

Literature Of Empire: A Post Colonialist Reading of Achebe's Exploitation of the Spirit of King Leopold II of Belgium's Letter to Colonial Missionaries in *Things Fall Apart*

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Published: March 2026</p> <p>Keywords: Colonizer Colonized Empire Literature Post colonialism</p>	<p>This paper sets out to demonstrate that Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> deals with the study of African literature as it relates to the colonizer-colonized experience. The study of literature as an inspirational activity cannot leave anyone indifferent. This presupposes that society informs literature and vice versa. It then becomes clear that the link between both is inseparable. Indeed, this explains why from the time of Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, right down to present date, literature has continued to be studied and or analyzed from a generational perspective. African literature which is the focus of this paper can be analyzed from a multidimensional perspective to give it a meaningful understanding. In this paper, my concern will be to give credit to Achebe as an early postcolonial writer whose writing ties with the spirit of king Leopold the II of Belgium's letter to the colonial missionaries, to show how it has inspired post-colonial writing, be it, as drama, the novel or poetry respectively. The hypothesis in this paper posits on the idea that the letter provides linguistic choices for analyzing tenets of post colonialism. Using insights drawn from the Postcolonial theory and textual analyses, I will examine the concepts of governance, subjugation, language, culture, center/margin and identity. The study will end up with the conclusion that there is a link between the letter and the spirit of postcolonial writing in modern life and the novelist's personal experiences and the present day space.</p>

1. Introduction

Postcolonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries, or literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized peoples. It focuses firstly on the way in which literature, by the colonizing culture distorts the experiences and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people. Next, on literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness. A case in point in Achebe's novel like *Things Fall Apart*, we notice that when the white man claims that Africans are barbaric, Achebe brings in the idea of the judicial system with the arrest of the people of Umuofia and consequent imprisonment showing how the system falls short of legal balances. This clearly shows how cruel the colonizer was in terms of captivity, bad governance, tyranny, and abuse of the colonized rights.

It can also deal with the ways, in which literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, traditions and so on, of colonized countries. This study intends to address some of the complexities of the postcolonial situation, in terms of the writing and reading situation of the colonized people, and of the colonizing people. If the popular saying holds that literature is of no moment, unless it speaks to my personal experience holds true, then whether or not the literature has post colonial colorations, it means as post colonial critics, we need to consider that the novelists under study have written on their personal experiences and that their works have continued to occupy present day space. In many works of literature, specifically those coming out of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Subcontinent, we meet characters who are struggling with their identities in the wake of colonization, or the establishment of colonies in another nation. For example, the British had a colonial presence in India from the 1700s until India gained its independence in 1947.

As you can imagine, the people of India as well as the characters in Indian novels must deal with the economic, political, and emotional effects that the British brought and left behind. This is true for literature that comes out of any colonized nation. In many cases, the literature stemming from these events is both emotional and political. As postcolonial critics, we need to enter these novels through a specific critical lens, when reading the texts. That critical lens of, post-colonial theory or post-colonialism, requires the reader to analyze and explain the effects that colonization and imperialism, or the extension of power into other nations, have on people and nations. This in effect, would constitute my approach in my analyses of Achebe. Some of the postcolonial key concepts include identity, language, culture, hybridity, ethnicity, otherness, race, and the center/margin dialectics. In my discussion, I will take into account the underpinnings of a novelist like Chinua Achebe and his classic: *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe as a writer wants to restore the cultural dignity of the continent obliterated by the colonial agency. This is due to the imposition of a foreign culture as a result of colonial presence in our continent. As a consequence of this, Africa art and culture suffered destruction and its values were replaced by those of the colonizer's culture. Achebe in his era has continued to evoke post colonial contestations against the dominance of the foreign culture over the culture of the continent. Post colonial studies emerged as counter discourse to the so-called narratives of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Conrad and Carrie's *Mister Johnson*.

In *Things Fall Apart*, we realize that the text paints a situation intended to debunk the western stereotypes and the prejudices on the African works. Conversely, with what Conrad's *Heart of Darkness as well as King Leopold's letter intends to* shows that the black does not have what it takes to get to the center, imagine when he calls the Africans as savages. As if that were not enough the missionaries are instructed to teach Africans how to read and never how to reason. We see that Achebe is abdicating from that peripheral situation to position himself at the center. There is unequal development in terms of governance. This ushers in disappointment, for the simple fact that the colonizer meted out very poor treatment on the African. We can immediately notice the tricks the colonizers played on Africa, almost bringing them close to the level of closing their eyes. In fact if we consider that writing or speaking during the colonial era was considered as subversive, then the novelist is trying to regain this lost glory. He is indeed struggling with his identity in the colonial encounter. The problems emanating from this novel are both emotional and political. Achebe no doubt belongs to the first generation of Nigerian writers who contributed to the invention of Modern African Literature. Which scholar will fail to see this glaring link between such a letter and post colonial writing? By taking the central stage in his era, he thus regenerated and authenticated African culture and help to enshrine African literature on the world map. A case in point where we see the devilish intentions behind the eroding of our customs can be captured in lines 15-17...*I make reference their mystic system and their fetish-warfare protection-which they don't want to abandon and you must make anything in your power to make it disappear.*' This in effect shows that the missionaries and King Leopold know that Africans have their authentic belief systems which are seemingly unshakable. Consequently the missionaries would want to do everything to bring chaos to such beliefs. Achebe in his writings set out to rescue such authentic African mores.

In an attempt to reclaim his African cultural heritage one can clearly see that he painted in his early novels like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, that Africans have a past that is realistic and authentic. By extension, he set out to clearly paint the indigenous African authentic identity. King Leopold knows this, and equally wishes his missionaries to understand that with Africans, to lie, to sleep with someone else's wife, to kill and to insult is bad. So when Achebe writes his novel, he wants to conscientize Africans on this idea which the Europeans know of Africans but would want to relegate it to the background. By the same token, Names in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* like *Okonkwo* and *Ezeulu* to name but these few play the role of shaping cultural identity. We can also clearly notice that the binary of master versus servant is persistent in King Leopold's letter. He says the missionaries need to always convert the blacks by using the whip. More so, the colonizer is made to believe that the colonized must remain and assume the position of a slave. Come to think of the following prescriptions: *'force them to pay you in sign of recognition-goats, chicken, or eggs every time you visit their villages .and make sure that niggers never become rich. Sing everyday that it's impossible for the rich to enter heaven. Make them pay tax each week at Sunday mass. Use the money supposed for the poor to build flourishing centers, Institute a confessional system which allows you to be good detectives, denouncing any black that has a different consciousness contrary to that of the decision maker.'*(29-34).

This excerpt clearly reveals oriental tendencies and otherness in a post colonial oriented text. In fact it is disheartening to learn that an African should never be invited for dinner even if the chicken were from him. By the same token, refusing to give him a chair is dehumanizing and just enough for such writers to stand up to the challenge.

As one turns to Achebe's work, Achebe in his novels has used language as a tool for transporting cultural elements into literature. Here, one can see a very positive attachment to their cultural mores. King Leopold does not want anything about the African culture to survive. He cautions the missionaries to teach the 'niggers never to count on their heroes but should only remember European heroes. As a consequence of their publications, one would evidently see the link that their novels have in terms of tradition and life during the encounter. One could move from that peripheral situation to the center in terms of his/her achievements. He has moved from the position of one in quest of a personal goal to that of the entire black race.

In an attempt to explore the way writers use language to express their different cultural experiences, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Grifflin and Helen Tiffin, hold succinctly that *"Language is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely differing cultural experiences"* (*The Empire Writes Back* 38-39) A very serious observation by Ngugi on the relationship between language and culture is that both are intricately linked to one another. This to him is because literature is supposed to be a reflection of cultural values, ideas and aspirations of the members of such a society that produces it. As this debate continues to pose an intellectual puzzle, Achebe on his part sees language as a people's world view and their way of life. Quoting Achebe in his words he remarks: *"No man can understand another whose language he does not understand"* (*Morning Yet On Creation Day* 7) Given such a relationship, any postcolonial critic cannot afford to undermine the place of language in his interpretation of any text from a postcolonial perspective. Since literature is like the mirror of any society, this gives the writers the leeway to be able to use language to impact on their societies.

Language is therefore very fundamental in the understanding of man and his social life. This explains why writers like Achebe and Ngugi believe that a society's literature needs to be written in that society's local language. Achebe's two cited texts show that the empire is writing back to downplay on the western assumptions about Africa in terms of culture and history. The colonizer even sees our religion as animist. King Leopold rightly submits when he says their knowledge of the gospel will allow you to find text ordering and encouraging your followers to love poverty. *"Happier are the poor because they will inherit the heaven and, it's*

very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God' lines 13-14. They are instructed to detach from them and make them disrespect everything which gives courage to affront them, making reference to the African's mystic system. When Achebe writes and brings in this notion of coexistence, it goes back to what King Leopold had been advocating for without a total annihilation of the colonized. In short in this context, the colonized must be subjected to the inferior position in terms of otherness in the context of such a postcolonial tenet. Achebe in the spirit of the letter brings in the two cultures to coexist. Hence, we see a synthesis which leads to the concept of hybridity as postulated by Homi Bhabha.

Moreover, when we put the style of Achebe's novel under study, one would quickly notice that Achebe uses so many proverbs. Indeed, one can also find a few proverbs embedded in King Leopold's letter. For instance, As a glaring example 'happy are those who are weeping for the kingdom of heaven is for them' and 'Happier are the poor because they will inherit the heaven.' At the time when the narrative begins Okonkwo has already achieved fame and has become one of the lords of the clan. This can best be described by the following proverb 'age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings.' (TFA P.8) As our people say, 'a man who pays respect to the great paves his way to greatness' (TFA P18). Indeed, the proverbs are used by elderly people as custodians of their culture. This is where we see the positive attitude of this novelist in painting his authentic culture. Again When Achebe Uses the following proverb about Okonkwo; in the following 'the ibo have a proverb that when a man says yes, his chi says yes also Okonkwo said yes very strongly so his chi also agreed And not only his chi but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands' (TFA P25). This shows how he is using resources of his first language to make his point. By the same token, he establishes a link between this letter and post coloniality. In fact, proverbs are timeless. Next, we also notice that the metaphorical painting of Okonkwo by the author can be extended in the postcolonial dimension to show how the novelist has positioned himself as a literary luminary. By extension one can also highlight the fact that, this novel has served like a springboard for some writers. So Achebe having moved from the periphery wants to demonstrate that Africans had a lot to offer vis-a-vis the colonizer.

Nkengasong has rightly pointed out that Soyinka, Bole Botake, Achebe, Tutuola and Gabriel Okara have incorporated oral traditions in their works with commendable artistry. The characteristics in their local environment are still very close to tradition in which the spiritual world is dominated by ancestors and deities. It is appropriate that such people should speak using an idiom, reflective of their origin. In fact, such oral tradition provides a solid basis for judging the life styles, histories and culture of these societies as it was the case in the past. It also feeds and revitalizes African culture by employing images, symbolic objects and sounds which one can simply consciously call "African" (Ambanasom 81).

Nkengasong has equally succinctly asserted that, the grand narratives no longer provide the model for which all art was measured and the center on which stood the imperial other no longer holds. Such a center has therefore been dismantled by the virulence of post colonial discourses initiated by Fanon and Said and globalization has instead created more consciousness towards cultural nationalism by marginal center.

2. Conclusion

We have seen how the personal experiences of earlier Africans and the novelist have remained an important factor in their novels using a postcolonial lens. In restating Sarah Anyang's claims that: "the postcolonial theory is a method of textual analysis that lays emphasis not only on the impact of colonialism but equally on the colonial experiences as a whole, because both the colonizer and the colonized have been affected by that experience" (An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature, 140). We can also highlight that postcolonial theory involves discussions about experiences of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race gender, place and responses of the influential master discourses of imperial Europe. In other words postcolonial theory is often regarded as having developed as a response to the master/colonialist discourses that constructed the "otherness" of the colonized and portrayed Europe as the "center" from which truth, reality and goodness flowed and spread to the colonial "margins." Indeed, Post colonialism, and the post-colonial lens, have been used in this context of globalization and neo colonialism to read, interpret and critique post colonial realities, shaped by some paradigms like; bad governance, exploitation, unequal development, political instability, identity, violence and gender inequality. By the same token, not only has the cultural, but also the political, social and the economic practices of colonialism have been used to deconstruct early African and contemporary African literary texts. In the reading of this novel, it is evident that there is a link between King Leopold's letter and postcoloniality.

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