



## The Postcolonial Connundrum- Perspectives and Contrasts

### KEYWORDS

hegemony, subaltern, New Literatures, postcolonialism, Pre-text, canonical literature, empire,

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**ABSTRACT** *Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad represent two conflicting themes of the postcolonial literature. A juxtaposition of their major works will reveal for forces at work behind the postcolonial literary representation. In an analysis that was painstaking and deeply disruptive they unleashed energies and forces that still provoke and instigate many irresolvable issues and perspectives. This paper is an attempt to understand the strained relationship that exists between their works.*

Quite often Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been brought in for a close contrast with *Things Fall Apart*, apparently offering a study of the colonial identity and crisis from the other viewpoint. Similarly works like Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* have brought into perspective offering divergent yet penetrating understanding of one of the most transformative occurrences of modern history. In all these there is emerging the discernible pattern which registers a marked deviation from the Eurocentric, homegenic perception to one based on unsettling heterogeneity and heterodoxy. They open out avenues for a candid dialogue and deconstruction of the Western canonical literature.

These 'new' literatures call for a new introspection of language and its use. The difficult task that the postcolonial writers were confronted was not much different from the poignant cry of Caliban against Prospero. They had to use the language of the coloniser and still device a way to defeat it. Frequently they had to violently distort and create deviants and stoways from that language. In the adapted and adopted English, they had to device pathways and create spaces for their modified experiences and sensitivities. The writer was caught in the impossible task of creating with language more than it could. But in the process a new 'articulatedness' was beginning to emerge. In short the postcolonial writer placed himself in an emerging literary sphere where social and political ethos of Europe were totally merged with the emerging literatures of the postcolonial scenerion.

In the Indian academic environment, there has always been an apparent dichotomy in the concept of Postcolonial, since it survives in a quite different historical context where the experience of colonialism is conspicuously missing. These assumes further complications when subjected to an introspective analysis as to the extent to which the classrooms have been decolonised. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958 is taken by many as one of the finest specimens of this cononial impact and the ensuing connundrum of postcolonialism.

The most visible manifestation of this idea got itself expressed in themes such as 'writing back to the empire'. Novels like *Things Fall Apart* are replete with techniques of linguistic decolonisation, where the writer continuously engages himself with the struggle of liberating and reinventing his own native idiom with the language of the coloniser. The writer employs the extensive mythical and folklorish leit motifs of his culture as a method of highlighting the difference. The ingenious use of W.B Yeats's *The Second Coming* imparts an added emphasis to this theme. These literatures showcase the lived life of aboriginal civilization which in a way seeks to project an alternate view of history. They offer a vibrant and poignant contrast with the canonised colonial writings of Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad.

In the periods that followed the subaltern 'other' culture was seldom intruded upon and left to its own to develop and claim an identity of

its own with its forever young themes of cultural repression and ostracisation. In due course of time the issue developed a legitimacy of its own as there loomed large the undeniable historical fact that the Empire always fiercely and insanely followed its own irrational logic of cultural hegemony and superiority. The glaring irony is that when growing aggrieved of the historical wrong perpetrated against them by the colonisers, simultaneously it is conceding a mental decolonisation on the part of the subalternized too.

*Things Fall Apart* poses innumerable issues during a classroom discussion, as it contains layered counter-discourse to the colonialists' narratives. At the second level it speaks through an institutionalised language, we tend to associate an implicit hierarchical pattern in its usage, the next logical step is its creolised application and renewed possibilities of adaptations and applications. Further the university education of Chinua Achebe advises us to be on our guards against the complex paradigms that seem to be emerging like the practised artistry of the author constructing complex crossroads of culture. Diana Brydon rightly observes that challenge of New Literatures is to 'rethink the boundaries of our work, the nature of our subject and the nature of ourselves as subjects and objects of our studies.'

As we approach these works of Postcolonialism, it is likely that we would be reading them on the basis of culturally defined responses. Linda Hutcheon famously uses the term 'ex-centric' with reference to them, and our reading of them will be controlled by the politically nuanced one. Susheila Nasta comes out with the proposition that we need to be aware of the historical specificities before and beyond the 'postcolonial moment'. Incidentally in the postcolonial phase replete with ideas of appropriation which was countered by the erstwhile colonised by creating dichotomies of West and the rest.

While analysing the complex genesis of a work like *Things Fall Apart*, quite naturally the focus drags in texts like *Heart of Darkness*, with their canonical approach. Bruce Fleming in his article, 'Brothers under the Skin: Achebe on *Heart of Darkness*' that Achebe should be read with a precognition of Conrad's, because the former came to be due to their reading of the latter. In every classroom there evolves a discursive process where the texts are read with implicit and explicit meanings contesting, supporting and frustrating each other.

A powerful contextual conversation often bearing its own politics and agendas forms a part of 'informed pedagogy' which is one of the prime requisites of New Literatures, ushering in crucial politics and methodologies of re-visioning and rewriting that is one of the prime motifs of 'New Literatures', in whose dexterous manoeuvres nebulous codes of colonial epistemology is broken down.

The nagging awareness of the colonial origins of the language of discourse gets reflected in the ingenious ways in which language is

used in the postcolonial fiction. The fusion styles in which language is put to use in these fictions signify writers' deep consciousness about the advantages as well as the drawbacks of the language. Achebe states that through the English language, it was possible to provide a common ground for many of the scattered native Africans, yet 'failed to give them a song', giving them only tongue to sigh. It thus grows evident that the African writers chose to write in English as the by-product of the historical process, and not as an unpatriotic act with an eye on fame as an international writer.

*Things Fall Apart* after its publication emerged as the favourite child of the 'New' canon with its genuinely eclectic literary, historical, and social intertexts and finding relevant analogies in our contemporary literary situation. The work could be sighted as a classic instance of 'mediated resistance' cunningly enacting the process of destabilizing the classroom hierarchies and severe codes of academic discipline. It seeks to usurp the traditional power centres and begins to distribute the authority of interpretation among the literary reading public as well as the student-teacher communities.

There is the need to recognise Achebe's language and politics of 'writing back to the Empire' in the tongue of the coloniser after cursing it, like Caliban. The novel unleashes some sort of discursive energy in the reading process that ideally infects the classroom bringing about a paradigm shift in its outlook at the postcolonial conundrum. While reading *Heart of Darkness* along with *Things Fall Apart*, we get exposed to Achebe's interrogatory image of Africa and we stand confronting the inescapable question why the whiteman can be made to take responsibility for it. As the Yeatsian imagery is ushered into the novel, it emerges into more than a literary irony that if the centre cannot hold, the banal sense of the historical guilt had begun to ingress the periphery also.

The con-texts and pre-texts concept through which John Thiern analyses the fiction of Achebe and Conrad, remarks that 'Conrad's fiction, and particularly *Heart of Darkness*, provokes a set of responses which in turn direct one back to the original novella and open up the possibility of reading it as incipiently "postcolonial", at least in the sense that it exposes tensions and dissensions that are internalised. It could not be due to African darkness but due to ulterior motives of the 'imperial project'. Thus it may turn out that in the character of Marlow, the pre-text itself contains ambiguities and contradictions that enact a 'postcolonial reading' of European imperialism. This kind of reading holds the danger of placing Conrad in a position analogous to Achebe.

Achebe's opposition and diatribe against Conrad has to be analysed in this emerging scenario which could be unusually complicated. Conrad had always been aware of the ill-effects of colonialism on its authors themselves. He continuously points out that the white colonialists were pushed into a confrontation with the darkness of the colonised country and its people in their mission, annulling the difference between being mercenary and philanthropists, ultimately addressing internalised darkness or horror in them to the people they encountered in the colonies. It is highly debatable point whether the counter-discursive energies of the postcolonial fiction could ever offer a viable alternative to the colonising experience.

In postcolonial theory and praxis, the Achebe's postcolonial or anti-colonial theories cannot be considered inherently superior to Conrad's, as both reveal an intent and energy to make an inquiry into the bewildering complexity of the postcolonial continuum. Achebe's emotionally aggrieved state could be seen more sympathetically, as Thiern rightly points out that Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* offer revisionist histories that attempt to recuperate Africa from negative Eurocentric construction and to invest his Ibo people's past with a dignity previously denied it in Anglophone writings about West Africa and that Achebe's revisionist plots unfold, they stage a complex debate about the relative merits of a steadfast

adherence to the traditional way of life and the desirability of adaptation to changing social situations.

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* emerge as victims of the conflicts and contradictions that emerge at the intersection of two cultures, both of them suffering from inherent follies and historical paradoxes. Ultimately it emerges that the antagonism between these two texts may never cease to exist, leading onto ever widening themes for debate across the wide spectrums of history, culture, politics and language.

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