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Nihilism and the Collapse of Indigenous Epistemology in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the idea of nihilism as it appears in Chinua Achebe's seminal work *Things Fall Apart*, which was published in 1958. It focuses on how colonial enterprise accelerated by white Europeans leads not only to political domination but also to a deep existential crisis of meaning within the Igbo community. *Things Fall Apart* significantly depicts the clash between the native and European culture which shows that the collapse of native traditional values is not the effect of internal skepticism or intellectual probing, as it appears in European existential thought but rather the outcome of an external cultural invasion. Okonkwo's downfall, in this context, encapsulates the moment of rupture between a communal, tradition-bound ethos and the encroaching colonial order. The Igbo world, premised in ancestral order, communal harmony, and spiritual balance, is gradually driven toward meaninglessness under the coercive influence of colonial rule and missionary enterprise. Specifically, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when judged alongside thinkers like Nietzsche, Camus, and Fanon; it articulates a distinct form of colonial nihilism which is grounded in the effacement of indigenous culture and the silencing of native gods.

Introduction:

In the aftermath of World War I, W. B. Yeats, in his poem "The Second Coming", deftly captures the convulsions of a civilization confronting the collapse of its moral and spiritual order in the line, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." (Yeats, 1951, p. 184) Chinua Achebe adapts this phrase as the title of his 1958 novel, infusing it with new historical and cultural resonance. The disintegration of European stability delineated in Yeats's poem becomes, for Achebe, an allegory of colonial disruption and the nihilistic vacuum it engenders. *Things Fall Apart* vividly depicts the disintegration of Igbo society in late 19th century Nigeria through the tragic downfall of Okonkwo, a mighty warrior whose unnatural death poignantly embodies both individual failure and the inevitable dissolution of an entire epistemological and moral universe that the Igbo community believes in. This paper endeavours to offer a sustained meditation on nihilism by examining the lived and historical experience of a people who witness the disruption of their world and the loss of coherent meaning.

Nihilism, derived from the Latin *nihil* (meaning "nothing"), posits that existence lacks intrinsic purpose, value, and order. Within the Western philosophical tradition, this idea finds its most influential articulation in Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead," (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 191) which signifies the collapse of transcendental guarantees of meaning in European modernity. However, the idea of nihilism expressed in *Things Fall Apart* differs sharply from this European lineage. Achebe envisions a form of colonial nihilism which is externally imposed through the brutal and forceful intrusion of an outlandish epistemology that disrupts the indigenous culture from its own systems of value, knowledge, and belief. Thus, the colonial confrontation brings about an intellectual crisis of faith and an existential annihilation of meaning.

This paper evaluates Achebe's representation of colonial nihilism through three interconnected dimensions: the fragmentation of cosmological coherence, the erosion of social ontology, and the futility of heroic agency within a disenchanted colonial world. Considering the close textual analysis and engagement with existentialist, postcolonial, and African philosophical frameworks, this paper argues that Achebe's narrative transforms the story of cultural conquest into an inquiry into the creation of nothingness—what Frantz Fanon terms "a zone of nonbeing." (Fanon, 1986, p. 10) In this perspective, *Things Fall Apart* emerges as both a tragedy of cultural extinction and a profound philosophical meditation on the death of meaning under colonial domination.

The Igbo Cosmos:

An understanding of the dense metaphysical coherence of the Igbo cosmos, which Achebe meticulously reconstructs in the novel's early chapters, is indispensable to apprehending the pervasive nature of nihilism in *Things Fall Apart*. The functionality of Umuofian society mirrors Mircea Eliade's observation that "between the nomadic hunters and the sedentary cultivators there is a similarity in behavior that seems to us infinitely more important than their differences: both live in a sacralized cosmos, both share in a cosmic sacrality manifested equally in the animal world and in the vegetable world" (Eliade, 1987, p. 17). In Umuofia, every phenomenon, object, and gesture operates within a matrix of spiritual significance and relational reciprocity. It is an articulation of Igbo ontology itself: existence is inherently interactional, revolving around ongoing exchanges among the human, ancestral, and divine realms.

In this sacred cosmology, meaning is neither transcendent nor postponed; it resides immanently within the interwoven fabric of worldly life. The native world exemplifies what Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, describes as the antithesis of the absurd condition. Camus observes that "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger." (p. 5) Precolonial Umuofian society embodies precisely such a "familiar world," where cause and consequence are coherently linked through spiritual causality. Prosperity, fertility, misfortune and essential dimensions of Igbo life are situated within a coherent moral and metaphysical order. Okonkwo's prosperity emerges from his reverence for Ani, the earth goddess, and the harmonious alignment of his chi (personal god), whereas agricultural failure, conversely, indicates a rupture in this ontological harmony necessitating ritual propitiation. Thus, the concept of *chi* becomes a philosophical principle that balances human agency with cosmic determinism, a resolution of the very existential tensions that European modernity would later codify as the "crisis of meaning."

Achebe depicts the Igbo world as harmoniously structured social order in which each individual holds a defined position within interrelated systems of kinship, lineage, age-grade, and the titles. His narration of Ezeudu's funeral: "It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups" (Achebe, 1992 p. 85), demonstrates a collective life governed by rhythm and continuity, where identity develops from participation in a living communal matrix.

The most remarkable characteristic trait of the Igbo cosmology lies in its ability to accommodate ambiguity and paradox within an integrated moral and metaphysical framework, without disintegrating

into relativism or nihilistic despair. Achebe reveals a culture capable of sustaining moral and metaphysical complexity: twins are deemed abominable and abandoned in the evil forest; Obierika questions the justice of their abandonment; "the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves" (Achebe, p. 11) speaks with divine command, yet its pronouncements are mediated through communal consensus; masculinity is deeply respected, but the priestess Chielo exercises a spiritual power surpassing that of any man. "The world is large" (Achebe, p. 53), Okonkwo reflects embracing inclusivity without perceiving it as chaos. The Igbo cosmos, therefore, constitutes a system of meaning that accommodates contradiction while retaining coherence—a culture that profoundly bewilders colonial epistemologies which dismissed African cosmologies as aboriginal, primitive, irrational, and superstitious.

Okonkwo's Pre-Colonial Nihilistic Tendencies:

Paradoxically, from the very beginning of the novel, even before the colonial intrusion, Okonkwo exhibits tendencies that might be regarded as proto-nihilistic, though of a distinctly non-existential kind. His character is defined less by affirmation than by negation. He repudiates his father's way of life, perceiving Unoka as indolent, weak, and disgracefully unsuccessful, a man despised by the clansmen for his debts and negligence. This profound resentment becomes, for Okonkwo, a negative foundation of selfhood: his entire moral and psychological constitution is built upon the rejection of his father's perceived failures, rather than on any positive ideal of being. This disposition finds resonance in Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of *ressentiment* in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where the reactive subject constructs values not from genuine creativity but from opposition to an internalized adversary. Nietzsche observes that "the slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values" (Nietzsche, p. 36). Okonkwo's identity is built through such negation: his obsessive repudiation of his father Unoka's gentleness and aesthetic sensibility becomes the central axis around which his sense of worth revolves. In constructing his masculinity upon the ruins of Unoka's perceived weakness, Okonkwo imbibes an ethics of aggression and control that hollows meaning from within and transforms masculine strength into a fragile defense against vulnerability.

The rigid masculinity that Okonkwo internalizes often serves as a refusal of several dimensions present in Igbo community. He violates the nuanced wisdom of his culture and desecrates the sanctity of the father-son relationship between himself and Ikemefuna by killing the latter in spite of being explicitly warned by Ezeudu against participation. Obierika reminds him, "What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families." (Achebe, p. 48). Okonkwo's response; "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger" (Achebe, p. 48) discloses

a monologic literalism that subverts the dialogic and context-sensitive rationality inherent in Igbo epistemology.

At times, Okonkwo's emptying of meaning through an obsessive reductionism generates his personal nihilistic tendencies; however, these remain contained within the broader communal system of meaning-making. His seven-year exile for manslaughter demonstrates the culture's capacity to absorb and rehabilitate even serious transgressions. The world of Umuofia maintains stability even in the face of personal failings. Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu reminds him, "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland" (Achebe, p. 94). The Igbo world supports multiple frameworks for its balance and harmony which prevent any single desecration from generating absolute nihilism.

Ironically, it is a purported colonialist narrative that the Igbo culture contains the seeds of its own nihilistic destruction but in reality, no amount of cultural integrity can resist the violent incursions of external colonial power. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, colonial power operates not through dialogue but through the violent imposition of European epistemological supremacy: " The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal." (Said, 1979, p. 40). Rather than engaging Igbo philosophy, the colonial enterprise institutes its epistemic erasure, designating indigenous thought as absence.

Missionary Colonialism as Nihilistic Force:

The culture and religion introduced by the European missionaries in Umuofia function within the novel's structure as a pure form of negation of the native world. Their doctrine systematically denies the reality of everything that the Igbo hold sacred and true. As Mr. Brown's translator announces: "All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us." (Achebe, p. 103) This is not religious pluralism but absolutely an utter nullification that acknowledges the Igbo cosmos is not only wrong or incomplete but it is fundamentally incapable of producing meaning, necessary for sustaining native life. This negation constitutes what Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, identifies as the fundamental violence of colonialism: the construction of nonbeing. Fanon writes, " The colonial world is a Manichean world … At times this Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal." (Fanon, 1963, p. 41). The missionary discourse transforms Igbo spirituality from a coherent indigenous

belief system into what the colonizers disparagingly term "heathen darkness." In the process, it reduces years of accumulated wisdom to nothingness.

Social outcasts such as the *osu* who live at the fringe of Umuofian society, the mothers of twins and particularly Okonkwo's son Nwoye who blatantly disregards his father's toxic idea of masculinity and questions the killing of innocent Ikemefuna, are among the earliest converts. They experience this cultural nihilism from within as no culture or religion is complete and flawless in itself. Thus, Nwoye's conversion to Christianity is triggered not by Christianity's truths but by his existing alienation from certain Igbo cultural practices. Achebe writes, "It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow." (p. 104) This very "poetry" functions as what Nietzsche describes in *The Will to Power* (1968), "Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism." (p. 17) This marks a passive withdrawal from the difficulties of one's own tradition into the comforting absolutism of colonial Christianity. Nwoye's conversion ensues not from his deep faith in Christianity but from the solace it gives to his painful experience and existential crisis through the adoption of a foreign belief system.

Initially, the missionary master tends to recognize Igbo cultural aspects: "Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs." (Achebe, p. 126) These conversations suggest the possibility of genuine intercultural dialogue and the simultaneous co-existence of cultural diversity. However, Mr. Brown's successor, Reverend Smith, embodies undiluted nihilistic colonialism: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil" (Achebe, p. 130). Smith's Manichean worldview cannot accommodate Igbo complexity. Under his leadership, the church becomes an instrument of absolute negation of native belief system. This culminates in Enoch's unmasking of an egwugwu, an act that violates the sacred core of Igbo spirituality and intensifies the irreconcilable tension between the church and the locals, foreshadowing the gradual disintegration of Igbo social fabric.

The colonial administrative system introduced following the advent of the missionary church completes the nihilistic project in Umuofia. The District Commissioner and his court messengers, the kotma, comprised of native Africans who served the European masters for financial gain, bring in a legal apparatus that transforms Igbo law and order meaningless and futile. Okonkwo and other leaders encounter colonial power at its most brutal and dehumanizing form when they are punished in the prison for desecrating the church. Those who did not follow their leaders in this failed attempt to punish the

trespassers realize that they have spared themselves from utter humiliation. This incident bears the mark of acceptance that resistance itself has become meaningless. Igbo agency can no longer exercise any power, authority or domination over its own land which is now plagued by foreign order established by the colonial masters to annihilate the native cosmos and to replace it with a cultural framework that does not conform to the indigenous ways of life.

Okonkwo's Nihilistic Suicide:

Okonkwo's suicide precipitated by physical insult and humiliation demonstrates the eventual exposition of colonial nihilism. The forceful imposition of colonial framework upon the native community renders their long-established way of lifestyle unbearable and ontologically incompatible with the new colonial order mandated by the white European masters where no viable alternative remains. In Igbo culture, suicide is regarded as an utter abomination and a serious violation against the earth goddess that robs the victim of a proper burial. Obierika expresses to the District Commissioner: " "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it." (Achebe, 145). In this context, Okonkwo's suicide can be considered as doubly nihilistic for it prematurely destroys himself, a form of self-annihilation and eventually violates his culture's one of the deepest taboos.

Okonkwo's suicide is not merely a personal failure but rather it is an act of existential angst that may be interpreted in Camusian terms as his confrontation with "the absurd"; the break between the human need for meaning and the absurdity of existence. As Camus writes, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." (Camus, p. 3). Okonkwo's suicide addresses this vey dilemma; his life ceases to be worth living and no longer produces any life-sustaining meaning, when the familiar and meaning-making native cosmos faces gradual destruction, when the heroic action produces only humiliation and resistance miserably surrenders before the colonizer's unmatchable power.

The final paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* concretizes the process of nihilistic reduction as Achebe dramatizes on the District Commissioner's plan to write a book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* that would contain only a brief mention of Okonkwo: "The story of this man (Okonkwo) who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details." (Achebe, p. 145-146). Ironically, a lifetime of struggle, the

irreparable damage to native culture and the inevitable collapse of the Igbo cosmos are all reduced to a mere paragraph in a colonial administrative writing. This moment captures colonial nihilism in its complete form, rigidly regulated by the European masters, embodying not merely the absence of meaning but the systematic erasure of indigenous epistemologies that earlier existed in pre-colonial world.

Significantly, at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe develops the District Commissioner's reductionist view of Okonkwo's death to indict colonial epistemology as a nihilistic apparatus. The Commissioner's reduction of Okonkwo's story to mere "interesting reading" parallels the colonial reduction of African humanity to ethnographic data. Therefore, the Commissioner's planned book serves this operation literally and transforms living tragedy and meaningful existence into curious anecdote.

Comparative Nihilisms: Achebe, Fanon, and the Existentialists:

The specificity of colonial nihilism becomes more apparent in *Things Fall Apart* when it is differentiated from European existential nihilism as Jean-Paul Sartre declares, "existence precedes essence," (Sartre, p.22) an assertion that suggests a philosophical liberation. Human beings are "condemned to be free," (Sartre, p.29) and responsible for creating their own meanings without divine assurances. This freedom, though fraught with uncertainty, opens possibilities for self-exploration. Sartre writes in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself." (p. 22). Colonial nihilism denies the natives the freedom to explore meaning out of their humble existence by monopolizing the authority of meaning-making ethos. Frantz Fanon captures this dilemma in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation."(p. 51) Okonkwo fails to add meaning to his life and community through individual action, as colonialism declares his story as primitive savagery that requires subjugation.

In the precolonial context, Okonkwo's heroic attempt that results in the killing of a court messenger could have been regarded as meaningful resistance and an expression of communal defense. However, in the colonial context, it is reinterpreted as a confirmation of African violence that requires suppression, even the natives look at it as a futile provocation fearing the loss of whatever harmony left in the clan. The same act, if committed by a colonial agent could have acquired an entirely different meaning depending on who controls the narrative framework. Fanon writes, " The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey." (p. 51) while the colonized exists in a sort of torpor. It rightfully

captures Okonkwo's tragedy in discovering that his Odyssey has been retrospectively reclassified as torpor.

Fanon primarily focuses on political and economic colonialism, whereas *Things Fall Apart* epitomizes the destruction of cosmological frameworks. The Igbo loss arises not merely from the erosion of political sovereignty or economic exploitation brought about by colonialism but from the very grounds of intelligibility itself. Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues in *Decolonising the Mind*, colonialism's deepest violence occurs at the level of language and consciousness: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation"(p. 9).

This spiritual subjugation engenders a form of "ontological nihilism", resulting in the destruction, not merely of particular meanings but of the very capacity to produce meaning. The incursion of a foreign administrative system into the Igbo world following the Christian missionary enterprise, declares the Igbo gods nonexistent and dismantles the Igbo world order that once sustained the indigenous community. Igbo language becomes subordinated to English and the entire network of relationships through which meaning emerged dissolves. This is graver than the Nietzsche's proclamation "God is dead" (p. 191) because it annihilates not a single deity but an entire relational Igbo cosmos.

Conclusion:

Things Fall Apart does not provide any easy resolutions to the nihilism it depicts. The novel's ending grants neither restoration nor redemption to the dismantled native world, leaving it instead with bureaucratic indifference and an unburied, abominable body. This refusal to include a false comfort at the end of the novel is objectively significant as it refuses to minimize colonial violence and to suggest that meaning cannot be easily reconstructed after such overwhelming devastation. Theodor Adorno wrote after Auschwitz, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (p. 34); suggesting that certain catastrophes shatter the aesthetic frameworks that once sustained a meaningful world within their own boundaries. However, Achebe writes after catastrophe to bring before the broader world the record of a shattered cosmos and unprecedented cultural destruction, implying that the victims are not forgotten and the perpetrators are not absolved.

The nihilism represented in *Things Fall Apart* is thus double-edged. On the one hand, it effectively communicates the creation of void through colonial violence; on the other, it resists this void through the insistence that stories matter and that meaningful literary art can contest historical erasure.

This tension between the representation of meaninglessness and the act of meaningful representation consolidates the novel's profound achievement.

Contemporary readers can recognize Achebe's nihilistic dimensions represented in *Things Fall Apart* as powerfully resonant with ongoing experiences of cultural erosion, pervasive global homogenization, and the psychological violence that devalues cultural intelligence. Achebe's depiction of colonial nihilism serves as a stark reminder that indigenous knowledge systems and local cultures, many of which face extinction under the pressures of scientific rationalism and global capitalism must be acknowledged and preserved if cultural diversity is to endure.

Things Fall Apart clearly expresses that nihilism is not merely an abstract idea but a lived experience of Umuofian people within the specific historical circumstances of the Igbo world. Achebe foregrounds nihilistic collapse in the concrete details of Igbo life and colonial violence, making visible what abstractions often hide; that behind every philosophical notion of meaninglessness lie real people, real cultures and seemingly, real gods dying real deaths. This specificity constitutes the novel's great achievement and its great warning. Nihilism has historical causes and concrete perpetrators, and only by understanding these causes can there arise the hope of constructing worlds that resist the creation of new voids.

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