



Rewriting the Colonial Past: The Role of Historical Trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*

Shashwat Tyagi*

*Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty) Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College, University of Delhi

Citation: Shashwat Tyagi, (2024), Rewriting the Colonial Past: The Role of Historical Trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 6390-6394
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.9738

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the treatment of historical trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*. Achebe's novel depicts the pre-colonial Igbo civilization, its destruction by the British imperialists, and the ensuing disorders, both psychological and societal, resulting from colonial rule. His character, Okonkwo, illustrates the fight for self-identity as he confronts cultural disintegration, and the novel becomes an act of literary defiance against colonial degradation. On the other hand, Ngũgĩ's theoretical work examines the phenomenon of linguistic imperialism, claiming that the language does not only serve as a means of communication and culture, but as a tool of oppression when it was English that separated the Africans from their identity. He claims that there is a need to mentally decolonize and assert cultural sovereignty through the adoption of local tongues. This article identifies the intersection of identity recovery, the impact of colonialism on the psyche, and the use of language in resistant literature that is addressed with divergent strategies in the two texts. This study draws attention to the need to transform colonial narratives that incorporate and confront the trauma of history through literature to expose the reality behind how and why these narratives were created in the first place.

Introduction

Colonialism has had a vast impact on indigenous people of great disturbance by brutal rule, cultural fragmentation, and systemic oppression. It broke down customary forms, Westernized ideas, and silenced dominant native narratives. Literature following the colonial rule is meant to address and attempt to rewrite colonial literature focusing on the trauma's aftermath to native cultures. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) are notable examples of this resistance literature. Achebe's novel depicts the destruction of Igbo civilization by British imperialists whereas Ngũgĩ's illustrative work discusses colonization and the use of language as a means of dominating culture. Both pieces tackle the issue of historical trauma and call for the restoration of one's heritage through narrative and linguistic freedom from colonial rule.

Historical Trauma in *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an essential novel in post-colonial literature focusing on structured and unstructured societies of Igbo during the colonial rule and after. The protagonist, Okonkwo, embodies the psychological and social fissures resulting from the colonial intrusion through which Achebe analyses. It showed in various aspects, like the fracture of self-defined social orders, the colonial violence's psychological effects, the use of counter-storytelling as a violent counteraction to manipulation of identity.

The Disintegration of Indigenous Structures

Achebe features a complex Igbo Society, which he claims, had a socio-political system of governance, culture, and have well-established traditions of sociocultural practices.

Values regarding community, worship, and customs that manage social and economic interactions are core to the existence of the Igbo people. The arrival of Western education, missionaries, and British rule begins to dismantle these customs and traditions. Western religion and governance introduce a new form of conflict within the newly introduced order and the resistance posed by the Igbo community.

Achebe illustrates this change not as discord that results from a single event but rather as a process that occurs overtime without drawing attention. The British colonization system supports itself by encouraging the destruction of the native structures by substituting courts with European ones, changing the laws regarding property, and enforcing Christianity as the dominant faith. Eventually, societies become politically dismembered, and people that have been relatives for a long time become enemies. The cultural erosion narrated in *Things Fall Apart* reveals the actual history of so many African nations that had to face European colonialism.

Psychological Trauma and the Colonial Encounter

The collapse of Okonkwo can be seen in a singular way as the example of broader psychological damage inflicted upon him and his people. Being a traditional Igbo, Okonkwo was expected to be a typical man with a soldier like personality, and a culture that values strength, manhood and rank. His stubborn fidelity to these principles, however, creates direct confrontation between him and the society undergoing change around him.

The British coming in changes the status quo and renders Okonkwo's beliefs nearly impossible. He fights to find a balance between his self and the new colonial world, which causes a conflict within him. His suicide is more than just a personal tragedy; it is an embodiment of the collective disempowerment of African societies because of colonialism. He was defeated and left without power. His passing is a testament to the subjugation faced without any hope of resistance. The novel showcases the emotional turmoil faced by the local natives when compelled to move away from the deepest roots of their culture.

Narrative as Resistance

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel about colonialism, but it is also a counter-narrative to African society's Eurocentric distortions. During the colonial period, Western literature considered Africa to be a "Dark Continent" because it was believed that Africans were savage, primitive, and require western civilization. In opposition to this claim, Achebe describes how Igbo civilization was complex and rich prior to colonial interference.

Perhaps the most important component of Achebe's resistance is language. He integrates Igbo proverbs, folktales, and speech into his English prose, which is heavily laced with colonial oppression. Such approaches enable him to defy English and make it a medium that conveys African narratives. In the process, he champions the dignity and complexities of indigenous cultures against the denigrating narratives of colonial literature.

Achebe writing in English raised controversy among the scholars, some claiming the use of the colonizer's language is perpetuating cultural domination. Achebe, however, defends his claim as the need to address a universal audience. In his response, Achebe explains that by transforming English into an African tale, he uses the imperialistic language in a non-imperialistic manner.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a key part in analysing the trauma of history in terms of colonial Africa. It sheds lights on the elements of the colonial impact through the disintegration of Igbo society, Okonkwo's psychological conflict and the use of narrative as a form of resistance. It counters the Western narrative of Africa by restoring the identity and history of the African natives. It further strengthens the idea that Africans have an identity. Achebe's work is one of the defining texts in postcolonial literature, showing the powerful ability of storytelling to contain cultural devastation and historical oppression.

Linguistic Colonization and Trauma in *Decolonising the Mind*

Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* is a fundamental piece that tackles language as a weapon of colonization. He states that language is not simply a means of communication; it is a carrier of a particular culture, history, and identity. The colonial powers like the British understood this and used languages as a means to suppress the people of these societies. By forcing the use of European languages and vernacular languages, the languages policies ensured that the ideologies of the colonizers were deeply rooted into the skin of the colonized. *Decolonising the Mind* looks at language as a means of inscribing trauma and alienation in the history while accentuating the necessity of recovery through language in the movement of resistance.

The Psychological Effects of Language Colonization

One of the most corrosive elements of colonist domination is the psychological conditioning during which several Africans began to regard their own languages as inferior. Ngugi criticizes the British educational system in Africa, which has always been English-centric. African learners were, in most cases, not allowed to use their native languages in school, and those who did were met with punishment. This practice perpetuated the notion that native languages, and the cultures associated with them, were primitive and did not deserve attention.

This was a case of mental control which has had adverse consequences. Students gradually came to accept the fact that English epitomized success, intelligence, and civilization while their mother tongues signified lack of education, savagery, and stagnation. Consequently, a large number of Africans chose to distance themselves from their cultural origins and accepted Western values as supreme, as well as renouncing traditional ways of knowledge. The emotional damage caused by this linguistic colonization was terribly deep leading to an identity crisis and a lack of confidence in oneself and one's culture.

Ngugi emphasizes the fact that colonial education established a preset linguistic order that subordinated native languages to informal settings while transforming English to the language of politics, law, and education. This

separation was intentional. It was crafted to systematically parse a selection of Africans who were loyal to colonial beliefs, but deeply separated from their cultural identity.

Language as a Tool of Resistance

With awareness that language can serve as an instrument for colonial oppression, Ngũgĩ proposes a revolutionary transformation. He suggests that to decolonize, one must first reclaim their language because language is so much more than a way of communication; it is, in fact, an archive of culture, identity, philosophy, and worldview. He further argues that writing and speaking in indigenous languages is an active form of defiance against the colonial powers.

Writing in his mother tongue Gikuyu came as a shock to many people from the Western world and for Ngũgĩ it was a tremendous act of defiance English colonials. This shift stemmed beyond mere symbolism; it highlighted the political necessity for African literature to be written in African vernaculars. In Ngũgĩ's view, writing in native languages enables Africans to take pride in their culture, as well as ensure the preservation of their traditions and history for posterity.

The covered writer also mentions the penalties supercilious slaver European authors incur at the hands of the African writers, denouncing their use of modern European languages that serve only to bolster heretical colonial legacies. He accepts that English serves as a passport to the world for African authors, but maintains that self-emancipation can only be fully established within a total shift towards self-determination in the use of language. He has tried to stir argumentation among postcolonial radical theorists, some of them siding with him, and some on the contrary, such as in the case of Achebe whose English serves as a disguise for opposition against colonial rule. But still, he is certain that the complete acceptance, even the over acceptance, of indigenous African languages is the main and fundamental question of colonization.

Education and Historical Erasure

Colonial powers perpetrated this systematic version of history by controlling the educational system through which children were taught. Teaching Africans to think and perceive themselves through European views devoid of any information on African reality was fundamental for the domination of Africa. Ngũgĩ says this stratum of education is as important as the subversion of the economy and politics of Africa, for it uprooted the heritage of every African intellectually.

In various Africa nations, colonizers taught curricula that celebrated European accomplishments while completely neglecting or misrepresenting African history. Students learned about European explorers, kings, and philosophers, but had no knowledge of their own ancestors, governance systems, or even their heritage's intellectual traditions. This created historical erasure, which intensified the psychological impact of colonialism, making it hard for many Africans to take pride in their heritage.

He adds that education is crucial because it provided children with a battlefield where they would have to choose between colonial ideologies and indigenous knowledge systems. He advocates restructuring the control of educational institutions so that languages, histories, and philosophies of Africa are prioritized. This way, he claims, African societies will have a chance to reclaim their cultural dignity and heal from the scars of colonialism. He further posits that there should be policy changes in African countries that regard language use intended to foster multilingualism so that local languages receive the same image and recognition as foreign ones.

The Wider Consequences of Linguistic Decolonization

The challenges which Ngũgĩ brings up in *Decolonising the Mind* are not only concerned with Africa, they have a wider applicability to several other postcolonial societies of the world. From the Americas to Asia Africa, colonialism brought foreign tongues, suppressed local languages, and caused cultural and historical alienation. The fight to restore native languages and in the context of the modern world is universal as people strive to restore their heritage, and fight the remnants of colonial oppression.

The book covers vital issues regarding the effect of globalization on linguistic decolonization. With globalization, the need for communication in English as the dominant language for business, modern technology, and international relations continues to grow. While this view is accepted by many, Ngũgĩ's perspective argues strongly against the harsh reality that globalization destroys linguistic diversity. His stance is that with sufficient institutional support, indigenous languages can and will thrive alongside global languages.

Additionally, *Decolonising the Mind* wants African writers, educators, and policymakers today to think over their parts within the processes of linguistic decolonization. They are made to ask if their choices of using European languages as the primary modes of communication amounts to sustaining colonial systems or if they are making feedback efforts to sustain and build up the use of indigenous languages.

Decolonising the Mind by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a glaring indictment of the colonization of languages and its repercussions on the African peoples. He reveals the deep-seated psychological suffering wrought by the colonial imposition of language, the need to use language as means of fighting back, and the absolute necessity for changing the ways in which education is provided in schools by making it more ethnocentric. His contributions to postcolonial discourse remain central to the debates that follow on language, culture, and identity reconstruction which, as by now, is a strong phenomenon. He makes a case for decolonization of

languages for people to be intellectually and culturally free and calls people to use their languages to communicate, challenge, and raise issues that matter to them.

Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o deal with the issue of colonization's historical trauma in their literary works using different strategies and techniques. They utilize diverse methods, and with all their differences, their writings reflect the importance of decolonization, restoration of original identity, and the brutality of colonialism.

Reconstruction of Indigenous Identity

Among the several similarities that exist between Achebe and Ngũgĩ is the focus on reconciling with the past as a way of addressing historical trauma. Achebe, for instance, uses storytelling in his portrayal of the Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart* and the rich traditions that existed before the coming of the colonialists. Achebe fights back against the ideas proposed by colonialists who claimed that Africans are savages and that their societies need colonization to be civilized. He does this by presenting a society filled with culture, art, and rich traditions. Ngũgĩ, on his side, resorts to identity recovery through language in his book *Decolonising the Mind*. In this book, he contends that language is one of the most powerful tools of carrying any culture and that the English and other colonial languages did not serve to enhance, but rather, alienate people from Africa and his people's heritage. In his view, writing in native languages is crucial for cultural recovery. Thus, for Ngũgĩ, linguistic decolonization elicits cultural restoration.

The Role of Language in Postcolonial Resistance

Achebe and Ngũgĩ profoundly differ in their understanding of language use in postcolonial resistance. Although he is very critical of colonialism, Achebe chooses to write in English, which he justifies by stating that African authors can employ the language of the colonizer to reinterpret stories and position their identities. In his book *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe explains how he uses English to tell a story in a way that an Igbo man would tell it, which is a way of mocking and turning the foreign language inside out by telling indigenous stories in it.

Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, shifts completely in the opposite direction. He does not only reject English but prefers vernaculars. In his view, writing in the languages of the Europeans continues the work of colonialism and disassociates African literature from its original civilization. In adopting Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ aims at enhancing the status of African languages as instruments of African knowledge and imagination. Their different positions illustrate the challenges of and decolonization of language and the struggle concerning the means of dealing with the imperialistic cultural domination.

Representation of Colonial Brutality

Achebe and Ngugi meticulously analyse the colonial's horrific sociological and psychological effects arguing that readers ought to grapple with this history. In His book, Achebe portrays the colonial violence using Okonkwo's tragic demise, an Igbo leader whose life gets disrupted by the British colonialism. The book shows the slow death of Igbo customs alongside the disintegration of the people which represents the widespread destruction of Africa's civilizations in the context of colonial domination.

Ngũgĩ offers an attempt in understanding the violence experienced during colonisation in *Decolonising the Mind*. He goes on to discuss the use of foreign languages and education as tools for cultural annihilation. The book advocates that colonialism not only sought to harvest the natural resources and labour of Africa, but also sought to capture the souls and spirits of the people by establishing a hegemony of self-loathing that existed long after the political freedom. Both writers emphasize the devastating consequences of colonialism, though Achebe does it with fiction and Ngũgĩ with analysis.

Language, Memory, and Identity in Postcolonial Literature: Achebe and Ngũgĩ's Decolonizing Vision

The major ideas presented in *Things Fall Apart* and *Decolonising the Mind* do not remain confined to their specific historical surrounded. The impact of colonial violence continues to persist in the sociopolitical reality of postcolonial states, where there is a constant battle with national identity vis-à-vis language and memory. In several African countries, the use of colonizers' languages for educational, political and literary purposes shows how strong the chains of colonialism still are, creating challenges of identity and autonomy.

In addition, postcolonial literature continues to be relevant when it comes to facing and healing unresolved traumas. Achebe and Ngũgĩ, through their stories, analyse colonial frameworks and also retell indigenous stories which aids in the re-establishment of an identity. In doing so, they confront the mainstreams' alternatives giving voice to the oppressed and enabling them to stand on their own. Their works not only document the oppression during the colonial eras, but also challenge future scholars to actively interact with their past and strive to restore their identity.

Achebe and Ngugi, although coming from rather different angles, both make important contributions to the understanding of colonial trauma and decolonization. Ngugi, through language, seeks to bring down the colonial culture of Africa while Achebe seeks to build an African history through an indigenous approach to storytelling. Collectively, these two writers bring forth the calls for both the cultural and linguistic decolonization of Africa, as well as shed light on the violence done by Western influences, so-called actors of

civilization. Literature is one of the spaces where post-colonial societies can emerge from the shadows of colonialism, restore their identities and their cultures.

Conclusion

Things Fall Apart and *Decolonising the Mind* are some of the first conversations in postcolonial literature, focusing on the deeply damaging impacts of colonization in the context of cultural and linguistic reclamation. While Achebe and Ngũgĩ adopt differentiated literary styles, they both journey towards the deconstruction of colonial ethos and the reinvention of native perspectives. Their narratives respond to the British subjugation of Africa, but further demonstrate the triumph of tradition and identity over negative impacts of colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's book that cultivates a non-Eurocentric perspective of pre-colonial Africa by humanizing African societies rather than treating them as simplistic cultures. He does this by providing a robust counter-narrative to existing Eurocentric perceptions by illustrating the complex systems of governance, organized religion, and social customs among the Igbo people. Native civilizations have dignity, and that was the central argument he established. But the books equally capture the brutal effects of colonization as foreign actors sought to upend these systems, which Achebe beautifully captures through Okonkwo's descent. His story reflects many peoples' experiences of fragmentation brought by imperialism, and the cognitive scars of colonialism.

On the contrary, Ngũgĩ positions himself differently in *Decolonising the Mind* wherein he critiques language for its role in preserving colonial power. In his view, the domination of European languages was a form of cultural vandalism that alienated the African people from their roots while promoting self-hatred. He seeks the restoration of native language and suggests, in the process, a more comprehensive decolonization that goes beyond political sovereignty to include self-governance in thought and culture. His work urges postcolonial societies to reinhabit the languages of their ancestors as a way of reconstructing their identity and culture.

Collectively, these writings serve to further the cause of redressing colonial-era distortions while celebrating the rich heritage of indigenous peoples. The investigation of historical trauma in postcolonial literature is not a mere academic issue; it is a form of defiance, a way of acknowledging wrongs done in the past, and a means of cultural renewal. Achebe and Ngũgĩ's works, particularly in the context of their own societies, remind us of the importance of being conscious of history and the need to reconstruct indigenous intellectual traditions.

Reflection through postcolonial literature serves a very pertinent purpose when addressing the impact of colonial rule and provides both narrative and guidance for future generations. It deepens understanding of the impact of colonial histories on contemporary identities, including policies in education, language, and national identity. By engaging in these important works, reformers, thinkers, and the general public take part in an urgent and much needed movement to enshrine and revive indigenous cultures. It is critical that the narratives that have been oppressed due to the force of colonial domination are not only reclaimed but celebrated, and doing so will ensure that these voices are carried to the future.

Works Cited

1. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
2. Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. Anchor Books, 1989.
3. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Petals of Blood*. Penguin Books, 1991.
4. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
5. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Books, 1994.
6. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. J. Currey, 1986.
7. Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction*. James Currey, 1991.