

## Colonial Racism and Identity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

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**Abstract:** *This article investigates the notions of colonial racism and identity in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. To reach this goal, two important aspects are analyzed: first, the colonizers' oppressive strategies and attitudes; second, the native Africans' reaction towards change. The paper will explore these issues by applying Frantz Fanon's and Abdul Jan Mohamed's ideas on the nature of colonialism and racism.*

**Key words:** *Colonialism, racism, identity, Manicheanism*

### Introduction

In *Things Fall Apart* (1985) and *Arrow of God* (1964) Achebe's major aim is to recreate an objective image of Africa and to help African people find their own cultural legacy and identity which have been lost because of the invasion of colonization. These two novels portray the everyday life of Igbo society until the arrival of the white people. What Achebe is concerned with in these two novels is that before the settlement of white Europeans, African people had a culture of their own and it was not the Europeans who introduced culture to the Igbo people of Africa: the native Africans were not uncivilized and ignorant people but had a rich culture with deep roots; moreover, they have dignity. Therefore, this article will investigate the colonizers' manipulative and racist actions towards transforming the natives' identity as a means to dominate them.

Since Fanon's concepts come in line with Achebe's issues revealed in his novels, it is wise to explore Fanon's theories. Fanon's discussions are divided into two parts. The first part, explains how the colonizers manage to rule the black natives and transform their existence and identity. The second part reveals how the black people can achieve freedom. As one of the leading Martinique critics in the field of postcolonial studies, Fanon is always concerned with the degraded situation caused by racism and colonialism. Fanon's goal is to remove the binary division between blacks and whites. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon talks about racial injustice and the Negroes problem with self-identity when facing colonization; therefore it is vital to first have a brief explanation of the concept of colonial situation.

In the colonial situation there are two important sides: one is the colonizer, the other is the colonized. The progression and development of the former depends on the deprivation and exploitation of the other.

One important outcome of this colonization is racism. Racism is the oppression and domination of one race by another. European colonizers consider themselves the superior race; as a result, they accumulate all the privileges as their natural rights. On the other hand, the native is deprived of all human rights and is reduced to beasts, animals and ignorance. In this system of racism Europe segregates the whites from the blacks and Fanon discusses this notion as Manichean thinking. Manichean “is that approach to culture in which all values and concepts are split into binary opposites, one that is positive (which is white) and one that is negative (black)” (Hook, 2004, p. 128). In fact, what occurs in the system of Manichean thinking is that this continuation of separation of the racial groups presents mutually exclusive sets of values and cultures. By this kind of logic it justifies the fact that the two groups are completely opposite to each other so that no integration can be possible.

For Fanon, the colonial culture has the power to sustain and legitimize white superiority. The colonizer substitutes indigenous histories and cultures with the new racial ideology. This new racial system is established through propaganda and the social and religious institutions in which they all associate blackness with evil, by this means they convince the subjugated people to obey the dominant racial belief. Among these institutions the school system is the most effective in making contact with the indigenous inhabitants and persuading them to leave behind their own traditions and system of belief. At school children are exposed to the language of the colonizer and the books visualize Europeans as strong and intelligent people, gradually children begin to internalize these values which are in contrast to the values presented at home.

Most of all, this new racial belief is transmitted and expanded through language which is one of the most important components of culture and also necessary for social development. As Fanon states, “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture” (Fanon, 1986, p. 17). When the oppressed person speaks the language of the oppressor, he is accepting the racist norms of his society and this means that he has abandoned his own identity, history and culture and becomes alienated. Thus, the Negro accepts to be inferior and to enter the white dominated world of the colonizer. “For Fanon, this movement to the white world constitutes more than merely a linguistic preference; it produces a transformation of being, a new ontology” (Kane, 2007, p. 357). This entrance to the new world (the world of white people) detaches the Negro from his homeland, and it seems that a new person with a new identity is born. The black man thinks he has become white and part of the white world by speaking their language. We can say that the black Negro is physically black but not psychologically because of the whiteness of his soul. “This may be the reason for the

strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs” (Fanon, 1986, p. 34).

However, against the oppressive pressures felt from the side of the colonizers Fanon discusses another important aspect which is the notion of recognition and self-consciousness that helps the Black Negro justify and preserve his unique identity. “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized” (cited in Fanon, 1986. p. 216). A human’s worth comes into existence when they try to impose their existence on another man so they can be recognized; however, this recognition is a two-sided act and should be based on mutual understanding and respect of the other; otherwise, if it moves in only one direction we will “keep the other within himself. Ultimately I deprive him of even this being-for-itself” (ibid., p. 217). Mutual understanding and recognition allows the self and the other to gain that freedom which is necessary for their self-conscious development. To have self-consciousness we must make ourselves recognized for others. However, self-consciousness becomes problematic between the white settler and the black man, because the black man is considered a slave, an object for the white master and must serve him. The Negro has no freedom and recognition in his relationship with the master; still, he never attributes his objectification (imposed by the white oppressor), which is a negative aspect, to his own master. “This is a necessary step on the way to subjectivity, and the Black slave never makes this move. Instead, he wants to be *like* the white master and he is fixated with becoming a subject” (Villet, 2011, p. 43). But, in the eyes of the colonizer the black man is always a thing, an object that fulfills four important aspects: first, the master evaluates his superiority through the enslaved Negro; second, the slave’s presence ensures the master’s subjectivity; third, the slave helps the master define him and the world; finally, the slave loses his freedom and individuality. For Fanon the only possible solution for the Negro is taking risks through violence and conflict. “Conflict, it seems, is a central feature in human reality if one is to be transformed from being an object to being a subject, thus facilitating the entry into self-consciousness”(Villet, 2011, p.44).

Fanon mentions three important criteria which lead to self-consciousness. First, to acknowledge the importance of difference among people: for Fanon accepting the difference between black and white is vital. According to Fanon, when the white man calls the Negro his brother to affirm that there is no difference between them it is not a matter of brotherhood but whether the white man can gain economic and political aid from the Negro; so beneath that statement there is a hidden motive. Fanon opposes this motivation and asserts, “yet the Negro *knows* that there is a difference. He *wants* it”(cited in Villet, 2011, p.46). Fanon believes that difference is pivotal for developing self-consciousness; furthermore, the impact of race in society should not be forgotten. “Difference, according to Fanon, is affirmed in what he calls the maintenance of alterity by the Black man, which means that the self affirms itself as fundamentally different in certain respects to the Other” (ibid., p.46). This alterity for Fanon means conflict which leads to

violence because the black man can never be sure whether the white man really considers his subjectivity; so he decides to express his individuality by establishing difference instead of searching for sameness in himself and the other.

Second, taking action in life is necessary for obtaining true liberation and recognition. For Fanon, recognition without action is futile, both should accompany each other. Furthermore, when the Negro is exposed to education and intelligent thought he understands the need to preserve and respect his values and this directs him towards action. Finally, for Fanon the strength of humanity relies on love, affection and generosity between the self and the other. Fanon hopes people pursue these values which at the same time motivates them to take actions for creating a society based on values that are worth maintaining. Fanon explains that action in this case is not negative; it is a reaction against things which violate humanity. "Therefore one's action, in favor of mutual subjectivity, must at the same time be a reaction against scorn, degradation and exploitation aimed at human life" (ibid., p. 48).

Similarly, Abdul JanMohamed has discussed the concept of Manichean allegory to reveal how the colonial world establishes its domination through the division of the colonizer and the colonized into good and evil. He has widely devoted his work to the colonial situation in literature, specifically African novels written in English. For JanMohamed "colonialist literature is an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of 'civilization', a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology" (JanMohamed, 1985, p. 64). Based on what he has discussed, the only possible solution to understand colonial literature and the rise of the African novel is to investigate them in their own context. JanMohamed believes that the socio-political dimensions between the colonizer and the colonized are more important for racial prejudice. The harsh imperial authority of the colonizers which negates the political and religious system of the indigenous culture is "an act of social surgery" (ibid, p. 2). The social change imposed on the indigenous people is so rapid that they have no time to construct a method to readjust to the current situation; instead, they are filled with social crisis. This is the result of domination and racism; it seems that the white colonizers think of themselves as feudal figures with some sort of rationalization: that the whites are the superior race, they have a duty to civilize the whole world, the natives are impotent to govern their own society and to develop their natural resources. Based on this logic:

The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. . . . The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (ibid., pp.2-3)

### Colonialism and the Question of Identity in *Things Fall Apart*

The first time we trace the steps of the missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* is after Okonkwo's exile. The natives become emotionally enslaved by the promise created by the missionaries that only God can save them from their dissatisfied and mischievous way of life. As a result, the Africans are cast in a system of oppression and inferiority complex created by the image Christians depicted of God:

The rebellious and discontent emotions were appeased with the promise of heaven that would only come for a slave when they died after serving their master well. Without the implantation of Christianity the slave would have quickly become discontented and despair at the horrors around them. In time, those left in Africa and those in the New World thanked God for the White man who saved them from so-called paganism and delivered them into glory. (Christianity as a tool of Europeans, (n.d), para. 2)<sup>1</sup>

The white man's speech in Achebe's novel clearly supports this representation of God:

He [the white man] told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in his happy kingdom. "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," he said. (Achebe, 1994, p. 145)

Although the missionaries make an effort to explain Hell to the Igbos, they are reluctant to understand the local religion and political system of the Igbos and try to reject it. Since they consider themselves superior, no effort is made by the colonizers to understand the Igbo's' life and this creates gap and hatred from the side of the local villages. This prejudiced view of the Europeans is due to their firm belief in themselves as the messengers of God who is the one and only true source of worship.

Moreover, knowing and understanding the cultural life of the Igbos would mean that the Igbos had a culture before the arrival of the missionaries. The colonizers want to impose the belief that it is the white missionaries who have first familiarized the Igbos with the concept of culture; therefore, knowing the Igbos would clash their superiority. So, the approach of these messengers is aggressive; it is not based on mutual understanding and acceptance but it is biased by imposing their world view and eradicating the other. An important and interesting detail in the story is the white man's promise to bring iron horses. The Christian church offers some objects as gifts that have never been seen before so that they can penetrate among the locals; for example, the bicycle is an iron horse for the Igbos. "In this way the white man attempts to transform the African

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<sup>1</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Africa)

bewilderment before new objects into a halo that presents the whites as superior, and even supernatural, in the eyes of the blacks” (Galvan & Galvan, p.107). The missionary’s speech ends with a deep statement, which is misunderstood and causes conflict: ““Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm’, replied the white man” (Achebe, 1994, p. 146). For the Igbos such a thing is nonsense because they had lived in fear of their gods’ rage and viewed them lively. For them their gods are not just an object but a vivid reality as the white men’s religion. Another method in which the Christian’s managed to win the heart of the locals is by the sweetness of their song: “Then the missionaries burst into song. It was one of those gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo” (Achebe, 1994, p. 146).

A comparison between the two different approaches of Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith as the two main missionaries of Achebe’s novel will help exemplify the nature of their colonial goal. Mr. Brown’s policy to impact the natives is based on compromise, mutual understanding, affection and respect in contrast to Mr. Smith’s harsh and aggressive behavior. For this aspect he becomes widely known and the center of attention managing to penetrate into the hearts of the natives. He goes beyond the conventional ideology of the colonial atmosphere and manages to make communication with the other side of the world. He is clever enough to come to this conclusion that the only way a person can affect another human being is by entering their world and witnessing things through their eyes. In other words, Mr. Brown approaches Fanon’s statement to praise and acknowledge the differences among human beings. The following passages taken from the novel clearly justifies his manner:

Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs.

In this way Mr. Brown learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to school, strangers would come from other places to rule them.

In the end Mr. Brown’s arguments began to have an effect. More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels. (Achebe, 1994, pp. 178-181)

After James Smith becomes the head of the church and replaces Mr. Brown we witness a sudden shift of attitude in the white man’s approach towards the natives. The following extract taken from the novel clearly exemplifies this aspect:

Mr. Brown's successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal. (Achebe, 1994, p. 184)

Mr. Smith's speech reflects one of the main discussions of colonialism and that is Frantz Fanon's statement regarding the Manichean world. Mr. Smith confines a set of opposite values as is expected in the colonial world. As a colonizer he imposes these values on the natives. For him the native is chaotic and irrational; while the European is normal and rational. Mr. Smith represents the Manichean division of Fanon and Jan Mohamed who does not go beyond his own mental ideas and does not possess flexibility.

Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, is one of the converts who mimics the established ideology of the missionaries. He joins the Christian school where the white colonizers force the Africans to read and write in the colonial language. This is one of their methods to create a binary division between the native and the English language and by this means they indicate the superiority of their language and the power to control the natives. Frantz Fanon has mentioned such an aspect in his book *The Wretched of The Earth*. In his book Fanon explains that the colonial administration uses its language to create a gap and distance between the children and their history as is the case with Nwoye. The cultural heritage of Nwoye is only revealed at home, but in the Christian school Nwoye and other African children only learn the language of the white colonizers. This eliminating of the native language from education was devastating and a source of great concern for Okonkwo, because by this elimination the colonized Africans and specifically the children came under the direct control of the colonizers. When Nwoye learns to speak and write the language of the colonizers he exists only for them and stands against his father's commands. In addition, by accepting the norms of the British Colonizers, Nwoye tries to justify an acceptable identity to fit in the new established system.

As time goes by the number of people adhering to the Christian religion rises and the new converts decide to succumb. They know if they fight with the colonizers they will be defeated. As witnessed, confusion is what causes the rising conflict and aggressiveness among the natives. "It is the confusion of pretending to be something they are not and of trying to fight what they were—and still are. It is something more than a schizophrenic conflict of identities" (Galvan & Galvan, p.112). The Igbos rejected certain patterns and values and adopted a new one, but their old worldview still exists. This is destructive because we are not facing two different identities; instead we are dealing with a single identity that is split between those who live in line with the new traditions and who try to destroy the old tradition but are still trapped in it. This is one of the outcomes of colonization. The natives lose their true identity and can never know who they are

because the colonial discourse splits their identities by persuading them to become westerners; this results in the annihilation of societies.

Based on Fanon's discussion that the only possible way a person reaches self-consciousness is to take action, this notion of self-conscious is the exact case with Okonkwo who knows that to make the missionaries understand his unique values that cannot be changed and to make his society understand the inevitability of universal respect for differences he takes action and fights against the white men. For Okonkwo preserving his differences is more valuable than reaching the exact sameness of the white men. He knows that the only way to preserve his unique self and identity is by being different and not something the white men want him to be.

Okonkwo stands against two important things: first, the white stereotypes such as used by Mr. Smith who dictate a fixed position on Okonkwo's people by making them accept to be inferior; second, the converts mimicking the white men's behavior. Okonkwo decides to stand against the white missionaries when his clan does not take side with him. However, he believes that to make an impression he must be persistent in his act even if this means to be alone. Okonkwo follows what Fanon mentions as being persistent in one's action and belief even when the rest of the world does not understand or accept it. This persistent quality of Okonkwo marks the contemplation and future change of his society. Okonkwo remains faithful to his society's ethos which his people have left, and then he cuts his deep connection with his people. His suicidal act happens because the Igbo people do not join him against the British colonizers. However, this suicidal act also shows Okonkwo's true representation of his cultural society. "For, as he sees it, Igbo culture has willingly succumbed to its own annihilation, committing what is a form of collective suicide by submitting to the British" (Begam, p.401). By taking his life Okonkwo forgoes his community's destruction.

### **Struggling for Identity in *Arrow of God***

Achebe's next novel *Arrow of God* is also concerned with the tumult caused by the entrance of colonization and by analyzing and reflecting Ezeulu's actions that stand at the heart of the novel clearly manifests this crisis. "He is established in a closely-knit society, and it is in his relationship with this community and also with other elements or factors in this setting that we are able to comprehend the problem that he is faced with" (Mordaunt, 1989, p.154). Ezeulu faces deep conflict not only with his competitors but also with the British colonizers and Christian missionaries. Cook believes that *Arrow of God* explores the limits of a person's power in a traditional system. Ezeulu does not like the thought of being a figurehead who must perform his responsibilities based on whatever is ordained in his status. He is deceived by the power of white man who intercedes and represses the civil war between Okperi and Umuaro by using the firearm. Ezeulu is a powerful and clever leader who is always concerned with doing what is beneficial and right for his people. Although Ezeulu understands his society's ordered system of values and Umuaro's position in the hierarchic system, he does not possess the intelligence to

understand that every nation when exposed to new concepts unconsciously changes even if that nation tries to resist. According to Okechukwu:

In spite of his dialectical discovery of the truth, Ezeulu fails to persuade his audience because he fails to evoke the proper pathos and because he lacks the appropriate ethos. Actually, at some point, he compromises his ethos so seriously that he loses his credibility. (2002, p. 569)

Ezeulu's mere persistence on preserving the hierarchical values for his people without having the power to speak effectively is a major imperfection. This inability is a vast defect for an oral society like Umuaro which puts much emphasis on oratorical skills. Ezeulu gradually becomes mad because he cannot understand why truth does not surround things. His failure to homogenize with his people is discerned when he faces various argumentative debates, specifically with his son Nwoye. He lacks to discriminate problems logically and people are reluctant to follow him since he does not have discretion to inspect matters deeply. For these reasons the church representative Mr. Goodcountry who conveys a strong ability in conversations and a convincing manner in solving matters prevails over the villagers. Goodcountry stirs a sense of anxiety and confusion in the villagers and this can be witnessed in one of the people's stated proverbs: "If the rat cannot flee fast enough, let him make way for the tortoise" (Achebe, 1969, p. 229).

As one of the missionaries Goodcountry manages to complete the colonial project. The policy of these missionaries is different from the old colonial discourse. This means that they try to modify the tenets of Christianity in Africa. Goodcountry makes use of the crisis over the festival of the New Yam feast. This movement becomes effective by rapidly converting a considerable number of people to Christianity. For example, Goodcountry makes use of Umuaro's own natives to disclaim a native and in this case Oduche, Ezeulu's son, is the best target because he is naïve and full of enthusiasm.

The sacred python which is representative of people's god and ultimately their identity has to be shown imperfect to pave the way for the new religion. To accomplish this deed, Goodcountry insists that the sacred python be killed. As a witty person he targets a native but not any ordinary random native, one with high reputations and that is Oduche the son of the chief priest of Ulu. Finally he manages to win Oduche into accepting the new religion and in killing the python. Oduche's statement totally shows Goodcountry's penetrating effect: "It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush its head after it had deceived his wife?" (Achebe, 1969, p. 49). In other words, Oduche uses a Christian myth to reject a traditional myth. Consequently, Goodcountry manages to promote the church over native teaching. He approaches people's emotion and sense by giving continuant biblical statements: "The world will pass away but not one single word of Our Lord will be set aside. He turned to

Oduche. “When the time comes for your baptism you will be called Peter; on this rock will I build my church” (Achebe, 1969, p.49).

As a result, the traditional Igbo structure crashes under colonialism and Ezeula perceives two important aspects: first, colonialism is an incisive and insidious enemy and produces disorder which inhabits with people indeterminably. Second, maintaining the past under such harsh situation requires united attempt from people. Abdul JanMohamed’s notes about the polarity of the colonial situation deeply manifests the first aspect just mentioned:

The limited choice of either petrification or catalepsy is imposed on the African by the colonial situation; his subjugation and lack of political power prevent him from constructively combining the [European and African] cultures and leave more vulnerable to further subjugation. If he chooses to be faithful to the indigenous values, he remains, from the colonialist’s view point a “savage” and the need to “civilize” him perpetuates colonialism. If, however, he attempts to espouse western values, then he is seen as a vacant imitator without a culture of his own. Thus, colonialist ideology is designed to confine the native in a confused and subservient position. (JanMohamed, 1983, p.5)

## Conclusion

Africa was one of the places in which Europeans near the end of the eighteenth century invaded in order to establish a colony. This colonial establishment introduced the European’s religion and culture which they forcefully dictated on the Igbo people. This imposition changed the whole structure and lifestyle of Achebe’s people. The Igbo’s’ identity shattered in the realms of the new introduced religion by the British colonizers. What Achebe tried to achieve in these two novels is to redefine the history of his society shaped by previous prejudiced writers. Thus, he shows that Africa is not an undignified region. Moreover, he depicts the racist intentions of the colonizers and in return the natives’ reaction under this burden.

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