

Valorising African Identity: Reading Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

The Eurocentric ideology is vigorously challenged by the African writers who attempt to recover their native identity, culture, and African values. 'Writing back' to the centre is an important aspect of the works of Third World writers as they resent the concept of 'racial othering'. Through their writing these writers register a sense of pride in their ancestry and the beauty of blackness. They believe in the intrinsic value of African culture moulded by indigenous practices and rituals. The paper analyses the African writer's defence against the alien encroachment and prejudices of colonial power and the role played by them in affirming their indigenous cultural identity through their works.

Nigerian Writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1976) are attempts to revive the native values, identity, culture through counter discourse and their writing is a quest for the total essence of the African identity. Both the works show the protest of the natives against the shackles of colonial authority. The rejection of the colonial authority and its 'civilizing mission' is symbolised by a return to Yoruba and Igbo culture.

Keywords: civilizing mission, othering, Yoruba, Igbo, indigenous, culture

The 'Third World' writing emerged in the early fifties of the twentieth century to counter the European novels that depicted the Africans as savages who required enlightening through 'civilizing mission'. The African writers thus protested against the Western misrepresentation of African values and rebuilt the lost dignity, denied identity and distorted history through their writing. They narrated and celebrated the black consciousness and also the writings which represented Africans not as 'objects' of Colonial rule but as individuals in their own right. Through counter discourse the third world writers registered their voice against the hegemonic power, thus subverted the relation between colonizers and colonized. Colonial authority often

... referred to as colonialist discourse to mark its relationship to the language in which colonialist thinking was expressed, was based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded. The colonizers believed that only their own Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated, or, as postcolonial critics put it, metropolitan. Therefore, native peoples were defined as savage, backward,

and undeveloped. Because their technology was more highly advanced, the colonizers believed that their whole culture was more highly advanced, and they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated. So the colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonized were at the margins. The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper “self”; native peoples were considered “other,” different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human. This practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called othering, and it divides the world between “us” (the “civilized”) and “them” (the “others” or “savages”). The “savage” is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the demonic other). But sometimes the “savage” is perceived as possessing a “primitive” beauty or nobility born of closeness to nature (the exotic other). In either case, however, the “savage” remains other and, therefore, not fully human (Tyson 419-20).

The colonial agenda thus was to push all native cultures to peripheral spaces while differentiating between the West and the rest. This Eurocentric position was emphasised by claiming the superiority of the West and placing it at the ‘centre’. This Central position assumed by the West is countered by the notion of ‘Writing back’ to the centre. Writers from colonized margins like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka directly challenge the colonial centre. This self-conscious writing back is a mode of empowerment that reclaims the identity denied to the colonized to the extent of being annihilated. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* claim a central position for the African culture and identity by countering the stereotypical image propagated through European discourse.

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1976) endeavour to unravel the discourse imposed by the Europe on the native cultures. Achebe and Soyinka share the attempt to revive the native values, identity, and culture through counter discourse. Their writings reflect the quest for recovering the authentic African identity and historical roots in the real essence. They reclaim blackness with pride and display the virtue of African heritage, identity, culture and traditions through their works. Their writings challenge the colonial agenda of stereotypical representation of the culture of native people as barbaric, irrational and savage. By writing back to the empire they protest against the canon, hence rewrite the distorted black history, and reconstruct the indigenous culture, identity and tradition. Their works urge to establish a sense of authority, dignity in native culture and cast away the subjugation of colonial power. Thus, they raise their voice against the colonial power, slavery, exploitation, oppression, alienation and humiliation.

Things fall Apart (1958) is a conscious voice against the colonial power that disintegrated the African identity. With the advent of colonialism the Igbo people lose their integrity, African values, the old age beliefs, rituals and traditions. The novel was influenced by Joseph Conrad’s projection of Africa and its people in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). To Conrad Africa was the ‘Dark Continent’ – uncivilized, barbaric and savage. Achebe in his *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness* (1963) writes that Conrad’s novel “projects the image of Africa as the ‘the other world’ the antithesis of Europe and, therefore, of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted

intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (2). Chinua Achebe asserts that the African representation in Conrad’s work is nothing but stereotypical which:

...eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. (6)

Therefore *Things Fall Apart* is a counter discourse to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* attempting to rectify the misrepresentations of Conrad’s novel.

Achebe takes the title from W.B Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (1919) and it suggests the disintegration of the Igbo socio-cultural structure with the advent of colonialism. Achebe gives us the glimpses of the Igbo culture before the arrival of the colonial authority and the effect of colonisation is symbolised with the new rules and beliefs brought by the colonizer. The title becomes significant because the clash between the Igbo culture and the western culture is brought out when things fall apart. The novel is about the Okonkwo and his struggle to preserve the indigenous identity of his tribe against the onslaught of the colonial forces. Okonkwo is well respected by the people of his clan. Achebe also exposes the readers to the social structure and hierarchy of the Igbo tribe. During the course of the novel Okonkwo is exiled for seven years when he accidentally kills a young member of the tribe. Upon his return, Okonkwo is shocked to discover how the colonial order has influenced the Igbo culture. He says:

Does the white man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad: and our brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (129).

Many people including Okonkwo’s son convert to Christianity. He disowns his son after he turns to Christianity and abandons his culture and traditions. “You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people” (126). This shows the pride of natives in their Ibo culture, values, and tradition. Okonkwo and a few others try to rebel against the civilizing mission of the white missionaries and this results in the burning down of the church. The Igbo tribe is fined and Okonkwo and others are sent to prison and released later after the fine is paid. Subsequently, five court messengers try to stop a meeting of the clan members and Okonkwo kills one of the messengers. However his tribes men are mute spectators to this event and Okonkwo realises that his land Umuofia

will eventually submit to colonial authority. For Okonkwo the Igbo identity has fallen apart and he rebels against the colonial authority one last time by committing suicide. The suicide is the most powerful message to the colonizer implying the refusal to adopt the western identity at the cost of annihilating the native identity.

The suicide of Okonkwo gains symbolic significance in reclaiming the essence of African identity and again it is the suicide of Olunde which becomes instrumental in reclaiming the native identity in the *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* explores the struggle between the indigenous culture and European culture with the imposition of the colonial rule on Yoruba people. The play addresses the erosion of traditional Nigerian culture and rituals as a result of the propagation of the culture of the coloniser. The play reaffirms the pride in blackness symbolised by a return to indigenous culture and African way of life.

Death and the King's Horseman revolves around the life of the King's Horseman Elesin Oba who is destined to accompany the king in the realm of death according to Yoruba culture. Soyinka writes, "It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven" (167). Elesin appreciates the significance of Yoruba native custom of sacrifice as it signifies pride and honour in Yoruba culture. He greets the Yoruba ritual with fervour and willingness, he says:

My rein is loosened.

I am master of my Fate. When the honor comes

Watch me dance along the narrowing path

Glazed by the soles of my great precursors

My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside (153)

Meanwhile, the District officer Simon Pilkings learns about the ritual suicide from his black sergeant Amusa. Due to the intervention of colonial authority, Elesin is unable to perform his prescribed role of self-sacrifice. For the white colonial authority practices like the ritual suicide are primitive, barbaric, and irrational. Pilkings says: "I don't have to stop anything. If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me? If it were ritual murder or something like that I'd be duty-bound to do something" (171). Elesin is arrested by the colonial officer. However, Elesin's son Olunde brought up with western education and values chooses to perform ritual suicide. He rejects the colonial restraints of Simon Pilkings and the concept of 'civilizing mission', thus upholds the native tradition and takes pride in native identity and tradition. Soyinka's representation of the 'traditional ritual of sacrifice' symbolises pride in blackness, black culture and revival of native identity. Through an argument between Pilkings and his wife with the Olunde, Soyinka unravels the European dictatorship. The exchange of words between Mrs Pilkings and Olunde exposes the

white ideology. Olunde says: “You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand” (192).

Through counter discourse Achebe and Soyinka dismantle the assumptions about Africa and question the authority and power of canonical texts to represent Africa. Both the writers denounce the stereotypical image of Africans as barbaric, voiceless, marginalized and savage and reclaim the African identity and culture in their works. The colonial conquest and European interventions in the indigenous cultural rituals and the native’s effort to panegyryze the African values are reflected in both the texts. The authority of Europeans threatens the Igbo and Yoruba people to terminate their religion, tradition and culture. The European strategies and agenda are exposed through the clash of cultures. The natives put veritable efforts to combat the subjugation and oppression by the imperial power. The determination of the native people to uphold the Igbo and Yoruba Culture is central to the two works. The dictatorship of colonial rule in Yoruba and Igbo culture consequently threatened the natives to discontinue the sacred tradition of their society. Both the societies witnessed the imperial domination and subjugation of native culture. By writing back to the centre Achebe and Soyinka embrace all that is indigenous, thus rejecting the European authority. They reconstruct the demolished native cultural values and systems by uncovering the true essence of black consciousness.

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