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# Cultural Variance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

**Md. Jahidul Azad***

**Abstract:** This paper explores the theme of cultural conflict in Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart, focusing on the clash between traditional Igbo society and Western colonial forces. The study examines how the protagonist, Okonkwo, represents the struggle to preserve cultural identity amidst the imposition of foreign ideologies. It investigates the dynamics of change, resistance, and adaptation within Igbo society as colonial powers introduced Christianity, new political systems, and economic structures. The emphasis of the paper lies in analyzing the breakdown of traditional values, generational divides, and the resulting fragmentation of the community. Okonkwo's tragic downfall serves as a reflection of the broader disintegration of indigenous culture when confronted with external forces. The research highlights the complexities of cultural negotiation and the consequences of cultural erasure while emphasizing the need to recognize and respect diverse cultural systems. Ultimately, the paper underscores Achebe's portrayal of cultural conflict as a universal challenge and a critical element in understanding historical and postcolonial experiences. Things Fall Apart explores the profound cultural clash between traditional Igbo society and the colonial forces introduced by British missionaries and administrators. This study thus examines how Achebe portrays the destabilizing impact of colonialism on indigenous values, social systems, and spiritual beliefs, highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of cultural struggle.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict, colonialism, identity, Igbo society.

## Introduction

Cultural conflict is one of the most profound and universal themes in human history, encompassing the clash of values, beliefs, and practices when societies with distinct cultural systems come into contact. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, this conflict is explored in the context of colonialism, as the traditional Igbo society encounters the disruptive forces of British colonial rule and Christian missionaries. Achebe's narrative delves into the intricate dynamics of cultural transformation, presenting a powerful critique of colonialism while also examining the internal vulnerabilities and contradictions within Igbo culture. This dual perspective makes *Things Fall Apart* a literary cornerstone for understanding cultural conflict in the postcolonial world.

Achebe's seminal work was published in 1958 during a period of significant sociopolitical change in Nigeria, as the country was on the brink of independence from British colonial rule. The novel is set in the late 19th century, a time when European powers were aggressively expanding their empires into Africa, imposing new systems of governance, religion, and ec communities. The notion of cultural conflict is a recurring theme in postcolonial literature, reflecting the clash of values, traditions, and worldviews that arise in the wake of colonial encounters. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is one of the most significant works that explore this theme, serving as a powerful response to colonial representations of Africa and its cultures. Achebe's novel examines the devastating impact of European colonization on Igbo society in Nigeria, revealing how traditional

***Corresponding email: jahid_azad10@yahoo.com
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh & PhD Fellow, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Mirpur Cantonment, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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African culture was disrupted, marginalized, and ultimately dismantled. Through the story of Okonkwo, Achebe vividly portrays the collision between indigenous traditions and Western modernity, a clash that results in the fragmentation of community, identity, and social order.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* serves as both a literary masterpiece and a historical document, narrating the experiences of a society grappling with cultural upheaval. The novel is set in pre-colonial and early colonial Nigeria and depicts the complex social, political, and spiritual systems of the Igbo people. At the heart of the narrative is the tragic figure of Okonkwo, a proud and determined leader who is deeply rooted in his community's customs and values. His story becomes a lens through which readers observe the profound dissonance caused by the arrival of British missionaries and colonial administrators. The forces of colonization bring about an ideological and cultural invasion that dismantles the social fabric of the Igbo community. Achebe's work challenges Western literary traditions that often depicted African societies as primitive and chaotic, offering instead a dignified and complex portrayal of indigenous culture.

The term "cultural conflict" refers to the struggle that occurs when two or more distinct cultures interact, often leading to misunderstanding, resistance, and transformation. In *Things Fall Apart*, cultural conflict manifests on multiple levels—personal, communal, and institutional. Okonkwo, as a traditionalist, finds himself at odds with the changing norms of his society. His inability to adapt to the new cultural realities introduced by colonial forces becomes symbolic of the larger struggle faced by many African communities during the colonial period. Through Okonkwo's resistance and ultimate downfall, Achebe highlights the emotional and psychological toll of cultural dissonance. The arrival of Christianity in Umuofia introduces a new belief system that stands in stark contrast to the traditional Igbo religion. The missionaries' insistence on the superiority of their faith and their rejection of Igbo spiritual practices creates a rift within the community, dividing families and friends. For Achebe, the conflict between Christianity and indigenous religion is not simply a clash of ideas but also a reflection of deeper power dynamics. The colonial agenda, couched in religious evangelism, seeks to dismantle traditional African identity and replace it with European norms and values. This ideological imposition disrupts the communal harmony that defines Igbo society, leading to internal divisions and societal disintegration. The conflict is not confined to religion but extends to other cultural aspects, including governance, gender roles, and language. The introduction of colonial administrative systems undermines the traditional leadership structures of the Igbo. The British District Commissioner's interventions erode the authority of local leaders, stripping them of their power and influence. Achebe carefully juxtaposes the democratic and consensus-based decision-making processes of the Igbo with the authoritarian imposition of colonial rule. This tension highlights the incompatibility of two systems of governance and the resulting erosion of indigenous autonomy.

Gender roles are another area where cultural conflict is evident. Igbo society, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, is patriarchal, with rigid expectations for men and women. Okonkwo embodies the ideal of masculinity, defined by strength, aggression, and emotional stoicism. However, the colonial encounter challenges these traditional gender norms. The Christian missionaries advocate for a more egalitarian worldview, offering refuge to marginalized members of Igbo society, including women and outcasts. While this shift may appear progressive, it also serves to further destabilize the traditional social order. Achebe presents these tensions without romanticizing either system, inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural change. Language also plays a crucial role in the cultural conflict depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's use of the English language to tell an African story is itself a significant act of cultural negotiation. By infusing the narrative with Igbo proverbs, idioms, and oral traditions, Achebe asserts the richness of African culture while subverting the colonial language. The novel demonstrates how language can be both a tool of domination and a means of resistance. The missionaries' dismissal of Igbo as a "heathen" language reflects the broader colonial tendency to delegitimize indigenous cultures. Yet, Achebe's narrative strategy reclaims linguistic power, challenging Eurocentric assumptions about African literature and identity.

## Literature Review

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has garnered significant scholarly analysis, particularly for its exploration of the cultural clash between indigenous Igbo society and British colonial forces. This review synthesizes critical interpretations of the novel, focusing on themes such as cultural disruption, identity crisis, generational divides, and the transformative impact of religion and colonial ideology. By adopting a postcolonial lens, this literature study underscores *Things Fall Apart* as a foundational text that challenges dominant colonial narratives while capturing the complexity of cultural conflict. Achebe's novel directly counters the colonial misconception of Africa as a monolithic and uncivilized entity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) offers a theoretical framework for examining how colonial powers constructed Africa as "the Other" to justify cultural dominance. Said's critique of Western superiority is exemplified by the British colonial missionaries and administrators in *Things Fall Apart*, who dismiss Igbo customs as primitive. Achebe challenges this colonial discourse by portraying Igbo society as intricate and functional, with well-established systems of governance, spirituality, and social organization. At the same time, he acknowledges the imperfections within the traditional order, presenting a nuanced and balanced perspective.

Scholars such as Eustace Palmer (1979) commend Achebe's ability to avoid romanticizing pre-colonial African life. In *The Growth of the African Novel*, Palmer emphasizes that Achebe highlights both the strengths and inherent flaws of Igbo culture. For instance, the marginalization of the osu (outcasts) and the rigid enforcement of gender norms reveal fissures within the society. These internal contradictions demonstrate that cultural conflict in the novel arises not only from colonial intrusion but also from vulnerabilities within traditional structures, which the colonial regime exploits to assert control.

The psychological and emotional repercussions of cultural upheaval, particularly as embodied by Okonkwo, remain a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Abiola Irele (1982), in *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, identifies Okonkwo as a tragic figure whose resistance symbolizes the broader struggle of colonized societies to preserve their cultural identity. Okonkwo's unwavering adherence to tradition reflects deep-seated anxiety over cultural disintegration; however, his inability to adapt to the colonial changes highlights the limitations of rigid traditionalism. His tragic downfall, culminating in his suicide, serves as a powerful metaphor for the collapse of Igbo society under colonial domination.

Religion serves as another central arena of cultural conflict within the novel. A. P. Obiechina (1975), in *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel*, argues that the introduction of Christianity destabilizes the spiritual foundations of Igbo life. The rejection of ancestral worship and indigenous deities by the missionaries fractures the community, deepening familial and generational divides. Nwoye, who represents the younger generation, finds refuge in Christianity, symbolizing a generational shift toward Western ideologies. In contrast, Okonkwo's steadfast commitment to traditional spirituality underscores the tension between preserving cultural heritage and accepting change, illustrating the emotional and psychological toll of cultural disruption.

In recent years, postcolonial scholars have examined the concept of cultural hybridity as a response to colonial domination. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) provides an insightful lens for understanding characters like Nwoye, who navigate between Igbo traditions and Western influences. While Achebe focuses on the catastrophic consequences of colonialism, the emergence of hybrid identities suggests a more nuanced dynamic of resistance and adaptation. These hybrid identities demonstrate that colonized societies do not merely succumb to erasure but engage in negotiation and transformation, showcasing resilience amidst cultural upheaval. Lastly, *Things Fall Apart* has been widely recognized for its critical examination of cultural conflict and colonial disruption. Scholars highlight Achebe's ability to balance an authentic portrayal of Igbo society with a critique of its internal flaws, emphasizing the psychological, spiritual, and social impact of colonialism. Through themes of generational divides, religious transformation, and cultural hybridity,

Achebe captures the complexity of cultural survival and resistance, solidifying *Things Fall Apart* as a cornerstone of postcolonial literature and timeless reflection on identity and change.

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## Methodology

The present literary analysis is a qualitative research work. The primary sources of information are the literary Chinua Achebe. The secondary information sources are the writings, books, scholarly articles, criticism, and internet sources. The author used textual analysis as the research tool with a review of previous related studies.

## Findings and Discussion

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is set in the late 19th century, a period when European colonial expansion into Africa began to take significant hold. The novel reflects the conflict between two distinct value systems—traditional Igbo customs and Western colonial ideologies—serving both as a historical document and a cultural critique. The primary aim of this study is to analyze the various dimensions of this cultural clash, shedding light on how the colonizers imposed their beliefs and disrupted the preexisting social structures of the Igbo people. Additionally, this research emphasizes the psychological, social, and political consequences of this conflict for individuals and their communities.

*Things Fall Apart* begins with Achebe depicting the pre-colonial cultural and social life of the Igbo people. This study will explore how Achebe portrays Igbo values, traditions, and rituals as a cohesive and functional social system. Special focus will be given to Igbo social institutions, including gender roles, family structures, religious beliefs, and community governance. By presenting a detailed and nuanced picture of Igbo life before colonization, Achebe challenges the colonial narrative that portrays African societies as backward and uncivilized. In addition to religion, colonization often manifests through the imposition of foreign legal and political systems. This research will examine how Achebe portrays the collapse of traditional governing structures that once provided stability and cohesion to Igbo communities. By focusing on key events in the novel, such as the establishment of colonial courts and the enforcement of European laws, the study will highlight how these changes undermine the authority of local leaders and disrupt the social fabric of Igbo life.

One of the primary objectives of this study is to examine Okonkwo as a symbol of resistance to cultural change. Achebe portrays Okonkwo as a tragic hero who reflects the struggles of his community through his unwavering commitment to tradition and his rejection of colonial intrusion. However, his inability to adapt to changing circumstances also underscores the limitations of rigid traditionalism in the face of modernity. By analyzing Okonkwo's character arc, the research will illuminate the complexities of cultural conflict and the devastating consequences of cultural disintegration. Achebe's depiction of Igbo culture and his critique of colonialism are deeply intertwined with his use of language. This study will explore how Achebe preserves and affirms African cultural identity by integrating Igbo idioms, folktales, and proverbs into the English narrative. Additionally, the research will analyze Achebe's choice to use English as the medium for telling an African story, examining its implications for postcolonial discourse and cross-cultural communication.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is widely regarded as a seminal work of postcolonial literature. This study will explore how the cultural conflicts depicted in the novel extend beyond the specific setting of colonial Nigeria and Igbo society. By situating the novel within the broader framework of postcolonial theory, the research will examine how *Things Fall Apart* contributes to contemporary discussions on resistance, cultural identity, and hybridity in the aftermath of colonialism. This study is significant because it offers a deeper understanding of how African nations were shaped by cultural conflicts during and after colonial rule. *Things Fall Apart* provides valuable insights into the experiences of colonized peoples and the strategies employed by colonial powers to undermine indigenous cultures. By focusing on Achebe's portrayal of Igbo society, the study highlights the

richness and complexity of African traditions while also acknowledging their vulnerabilities to external influences.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of *Things Fall Apart* as a novel that challenges Western ideas of cultural superiority. Achebe's work affirms the value and dignity of African civilizations, serving as a counter-narrative to colonial portrayals of the continent. This research aims to advance the field of postcolonial studies by critically examining the cultural conflicts within the novel and offering a framework for understanding similar conflicts in other colonized societies. Several significant conclusions were reached from the analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and its depiction of the relationship between indigenous Igbo culture and the forces of British colonialism in this research paper on the theme of cultural conflict. One of the key conclusions of the study is the profound cultural struggle that arises from the conflict between traditional Igbo beliefs and the Christian ideology introduced by the British colonizers. The narrative highlights how the long-established social and religious fabric of Igbo society is disrupted by British missionaries, colonial authorities, and their supporters, leading to a breakdown of unity and cohesion within the community. Deep divisions develop within families and communities as Igbo spirituality, rooted in respect for nature and ancestral worship, is rejected and replaced by a foreign religion.

Okonkwo's character embodies the Igbo community's resistance to change. As a staunch traditionalist who values his people's customs, Okonkwo finds himself in conflict with the growing embrace of Western ways, especially the political and judicial systems imposed by the British. His tragic death serves as a symbol of the failings of traditional leadership and the inability to adapt to a new global order. Okonkwo's struggle with the changes in his culture reflects the broader fight of colonized peoples to preserve their cultural identity in the face of external forces. Another area where cultural conflict is evident in Igbo society is gender roles. The patriarchal structures that governed Igbo society were disrupted by the arrival of colonial powers. Igbo women are often caught between traditional norms and the influence of colonial missionaries, who offer them a new sense of agency, but often within the confines of colonial values. In contrast, male characters like Okonkwo strive to uphold traditional masculine values.

Cultural imperialism, which seeks to impose foreign laws, customs, and beliefs on the Igbo people, is personified by the British colonial government, primarily represented by the District Commissioner and his officers. The District Commissioner's perspective, which views the Igbo as primitive and in need of civilization, serves as a clear example of the colonial mindset that seeks to replace indigenous traditions with Western ideals. His view diminishes the depth and significance of Igbo society by reducing its rich complexity to nothing more than a subject of study.

The family system, which is central to Igbo culture, is significantly affected by the cultural conflict between the colonizers and the colonized. As traditional customs begin to crumble, characters like Okonkwo's son Nwoye and other young members of the community are drawn to the new Christian teachings. This breakdown of family ties highlights the profound psychological and emotional effects of colonization as individuals struggle to balance their loyalty to their cultural heritage with the allure of Western culture. The novel illustrates how the social structures that held Igbo society together were gradually dismantled by the introduction of foreign systems. British laws and institutions replace traditional customs related to justice, leadership, and the community's relationship with God. This shift weakens the indigenous identity and leads to a loss of cultural coherence. The concept of cultural hybridization is one of the study's more complex conclusions. While the novel primarily focuses on the destructive effects of colonialism, it also hints at the emergence of a hybrid society where some Igbo characters, like Nwoye, begin to adopt aspects of the new culture while retaining elements of their indigenous identity. This hybridization demonstrates how the impacts of colonialism go beyond mere erasure, encompassing adaptation, and negotiation, reflecting the lasting consequences on both individual and community identities.

One of the key aspects of the cultural conflict is the generational divide within the Igbo community. While the younger generation, influenced by colonial ideas, begins to question and

abandon traditional customs, the older generation, represented by Okonkwo, remains committed to ancient practices. This division deepens the cultural conflict, as the younger generation is torn between the values of their elders and the allure of a modern, Westernized society. Throughout the novel, the psychological and emotional toll of cultural conflict is evident. As their culture changes, characters like Okonkwo undergo intense personal struggles, feeling isolated and powerless. This is particularly evident in Okonkwo's tragic death, which symbolizes the mental collapse of a man who cannot reconcile his cultural values with the changing realities brought on by colonization. The profound effects of colonialism on indigenous cultures, along with the challenges of cultural resistance and adaptation, are powerfully portrayed in the novel. Achebe's writing provides important insights into the impact of cultural conflict on individuals, families, and society, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play during this historical period.

## Conclusion

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe skillfully explores the deep cultural tension that arises from the clash between traditional Igbo culture and Western ideology, as well as British colonialism. The novel highlights the complexities of colonial encounters by depicting how the social, religious, and cultural fabric of Igbo society is disrupted and weakened through the imposition of foreign systems, such as Christianity, British law, and political structures. By focusing on characters like Okonkwo and Nwoye, the book portrays the psychological and emotional toll of cultural conflict, as they struggle to preserve their identity in the face of the demands of colonization.

The tension between indigenous beliefs and colonial norms, the generational divide within the Igbo community, and the role of women in navigating these cultural changes all contribute to the complexity of the cultural conflict portrayed in the novel. While *Things Fall Apart* primarily focuses on the devastating consequences of colonialism, it also alludes to the complex processes of adaptation and cultural fusion. The lasting impact of colonialism on both individual and collective identities is reflected in characters like Nwoye, who embody the conflict between tradition and the allure of Western ideals. Achebe's novel provides a powerful critique of the destruction and transformation caused by colonialism. It offers a thorough and nuanced exploration of how colonized nations struggle to preserve their cultural traditions while adapting to the inevitable changes brought about by external forces. A pivotal work in postcolonial studies, *Things Fall Apart* offers valuable insights into the challenges of cultural survival and adaptation in a world forever changed by colonialism. Its themes of resistance, loss, and transition remain relevant today, making it a timeless work that encapsulates the enduring human experience in the face of cultural upheaval.

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