

### 3. When Things Fall Apart: Looking through Said's and Spivak's Postcolonial Perspectives

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#### **Abstract:**

*Broadly defined, postcolonial criticism is the examination of the effects of colonialism on societies. Its purpose is to analyze the ways through which "powerful" cultures dominated the third World nations. On the other hand, these nations have certain reactions to the attempts mentioned. As an area of study which embodies cultural awareness, postcolonial theory attempts to make the related parties realize the construction of an inferiority felt by the colonized and lead a struggle for gaining cultural, social and political voice, which necessitates an understanding of the existing cultural hybridity. Edward Said and Gayatri Chakraworty Spivak are two of the critics whose ideas on post colonialism should be referred to in this respect. This paper aims to shed light on the colonial features in Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart, presenting a postcolonial approach to the novel by drawing on the two critics' ideas. Said holds an opposition to marginalization of literary theory, asserting that such a practice expands the differentiation between literature and the world and it becomes harder for critics to examine the literature of the "other". Meanwhile, Spivak defends that not only U.S. and European literatures but also literatures of the Southern cultures should be taken into consideration for analysis. She pinpoints the linguistic distinctions of minority cultures and states that contemporary criticism misses the variances in them. Achebe's prominence as a writer due to the postcolonial themes he introduced and his literary devices serving for his nation's recognition result in the fact that his novel comes forth as a significant example of the common point Said and Spivak argue for; cultural varieties are to be kept and protected.*

**Keywords:** *postcolonial criticism, Ethnic studies, minority literature, cultural variety*

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In today's conceptualization of literary theory and criticism, postcolonial criticism stands as an essential area of study due to the definitions and meanings it attributes to the reading of texts from different backgrounds. As a movement, post-colonialism undermines the assumptions brought by colonialism, mainly the colonizer and the colonized, their validity and interrelationship. Colonialism can be broadly defined as the dominance of a powerful nation or group over a weaker one; the powerful claims its dominance when it has political, cultural and economic interests over the other. This activity can be conducted by means of violence, brutal force and usurpation of resources and manpower of the colonized territories. It attributes the usurpation to so-called "reasonable" grounds, such as carrying education, morality, civilization and modern life to the colonized territories. Post-colonial theorists aim to eradicate the current structure of a single, dominant power, informing that none of the cultures can be more important than others. In this point, there exist some thinkers whose theories should be referred to, because they aim at representing a great deal of people without being offensive or provocative. In this article, Edward Said's work, "The World, the Text, and the Critic" (1983) and Gayatri C. Spivak's work, "Crossing Borders" (2003) are referred to as basic sources to analyze a postcolonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe. These critics' works are timeless due to the fact that they pinpoint some disregarded facts about postcolonial studies.

## Said and Spivak on the Stage: Theoretical Discussion

A very significant critic and writer of the postcolonial movement, Edward Said in his article argues that literary criticism should not be marginalized, as opposed to the dominant

structure. For him, the critic is responsible for participating in the formation of cultures and stands against a type of cultural formation initiated by hegemonic powers. Surely, he points out, that a critic may serve to justify the aims of the colonizer, or she/he may disprove them. Meanwhile, Gayatri C. Spivak asserts that current literature generally makes a selection of subject matters among European or U.S. literatures. She desires to give voice to the literary and linguistic traditions of the areas in the South as well. She implies her wish to “... make the traditional linguistic sophistication of Comparative Literature supplement Area Studies... by approaching the language of the other not only as a ‘field’ language” (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009, p. 386). She applies Derrida’s idea stating the inability of philosophical concepts to surpass idiomatic differences not only to the European-U.S. cultures but also to the “global other(s) in the Southern Hemisphere” (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009, p. 387). As seen clearly, both writers regard the mainstream literary investigation to lack the multitude and variance that can be achieved through a combination of U.S. – European literature and literature of “other”, minor cultures.

Every literary text is involved in a situation within history, so they are worldly. Said emphasizes this worldliness; indeed, what he refers to by using the word “worldliness” implies the cultural, political, also financial phenomena embodied (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009). In relation to that, he thinks that style lessens the critical discourse found in the text because it is too much interested in textuality. A text is a social and political work that takes its roots from history, rather than being a mere critical representation. He is more focused on discursive points. Power of the colonizer dominates the texts, and suppresses the voice of the other. Hence, like the physical world, texts are invaded by the powerful ones. Said connects this idea to the fact that texts are affected by the circumstances around them. An effective example is given to further the argument. In terms of the sharp distinction commonly made between speech and writing, Said gives the noteworthy example of Batinists and Zahirites, and their approach towards a sacred text, Koran. Koran

is controlled by two paradigms, reading and telling; also, it presents an incorporation of speaking and writing at the same time. So, even such a sacred text necessitates the interplay of verbal discourse and written forms. In addition, he gives place to Renan's argument, which presumes that sacred texts as we call them today would not be sacred if they were not made up of "poor" worldly matters. In other words, they owe their theological power to their worldliness. He refers to Nietzsche's idea that texts are facts of power, not of democratic exchange (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009). Here, the fact that a literary text is a product of the physical world is emphasized. All criticism should be conducted regarding this fact. Another point Said puts criticism on is "deconstruction". He criticizes Michel Foucault due to his deconstructive approach, as for Said worldliness of the text is affected when the text's meaning is undermined, and the critic's responsibility in challenging dominant power is reduced. *Criticism of literary texts from a worldly perspective; criticism* is always required to spare place for alternative and marginal voices in this respect. It should be kept away from monocentric vision; this will lead to a worldly criticism. Said was also in the deepest realization of the hardship of this act, and knew it required a lot of responsibility. He targets a type of independent criticism that embraces oppositions in the world in any case.

The other critic and thinker, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak conducts a theoretical discussion, parallel but not limited to Said's. In the first chapter of her 2003 book *Death of a Discipline*, named "Crossing Borders", she emphasizes much more than crossing the physical borders of territories. She brings forth the concept of Area Studies, which she depicts as focusing on the knowledge of the "other" in service of power. The study of the "other", Ethnic Studies in Spivak's terms is very important. Spivak criticizes Ethnic Studies (also referred to as Cultural Studies) because of its lack of representing the "other" sufficiently. She touches upon the mistaken view that the concept of "other" and "otherness" can be reduced to one single category under the title of identity and politics. She reflects on the

hardship for the “other” cultures to make their voices heard, informing that metropolitan countries may easily cross the borders, while it is not the same case for “peripheral countries” as they come across many bureaucratic obstacles (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009). For Spivak, the first thing to do for crossing borders is to be well-equipped with literary and linguistic knowledge and to supplement these with Area Studies. She states: “From the inside, acknowledging complicity. No accusations. No excuses. Rather, learning the protocol of those disciplines ... not only by building institutional bridges but also by persistent curricular interventions” (as cited in Damrosch et al., 2009, p. 387). So, she believes in creating a range of literary texts, producing curricula which include not only the texts of authorial figures but also those of the minorities. All these texts are supposed to be analyzed by the critics.

Spivak assumes that so far, crossing the borders has been based on crossing colonial language borders and borders of people in the Diaspora. For instance, she uses the term “Franco-phony”, which is a sphere where literature written by an African or Canadian writing in French is examined under the same roof. However, Spivak searches for a different collectively beyond this type of hybridity. She is quite aware of the varieties, so she is not in search for a universal order. Instead, she wants respect for and a fraternal view to these differences. One can explain Spivak’s point by referring to the fact that there is a plague caused by colonialism on modern African literature. Africa was going through a process of cultural clashes, and included various language groups (Guthrie, 2011). With the European colonialism, a consciously created linguistic separation has dominated the continent. So, English gained much significance for most literary figures to reach their audience. In order to get over the problems of this reality, some critics argue the necessity of reminding the past traditions and blending them with the present ones. Most importantly, writers should dwell on common subjects of all the subdivisions in the area so that they can compose a powerful union. Literature cannot be produced by being excluded from worldly realities,

such as politics, financial balances, or changing borders. Critics and producers of literature should take these factors into account and be attentive in directing their audiences. Colonialism has been on the stage since the sixteenth century, and it has caused various discussions, most of which focus on identity and nationalism. Surely, many people have suffered from it, and it becomes necessary for them to unite their voice that could embrace every individual and institution they have common grounds with.

### **A Postcolonial Approach to *Things Fall Apart***

From the nineteenth century onward, colonialism has been a matter of discussion in literary genres as well as in all parts of society. In English literature, impact of colonialism is strongly felt as an inevitable result of British imperialism. While some writers, especially of postcolonial period, criticize the effects of colonialism over the “other” societies, some writers issue it through a dehumanizing portrayal of the colonized, justifying the reasons of colonization.

Achebe was born in a town in Nigeria where Igbo speaking tribes lived; it is noted that Igbo tribes felt proud because of the autonomy they had. Indeed, self-government was a reason for cultural pride due to the postcolonial (also pre-colonial) period they were in (Guthrie, 2011). He has been an active figure in Nigerian politics since the 1960s, and his novels mainly address the postcolonial social and political problems that Nigeria goes through. He published *Things Fall Apart* as a response to novels such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, which represent Africa as a primitive and uneducated land subordinate to Europe. Achebe tried to convey a full recognition of Nigerian culture and introduce an underrepresented colonial subject to the world. The story in *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s and issues the clash between the traditional culture of Igbo people and Nigeria’s white colonial government. Achebe’s novel plays with the stereotypical European portrayal

of native Africans. The fact that he was educated in English and exposed to European customs to a great extent makes him follow both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, race, culture and religion. His decision to write *Things Fall Apart* in English is related to this fact. Most probably, Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa. As English has been the language of the colonizer, Achebe's aim required the use of English. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs, Achebe succeeds in capturing the rhythm and essence of the Igbo culture. Throughout the novel, Achebe demonstrates the Igbo language in order to emphasize that Africa is not the silent or brutal continent that books such as *Heart of Darkness* claim to be. Most probably, his intention is to keep the cultural components alive and he does this through linguistic measures. He shows that the Igbo language is too complex to translate into English. In addition, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. Achebe argues for an independent group that tries to protect its authentic values. On the other hand, defenders of world literature insisted upon an internationally unified and comprehensive form of writing. It seems that Achebe's attempt contradicts with the idea of world literature in this respect. Achebe also points out that Africa has different languages. For instance, the villagers make fun of Mr. Brown's translator because his language is different from their own.

It is known that he was harshly criticized because people believed that he betrayed his Nigerian identity when he wrote *Things Fall Apart* in English. As a conscious writer, Achebe thinks that critics who believe that literature in Africa should be written in African languages and only for Africans are in a vain effort. Whether he believes it right or not, he accepts English to be the dominant language.

He comments (as cited in Guthrie, 2011):

*I have indicated somewhat off-handedly that the national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. (p. 59)*

It can be inferred from his statement that he was able to see the mainstream factors brought by political relationships and changes due to colonialism. In world literatures, there are many examples of domestic writers who remain rather loyal to his/her own subculture and dismiss the general portrait. It seems almost impossible for such a writer to appeal to and represent large groups.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the main character is Okonkwo, a tribal leader figure who lives in the village of Umuofia. The village is given as a place with no intervention of colonizers, living under its own regulations. People in power deserve their positions by their courageous acts or words and this is a sharp contrast with the ideals of the colonizer. Also, people in Umuofia believe in gods and deities, and they are in close contact with nature. Farming is common, and people help each other in their tasks, such as building houses and cutting down trees. Farming constitutes such an important place in the community's life that when people pray for yam to their gods and receive it, people call the yam as "the king of crops, (who) was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost" (Achebe, 1958).

When the Europeans arrive in Umuofia, they initiate a number of changes and the tension about whether change should be held over tradition is very much involved in personal questionings. For instance, Okonkwo resists internalizing the new political orders because he feels that they are not manly. To some extent, Okonkwo's resistance of change is due to his fear of losing social status. It is clear that his sense of self-worth depends on the traditional standards by which society judges him. Also, the villagers in general are caught between resisting and accepting change. In the novel, family is a significant part of culture.



Men and women possess different duties in the village. While men are generally responsible for bringing food and protecting their families from dangers, women take care of domestic work and raise children, though they are inferior to their men. In bigger issues, members of the society serve for the welfare of their village in a collective manner. By the time the European missionaries arrive in the village, things begin to change. The Europeans work for forming large colonial groups in which they attempt to educate and shape the “savage” villagers. Achebe explicitly shows the distinction between the intentions of two opposite sides. He presents the social structure that the Europeans try to form through the portrayal of some characters such as Mr. Brown and his translators. Igbo villagers’ cultural values and sense of dignity are shaken with the white men’s efforts, one of which is building a church next to the village. Conversion of a villager to Christianity and leaving the village is another breaking point. As the story proceeds, number of converts increase, and the villagers begin to question their identity. This is a very noteworthy effect of colonialism over the target society. Imperialists usurp the openness and insightfulness of people in Umuofia. Additionally, Europeans’ hard work in establishment of governmental and educational institutions ends in success to a great extent; they manage to divide Umuofia in terms of opinion. The novel finishes unresolved, Okonkwo commits suicide as a result of his split identity and inner conflict. His suicide embodies the overall problem; villagers face the danger of losing their values and becoming subjects of imperial power.

As a matter of fact, one can find various elements to discuss under the title of post-colonialism in the novel. The villagers have their own legal, religious, cultural regulations and the arrival of the Europeans only serves to show the contradictions between the two sides and how defective the Europeans’ systems are compared to the Igbo people. To illustrate, the villagers already live upon a deep rooted juridical system in which the Europeans intervene despite lacking knowledge on it. The Igbo people want to take control of their own lives; so, they have implemented a free, self-managing government system in

themselves, which is the indicator of importance given to equality at the same time (Rhoads, 1993). Older men of the village are in charge of the courts because their word is trusted amongst the tribe members and believed to be unbiased. It can be argued that the Igbo people are far more civilized than the Europeans due to the fact that the Europeans try to assimilate the Igbo people into their own culture in a forceful and vulgar manner. Another noteworthy feature of the novel from the postcolonial aspect is its narrative tone. Achebe reflects Africa's reaction to European imperialism with a clear but polyphonic narrative style. As Dannenberg (2009) puts it:

*“Achebe’s narrator is so nimble and mercurial that he subverts all binaries. This narratorial and ideological mercuriality is achieved through the inclusion of many layers of voice, perspective and culture in the text” (p. 176). His narrative tone becomes the embodiment of complexity in postcolonial context in this respect.*

Achebe is accepted to be a very important writer in terms of his rising voice that tries to introduce his people, the society he came from, and a depiction of the colonized from their own perspective; however, he is very careful in not being offensive or insulting. He demonstrates that his literature deliberately engages his culture and his audience. By writing on Africa and the African people, he attempts to shed light on certain literary obscurities. As an author of an ethnic text, he surely holds the power to influence Africa and the African literary development and the intention to shape his work for the welfare of his nation. Besides, his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, has drawn heavy criticism because of his multilingual writing. Some critics argue that he usurps English language by presenting a mixture of English and Igbo language; many examples of proverbs and phrases from Igbo language are seen in the novel. Achebe's linguistic choice has arisen much debate; while he has quite a keen attitude towards his native tongue, he prefers to write *Things Fall Apart* in English, the hegemonic language in his time (and it still is). Indeed, Achebe's attitude in language is functional in showing the ways a writer's stereotypical figures affect the

reception of the text. The linguistic approach of a writer, combined with the literary style, makes the reader think about the culture, identity and all the related themes to that text while reading. The more impressively the writer presents the textual world to the reader, the more dramatic that text's effect will be upon the reader. However, there is another point to be considered. As it is widely known, Africa consists of a number of different subcultures and it is impossible for a person to talk about a single, unified culture, and in relation to that, language. In a place where many tribes live together with an aim to hold onto their own cultures, it must not be too easy to produce a text of one's tongue amongst many others. In this respect, English could be the means to appeal to both national and international public, and this fact lies beneath Achebe's success. On the other hand, he does not ignore giving messages in Igbo language.

## Conclusion

In final consideration, post-colonialism examines the cultural identity in colonized societies and in which ways writers and critics put that identity into words. Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is a text that issues the life of an African tribe at a time when the European colonialism dominated all over Africa. It shows how a society can cope with change and how change affects the individuals and institutions of that society. In terms of postcolonial criticism, Edward Said and Gayatri C. Spivak stand as two critical writers and a great deal of their theories can be applied to *Things Fall Apart*. The novel fits very much in "worldliness" in Said's terms; we get into a cultural and political intercourse between the Igbo people and the Europeans. Achebe's style is direct and his messages are clearly understood. Oral tradition and verbal literature hold an extensive place in Achebe's work, a feature which was supported by Said and Spivak as well. Both Said and Spivak agree upon the essentiality of protecting cultural differences. Spivak's theory on raising the voice of "other" cultures in an effective manner and her understanding of collectively are embodied

in the novel. Under the light of the discussion put forth in this paper, it is believed that the concept of comparative literature has changed a lot since the first time it was introduced. World literature focused on a unified form of literary study which could appeal to various cultures and traditions; following that, a new way of literary study that promotes national identities - examined under the concept of comparative literature - came into existence. Said and Spivak are able to foresee the new world with its globalizing and at the same time, individualized social structures. In order to get over the problems caused by colonialism, writers and critics of all literary genres should work on the parallel and common themes involving all nations; however, they should not attempt to judge or evaluate texts peculiar to different cultures under the same criteria. None of the literatures can be held above one another, and the issue of “othering” must be discussed in detail. Said and Spivak, together with Achebe, manage to undermine this concept without offending one side. The reader must always be researching, and thinking about the phenomena brought by the literary canon.

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