

THE DISTORTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

Şule Okuroğlu ÖZÜN*
Nagihan BAŞKALE**

ABSTRACT: Twenty-first century Africa is currently a continent of culturally diverse groups of people, many opposing governments, and fragmented identities due to its long history of colonization and the drastical changes following its independence. Accordingly, the study of post-colonial African literature cannot be complete without the study of Africa's colonial past and the ideology behind a text. Chinua Achebe is one of the significant writers of African culture who in his novels aims to provide an erudite exegesis of the texts and introduce readers to important contextualizing historical and cultural perspectives it defines. His novels not only represent the history and culture of Africa, but also serve as a direct response to a whole canon of Eurocentric writings presenting Africans as inhuman savages. Particularly, in his *Things Fall Apart* Achebe paints a grim picture of the colonization of Nigeria by the British and the political turbulence following its colonization. The primary purpose of this paper is to shed light on Achebe's various ways of representing the self-sufficiency of African nations with a strong sense of cultural identity, and the catastrophic changes in an African society brought along by colonialism, resulting in the distortion of its cultural identity.

Key words: colonialism, postcolonial literature, cultural identity, African literature, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

CHINUA ACHEBE'NİN PARÇALANMA (*THINGS FALL APART*) ADLI ESERİNDE KÜLTÜREL KİMLİĞİN BOZULMASI

ÖZ: Yirmi birinci yüzyıl Afrika'sı uzun süren sömürgecilik tarihi ve akabindeki köklü değişiklikler nedeniyle çeşitli kültürden insan gruplarının ve bir çok muhalif hükümetin kıtası olmuştur. Bu nedenle, sömürge sonrası Afrika edebiyatı hakkındaki çalışmalar, Afrika'nın sömürge geçmişini ve bir metnin arkasında yatan ideolojiyi incelenmeden tamamlanmış sayılmaz. Chinua Achebe, romanlarında metinlerin doğru bir şekilde tefsir edilmesini sağlayan ve okurları tarihsel ve kültürel bakış açılarıyla kavramsallaştırılmış önemli konularla tanıştıran, Afrika kültürünün en önemli yazarlarından birisidir. Onun romanları sadece Afrika tarihini ve kültürünü yansıtmakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda Afrikalıları insan olmayan vahşi yaratık olarak

* Assist. Prof. Dr. Suleyman Demirel University, Department of English Language and Literature, suleokuroglu@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5471-8075>

** Graduate Student, Suleyman Demirel University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature. incinagi@hotmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0059-9589>

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resmeden Avrupa merkezli yazınlardan oluşan edebi kanona doğrudan bir cevap niteliğindedir. Özellikle *Things Fall Apart* adlı eserinde, Achebe Nijerya'nın İngilizler tarafından sömürgeleştirilmesinin ve bu sömürünün beraberinde getirdiği siyasi çalkantının resmini çizer. Bu makalenin öncelikli amacı, Achebe'nin birçok şekilde Afrika'yı güçlü bir kültürel kimliğe sahip, kendi kendine yeten bir millet olarak temsil etmesi ve Afrika'nın belli bir toplumunda sömürgeciliğin yol açtığı kültürel kimliğin bozulmasıyla sonuçlanan yıkıcı değişiklere ışık tutmaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: sömürgecilik, sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyat, kültürel kimlik, Afrika edebiyatı, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (*Parçalanma*)

“*Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*”¹

Introduction

Twenty-first century Africa is currently a continent of alienated villages, separated ethnic communities, culturally diverse groups of people, hundreds of spoken dialects, and opposing governments due to its long history of colonization; thus, the study of post-colonial African literature or Anglo African writers cannot be complete without the study of Africa's colonial past and the political discourses behind a text. The political and literary struggles to locate the African identity and its meaning within the larger global context involve a variety of histories needing to be read in ways that acknowledge the various, specific textualities informing them. Achebe is one of the most important writers to emanate from contemporary Africa with a literary discernment that has profoundly swayed the form and content of contemporary African literature, culture, religion and history. Nigerian Chinua Achebe is one of the significant writers of African culture whose novels represent some of the earliest written works in English that enunciate an intimate and genuine account of African culture and customs. In his novels, he narrates the colonization of Nigeria by the British and the political turbulence following its independence. Achebe overtly stresses in *An African Voice* that “The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery” and this “continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth, took into their own hands the telling of their story.” Hence, in his novels Achebe aims to provide a scholarly exegesis of the texts and introduce readers to important

¹ Chinua Achebe, interviewed by Jerome Brooks, *The Art of Fiction No.139*, 1994, retrieved 11, April 2019 from <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/chinua-achebe-the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe>.

contextualizing historical and cultural perspectives it defines. Particularly, *Things Fall Apart* is the pioneering work of Chinua Achebe with which he subverts the Western's long tradition of depicting Africans as savage and primitive. His novel not only represents the history and culture of Africa but also serves as a direct response to a whole canon of writings produced by European writers like Joseph Conrad and their refusal to see Africans as fully human.²

In the Paris review in 1994, Achebe states “if you don't like someone's story, write your own”, thus, he dedicates himself to write about colonial experience from the perspective of the colonized and also to criticize those works written by Europeans including a number of misrepresentations about Africans. As a victim of colonialism, Achebe attempts to show in his work that Africans are not in need of the allegedly “virtuous and necessary civilizing task”³ of colonization carried out by the imperialist nations. Achebe, through various ways of representing Africa as a self-sufficient nation with a strong sense of cultural identity and the catastrophic changes in an African society brought along by colonialism resulting in the distortion of its cultural identity, highlights that colonialism results in the distortion of cultural identity. Undoubtedly, Achebe devotes himself to fill the lack of true cultural representation of Africa in literary canon and thus becomes the father of African literature. We can definitely claim that *Things Fall Apart* speaks the truth about Africa, African cultural identity, and Africa's response to British imperialism.

Colonial Encounters and the Cultural Identity

Born on the 15th of November in the small town of Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria, and growing up in Nigeria which is one of the colonies of British Empire, Achebe, along with his family, was imposed extensively to the language and culture of the colonizer as a result of which his family became the early converts of Christianity. While describing the time he was growing up, Achebe highlights that it was “a strongly multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious, somewhat chaotic colonial” period. He was not aware of the bitter consequences of colonial power enforced to his culture and the Europeans' false perception of Africans as uncivilized and cannibalistic tribes until he got educated under British educational system and started to

² Chinua Achebe, interviewed by Katie Bacon, “An African Voice”, *Atlantic Monthly* 2 Aug. 2000. *Atlantic Online*, Atlantic Group, 2000. 1 Jan. 2003, Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/an-african-voice/306020/>.

³ Bill Ashcroft et al., *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 41.

read about Africa in the works produced by the Western patriotic ideologies and discourses. Having realized “the danger of not having your own story” as he expresses in the Paris review he “grew older and began to read about adventures in which [he] didn’t know that [he] was supposed to be on the side of those savages who were encountered by the good white man. [He] instinctively took sides with the white people. They were fine! They were excellent. They were intelligent. The others were not . . . they were stupid and ugly.”⁴

In his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe writes about stories and traditions of a particular African society, which are passed down orally for generations, with the aim of re-establishing the national cultural heritage. The novel “describes the effect of British missionaries and administrators on a typical village tribal society; the dislocation that change, religious and educational, brings to historic certainties.”⁵ The well-thought-out mode in which Achebe writes places him a transcendental liminal position between two literary canons: the Western (English) and the African literary tenets. Achebe’s canonical work, *Things Fall Apart*, speaks truth about Africa and Africa’s response to British imperialism with clarity of language that brings Achebe both acclaim and criticism. In order to make *Things Fall Apart* having been read by many people he writes his notable work in English, in the language of the colonizer, which has sparked innumerable discussions, both in African and non-African circles, over Achebe’s adherence to his homeland and his beliefs about colonialism. Feeling “that the English language will be able to carry the weight of [his] African experience”, Achebe devises and employs “a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings”⁶. In his 1997 essay “English and The African Writer”, Achebe further points out, at the same time justifies, the universal use of English as a result of the wide-scale spread of colonialism and African writers’ necessary appropriation of the language to tell their stories:

“The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Povey, Contemporary West African Writing in English, Books Abroad Vol: 40, Issue: 3, 1966, p. 254.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, English and The African Writer, Transition (75/76), 1997, p. 349. doi:10.2307/2935429.

*should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.*⁷

Despite the fact Achebe uses the language of the colonizer to tell his story from the margin, he presents some words or proverbs in Igbo language to response the false accusations of white nations' descriptions of the colonial subjects as not having a proper language or culture of their own. He even tries to give the meanings of some words to prove the complexity of his language and his society's deeper understanding of the world around them as he indicates in the novel, "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten."⁸ It is obvious that Achebe uses English as a tool to show the underestimated existence of history, cultural values and strong sense of identity in Igbo society.

Achebe also presents Africans' perception of life by translating the African proverbs into English since they have not their equivalents in English language such as "looking at a king's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast"⁹ to mean a man's rising from poverty to prosperity with his hard work and achievements. Achebe provides another proverb related to the same content as "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings."¹⁰ He appropriates English to present some superstitions of the colonial subjects such as "The children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear"¹¹ or he uses English to present the table etiquette of a supposedly uncivilized African society such as "People should not talk when they are eating or pepper may go down the wrong way."¹²

Although Achebe creates his work to give voice to the misrepresented and disparaged colonial subjects, he achieves his goal with a calm and eloquent tone. *Things Fall Apart* is a novel written in 1950s, at a time when the colonial system was falling apart in Africa, yet its story covers the pre-colonial time in a particular ethnic group in Nigeria to contradict the assumption that all Africa and all Africans are the same. He describes the Igbo tribe as realistically as possible without falling into the same mistake as

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Things fall apart*, New York: Anchor Books, 1994, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the white discourse did by depicting the colonial subjects as a foil to enlightened European nations as David Whittaker and Msiska suggests:

*“Things Fall Apart was notable for being the first novel by a West African to portray graphically how colonized subjects perceived the arrival of colonizing Europeans, and one of Achebe’s significant achievements in the novel is the way he succeeds in depicting Umuofia as a vibrant and sophisticated society, with its own complex culture and elaborate moral and ethical codes, while never succumbing a desire to portray it as an idyllic pre-colonial utopia.”*¹³

While Achebe presents the positive sides of the Igbo customs and traditions such as palm-wine and kola nut sharing or consulting the elders before starting an unreasoned fight that would disturb the public peace, Achebe also depicts the flaws in the society such as the blind allegiance to the superstitious beliefs including throwing new born twins or leaving sick people who are in the threshold of death in an isolated forest due to the belief that sickness is an abomination to the Earth. Achebe portrays the dogmeat eating Igbo society with its harsh realities including the sacrifice of young children for averting a war and the oppression of women who are under constant threat of beating by their husbands. He dedicates a whole chapter to a story about a woman, who is beaten to death by her husband, is saved by her brothers, and takes refuge in her father’s clan to point out the patriarchal nature of Igbo culture.

There are some ironic remarks in the narration of the story of Igbo clan which is conveyed deliberately by Achebe to suggest that the members of the Igbo clan do not believe in every superstition or religious practice blindfoldedly. For instance, Umuofia holds a ceremonial gathering to solve some problems in public in which the clan’s ancestral spirits, known as “egwugwu”, walk among people, yet they are basically the members of Igbo clan wearing masks as it is understood from the passage:

“Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The egwugwu with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia "body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the

¹³ David Whittaker and Mpalive Msiska, *Chinua achebe’s things fall apart: A routledge study guide*, 2007, pp. xi-xii, 10.4324/9780203496404.

charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns.”¹⁴

From the given passage above, it is suggested that although Okonkwo's wives know that he is the one who wears mask and impersonate one of the ancestral spirit of the clan, they keep it to themselves because of holding in high esteem in their religious traditions and rituals. By means of the present example, Achebe points out that these colonial subjects are not primitive and uncivilized as opposed to what has been portrayed in the discourses of the colonizer like in the title of the book that the District Commissioner choses “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Nigeria.”¹⁵ After having read the impressive novel of Achebe, one can hardly suggest that these people are ignorant and barbaric who need to be pacificated. Thus, he uses the power of literature to throw off the colonial burden.

Achebe further uses the same ironic tone while telling the story related to a medicine man finding Ezinma's “iyi-uwa”, which is a special kind of stone buried to the ground that forms a link between evil child and “the spirit world”¹⁶. If the iyi-uwa is found and destroyed, it is believed that the child will not die. When the medicine man asks for the place where Ezinma supposedly buried her iyi-uwa, Ezinma reveals that she does not know what it means. After the medicine man answers as “You know what it is. You buried it in the ground somewhere so that you can die and return again to torment your mother”¹⁷ Ezinma gives intricate directions to a place where she does not even know. As can be seen in this story, Achebe represents the Igbo society and their beliefs with their imperfections just to make sure that African people are not inhuman or uncivilized, they are just different from Western people.

Achebe's characterisation also contributes to his goal of realistic presentation of a particular African tribe. His protagonist Okonkwo is a character who blindly carries out the orders of the council of elders in his clan without any hesitation. When they order him to go and bring a boy and a virgin girl from a neighbouring clan to compensate the crime of killing an Igbo woman in their market, he separates an innocent boy named Ikemefuna from his family by force and brings him to live in a remote society. Okonkwo even cuts down the boy himself after fathering him for three years

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 210.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

just because the Oracle orders that the boy must be killed. As opposed to Okonkwo, Achebe depicts characters like Obierika and Nyowe who are questioning the malicious and irrational actions carried out in their society without a fair reason behind. For instance, Achebe explicitly presents Obierika's doubts about the practice of throwing twins away as it is stated "he remember his wife's twin children, with whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed."¹⁸ In another example, Nyowe, who is the lazy son of Okonkwo, cries his eyes out to the death of Ikemefuna and questions the reason behind resulting in his conversion to Christianity by disowning his father. These characters' act of questioning can be considered as Achebe's message to the colonizers who are unable to see or accept the injustices and ill-treatment of their nations enforced on innocent people who are subjugated and enslaved in their own lands.

Achebe does not present a clear-cut division of Igbo culture as good and the culture of the colonizer as bad. It is hard to expect such discrimination from him since he grows up in an understanding environment by observing his Christian parents and the traditional Igbo culture and thus he shapes his character under the influence of his native culture and the culture of the colonizer. He accepts Christianity which is the religion of the colonizer, yet he refuses to change his name Chinua to Albert in order not to lose his cultural identity unlike his character Nyowe who change his name to Isaac after his conversion. In this regard, Achebe does not stereotype the Christian missionaries who come to convert Africans out of their vile religion in his novel; instead he depicts contradictory characters like Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith to show the fault in their system. Mr. Brown is a tolerant man who does not force natives to convert and even makes an effort to understand the religion of the Igbo society. He subscribes the so called humanitarian ideals behind colonialism by encouraging natives to learn to read and write with a warning that "If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them."¹⁹ Mr. Smith, on the other hand, is a typical white colonialist who forces the converts to disrespect the customs and religion of the Igbo society and for that reason Enoch unmask an egwugwu in public which is believed as one of the greatest crimes a man can commit in Igbo society. The other Christian missionaries working in the colonial government punish natives according to the laws and religious

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

values of their own nation by ignoring the rules and traditions of the Igbo society.

Achebe devotes almost the half of his novel to describe the harmonious and peaceful functioning of the social structure of Igbo community as opposed to Europeans tendency to perceive colonial subjects as untamed savages living in barbaric tribes who are in desperate need of being ruled and controlled. In the early chapters of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe provides readers with the portrayal of a harmonious society. The members of the Igbo clan share palm-oil and kola nuts with their guests or friends in every situation, even to ease a possible tension before a dispute. They respect to ndichie (the elders) of their clan in regard to this particular proverb “A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness”²⁰ and ask for their advice before starting a work relying on their experiences. The members of the Igbo clan are mostly fair in their judgments as it is stated “among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father.”²¹ The clan is understanding and tolerant to other cultures. The elders of the clan say Mr. Brown that “You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and spirits of his fathers.”²², and this shows how lenient the clan members are.

The social activities of the Igbo clan add to the cultural unity and harmony among the clan members as well. The Igbo people have festivals such as “The Feast of the New Yams” which is held every year for “giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility”²³, in which they come together and eat the new yams of the season with their relatives. They organize wrestling contests with judges who are in the power of changing the customs on some occasions and have great ceremonies and dances in their “ilo”, a green playground. For weddings, all women and children help the bride’s mother cook for the whole village. They respect the nature around them addressing the trees or fishes as sacred unlike European nations’ deforestation to build factories in which they manufacture products by using African resources.

The women of Igbo clan also contribute to the peaceful living of the community that they belong even though they are exposed to the oppression of their male dominant society every day. The multiple wives of the same

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

man get along well with each other since they have a system in which they act in a proper order. When Okonkwo's neighbour asks for his wives to drink wine, he questions the whereabouts of his first wife because the others cannot drink wine before she does. Besides, the women help each other for the daily chores and support each other for their responsibilities to their husbands. When one of Okonkwo's wives Ojiugo forgets to cook afternoon meal for her husband because she goes to plait her hair, Nwoye's mother lies to Okonkwo saying that Ojiugo has fed her children beforehand. The women of Igbo clan are understanding and kind in their actions in that when Ikemefuna, the young boy brought by the neighbouring clan is taken from his mother's arms and starts to live with Okonkwo's family, his wives treat him affectionately as if he is one of their own children. And even though Ekwefi, one of Okonkwo's wives, has lost eight of her children one after the other, she never feels any jealousy for the birth of the Okonkwo's other children by his other wives.

The Igbo people have fair and settled justice system of their own. When a neighbouring village kill one of the women of Umuofia, the elders of the Igbo clan "follow the normal course of action" as it is presented "An ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation."²⁴ Besides, the people of Igbo clan consult the Oracle or the elders of their clan before declaring a war, and the elders settle most of the problems without violence with the fear of its consequences. As voiced in the novel,

*"the neighbouring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle - the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded agadi-nwayi would never fight what the Ibo call a fight of blame."*²⁵

For that reason, when Okonkwo insults Osugo without a reason, they resolve the problem only by means of an evocative proverb, "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget how to be humble"²⁶, which makes Okonkwo apologize his resentful friend.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

When Okonkwo beats his wife in the Week of Peace, the council punishes him with making him pay a fine believing that they have to live in peace before the plantation of crops in order not to offend the goddess of earth. Even there is a crime of murder, they avoid violence. After Okonkwo shoots a boy accidentally, he is exiled for seven years from his own clan by the order of the elders who try to evade a possible anger or revenge from the bereaved.

The traditional culture of the Igbo society is indeed democratic in nature. Since the crimes committed by each individual effect the peace of the whole clan, the elders and the men of high title come together to administer justice so as to restore the order of the society. The Igbo culture is open to progress as it is suggested in Okonkwo's punishment of fine after breaking the Week of Peace by beating his wife because the custom is changed as Okonkwo emphasises, "My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve."²⁷ According to Diana Rhoads, Achebe's depiction of Igbo society and their culture is considered as being superior to the ones that the enlightened white nations have:

*"What is remarkable about his Igbos is the degree to which they have achieved the foundations of what most people seek today – democratic institutions, tolerance of other cultures, a balance of male and female principles, capacity to change for the better or to meet new circumstances, a means of distributing wealth, a viable system of morality, support for industriousness, an effective system of justice, striking and memorable poetry and art."*²⁸

When the monarchist white colonizers arrive in Africa, the first thing they ask for is the king of the village but there is no king in the Igbo society. They have traditional customs, cultural and religious values to live by, which comprise a basis for the ethnic and cultural identity of Igbo people. Even the strongest man in the clan Okonkwo, who tears people apart with his machete, obeys the rules of his society and accepts his deserved punishment of exile without questioning. Yet, white men claim that they supposedly bring "a peaceful administration" as if they have the right and the Igbo people need any as the District Commissioner states:

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁸ Diana A. Rhoads, Culture in Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart, African Studies Review, 36(2), 1993, p. 61, doi:10.2307/524733.

*"We shall not do you any harm," said the District Commissioner to them later, "if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship. That must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world."*²⁹

As it is understood from the previous passages and examples, the people of Umuofia are happy with their own administration. They have their own laws and customs which are adequate enough to keep the peace and balance in the society. The colonizers are the ones who ill-treat the colonial subjects and they are the ones who molest others, ruin their lives, cultural identities, and religious beliefs. The destruction of the neighbouring clan by the hands of the colonizer foreshadows the destruction and distortion of the cultural identity of the Igbo people and they keep on their corruption. They force their own laws and their governmental system to those people who do not need a king or a queen:

*"But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial. Many of these messengers came from Umuru on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the centre of their religion and trade and government ...They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law."*³⁰

White men bring nothing but a catastrophe to the social life of the clan. They change the rules, they humiliate the respected people of the Igbo society, they minimize and distort the clan's cultural identity by forcing their religion claiming that "We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die."³¹ If the humanitarian white people come all the way to Africa in order to enlighten and civilize those allegedly inhuman savages, why do they start it with religion other than education? The answer is provided by Achebe in the novel through the voice of his intelligent character Obierika who questions things when he states "The white man is

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

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.”³² The white man is clever indeed, they pretend to be “friendly”, they use religion to enforce their ways because all societies or communities in the history are afraid of the unknown and try to make sense of the world around them with religion as Igbo people do. However, Achebe does not lay the blame entirely on the colonialist white man for the distortion of their cultural identity. He regards Igbo people as being responsible for their doom. Even though white man sets the natives against each other by forcing them to disrespect their own cultural values and customs, the Igbo people confirm the role that they are casted as Obierika indicates:

*“Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? ... But he says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?”*³³

Achebe criticizes the locals for their failure to response to the unjust presence of colonial power in their lands. They let white people destroy their neighbouring clans, they cast their own kinsmen who convert Christianity off their community and choose to ignore the presence of the colonialists in their lives. When the people of high title are taken into prison and whipped for resisting the white men, the only thing that the local people could do is collecting fine for their release. Even, the strongest and loyalist clan member Okonkwo, who conforms all the rules and conducts of his community, turns his back to his cultural values and traditions by committing suicide at the end, which is believed as an offence against the Earth within Igbo culture. Obierika has every right to blame the District Commissioner and everybody whom he represented for the self-destruction of Okonkwo as he states “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.”³⁴ After that, as the history demonstrates, the identity of the colonial subjects distorted day by day to the point where they forget who they are.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Conclusion

Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* dives into the melee of postcolonial literature with the intent of questioning, re-formulating, and re-defining African cultural identity. Achebe successfully depicts a particular clan in Nigeria who live peacefully with their customs and traditions as opposed to the misrepresented African people as cultureless and inhuman in the works of European writers. Even in the last page of the novel, he presents the cultural values of colonial subjects when Obierika tries to explain to the District Commissioner that it is against their custom to bury a man who commits suicide believing that his body is evil. Yet, the reader can see how colonialists distort the cultural identity of Igbo people with their horrid ways through the eyes of a colonized. In his novel, Achebe reveals the reality behind European expansion with the moral of a local story about a tortoise. The birds lend voluntarily their beautiful feathers to a cunning tortoise but he uses them for his own good. White nations use the resources of Africa to make themselves rich with the justification of bringing civilization to supposedly uncivilized tribes of Africa. The people of Igbo clan are not uncivilized; they only fail to protect their cultural identity from the wicked intentions of the colonizer white nation.

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