

# Colonial Resistance and Cultural Revival: Insights from African Postcolonial Writings

Asit Panda

Associate Professor, Department of English, Belda College, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India  
asitpanda23@rediffmail.com

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<p>Received: 12 Mar 2024; Received in revised form: 17 Apr 2024; Accepted: 25 Apr 2024; Available online: 30 Apr 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords</b> – Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, colonization, resistance, tradition, identity.</p>	<p><i>The impact of colonization on native cultural life, modernization, and anticolonial nationalism led African writers to reflect on colonial encounters and their effects on social, economic, and cultural aspects. They felt tension between traditional and colonial values, seeking to re-discover cultural roots. Through a critical evaluation of the significant works by key African postcolonial writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi, D. O. Fagunwa, J. P. Clark, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and others, this article seeks to explore how these African authors have dealt with the issue of colonial encounter in their writings. The focus is also on highlighting how these African authors have voiced their opposition to colonial legacies and have actively engaged in the resuscitation and celebration of local customs and cultural heritage through their writings in the postcolonial era. This research highlights the significant role that literature has in creating and expressing postcolonial African consciousness by analysing topics such as resistance, identity, tradition, and cultural pride. The study also examines how these literary contributions have actively questioned and dismantled colonial narratives, creating an opportunity for the genuine voices of African nations to emerge and thrive.</i></p>

The colonization of African nations had a profound impact on their cultural life, leading to modernization and the rise of anticolonial nationalism. As a result, African writers felt compelled to reflect on the colonial encounter and its wide-ranging effects on society, economy, and culture through their creative writing. Unlike other professionals, writers experienced a profound conflict between traditional and colonial values. Many of them came from families that had recently embraced Christianity but still held onto their indigenous cultural traditions. With a strong aversion to Europeanization, certain writers

embarked on a quest to rediscover their cultural origins and displayed a fervent passion for the traditional customs and folklore. In terms of the formal aspects of their writings, while some writers drew heavily from Western literary traditions and adopted an imitative approach, a select few writers aimed to blend Western literary forms with the idioms of indigenous performance traditions. The objective of this research is to examine the manner in which these African authors addressed colonial encounters in their writings. The objective of this investigation is to emphasise the fact that these African authors have actively participated in the

resuscitation and commemoration of local customs and cultural heritage through their writings in the postcolonial era, as well as expressed their opposition to colonial legacies.

The disintegration of traditional ethnic communities resulting from years of colonial rule and the rapid urbanization of the colonies during the war years ultimately resulted in a profound identity crisis at both personal and national levels following the departure of the colonizers and the subsequent dismantling of control by the older colonial establishments. Individuals faced a dilemma when deciding between the established nationalist culture rooted in history and the emerging modern culture. An intense quest for national origins and a passionate desire to uncover personal identity can be seen in the literature that emerged during the 1950s. As people in the colonies grappled with doubts and uncertainties about their identities, writers became more and more focused on exploring national identity and examining the historical roots of their current situation. Writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o discovered the national identity of their countries by embracing the ideals of the past and expressing a longing for their native cultural traditions.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, stories and poems started to emerge in local newspapers along the coast of West Africa. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*, and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* came before Achebe's novels. In 1911, J.E. Casely-Hayford, the Ghanaian nationalist leader, published *Ethiopia Unbound*, a thought-provoking novel that emphasized the importance of tribal culture and foreshadowed the themes found in subsequent nationalist literature. In 1941, R.E. Obeng's novel *Eighteen Pence* made its debut in Ghana. The novel beautifully portrays the blending of traditional African customs with the practicality of Western agricultural and educational methods. It captures the fascinating period of African society's transition from traditional to modern while presenting the author as a representative of those Africans who find themselves caught between two cultures. In South Africa, Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy* (1946) and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) exemplify the changing nature of the novel during a time of societal

transition. These works reflect the shift from earlier protest fiction to a new form of storytelling that addresses the emerging social issues brought about by the Second World War. The early novels of Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer explore the quest for national and individual identity amidst the profound cultural and political upheaval of the post-war era. Gordimer's *A World of Strangers* (1953) presents a striking juxtaposition of indigenous and Western values.

Cyprian Ekwensi is a member of the initial cohort of Nigerian authors who received their education in Nigerian colleges. Despite commencing his literary career in the mid-1940s, his initial anthology of stories, *Ikola the Wrestler and Other Ibo Tales* was published in 1947. Cyprian Ekwensi skillfully portrays the impact of growing urbanization and resulting societal changes on the lives of Nigerians in his early short tales. Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) is arguably the inaugural realistic novel in English to be published in West Africa. It portrays the ethical and cultural disarray experienced by the emerging cohort of Nigerian urban residents who migrated from rural areas to urban centres in pursuit of improved professional prospects and personal recognition. Ekwensi, by means of his protagonist Sango and the females that Sango loves, raises awareness among his age about the potential spiritual consequences of pursuing ambition for progress in a contemporary Westernised metropolis and being captivated by a foreign lifestyle. The novel explores a recurring theme in African literature during the period surrounding independence: the clash between the younger, educated, forward-thinking nationalist Africans and the older, traditionalist, privileged Africans who benefited from colonialism. The novel explores a prevalent theme in African literature during the period surrounding independence: the clash between the younger, educated, progressive nationalist Africans and the older, traditionalist, corrupt upper-class Africans who held positions of power and benefited greatly from colonial rule.

Chief D.O. Fagunwa gained popularity among his fellow tribesmen due to his exceptional ability to create narratives by blending Yoruba prose style with Christian principles, using Yoruba folk tales as a foundation. Amos Tutuola, the first

Nigerian writer of fiction to be published, was greatly influenced by Fagunwa's storytelling techniques and European literary works such as the *Bible*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. In his novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), Tutuola incorporated various elements of folk literature, including the quest motif, riddles, and creation myths. This work gained significant international recognition for its distinct African identity and stylistic deviations. Tutuola's novel, much like Obeng's novel, captures the shift from tradition to modernization. Tutuola's work, similar to Obeng's novel, depicts the shift from tradition to modernism.

While drama had been written in Nigeria since the late 19th century, it was Hubert Ogunde in the 1940s who brought national significance to the genre. He achieved this by writing several nationalist plays such as *Strike and Hunger* (1945), *Worse than Crime* (1945), and *Towards Liberty* (1947). These plays were performed by different touring companies in the postwar period. Contrary to popular belief, James Ene Henshaw holds the distinction of being the inaugural Nigerian playwright to have his works published in English. In the early 1950s, Henshaw authored "This Is Our Chance," in which he urged for the adoption of Westernisation and modernism. Henshaw's *Children of the Goddess* portrays the conflict between Christianity and indigenous religion in an African hamlet. Henshaw's plays depict the clash between development and authenticity as a fight between different generations.

The dissolution of conventional ethnic communities due to prolonged colonial rule and the swift urbanisation of the colonies during the war years ultimately resulted in a profound crisis of identity at both individual and national levels following the departure of the colonisers and subsequent dismantling of control by the previous colonial authorities. Individuals were faced with a dilemma when deciding between the established nationalist culture rooted in history and the just emerging contemporary culture. The literature that emerged during the 1950s reflects a desperate search for national origins and a strong desire to uncover personal identity. As people in the colonies began to question their identities and face uncertainties, writers became increasingly focused on exploring national identity and examining the historical origins

of their current situation. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o discovered their country's national identity by looking to the ideals of the past and expressing a longing for tradition. They instructed their community to honour their history and also sought to establish new principles for the creation of a fresh African literature.

However, the opening of the University of Ibadan in 1948 was a significant milestone in the history of Nigerian literature development, as the university brought together a national elite and gave the necessary impetus to the rise of a group of literary talents like Soyinka, Achebe, J.P. Clark, and Okigbo. The launch of journals such as J.P. Clark's *The Horn* (1954) or the *Ibadan University Herald*, among others, provided young talents in a newly emerging nation with the necessary platform for publishing their stories and poems. Christopher Okigbo was among the regular contributors to Clark's student poetry journal. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the appearance of *Black Orpheus* (1957) and the foundation of Mbari Press provided English-speaking black Africans with ample opportunities to give an outlet to their literary outputs. In J. P. Clark's four plays, namely, *Song of a Goat*, *The Masquerade*, *The Raft*, and *Ozidi*, one may notice an exploration of certain aspects of African tradition. Efua Sutherland, in his Ghanaian play *Edufa*, explores traditional ideas in a modern setting.

In his novels *Things Fall Apart* (1954) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Chinua Achebe attempts at a reconstruction of the pre-colonial world. During his formative years, Chinua Achebe imbibed values that were essentially English, but being born into a family of African converts to Christianity, Achebe succumbed to a sense of self-alienation from the old culture. His primary identification with colonial culture and the inevitable disillusionment with it led him to be a writer celebrating the precolonial past in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which fictionalizes the traumatic encounter between Europe and Africa and its appalling aftermath. In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recreated a lost world and introduced his readers to a rich tribal cultural tradition, which is dynamic and constantly challenged by the intrusion of colonial culture and religion. The novel creates the impression that the cultural tradition of African villages is evolving, with

customs from one village potentially disregarding those from another. Simon Gikandi considers Achebe “the man who invented African literature” not simply because of his innovation in fiction-writing but for the reason that in *Things Fall Apart* he succeeds in capturing the crisis and anxieties of the common Africans of his generation through his fictional hero Okonkwo, who struggles hard in the novel “to maintain the cultural integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule” (x). The cultural crisis generated by the collapse of colonial rule has been well delineated in *Things Fall Apart*, where the cultural hero Okonkwo suffers from psychological disintegration and commits suicide when the values and institutions that sustained both he and his society collapsed and were replaced by a new set of values and notions regarding religion, wealth, language, marriage, history, etc. brought by the Europeans. Despite writing *Things Fall Apart* from an African perspective, Achebe refrained from glorifying the African past, as evidenced by his ambiguous portrayal of the Igbo past. Achebe's novel was also a response to the distorted representation of Africa in English novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1952), which depicted its inhabitants as uncivilised and uneducated. Achebe contested the biased depiction of his homeland and its inhabitants from the perspective of the colonizers. His objective in *Things Fall Apart* was to convey to his readers that Africans, who possess a rich cultural heritage, were not introduced to the concept of culture by Europeans.

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), chronicles the period of Nigerian sociopolitical history immediately preceding independence, during which the newly emergent native elite, influenced by Western education, occupied all professional positions in the country, with the aim of gaining quick access to wealth through corruption. The picture of cultural tradition that emerges in Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964), is dynamic; as in *Things Fall Apart*, it is changeable. The impression we get is that the tribal community created African gods and customs for their benefit, and when any god fails to fulfil their purpose, they quickly replace it with a new one. Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) reproduces the

new modern state, full of corruption and devoid of any sense of ethics, which is in contrast to the traditional Nigerian society with its deep anchorage in a worldview full of moral and ethical undertones. The novel reflects the social unrest and political crisis of Nigeria after independence, the disillusionment of Nigerian people with the long-coveted freedom as well as luxurious Western ways of life, and the growing animosity between the native intellectuals and the oppressive, corrupt government of the state.

In the independence period and the years immediately following it, African writings like Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and T. Aluko's *One Man, One Wife* (1959) chose the contrasts between Western and local tribal values as their subject matter. T.M. Aluko offered a parody of *Things Fall Apart* in his *One Man, One Wife*, in which he comically treated the cultural confusion arising from partial Westernization. The chaos in the field of culture springing from rapid modernization and the consequent embarrassment of the people caught the attention of many writers of the independence period, like Aluko. Although Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *River Between* had its publication in 1965, it was written earlier. It “combines nostalgia for tradition with an awareness of the difficulty of building a Kenyan nation from various tribes and religions” (King 28).

In his novels, Chinua Achebe portrays colonial experience from an African's perspective and offers an insider's view of African culture. Achebe perceived the rediscovery of the precolonial African past and the celebration of indigenous culture as key strategies for decolonization and resistance to cultural colonialism. Like many other contemporary African intellectuals, Achebe attempted to form a postcolonial African identity by making an imaginative return to the traditional life of African society and its harmonious culture in novels like *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Achebe viewed this kind of cultural retrieval as one of the primary duties of African intellectuals in the years immediately following political emancipation. However, some African political thinkers and literary artists adopted this attitude as a form of commitment, which carries the inherent risk of romanticizing the African past, something Achebe was aware of. Hence, he did not resort to



propaganda, as he realised that the artist's failure to see anything bad in African traditions is equally a distortion as the colonist's reluctance to see anything good in them. Similar to Achebe, Wole Soyinka, a celebrated Nigerian dramatist, critically examined the African past in his *magnum opus A Dance of the Forests* (1960), questioning the supposed harmony and idyllic purity of the pre-colonial period.

Again, in works like Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, the writer's frantic search for a new set of values to bridge the present and past is discernible. In the post-independence period, self-government often proved a curse to the African countries, which were shaken by various problems as the colonizers were substituted by a new group of oppressors, often uncultured, corrupt, and hypocrites. After independence, a sense of frustration and pessimism about the nation's present and future emerged. Young, Western-educated writers often resorted to complex forms, fusing satire allegory, parody myth, etc., to give adequate expression to the complexities of the period. Nigerian novels by Aluko and Ekwensi, Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), Achebe's novel *A Man of the People* (1966), etc. warn against the rise of political corruption and criticise inefficient and tyrannical governments.

Biodun Jeyifo contends that Wole Soyinka's account of the historic encounter of Europe and Africa in the realm of culture is expressed "exclusively in terms of a confrontation of two civilisations, two world-views . . . a Manichean structure of opposition and negation." In the words of Jeyifo, "The way out, as Soyinka sees it, is for us to reconstruct the 'African world' which the Manichean cultural terrorism of colonialist, Eurocentric racism devalued and tried to extirpate, without cutting ourselves off from positive influence from other cultures of the world" ("What is" 150). However, as a visionary intellectual, Soyinka ideologically projects himself as a staunch believer in intercultural dialogue, mutual enrichment, and the exchange of ideas among diverse cultures.

In his writings, as Soyinka himself claims, he explores the "points of departure as well as meeting points between African and European literary and artistic traditions" and exploits "quite unabashedly . . . various complementarities, or singularities, or contradictions" (Jeyifo, "Realms of" 123). Soyinka

also perceived these points of confluence among the world's leading societies and their cultural attributes. According to him, it is not easy to draw a line of demarcation between different cultures around the world. Likewise, the playwright refuses to regard African culture as something "pure" and rejects the essentialist claims of many Negritudists. In Soyinka's words, "[t]he culture of Africa has never been as 'pure' as these people try to make out.... It's been constantly digesting, analysing and adjusting experiences from wherever these experiences come" (Wilkinson 165). Soyinka significantly marks the points of confluence among ancient European, Asian, and African cultures.

Soyinka bore a deep-rooted reverence for indigenous tradition. Ordinary Africans' worldviews generally control and propel their lives. Soyinka was an advocate and a staunch believer in the Yoruba worldview, which, with its distinctive myths and rituals, has framed the necessary background for most of his plays. Most of Soyinka's protagonists, nourished by this traditional worldview, tackle the onslaughts of alien culture successfully and try to maintain their moral integrity. Soyinka finds certain aspects of traditional myths, rituals, thoughts, and ideas highly relevant and beneficial for societal development in modern Nigeria, which is enthusiastically and aggressively embracing Western technology, ideas, and values. For instance, Soyinka discovers that the Yoruba mythology-derived traditional system of thought regards Ogun as the 'essence' of African artists. Ogun, who sets an exemplar through his self-sacrificing gesture for communal well-being, is perceived to offer a paradigm of responsibility and action, which may be highly pertinent in postcolonial Nigeria when artists and politicians were forgetting their accountability to the nation. Soyinka's artistic mission was thus to revitalise positive elements of indigenous traditions to meet contemporary needs and contextualise them in a modern ambience.

Biodun Jeyifo argues that while Soyinka's approach to subjects concerning race, culture, and nationalism, as articulated in his relatively early works like *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Strong Breed* (1963), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1963), and *The Interpreters* (1965), or essays like "The Future of West African Writing," has clearly been anti-Negritudist,

his writings of the mid-1970s and early 1980s like *Poems of Black Africa* (1974), *DKH* (1975), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), and the essays compiled in *MLA* reveal his manifest neo-Negritudist temper. As Jeyifo points out, in the first group of works, "so strong is the critique of the romanticization of African precolonial traditions and the African past that Soyinka escapes the charge of ideological anti-nationalism or cultural deracination only because nearly all of these works and essays also contain powerful, if critical affirmation of the positive, humanistic aspects of that same precolonial past and its cultural traditions." Jeyifo proceeds to contend that, in contrast to the first group, in the second group of writings, a valorization of a distinct African world, as well as manifestations of a neo-Negritudist attitude in the playwright's evaluation of African past and precolonial tradition, may be perceptible. In the words of Jeyifo, "Where the protagonists of the earlier group of works strenuously distance themselves from the normative, customary institutions and practices of precolonial tradition and culture, the protagonist characters in this second group of works are equally determined to locate themselves in, and celebrate these very centres and matrices of collective tradition" (*Wole Soyinka* 43-4).

Postcolonial African writings emphasize the critical role of literature in the continuous struggle against colonial legacies and the revitalization of native cultural traditions. The analysed literary pieces provide a diverse and intricate portrayal of opposition, endurance, adaptation, and reacquaintance, showcasing the adeptness with which African authors have manoeuvred through the intricacies of postcolonial selfhood. These authors have boldly addressed the historical injustices of colonialism in their works, emphasising the lasting significance and vibrancy of indigenous cultures. African postcolonial literature has played a crucial role in demolishing repressive structures and imagining a future based on cultural authenticity and self-determination. The discovery of their rich cultural history and the nurturing of a revitalised sense of pride and identity have achieved this. These literary voices continue to inspire and educate, establishing the foundation for a deeper understanding and appreciation of Africa's diverse

cultural fabric and ensuring the lasting presence of the spirit of resilience and revitalization.

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