

Article

## From Tribal Roots to Colonial Influence: A Dual Perspective on Cultural Change in *Things Fall Apart*

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**Abstract:** Culture encompasses within itself a broad set of ideas. We are all the result of the kind of culture we are born into and grow up in. It is not always the native culture that predominates; often, the foreign culture occupies a central place. Such has been the case between the Britishers and the Indians. Similar has been the situation in the other former British colonies. Here, our focus will be on the Nigerian culture as depicted in the novel '*Things Fall Apart*'. Africa is one of the developing countries and is still renowned for its unique tribal culture, which particularly includes their folk dances and music. These tribal societies have their way of living, which is interrupted by the intrusion of colonial powers. There is an emergence of a 'hybrid culture' formed as a result of the intermingling of two cultures. This paper will focus on an examination of how the culture of the coloniser and the colonised interact and, in turn, affect each other. The study will be confined to the above-mentioned novel of Chinua Achebe. We can hardly disagree with the fact that the culture of the coloniser dominates because it wields power, and power plays a significant role in the formation and collapse of cultures. This paper aims to conduct a bi-directional assessment of colonial and tribal cultures, concluding their mutual influence beyond a one-sided conventional approach.

**Keywords:** Tribalism; Colonialism; Power; Hierarchy

### Introduction

Human beings, as social beings, are naturally inclined towards living in company. The entire human race, as one big group, is divided into smaller groups. Every one of us belongs to different circles simultaneously. We may be part of different families, societies, classes, castes, countries, states, and so on, simultaneously. As a result of such

a lifestyle, specific belief systems and traditions develop, giving rise to the formation of various cultures.

We have been natural wanderers. Thus, our curiosity led to the exploration of new lands, and it gave rise to the process of colonisation. As per *Black Skin, White Masks*, a work by Frantz Fanon, "Man is propelled toward the world and his kind. A movement of aggressiveness engendering servitude or conquest." (24). This has been the case in the past, and this is the case in the present as well. However, colonialism has undergone its evolution. We do not often see it in its primitive forms, i.e., in terms of territorial control, etc., but we do observe it in indirect ways, in the form of Neocolonialism.

The theoretical framework for analysing the novel *Things Fall Apart* will be Frantz Fanon's autoethnography, *Black Skin, White Masks*. The very title conveys the idea of the black man's desire to become white. "The black man wants to be white." (Fanon ix). In other words, there is the process of 'lactification' (given by Fanon) and evident in the novel by Achebe. "In a word, the race must be whitened." (Fanon 29). Both the coloniser and the colonised strive for whiteness, which has been set up as the standard.

### **'Black Skin, White Masks' in 'Things Fall Apart'**

*Things Fall Apart*, a novel by Chinua Achebe, first published in 1958, begins with an epigraph taken from the poem "The Second Coming" by W. B. Yeats.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

These lines, written in the context of the First World War, suit the clash between the colonial and tribal worlds as depicted in the novel very well. A thorough study of the novel reveals the anarchy which is loosed upon the tribal world by the White man. The line 'the centre cannot hold' can be interpreted as the core of the tribal culture, which is shattered by the colonial interference. An outside force destabilises the native way of living. "But imperialism did not limit itself to the mere blunting of Africa's natural path to a self-defined progress or modernity. Where African civilizational ethos could not be destroyed, it was re-imagined or reshaped." (Mengara 36)

In the novel, there is a gradual appearance of the coloniser. Initially, a white man arrives and destroys a single village, named Abame. The advent of the White man (a strange man) is prophesied as a threat. "The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." (Achebe 101). The consultation with the oracle in the African culture shares a similarity with our folk tradition of Jagar. Thus, we see a likeness in the folk cultures across the continents.

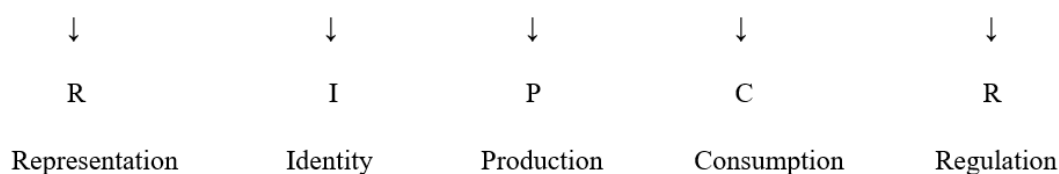
Through institutionalisation, it becomes very easy for the coloniser to establish his stronghold on the colonised. "The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages." (Achebe 105). The news of such transformations

in their village is given to Okonkwo by his friend Obierika. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, becomes a part of the missionaries. His assertion of himself identifying with the so-called strange man is reflected in his statement, "I am one of them" (Achebe 105). Thus, we see interference in the tribal world through the establishment of a church, which may appear, at first sight, merely as a territorial invasion, but it extends beyond the physical dimension. Church, gospel and government serve as a means of changing their very roots and placing them in such an atmosphere which ultimately tempts them to the foreign culture and makes them one with the colonised like Nwoye.

Another means adopted by the colonised in the process of lactification is language. In the novel, the white man uses an interpreter, who is a native (an Ibo man). Here, the irony lies in that this very native man is being used to destroy the entire value system on which the tribal society (here, the Ibo tribe) is based. "He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone." Here, the white man openly dismisses the native gods, which form the centre of every culture. A slight attention to the language will make it clear that 'gods' has been written with a small 'g', which is an indication of the belittling of the native gods. They have been adjudicated as false.

"This great God has sent us to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die." (Achebe 106). The language used by the white man portrays their God as great with a capital 'G'. The ways of the native people have been termed as wicked. The transformation of 'Nwoye' to 'Isaac' is an evident sign of Christianisation. "And the fact that the newly returned Martinican adopts a language different from that of the community in which he was born is evidence of a shift and a split." (Fanon 9). In these lines, Fanon refers to the Martinican who has returned from France and has turned his back on his community. Unlike the Martinican, Nwoye in the novel *Things Fall Apart* has not been to any foreign country; instead, the foreigner has come into his very native land and made him one like him. Nwoye, as an individual, identifies himself with the coloniser, leading to a shift towards the coloniser's culture and a split in the culture of the colonised.

The 'Circuit of Culture' propounded by Stuart Hall looks pretty relevant in this context. The concept comprises the following five elements or steps:



This is how a culture establishes and sustains itself. The first Step is Representation, where a particular group (here, the colonised) is shown stereotypically. This leads to the second step in the identity formation process. When a specific group (here, the tribal community) is identified in a particular manner, that image is circulated and reproduced repeatedly until it is deeply ingrained in the people. The image produced and reinforced through different media is what is consumed at a mass level.

The last step in the process is Regulation, which ensures the continuation of any idea. Without regulation, any hierarchy is bound to break. There has to be a class which controls the circulation of an idea. In this case, the white man has been prominent in the propagation of a specific ideology of the native people. In the novel, the coloniser is initially violent; however, overall, the regulation is achieved through consent, rather than coercion. Thus, this chain, which begins with representation and ends in regulation, is looked after by the authority-wielding group.

### Conclusion

Native cultures have undergone decay due to colonialism, but there has not been destruction; instead, there has been a creation of a 'Third space'- an emergence of a Hybrid Culture. Although there is an intrusion of colonial power, some tribal values remain intact (as in the novel). "Leonard Dobb, the American psychologist, observes that: Everywhere the traditional society meaningfully survives." (Champion 272). There is a co-existence of cultures. Indeed, the native becomes foreign, but the foreigner is also nativized. Colonialism has also been the cause of the awakening and strengthening of the native communities and has played a role in being VOCAL FOR LOCAL. Thus, colonialism led to the creation of a 'third space', which has served the purposes of the tribal groups. Unfortunately, this third space overlooks the feminine aspect. Tribal women, though freed from colonisation, remain trapped in the process of colonisation within. The need of the hour is to extend the confines of the third space to make it more inclusive for tribal women.

Instead of looking at colonialism as a devil that broke into the doors of the local people, it can also be looked at as a channel that opened up possibilities for tribal groups to resist and carve out their own space. At first sight, colonialism seems to weaken the local culture, but it turns into the very source that drives the native groups to assert their indigenous cultural identities. This is one of the observations that is evident in the contemporary world. Despite the havoc caused by years and years of subjugation, native cultures of not only the African region but of the other parts of the world, including India, have thrived. With the emphasis on native languages and literature, tribalism has enlarged its sphere. In recent years, it has grown and made itself accessible through the very tools of colonialism, especially the English language.

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