask their relatives at home to find them a wife, or they build a 'zinc' house on their family land. No matter where they are in Nigeria, they started a local branch of Umuofia Progressive Union. (NLE 4)

The Umuofia Progressive Association is communal organization which helps all the members of the society. The Umuofia Progressive Association stands solidly behind Obi even when he is found to be a corrupt man. The president of the Union points out: "A kinsman in trouble has to be saved, not blamed; anger against a brother was felt in the flesh not in the bone" (NLE 4).

The members of the Umuofia Progressive Association stand solidly behind Obi only because he is an Igbo. Their stand shows that tribal feelings are still strong among the people, but these feelings have debilitated in Obi because of his western education. Obi gets educated in England by the community generated fund, but western education and his stay in England alienates him from his own people who has

paid for his success without any interest of selfish motive. This lack of communal feeling and alienation so he forgets the Ibo sayings which stressed on Unity:

Our father also have a saying about the danger of living apart. They say it is the curse of the snake. If all snakes lived together in one place, who would approach them? But they live every one unto himself and so fall easy prey to man. (NLE 64)

Obi commits the same mistake as committed by the snakes. He gets alienated from his own community and his benefactors who could have stopped him from going astray. Achebe clearly espouses the community life of the Igbos where they lived in a closely knit society and shared their lives with one another.

White man accused the Ibos of being uncivilized and backward, but Achebe shows that Igbo society was a just society where everybody got a fair chance to change his fortune. The decisive factor in Igbo society is hard work and strength. The people could change their fortunes by hard work. Okonkwo's father Unoka was lazy person who did not do any hard work, so he lived in poverty, but in Ibos "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to worth of his father" (TFA 6).

Ill reputation of Okonkwo's father does not hinder the path of Okonkwo who builds a reputation among his people by the virtue of his hardwork:

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two title and shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest man of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. (TFA 6)

Thus Achebe in his writing makes clear case for Africa. His writings not only bring forth the reality of African society and its institutions before readers, but shatters the stereotypes of Africa prevalent in their minds. His novels shows that Africa customs and traditions were misinterpreted by the whites because of their ethnocentric bias. Achebe's novels make clear that institutions of Africans were not primitive as described by the whites; rather they were rooted in culture of the society. In novels *live No Longer at Ease*, Achebe confirms that indigenous institutions were best for the people of Africa. The White institutions and Christianity has ruined Africa and Africans.

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