CHAPTER FOUR

CHINUA ACHEBE
CHAPTER FOUR

CHINUA ACHEBE

4.1 Preliminaries

This chapter is an effort to highlight those specific elements of Achebe’s works that characterize a response to the colonial connotations made by colonialist writings. It throws light upon Achebe's life and work. His *Things Fall Apart* is discussed in detail, where the theme of colonialism is viewed/examined from a new perspective.

4.2 Achebe's Life and Works

If as Chinua Achebe and Edward Said suggest, imperial writers like Conrad cannot see beyond their own European prejudices, it remains to be seen how writers grew up in contract zones\(^1\) like colonial Nigeria respond to imperialist models and how they realize alternatives in their own works. One of these writers is the Nigerian Chinua Achebe who, through his works, tries to demonstrate that every society depends on rigid sets of conventions that can only be lived as a whole and can therefore only be evaluated as a whole – ideally, from the inside. One of the characters in *Things Fall Apart* expresses the idea in this way: “We cannot leave the matter in his [Mr. Smith’s] hands
because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his”. (2) Before dealing with Achebe’s evaluation of society through his novels, particularly *Things Fall Apart*, it is profitable to provide a brief sketch of relevant aspects of his personal biography and his prominent works. This will reveal his Igbo/Ibo cultural (3) background and some of the factors that have shaped Achebe the man as well as the purpose that drives his writing.

4.2.1 Achebe’s Life

That Achebe reacts strongly to imperialist rhetoric is not surprising; he encountered it first hand as a colonial subject. He was born and grew up in a small Igbo village near Onitsha in the Eastern part of Colonial Nigeria on November 16, 1930 to Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet Iloegbunam Achebe. At the time of Achebe’s birth, the British had gained a foothold in Igbo land after their initial unsuccessful forays in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Missionaries had established churches, schools, and all the paraphernalia of British rule. Achebe’s parents were products of the earliest of these mission schools, and quickly came to appreciate the advantages of acquiring Western language and culture, exposure that enhanced their status in their native Ogidi. Both parents were missionaries for the Church Missionary Society. Although both his parents were Christian converts, Achebe was exposed to traditional Igbo beliefs as well through his father’s family and, according to Catherine Lynette Innes, “moved between both sides of his family, finding himself intrigued by
the differing rituals and tempted by the “heathen” food. So, very early in life, and even before he started school, Achebe found himself at the boundary of different ideologies and this was to have an impact on his creative genius.

As a child of six years, Achebe attended local church school where he was introduced to the English language and until he was ten years, he received all of his formal instruction in English. At the age of fourteen, Achebe left his family to attend secondary school in Umuahia and in 1948, he gained admission, on a scholarship, to study medicine at the University College in Ibadan. A year later, however, Achebe abandoned medical studies in favour of Arts, a decision that cost him his scholarship. At this time his desire to acknowledge his pride in his Igbo identity, led him to abandon his Christian name, Albert, for his Igbo name, Chinua. His love for reading and Literature began earlier and was further nurtured by the excellent library and teachers he encountered at Umuahia. This was his period of introduction to British colonial literature (Classics). While at Ibadan, he felt keenly the absence of African literature written by Africans and which portrayed Africans in a positive light. According to Achebe, it was about this time that he decided to become a professional writer. After reading "some appalling novels about Africa," he realized that "the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned". 

(4) 
(5)
Achebe graduated with the B.A. (London) degree in 1953, and after a brief period of teaching, he went to work for the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation. In 1956, he was at the BBC staff training school in London. Upon his return to Nigeria, he was appointed Director, External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (1961-66). In 1960, he had been awarded a scholarship that allowed him to travel in East and Central Africa and to make contact with writers from those countries. He was able to witness first hand the prejudice that eastern and southern Africans were subjected to their own homeland, by the white settlers. He rallied and persuaded the writers of those African countries and other Igbo writers as well to continue the creative process through the writing and publication of novels, short stories and poems in order, from the one hand, to teach their peoples, and from the other, to show to the world the bright face of Africa and the Africans which was (and still is) distorted by the Europeans and their literary works - during and even after the colonial years.

Achebe has also played a role of crucial importance in the emergence of postcolonial Anglophone literature; and as an editor of Heinemann African Writer Series, and then a Director since 1970; he has encouraged and published the work of many gifted African authors. In 1971 he founded Okike, which is an African leading journal of new writing. In 1984, Achebe established and published Uwa Ndi Igbo (Igbo World), a bilingual periodical of Igbo life and culture. Achebe taught
in universities in Britain and America, notably at the University of Connecticut (1975-1976) and at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (1987-1988). He has been a Professor Emeritus of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka since retiring from there in 1985.

In March 1990, while on his way back to the United States of America after a literary symposium organized in his honour by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Nigeria, Achebe was seriously injured in a car accident that has since then left him in a "wheel chair". More than twenty years later, speaking from his wheelchair, he has in no way diminished his active role "as a writer, speaker, teacher, and ambassador for African culture". Achebe is currently at the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Literature at Bard College in New York.

4.2.2 Achebe's Work

In the introduction to their book *Critical Perspective on China Achebe*, C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindors, asserted in 1978, that Achebe "is probably the most widely read of contemporary African writers, both on the African continent and abroad." He is referred to by many as the "father of the African novel". Similarly, but more specifically, Appiah has referred to him as the founding father of modern African literature in English languages. Likewise, while Simon Gikandi asserts that, "Achebe [is] not the first African Literary figure ...... yet", Gikandi acknowledges, "it is often said that modern African literature originates with Achebe". Critics attest to the apparently simple, yet
complex but evocative quality of Achebe’s prose, and that his greatest quality is as a teacher, one who through his works 'enlightens' and 'enriches' the life of his readers. Accordingly, in _The Novelist as Teacher_, Achebe himself writes:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. (14)

Ultimately, Achebe hopes to undo some of the damage European literary works have done in their portrayal of Africa and the Africans; he hopes to help his "society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement." (15)

Ironically, in order to create a past for himself, for the Igbo and for African in general, Achebe transculturates a European language and genre, reworking them in the context of Igbo language and culture. He represents a bridge between two cultures, African and European validating the former and informing the latter; that is why his position is likened by critics as a citizen of the crossroads. Chantal Zabus, for example, identifies Achebe’s works as "ethno-texts" since the attempt to capture and recapture not only Igbo traditional speech patterns but Igbo thought patterns and atmosphere as well, in his English language novels. As many critics have observed, Achebe also uses Igbo proverbs and sayings in an effort to 'indigenize' the English Novel. (16)

This issue, the employment of English (imperial) language to articulate
indigenous reality, is one of the problematic questions that cause much discussion in postcolonial literature and criticism.

However, Achebe has argued in his various essays on the subject of language that the challenge is to re-work the language of imposition. By appropriating the language of canonical colonial texts that he is writing back to, Achebe is actually defying a silence that had been imposed upon the native voice, and evoking a picture of Igbo life to recover the cultural realities that had been repressed by the colonizing structure. The most compelling duty of the current generation of African intellectuals, according to Achebe, is to help their fellow Africans regain the dignity and self-esteem lost during the colonial years. This educational intent is manifest in much of Achebe's works. To appreciate fully the achievement of Chinua Achebe in this regard, and before plunging into the bulk of this chapter to fully investigate and verify this intention of Achebe, it is a worthwhile giving the reader a quick review of his major works.

According to Parekh and Jagne, “Achebe is a superb story teller, a gifted poet and insightful literary critic, and a brilliant cultural commentator.” In 1958 Achebe published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart;* and since its first appearance, Achebe has written and published four other novels, a book of short fiction, a volume of poetry, two collections of essays, and numerous miscellaneous pieces, but *Things Fall Apart* remains his most widely read work. It has sold millions of copies internationally, and altogether his novels have been
translated into over 45 languages around the world. A landmark piece of postcolonial fiction, *Things Fall Apart* is set in the Igbo village of Umuofia in eastern Nigeria. It deals with traditional Igbo life and with British colonial aspirations in Igboland; the actions take place during the closing decades of nineteenth century when the first contact with Europeans were taking place. The narrative is divided into three parts and focuses on the rise and fall of its strong willed protagonist, Okonkwo. While mapping the course of Okonkwo’s life, Achebe manages to provide a memorable recreation of Igbo life before, during and immediately after the British colonial intrusion.

Nigeria attained independence in 1960, the same year that Achebe’s second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, was published. At the centre of the Action is Obi, the son of Nwoye and grandson of Okonkwo; here as in *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative records the rise and fall of its protagonist. But the fictional milieu, however, is radically different: the work is set in the Nigeria of the 1950s. As its title suggests, the novel explores the malaise of the country on the eve of its political independence: the uneasy co-existence of traditional ethos and European values and the absence of a coherent cultural framework that can give a firm direction to the country in general and to its educated elite in particular. Thus, in *No Longer at Ease*, as in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe is concerned with the debilitating impact of colonialism on the individual as well as on the national psyche.
Arrow of God was published in 1964; it is Achebe’s third novel and his first post-independence work; but here Achebe returns to Nigeria’s past and, as in Things Fall Apart, he explores the impact of change on individuals and communities. Arrow of God is set in the Igbo territory of Umuaro in eastern Nigeria during the 1920s; it narrates the story of Ezeulu, a tribal priest, who is faced with the gradual loss of his authority because of the advent of Christianity, the encroachment of colonialism and the emergence of intratribal rivalries. Like Okonkwo, Ezeulu resists changes. In his third novel, as in the first two, Achebe assesses the disruptive nature of Africa’s encounter with Europe. Arrow of God is also a powerful meditation on the nature of individual authority, and the question of political power- the issues that will dominate Achebe’s next two novels.

A Man of the People, a satire of corruption and struggle for power in an African state in the 1960s, is Achebe’s fourth novel which was published in 1966. This novel, set in an unnamed African country but resembles Nigeria, dramatizes a complex set of political events that push this country to the brink of anarchy. The central conflict in the novel is between the anglicized narrator, Odili, an idealistic university-educated young man- but culturally arrogant, and Chief Nanga, a corrupt and ruthless- but widely popular politician- who views himself as a man of the people. The novel reflects Achebe’s deep personal disappointment with what Nigeria has become since its independence.
Achebe’s fifth and last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, appeared in 1987, almost twenty-one years after the publication of *A Man of the People*. Here again Achebe explores the psychology of power in an attempt to understand the political nightmare that Nigeria has turned into. The novel reveals Achebe’s ongoing engagement with Nigeria’s unstable politics. The Nigerians’ irresponsible, self-appointed political leaders inform *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Though Achebe is most widely known for his novels, he is also a distinguished poet. His only collection of published poetry, *Beware, Soul Brother* was published in 1971. The thirty poems in the volume are anguished commentaries on the Nigerian Civil War and its lingering consequences. The Nigerian Civil War is also the setting for the title story in Achebe’s Collection of short fiction, *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972).

Significant major texts among Achebe’s non-fiction prose works – *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) and *Hopes and Impediments* (1988) – are collections of essays. *The Writer as Teacher*, which appears in the first volume, is indispensable for an understanding of Achebe’s art. *The African Writer and the English Language* engages one of the vexing issues in postcolonial literature: the employment of imperial language to articulate indigenous reality. The second volume deals with how literature and culture interact with the socio-political realities of the modern world. It also examines the Eurocentric bias of the fiction and mores of the colonialist era and in contemporary
literary journalism as well. This volume includes the most relevant essay to this study – Achebe’s controversial reading of Conrad - *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. In this essay, Achebe exposes convincingly the vulgar racism that is inlaid in Conrad’s text.

Achebe has also published three short, delightful children’s books. In contrast to the countless children’s books about Africa written by Westerners for Western consumption, these narratives are written with Achebe’s African children in mind. His mission here, explicitly, is to educate – to create culturally affirming images of Africa and its people for Africa’s children.

Thus, Achebe’s novels in particular and altogether all his works in general provide a historical account of the colonial experience in Nigeria; they also provide a continuous criticism – constructively – of the Nigeria’s corrupt military and civilian regimes for their role in keeping the newly independent country backward. Achebe as well as other African novelists are primarily faced with the need to revise and redefine their past from the authorized version of history and to salvage this past from distortions and denigrations. Here they offer a re-articulation of history that is designed to destabilize European discursive constructions of Africa’s past. Then, such reinscription of African history, of course, fits neatly into the larger project of educating peoples – as mentioned earlier. The African novelists’ dialogue with colonialist historical narratives, therefore, assumes a
subversive character. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is one of the most celebrated imaginative attempts to subvert this authorized history by constructing an oppositional version of it – the issue that will constitute the domination of the remaining pages of this chapter, not only through reading *Things Fall Apart*, but also *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, since Achebe himself says that these three novels “constitute only one, a kind of trilogy”. Thus, the three novels should be considered, together, as a direct response to the works of such writers as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary.

4.3 *Things Fall Apart*

As stated earlier, African novelists have striven not to retreat but to react against colonial writings and to bring to the world a view of history and culture that went unrecognized or that was effectively negated by the colonial rule and its literary narratives. It is against perception of Negroes as “a beastly living people, without God, Law, Religion …,” that African writers try to shed light on what is racially called “the Dark Continent”. One of these writers is the Nigerian Chinua Achebe who – through his *African Trilogy*, a set of works that includes *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* – tries to demonstrate that every society depends on rigid sets of conventions which can only be lived and evaluated as a whole, ideally, from the inside. Likewise, suggesting that it would be profitable to “take an inside view of the Dark Continent,” David Carroll writes that in *Things*
Fall Apart we are given “an Africa described by an African not as a scenario for an exploration of the black side of the European soul but as a place where people live normal, unfrenzied lives”. (21)

‘Contact’ novels – like The African Trilogy – do more than simply mirror reality; they also help create it and can be used to disseminate ideology. As a novelist, Achebe is very aware of the novel’s potential to ‘regenerate’ culture and ‘re-educate’ readers. However, Achebe’s purpose in Things Fall Apart is not only to recreate a valid picture of the traditional Igbo life, but also to reassert and re-establish its value and beauty. The novel, for Achebe, is a means of “rehabilitating the African psyche, which had been severely damaged in its confrontation with the colonial invaders, and a means of destroying his society’s acceptance of racial and cultural inferiority”. (22)

In Things Fall Apart, Achebe tries to present a coherent picture of an organic society with a unique identity – a picture in contrast to that which had been depicted in the colonial narratives. Thus, Things Fall Apart is a reaction to the colonial novels and, as such, it focuses on the cultural aspects of colonial policy and practice. In his reaction against the colonial novel, Achebe identified two well-known authors whose depiction of Africa denigrates indigenous cultures. Joyce Cary angered and upset him by his book, Mister Johnson, set in Nigeria. Achebe felt insulted by this book, and for this reason he was inspired to write a novel based on his own version of the African experience. (23)
In fact, Achebe’s encounter with Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* is said to be the reason for his abandoning medicine for literature as a profession.

In the case of postcolonial African writing in general, no canonical European text, perhaps, has had greater influence and induced stronger reaction than Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Of all contemporary African writers, it is perhaps Achebe who responds most strongly to imperialist discourse in general, but he finds Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* particularly offensive and terms it a racist book. In short, it is the Africa of the European novel – an Africa which has no meaning, no cultural structure or coherence – that turned Achebe into a novelist. An American critic, M. Mahood, writes that the present generation of African writes “play with the idea of re-writing” *Heart of Darkness* and, for Mahood, “one reader of Conrad who actually has had the knowledge and initiative to do this is Chinua Achebe.” (24)

However, the postcolonial project of rewriting canonical colonial texts is no longer considered an exercise that merely bears testimony to the anxiety of influence or as an expression of the dialectical relations between the colonial and its post-; it is now widely accepted, according to Stephen Slemon, that the rewriting provides an alternative reading that displaces the existing historical narrative as the sole truth-bearer, and establishes the revisionist strategy ”as an anti-colonial assault on European assumptions about originality and mimicry” (25)
This is not to say that one can ignore or wash away an inheritance, however troubling it may be. Africa/Africans are made synonymous with black/dark/evil/inferior, in canonical colonial master texts, a projection that postcolonial Africa inherited, with the possibility of its remaining deeply embedded in the native social psyche. However, the researcher believes that this revisionist literary strategy of postcolonial fiction does not merely reiterate their literary inheritance, but also challenge colonial constructs: after all, the native now also subjects the erstwhile colonizer to an answer, challenging the identities that had been imposed upon the colonized by re-constructing and re-birthing the texts that once were considered definitive.

The researcher does not doubt Conrad’s influence on Achebe but it is largely a negative influence, a kind of inspiration, but not in the usual way that produced Achebe’s response. His works should be taken more seriously for it is not mere “rewriting” but rather a demand for justice to correct or redeem Marlow’s distorted presentation of Africa and the Africans. Things Fall Apart, for example, was both an effort to restore the faith of Africans in the strength of Igbo culture, and an attempt to answer what he (Achebe) believed were wrongful charges of savagery against native African, in the colonial texts that he had grown upon. However, the researcher agrees with Mahood when he states that Achebe’s works open to English readers the complex and ordered rural society that lies behind Marlow’s brief glimpses of an African scene that extends from equatorial forests of the Congo to the
lower reaches of Niger River. (26) Generally speaking, the complexity, order, and harmony of “primitive” African society are the main themes of Things Fall Apart, in particular, and The African Trilogy in general.

Things Fall Apart is a vision of what life was like in Igboland between 1850 and 1910. In this novel, Achebe makes a serious attempt to capture realistically the strains and tensions the Igbo people experienced under the impact of colonialism. It is an imaginatively recreated account of things as they happened during colonization from the perspective of the “primitive” people – a task that neither Carry nor Conrad was equipped to handle. Structurally, Things Fall Apart has three sections: the first and longest is set in Umuofia before the coming of the white man. The second part dramatizes Okonkwo’s banishment to Moanta, the village of his mother’s people, for sins committed against the Earth goddess. It also describes the coming of the white men to the nine villages that constitute Umuofia. The third section deals with the death of the old ways, symbolized by Okonkwo’s death. The novel is thus divided into three phases, the period of Africa’s virginity (before colonialism), the actual encounter with Europe and final disintegration of the African society.

**Self-made Hero**

As a character, Okonkwo is both an individual and a type. He is a character of intense individuality, a self-made hero, yet one who embodies the values most admired by the Igbo people. The narrator introduces Okonkwo early in the novel as,
a well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino ............

That was many years ago ... and during this time Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire ... When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fits. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. (27)

This citation praises Okonkwo’s manliness, his physical strength and valour. His stature is presented as typically heroic in the African sense, where heroism is seen in terms of actions that were virile, valiant and stout-hearted. He heroically defies the District Commissioner representing her Britannic Majesty.

The Hero as a Violent Man

In spite of all this glorification, Okonkwo remains violent. He brings his violation to a dramatic climax in the death of Ikemefuna, a teenaged boy – a ransom from an enemy village. The boy is given by the council of the village to Okonkwo’s care because of his boldness. The boy lived in Okonkwo’s household, and the latter comes to love the boy as his own son. Nevertheless, according to the Oracle, the boy “should die”. (28) Before the execution, Okonkwo is advised not to take
a hand in the boy’s death since he also had come to love Okonkwo more than his own father. Okonkwo’s fears of appearing weak turns him into a heathen man: “Dazed with fears, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.”

The death of Ikemefuna initiates a series of events for Okonkwo. He beat his wife during the Week of Peace; this act is an offense against the god of fertility. Immediately after, he inadvertently shoots the son of a dead Kinsman who is being mourned. According to tradition, this is a crime against the earth goddess, and accordingly, Okonkwo has to be banished to the home of his mother for seven years. In fact, in addition to his exile, all the villagers turn against Okonkwo, and more punitive actions are taken against him. Okonkwo’s banishment to the village of his mother’s people underlines the contrast of a well ordered “primitive” African society with a coercive system.

Okonkwo was still expiating his crimes in Mbanta once the white man has established himself in Umuofia. Meanwhile, in Umuofia, no one dares challenge the white man because they remember the massacre that took place in the neighboring village of Abame where an entire population was wiped out by the white man’s army for their having resisted and killed the first white man who set foot in the village. This massacre reminds us of the one that had taken place by Kurtz’s Heart of Darkness, where an entire African tribe had been killed for opposing him.
Once back from his exile, Okonkwo advises the council of the elders to wage a war against the newcomers: “We must fight these men and drive them from the land,” he says. But the elders and friends, Obierika and Ezeudu warns him that,

Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger .... And our clan can no longer act like one. He [the white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (33)

The preservation of his society’s integrity and of traditional values lead Okonkwo and a limited number of followers to burn the white man’s newly built church in Umuofia.

Okonkwo’s fierceness reaches its peak in his killing of a white man. As he could not strike directly at a white man, he draws his machete on the first white man’s messenger, comes to Umuofia to stop the gathering. Okonkwo thinks that by initiating the violence, Umuofians will follow his example; instead he hears voices condemning him and asking, “why did he do it” (34) Realizing that no man of Umuofia will join him in his defiance, he ends his life by hanging himself on a branch of a tree to avoid death at the hands of a white man. When he decided to put an end to his life, Okonkwo had reached the point of absolute disillusionment. In the betrayal of his clansmen, the values he had striven to maintain had disintegrated, and consequently his life no longer had any meaning. His death was a physical expression
of his knowledge that things had irrevocably fallen apart and his society totally disintegrated.

The underlying message behind the massacre of Abame and Okonkwo’s resistance and suicide is Achebe’s way of informing those critical of Negroes for their ‘tractability’ that Africans did resist colonialism – in spite of the fact that any resistance meant death before the then most powerful force on the earth. Achebe is also suggesting that there were/are many people like Okonkwo who found their life meaningful only through bold activities such as war and fighting to preserve the integrity of their society and their traditional values. Thus, Achebe, in Things Fall Apart, maps out an Africa in which not everything holds together, an Africa that begins to fall apart, culturally, socially and economically, with the coming of the white colonizer. The violence that had been created in the Igboland implies that the native Africans were living peacefully at home, and that the Europeans had come as “violent invaders”. (35) Again, the implication here is that colonialism is part and parcel of the problem. European invaders created violence rather than curbed it, as they always claimed.

Similarly, the stereotypical racial image of the African we know in fiction was originally created by the Europeans. “The negro,” Fanon writes, is "never so much a negro as since he has been dominated by whites", (36) as such, in the European master texts, the African is made synonymous with black/dark/evil/ inferior. JanMohamed has
focused attention on the phenomenon of domination by race – that the dominance of one race over another, historically, has made acceptable the projection of whatever is “bad” in human nature upon dark skin. In the researcher’s earlier reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, as one of the primary colonial texts, this reading of racial domination is found to be generally true, irrespective of the question of whatever the author is guilty of racism or do, actually, condemn it through an ironic delineation of its excesses. In *Heart of Darkness*, the composite picture that emerges is dependent on the key images, of darkness, savagery, confusion, chaos, horror.

In an interaction to this impression of a pervasive nightmare, Achebe, in famous diatribe against racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, talks of seeming impossibility of the West to look at Africa “not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people – not angels, but not rudimentary souls either – just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society.” Realizing that he was a representative of the other, who was inadequately drawn in canonical colonial fiction, it became necessary for him to answer this European fiction by attempting a work of fiction to overturn what he believed were wrongful charges of savagery against his native Africans in colonial texts.

Apparently, Achebe’s first work of fiction, *Things Fall Apart*, was both an attempt to demystify the demonic face that colonial texts
deliberately painted for Africa, and an effort to evoke a picture of Igbo life to restore the faith of Africans in the strength of their culture that the colonizing structure has repressed. Patrick McGee, in analyzing Achebe’s attempt to undermine the imperialist rhetoric of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, defines Achebe’s goal as “to undo the imperialism of the metaphor and to articulate the concrete particularity of African life that imperialist discourse occludes.” (39) And as is common in the exercise of rewriting Conrad in the postcolonial context, *Things Fall Apart* abounds with such instances of re-worked images and metaphors. McGee traces the metamorphosis of the meaning(s) of “darkness” through Conrad and Achebe, the latter rewriting Conrad’s central metaphor in ways that dispel the myth of its synonymity with African’s soul, even while allowing it its rightful place in the cultural traditions of Igbo lives.

**The Dichotomy between Light and Dark and Good and Evil**

The interrelationships between the light/dark and good/evil oppositions that exist for the Umuofians are roughly consistent with those that exist for Europeans as they were outlined in Chapter Three: light is good while darkness is not. Here, Achebe seems to suggest that light is better than darkness, but that has nothing to do with race. His narrator of *Things Fall Apart* begins to delimit the basic light/dark model in the very first pages of the novel, associating darkness with evil, among other things, and light with security and pleasure:
Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. On a moonlight night it would be different. The happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard, ... and old men and women would remember their youth. As the Igbo say: "When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk."  

When describing the “evil forests,” the narrator associates darkness directly with evil:

Every clan and village has its ‘evil forest’. In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine–men when they died. An “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. 

The narrator identifies light and whiteness, in contrast, with divine benevolence. For example, when the lords of the clan impersonate the villages’ ancestral spirits, they wear “a huge wooden face painted white”. Similarly, in Arrow of God, the Chief Priest of Ulu chalks the left side of his body white during the Pumpkin festival to represent his divine half. The same sort of white chalk is used routinely in both novels to represent good fellowship between guest and host, and in Arrow of God, “white clay” is used to symbolize “peace” when two clans are negotiating.
Although the persistent use of light and dark imagery throughout *The African Trilogy* suggests that this imagery or model is a part of the Igbo conceptual system, at least as Achebe represents its, the model is not arbitrarily extended to include skin colour until the Igbo come into contact with Europeans. To make this point, skin color is not mentioned at all in *Things Fall Apart* until Obierika tells Okonkwo the “story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk”:

> He held up a piece of chalk, which everyman kept in his Obi and with which his guests drew lines on the floor before they ate kola nuts. “And these white men, they say, have no toes.”

By having Obierika compare the colour of Europeans to that of the ceremonial chalk used to signify divine benevolence and the spirits themselves, the narrator subtly challenges the imperialist myth that ‘savage’ Africans took whites for gods because of their skin-colour; even though Obierika recognizes that the gods and the whites have a similar colour, he sees nothing divine or benevolent about Europeans. To him, they are “men,” not gods.

Even though Achebe’s Africans identify light and whiteness with divine benevolence, they do not associate white skin with divinity in *Things Fall Apart*. Skin-colour becomes an important facial marker once whites are introduced into the narrative; in fact, virtually every character who enters the story after the first mentioned of white is described as being either “light-skin” or “dark,” “black” or “white”. For the Umuofians, however, it is the fact that whites have different
pigmentation that is important, rather than the nature of that difference. Accordingly, when describing to Okonkwo how and why whites massacred the people of Abame, Obierika attaches no significance to the colour of the European's skin: “Who knows what may happen tomorrow?” he asks his friend. “Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us”. Clearly the Igbo have not yet extended light/colour model to include “white” and “dark” skin. To Obierika, the whites might as well be green.

So, despite his contempt for Conrad and his work, Achebe’s first novels parallel Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in their representation of imperialist ideology regarding the rhetoric of light and darkness. Like Conrad, Achebe suggests that light is better than darkness; but he reproduces the imperialist rhetoric in order to subvert it: he tries to challenge imperialist ideology from the “inside”. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Achebe’s Umuofian characters, like his Europeans, privilege light over darkness and whiteness over blackness, but they do not extend the oppositions along racial lines – at least not until Europeans arrive with their guns and missionaries, who, then, have extended the basic model only to legitimate their own activities. The local missionary, Mr. Smith, for example, “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 moral conflict with the sons of darkness”. To Smith, of course, the “sons of darkness” are the black savages that comprise his flock.
As the researcher noted earlier, in Chapters Two and Three, many imperialists argued that the invasion of Africa was in the best interests of Africans since it introduced “light” to the “Dark Continent”. Missionaries in particular employed the rhetoric of light and darkness in order to justify their activities in Africa. Writing in 1921, G.T. Basden, for example, concludes that “The advent of Christianity has led many “Igbo” out of darkness into light, and from the power of Satan unto God”\(^{(49)}\). Likewise, Robert Milligan refers to African Christians as “precious human souls upon whose darkness the light of heaven has dawned”\(^{(50)}\) (italics added). Like most missionaries, Milligan considers the conquest of Africa to be a "natural duty".\(^{(51)}\) Similarly, the District Commissioner, George Allen, in *Things Fall Apart* believes that, as a British Colonial administrator, he is bringing “civilization” to Africa. He even decides to write a book on the subject, whose title will be “The Participation of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger”.\(^{(52)}\) The book is a parody of Kurtz’s *Heart of Darkness* report to the *International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs*; it will serve as a reference work for later white men who will come to that area. The District Commissioner’s purpose in writing the book is to ensure that no white man should attend undignified native traditions; otherwise, it would give the natives a poor opinion of the white man.\(^{(53)}\)
The Colonizer as Morally Corrupt

In fact, the book has already become a standard guidebook of the fictional colonial administration as the basis for its policies in Nigeria. Achebe exploits this book in his third novel, *Arrow of God*. Captain Winterbottom, the Chief Colonial Administrator in *Arrow of God*, looks back nostalgically to the time of *Things Fall Apart* when his friend Allen wrote the book. This was the time when the District Commissioner ruled alone, without native warrants, and this helped his predecessors to wipe out any resistance from the natives. Following the book closely, Winterbottom insists on the rigid hierarchy of power, and warned against the wanton character that some white might have toward native women. “It was absolutely imperative,” he warned them, "that every European in Nigeria ... should not lower themselves in the eyes of the natives". (54)

The colonial world of *Arrow of God* reveals itself as unproductive as that of *Heart of Darkness*. Sex and laziness keep the colonial rulers of the country inefficient, as one senior officer tells his group around him, “*Old Tom* [Winterbottom] is *always reminding you that he came out to Nigeria in 1910, but he never mentions that in all that time he has not put in a day’s work*”(55). It seems that those white rulers are busying themselves in doing nothing but backbiting. Tony Clarke, Winterbottom’s assistant, and Mr. Wright, Public Works Department Supervisor, for example, spend their days at gossiping about Winterbottom’s marital problems (his wife had left him while he was at
war with Germany in the colony of Cameroons). Clarke also tells Wright “the real trouble with Winterbottom is that he is too serious to sleep with native women”\textsuperscript{[56]}. The novel also discloses cases of white administrators raping native women after having whipped their husbands. Achebe’s extensive exploration of the sex theme among white colonialists is his rebuttal to the Western Literature, which considers Negroes as sensuous to the extreme, and which has always debased the black woman.

\textbf{Religion and Customs}

Achebe also focuses on the theme of religion. In \textit{Things Fall Apart}, as we have seen, he portrays the initial responses of a remote Igbo community to European beliefs and practices. Fifteen years later, in \textit{Arrow of God}, Achebe imagines the development of colonial institutions; in particular, he focuses on religious institutions and their impact upon traditional Igbo beliefs and practices. Although the relationship between Christianity and Igbo beliefs is developed throughout \textit{The African Trilogy}, their structural similarities become most clear in \textit{Things Fall Apart}. In this novel, Achebe tries to show to the world that the African societies are not animistic. Their religion acknowledges the existence of a Supreme Being. The traditional Igbo, for instance, call the Supreme Being Chukwu or Chineke.

Likewise, David Carroll writes that Igbo religion is not limited to the Igbo themselves. “It transcends local boundaries, and it consists of three major categories of belief – the worship of great public deities,
the cult of personal gods, and the worship of ancestors.” (57) The Igbos believe in a Supreme God, Chukwu, who lives in the sky from where he controls fertility and creation; he watches over his creatures from a distance and never receives direct sacrifices. These are offered to lesser gods such as Ala, Ani, and the earth goddess. The cult of ancestors is controlled by Ala, and its emissaries on earth are the “egwugwu”. The dead are part of the Igbo social world and are treated as if they are alive. They invisibly continue the lineage system and safeguard it against wicket spirits. The third category of belief is the worship of a personal god or “chi”. A “chi” is a spiritual soul to which one’s fortunes and abilities are ascribed. Each individual is controlled by his “chi”. (58)

Achebe’s inclusion of these gods in his novel Things Fall Apart suggests that the Igbos had a highly developed value system prior to the advent of Christianity in Africa. Moreover, similar to Christianity, the religious system of the Igbos is centered around an all-powerful deity that structures a belief system around itself. As has been just indicated, the structural similarities between Christianity and Igbo beliefs become most clear in Things Fall Apart in a conversation between Mr. Brown, a Christian missionary, and Akunna, one of Umuofia's leaders:

‘You say that there is one Supreme God who made heaven and earth,’ said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown’s visits. ‘We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and other gods.’
'There are no other gods,' said Mr. Brown. ‘Chukwu is the only God and all others are false ...' [59]

Mr. Brown’s contact with the elders of the clan teaches him “a good deal about the religion of the clan”, and his genuine interest in the Igbo belief leads him to debate the relative merits of Igbo and Christian theologies. His willingness to refer to his “god” as “Chukwu” suggests that he finds the two deities to be conceptually similar, both are Supreme Beings, and both are centred around an omnipotent being who created and rules the universe. Because the two religious systems are – in part – structurally similar, Mr. Brown comes “to the conclusion that a frontal attack” upon the Igbo religion “would not succeed”, accordingly, he decides to “trod softly” on the traditional faith. In this way his “mission grew from strength to strength”. [60]

Once again, in focusing on the system of traditional Igbo beliefs and practices, Achebe’s purpose is to point out that the Igbos had a highly developed value system. He also suggests that a successful way of introducing Christianity would have been to start from the existing belief and then convey the new concepts. He admirably expresses it in the conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna (referred to in the previous page), and Mr. Brown’s interest in the ordered system of Igbo beliefs. But this ordered belief and life cannot last any longer when the white man introduces a new order with his new religion and rule. Since European beliefs and practices insinuate themselves within Umuofia – to complete Yeat’s celebrated line – the “centre cannot
hold”. As has been suggested earlier, the Europeans succeed to violate the Umuofians’ traditional beliefs and practices by focusing on similarities instead of differences. The European missionary, Mr. Brown, also recognizes that religion, education and medical technology go “hand in hand,” establishing a school and a hospital along with his Church in Umuofia. As a result, the Umuofians came to realize the power of the “white man’s medicine” and the economic advantages of an English education; the “new” religion and the culture associated with it provide a means of social and economic power.

**Conflict with Church and its Teachings**

However, the Igbo system with its traditional checks and balances is disturbed by the European imposed beliefs and ways of administration. We can see such disturbances, for examples, in the several conflicts that are created by the new religion. One of these conflicts is focused on the teaching of the church that demands – among other things – that the worshipping of fake gods, “gods of wood and stone,” and “gods of deceit” be stopped. [61] This teaching alone disturbs the people to the point that they say, “it is not [our] custom to fight for [our] gods.” [62]

Furthermore, the new religion creates a wider social conflict between two different ways of life at the personal level. This conflict is centred on the teaching of the Church that hardens oppositions between fathers and sons; and Nwoye's opposition to his father, Okonkwo, is one instance. To the young mind of Nwoye, Christian teaching meant
what it says. Mr. Kiaga, the new convert and missionary’s interpreter, advises the wondering Nwoye that “Blessed is he who forsakes his father and mother for my sake ... Those that hear my words are my father and my mother”. [63] Indeed, Mr. Kiaga’s teaching initiated Nwoye’s rebellion towards his father which leads him to say: “He is not my father,”[64] in response to Obierika who wants to know the whereabouts of his father. So, the opposition and imbalance embodied by father and son caused the society to fall apart under the impact of colonialism and the doctrine of the new religion.

In Arrow of God, as in Things Fall Apart, the forces of colonialism and Church precipitate a crisis. Ezeulu, the Chief Character of Arrow of God sees the value of change and reacts to Europe in a different way than that of Okonkwo’s in Things Fall Apart. Ezeulu even sends one of his sons to the white man’s Church and School. This step results in a problem in the clan that leads the traditional tribesmen to accuse Ezeulu of befriending the white man; in his position of god’s representative, he is also the guarantor of tribal institutions and as such, no contact should be permitted between him and the white man.

However, Ezeulu is ready to accept change and to come to terms with it unto a point, but when his dignity is involved he could not accept. Similarly, he could not accept violating the Umuaroans’ traditional beliefs and practices. Recognizing that European ways and beliefs threaten not only the traditions of Umuaro but its sovereignty as well,
he alerts his people hoping to unite them against the white men and their religion and eventually drive them away. Accordingly, when he is summoned by Winterbottom, he refuses to go, directing the messenger, "tell your white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me he must come here,"[65] since “it is against custom for the priest of Ulu to travel far from his hut".[66] Ezeulu even promptly declines an opportunity to be appointed by the District Commissioner as the “warrant Chief” for all of Umuaro, informing the interpreter to “tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody’s chief, except Ulu”. [67]

**Colonial Militancy/Zealotry and Extremism**

A main problem for Western colonialists and their faith is that they laid the foundation of extremism. In *Arrow of God*, the catechist, John Goodcountry, brought by the missionaries from the Niger Delta, advocates a militant evangelism, that blood should be shed for Christianity’s sake! “If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith”.[68] Soon this teaching brings its outcome, Oduche, one of the hero’s sons, burns the sacred python of his father, Ezeulu, the legitimate representative of god. This act of Oduche can be taken as another instance of the oppositions in the relationship of fathers and sons, which are highlighted under the impact of colonialism and the new religious doctrine.
So, colonialists and their new faith create a new class of Africans: new converts, teachers. They are also known as interpreters. Ironically, these people misinterpret their duties, mistreat, and humiliate hideously their fellow natives and even their relatives. They become worse than the white man does in dealing with their fellow citizens. These groups reveal themselves zealots and extremists.

On the whole, though the Europeans establish outposts, missions, schools and hospitals, and are able to impose their political, religious and educational institutions upon the Igbos with little opposition, they are unable to induce them (the Igbos) to absolutely abandon their traditional practices and beliefs. Even though there are a few converts and generate some interest in European-style education who form an opposite force to the priests and tribal deities, they seem peripheral to the main events; and the Europeans are aliens and invaders and their culture has little impact upon Igbo culture because the transfer of values and beliefs is much more difficult. The new converted Igbos themselves hesitate to destroy the python that they worship, and one elder in *Arrow of God* expresses the new converts and his irrespective attitude in this way:

> You may be called Peter, or you may be called Paul or Barnabas; it does not pull a hair from one ... But since you have also become our teachers I shall be waiting for the day when you have the courage to kill a python ... \(^{69}\)

The Umuofians who join the church seem to do so for material benefits rather than spiritual rewards.
If, for the Igbos, accepting the European culture afforded a number of benefits, nevertheless, according to Pratt, “they [the Igbos] do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own [culture] and what they use it for”. [70] Similarly, Richard Gray notes, despite the Europeans’ efforts,

Christianity in Africa was never synonymous with the missionaries’ understanding of the faith; the encounter with Africa involved a process of interaction in which Africa’s distinctive characteristics and contributions have become increasingly prominent [71].

This process of interaction is what Pratt and Gray term as “transculturation”, or “hybridity” according to Homi Bhabha. However, where imperial writers, including Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, Joyce Cary, and Graham Green, typically describe indigenous responses in one of two ways – the natives either resist European domination and remain “savage” or they accept European beliefs and practices and become “civilized” – postcolonial writers like Achebe describe a third response, one which suggests that rather than simply resist or accept European beliefs and practices, Achebe’s伊博人的accept some, reject others, and in some cases invent new ones. As Gray’s work suggests, the process involves not only the loss and gain but the exchange of cultural materials, it is, in his words, “a dynamic two way process.” [72] Accordingly, as Diana Taylor notes, “the dominant groups that define, acquire, and impose culture are themselves transculturated sooner or later, whether they want it or not” [73].
So far, the researcher has argued that though a dominant (colonial) culture can often impose its institutions upon subject (colonized) people by force, it is much more difficult to transplant values and beliefs. However, in terms of race and gender, colonial forces, via texts and contexts, engender complex patterns of superiority/inferiority, voice/silence and power/weakness in human interactions. Achebe not only recognized canonical colonial fiction’s power, but also realized that he was a representative of the other, who was inadequately drawn. It became necessary for him to answer the European text by usurping its language – the language of imposition – using it in new ways; because in so far as it happens to be the language of the colonizers, such an imposition may appear as a way of “silencing” the native voice. Hence, in his extensive criticism of “racism” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe, for example, has focused upon the contrasting portrayals of the two women of the novella, Kurtz’s mistress in the Congo and his intended in England (discussed in the previous chapter). In any case, what seems to bother Achebe most about the two portrayals he contrasts is the fact that the African woman never speaks.

Achebe, then, systematically and “contrapuntally” perused the colonial texts and discovered his own compulsion to overturn the prevailing colonial constructs and inscriptions in the canonical European text by usurping its language (here English); but, for Achebe, “it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with
its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings”. Achebe has argued in his various essays on the subject of language that the challenge is to rework the language of imposition. By appropriating the language of canonical texts that he is writing back to, his project is to deprive the colonial text of its position as the sole voice of authority on the social/political/historical reality of African colonization.

Significantly, the titles of Achebe’s novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are adaptations from W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, respectively. The use of Western titles can be viewed as an instance of appropriation of English – an attempt of resistance against the imposition of English. This kind of appropriation can be read as an act of “mimicry”. According too Homi Bhabha, mimicry functions as an “authorized versions of otherness”. In Bhabha’s view, Achebe’s attempt to appropriate English titles can be read as a symbolic expression of the relationship of colonial domination which is perpetuated through internalization and reiteration of the colonizer’s superiority. But Achebe insists that Africanizing or indigenizing English is part of African empowerment. Therefore, the action of seizing and reworking a language and questioning its established usages, questions the “silencing” act of colonial imposition, and clearly focuses on issues of race and power.
Although our understanding of power is often directly expressed in terms of forces and objects, that is, forces acting upon objects, it is frequently represented as “voice” as well, not only in literary or religious texts but even in ordinary language. Accordingly, as we shall see in his novels, Achebe develops and disseminates a new model or an alternative understanding for the structuring of power relations, a model based on force schema which equates “voice” with power – to have “voice” is to have power, while the disempowered have no “say” in their destinies. One of the eldest members of the clan in *Things Fall Apart*, expressing the importance of voice, addressing the young, “I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result?”[77]

In his novels, Achebe focuses on Africans coming to terms with the colonial past and the postcolonial future, suggesting that if the Igbo are to survive as a people – literally and figuratively – in postcolonial Nigeria – they will have to recover their “voice” they lost during the colonial period, because “with all its imperfections,” Achebe says, “their past was not one long night of savagery”.[78] By giving his Igbo readers a sense of their own past, Achebe, in his work, appears to have a dual purpose: to evoke a picture of Igbo life so as to recover the faith of Africans in the strength of their cultural realities that the colonizing structure has repressed, and to help them regain their voice as a people and use it to save themselves.
Voice

Achebe’s critics have long noted that “voice” plays an important role in his novels. Simon Gikandi, for instance, notes that in writing the novel, “Achebe seems to be making a case for the absolute and inescapable linkage between being and voice:

After all, the most obvious sign of the destruction of Igbo culture and its authority is the repression of Igbo voices at the end of the novel when colonialism … represents the African as a subject with neither a voice nor a logos. Clearly, writing in the colonial situation, as an act of restitution, demands a process of reversal – the reconstitution of the repressed being and its voice. [79]

“Voice” is also a manifestation of social power among the Umuofians. Even the District Commissioner recognizes the importance of speech to the Umuofians, noting disparagingly, ”One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words …” [80] To the Umuofians, of course, their words are anything but superfluous. In fact, as the narrator notes, “Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten”. [81] Similarly, Gikandi notes, “In Things Fall Apart, the act of narration is often a celebration of the power of the Igbo voice”, [82] Accordingly, “powerful orators” like Ogbuefi Ezeugo and Okika are among the most important leaders of Umuofia. Other leaders like Okoye, are granted a “voice” because of their economic power. Okonkwo’s voice in the community, on the other hand, is based initially upon his physical power rather than his oratorical prowess.
because “He had a slight stammer and whenever he … could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists”.[83] Eventually, however, he gets an official voice as “one of the Lords of the clan” because he is strong, rich and respected for his “industry and success”.[84]

Ultimately, Okonkwo does lose his voice, however, and through his loss, we can see the general “repression of Igbo voices” that Gikandi notes. Okonkwo’s loss of voice is most evident when he faces the District Commissioner: although he is vocal enough when he instigates an assault upon the local Christian Church, once he is in shackles, Okonkwo, like his five companions, is "sullen and silent." Even when they were left alone in prison, "they found no words to speak to one another",[85] remaining silent even when the guards beat them. The silence of Okonkwo and the other leaders continues upon their release. Likewise, the village itself is “astir in a silent, suppressed way”.[86] When the village gathers the next day to decide how to respond to the indignities suffered by Okonkwo and his fellow prisoners, the meeting is broken up by representatives of the colonial administration before Okonkwo can speak. Without saying a word, he takes action and kills one of the messengers, hoping the murder of the messenger will initiate Umuofia to resist the whites. When the Umuofians refuse to kill the other messengers, Okonkwo realizes they will never rebel, and so he hangs himself, dying silently and alone.
Achebe’s focus on “voice” and “voiceless” is not surprising when we consider *The African Trilogy* as a direct response to the works of Conrad and Cary. In their novels, Africans are denied not only “voice” but the capacity to speak an intelligible language at all. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow never acknowledges African language as such, characterizing it instead as “short, grunting phrases”. As Achebe notes, in *An Image of Africa*, the only language Africans can speak is English, and even in that language, their utterances are limited to things like “Mistah Kurtz, he dead.” Similarly, in Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, when Africans speak in English, their productions, syntax and diction are represented as being comical if not incorrect. Johnson’s speech in particular, is marked by mispronunciations and malapropisms. Cary does allow Africans a language of their own, however; when African characters speak in their native language, the narrator translates their words into “correct,” standard English. Cary’s Africans, then, can talk and think sensibly in their “native” tongue. They are unable, however, to express themselves clearly, if at all, in the colonial language.

As in *Mister Johnson*, in *Things Fall Apart* English is represented as the only means the natives have of acquiring a voice in the colonial administration. As Mr. Brown, a white missionary, warns, “If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school [the white’s school], strangers would come from other places to rule them. They could already see that happening in the Native Court, where the D.C. [District
Commissioner] was surrounded by strangers who spoke his tongue”. Consequently, Akunna, “one of the great men in the village [gives] one of his sons to be taught the white man’s knowledge”. Even Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, returns to Umuofia against his father’s wish because “the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write”. As the next novel in the trilogy, No longer at Ease, relates, Nwoye’s decision ultimately leads to material success:

By Umuofia standards he was well well-to-do. He had been a Catechist of the Church Missionary Society for twenty-five years and then retired on a pension of twenty-five pounds a year. He had been the very first man to build a “zinc” house in Umuofia.

If Nwoye succeeds in colonial Umuofia because he adopts the language and religion of the invaders, his son, Obi, has even more potential because he excels academically at “one of the best secondary schools in Eastern Nigeria”. Recognizing that they may be able to “voice” their interests through Obi, the Umuofia Progress Union invests 800 pounds in his education, sending him to England. They wanted him to study law, but rather, he studies English. Although he is not particularly ambitious, he recognizes that the only way to escape Umuofia, “where money was so rare,” is to learn the language of the colonizers.

After completing his formal education and returning to Nigeria, Obi gets a civil service job in the capital and quickly becomes caught up in
city-life. When he visits his ancestral home, he finds that he no longer can connect with his people; he cannot be the “voice” of Umuofia because he is no longer a Umuofian. The distance that develops between Obi and the traditional values he grew up with becomes too wide. As the narrator notes, "Obi’s mission-house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country". Unfortunately, for Obi, if he can no longer be Igbo, he cannot really be English either. Much like Cary’s Mr. Johnson, Obi becomes a man without a people. Although he can “pass” as a lower civil servant for a while, he is unable to adjust to the unfamiliar life in the capital; he falls into debt, gets into tax trouble, and, in despair, accepts monetary bribe until he is caught and convicted. Ultimately, he accepts his punishment in silence, appearing “unruffled and indifferent” while the court judges him.

In addition to highlighting the relationship between voicelessness and powerlessness, Achebe suggests that the imposition or adoption of foreign culture and religious beliefs can destroy one’s cultural identity; and Obi’s case is a living proof of Achebe’s statement. Obi’s silence and his indifference to his fate at the end of the novel can be interpreted as the disintegration that might accompany transculturation. In fact, as David Carroll observes, Obi – as a character – is the creation of the “disparate fragments” that make up his past, “but,” for Carroll, "Obi himself remains shadowy". Carroll is correct in his observation that Obi is "shadowy" because he (Obi) is
comprised of shadows, shadows of the Igbo past and the colonial present. He has no graspable identity. In this sense, transculturation is represented as being a destructive process.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, at least, “voice” represents both personal and communal “force”. To have “voice” is to have “power” over “objects” while to be dispossessed of “voice” is to become an “object”, subject to another “power”. Like Okonkwo and Obi, the Igbo community in general becomes silent as the British take control of Eastern Nigeria. As the European invaders impose their culture, language and religious beliefs upon the peoples of Nigeria, those people lose their agency. Since the colonizers do not recognize Igbo as a legitimate language and the Igbo do not speak the colonizers’ language, the Igbo are denied any voice at all. Much like Obi, the Igbo community in general has no recognizable identity because, in Achebe’s view, the colonial system had destroyed it. Thus, as Nigeria stands on the brink of Independence, there are no recognizable “Nigerians”; until they find their “voice,” they are doomed to repeat Obi’s tragedy.

As critics have noted, in his early work, Achebe seems anxious about the survival of Igbo traditions and culture in postcolonial Nigeria. In *The African Trilogy*, indigenous culture has been badly damaged by the colonial experience – the centre will not hold. In fact, as the *Trilogy* suggests, Achebe has observed that everything does not hold together; and in his *Things Fall Apart*, in particular, Achebe maps out an Africa
that begins to fall apart, culturally, socially and economically, with the advent of white missionaries.

**Conclusion**

In fine, Achebe addresses Nigeria’s post-colonial identity crises by reconsidering European imperialism in the context of the Igbo civilization that preceded it in Eastern Nigeria. Achebe does more than simply challenge the extended light/dark model, however; he also suggest that pre-colonial Igbo communities were “civilized” rather than “savage” and that Europeans managed to dominate Igboland only by systematically repressing, destroying and/or subsuming traditional Igbo beliefs and practices. Finally, Achebe emphasizes traditional Igbo attitudes towards “voice” in order to suggest to his Igbo readers that they can become a “force” again in a free, postcolonial Nigeria.
Notes:

1. Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 P.4. Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”.

2. Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, New Delhi: Allied Publishes Pvt. Ltd., 2006, p.172. All the subsequent references to this text are to this edition.

3. The terms “Igbo” and “Ibo” are both used to designate the peoples of Igboland. Igboland is an area in Eastern Nigeria.


15. Ibid., p. 44.


17. Parekh and Jagne, p. 20.


29. Ibid p. 53.


31. For more details on Okonkwo’s banishment and the extra punitive actions, which are taken against him, see *Things Fall Apart*, p. 113.

32. Ibid, p.126.

33. Ibid, pp. 159 – 160.

34. Ibid, p. 184.


41. Ibid, p. 135.

42. Ibid, pp.81-82.

44. Ibid, p.16.


46. Ibid, p.128.

47. Ibid, p.166.


53. Ibid.


55. Ibid., p. 106.

56. Ibid., p. 105.

57. David Carroll. p. 29.

58. Ibid.


60. Ibid., pp. 162 – 64.

61. Ibid., pp. 131 – 32.

62. Ibid., p. 145.

63. Ibid., p. 139.

64. Ibid., p. 131.

66. ibid., p.145.

67. ibid., p. 176.

68. ibid., p. 48.

69. ibid., p. 51.

70. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 06.


72. ibid., p. 81.


77. *Things Fall Apart*, p. 152.

78. Achebe, "The novelist as Teacher", in *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 45.


80. *Things Fall Apart*, p. 158.

81. ibid., p. 06.

82. Gikandi, p, 33.


84. ibid., p. 24.

85. ibid., pp. 175–76.
86. ibid., p.179.


88. ibid., p. 106.


90. ibid., p.162.


93. ibid., p. 06.

94. ibid., p. 09.

95. ibid., p. 57.

96. ibid., p. 01.

97. David Carroll, p. 86.