



Themes of Resistance and Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*.

'Ruth Oluwatosin Etohwo

Department of English and Literary Studies, Imo State University

etohworuth@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the issues of identity and resistance in two important pieces of African literature, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The intricacies of cultural identity in the face of colonialism, as well as the internal and external conflicts that characterize resistance in colonized nations, are explored in both books. As British colonization imposes new ideals, Okonkwo's unwavering devotion to ancient Igbo values causes personal and communal turmoil, embodying resistance in *Things Fall Apart*. Waiyaki, on the other hand, demonstrates the conflicts between identity preservation and adaptation in *The River Between* by attempting to balance his Kikuyu background with the Western education and religion brought by missionaries. Achebe and Ngugi examine the complex nature of resistance, the difficulties in preserving cultural integrity, and the profound splits colonialism creates within communities through these stories. This article makes the case that although both writers portray resistance as a crucial element of identity preservation, they also highlight its limitations in the face of unavoidable societal change.

Introduction

In African literature, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are two titans whose writings have profoundly influenced the conversation about colonialism and postcolonial identity. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *The River Between* (1965), their respective novels, are frequently considered foundational texts that explore African nations' experiences during the colonial encounter (Uddin & Hasan, 2023). The loss, alteration, and resistance of cultural identities are among the many effects of European imperialism on indigenous cultures that are discussed in these novels.

Set in pre-colonial and early colonial Nigeria, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* examines how British missionaries and colonial officials caused the Igbo civilization to fall apart. The story explores the complex interrelationship between personal identity and community heritage via Okonkwo's life, emphasizing the destructive effects of colonialism on both (Asharudeen, 2018). Achebe emphasizes the human cost of resistance to strong external influences and the tenacity of traditional values through Okonkwo's character (Irele, 2001).

The River Between by Ngugi wa Thiong'o explores a related subject from the viewpoint of the Kikuyu people in Kenya. The tale illustrates the profound cultural divide brought about by colonial imposition and is set in the early years of British colonial power (Kaur, 2024). Ngugi looks at Waiyaki's challenges as a young leader who tries to balance the advantages of Western education with the ideals of his Kikuyu background. As colonized nations struggle with the loss of their cultural identity and the temptation to conform to foreign norms, his voyage represents a larger existential crisis within those societies (Gikandi, 2000).

Both Achebe and Ngugi use their protagonists and settings to illustrate the intricacies of African communities negotiating colonial upheaval, placing resistance and identity at the center of their stories. As we examine how Achebe and Ngugi express the dynamics of cultural preservation, resistance, and self-definition in their separate texts, the interaction between these two themes serves as the basis for our research.

Resistance in *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe offers a profoundly complex examination of resistance, presenting it as both an individual battle symbolized by the main character Okonkwo and a group obstacle that the Igbo culture faces. The novel's resistance reveals the intricacies and repercussions of resisting colonial oppression on a number of levels, including cultural, political, and spiritual (Study.com, 2023). Achebe explores the complex dynamics of resistance, emphasizing its value and drawbacks in a society that is divided.

Okonkwo's personal ideals, which are closely correlated with Igbo customs, form the foundation of his resistance to colonization. The hierarchical clan systems, agricultural methods, and spiritual beliefs of Okonkwo's civilization are all integral to his identity as a warrior and leader (CliffsNotes, 2015).

He sees these foundations as directly threatened by the entry of British missionaries and their doctrine. Okonkwo's dread of cultural destruction and his resolve to preserve the Igbo way of life are the main drivers of his opposition.

Okonkwo's defiance is immediately apparent in his contempt for any indications of weakness in his neighborhood. He also opposes Christianity because he believes it undermines traditional values and rituals. For instance, Okonkwo responds angrily to the missionaries' establishment of a church in Umuofia and calls for taking immediate action to expel them. His reaction reflects a type of resistance that depends on conflict rather than compromise and is representative of his strict loyalty to his people's warrior mentality (Achebe, 1958).

But there are several shortcomings in Okonkwo's resistance. His unyielding character and inability to adjust to the shifting conditions of colonial rule make him unpopular with his fellow citizens. The difficulties of leading a divided society during times of crisis are highlighted by Okonkwo's inflexible approach to resistance, which eventually restricts his capacity to mobilize group support (Uddin & Hasan, 2023).

Achebe as a collective battle rife with internal tensions portrays the wider Igbo reaction to colonialism, even though Okonkwo's resistance is intensely personal. The community becomes divided because of the missionaries' introduction of a foreign ideology (Uddin & Hasan, 2023). Some, like Okonkwo, view Christianity and the colonial administration as existential threats to Igbo identity and autonomy. Others, like as Okonkwo's son Nwoye, find comfort in the new religion since it provides an alternative to their society's strict and frequently harsh customs.

The community's ideological and generational divisions are reflected in Nwoye's conversion to Christianity. Nwoye accepts Christianity as a means of emancipation after being disillusioned with customs like the murder of twins and the exclusion of the *osu* (outcasts). This act of defection challenges the community's togetherness on a larger scale in addition to being a personal rejection of Igbo customs. Through Nwoye's metamorphosis, Achebe draws attention to the internal division brought about by colonial influence, implying that resistance becomes more challenging in a society that lacks ideological cohesion (Irele, 2001).

At the book's conclusion, Okonkwo commits suicide, which is both a tragic admission of failure and a personal protest (CliffsNotes, 2015). Upon realizing that his society has undergone irreversible transformation and that there is no longer any chance of collective resistance to colonial tyranny, Okonkwo decides to take his own life. His passing serves as a metaphor for how pointless individual resistance is when confronted with powerful outside forces and internal conflict.

According to Friesen (2024), Okonkwo's suicide also symbolizes the traditional leadership's eventual inability to adjust to the new colonial rule. His act of self-destruction represents the breakdown of the institutions and ideals that had constituted his identity and that of his community, even as it is also a final declaration of agency. When a society is split and its cultural underpinnings are undermined, Achebe portrays this instance as a critique of colonialism as well as a moving reflection on the limits of resistance.

Beyond Okonkwo, Achebe depicts resistance in terms of the larger dynamics of colonial interactions in Igbo society. The difficulties of organizing a cohesive resistance to colonial domination are reflected in Umuofia's splits. The colonial government's promise of political and educational prospects draws some clan members to work together, making resistance even more difficult (Roy, 2022). The community's capacity to resist the advancing forces as a whole is weakened by this fragmentation, underscoring the tactical edge colonial powers obtain by taking advantage of internal conflicts.

Achebe provides a gloomy viewpoint on resistance by utilizing these intricacies. The book highlights the Igbo people's pride and tenacity, but it also emphasizes how difficult it is to maintain cultural identity in the face of outside influences and how change is inevitable. According to Achebe, resistance is a complex process that is frequently characterized by compromise, struggle, and loss rather than being a straightforward or cohesive undertaking.

Resistance in the River Between

The River Between by Ngugi wa Thiong'o provides a thorough and multifaceted examination of resistance, not just as a fight against colonial tyranny but also as a profoundly internalized conflict inside the Kikuyu community. Waiyaki, the main character, represents the conflicts of balancing tradition with the colonial-era modern world (Kaur, 2024). Ngugi portrays resistance through Waiyaki's voyage as a dispersed and splintered force that defies easy reduction to binary classifications of pro- or anti-colonial feeling. This nuanced representation examines how colonialism undermines cultural identity and social cohesion as an external force and as a collection of internalized mechanisms.

Waiyaki is a figure torn between his people's cultural legacy and the colonial system's educational chances (Jean, 2018). He is exposed to Western ideas and information through his schooling at a missionary school, but it also puts him in a vulnerable position where his adherence to Kikuyu customs is continuously questioned. The foundation of his resistance is this combined exposure to colonial education and traditional values.

Waiyaki's opposition is thoughtful and calculated, in contrast to other characters who openly fight colonialism by insurrection or violence. According to him, his people must learn about the West while retaining their Kikuyu customs in order to adapt to the changing world and withstand the colonial assault (Graves, 2024). He sees education and cultural preservation as complementary. Waiyaki envisions a society that is able to blend the two cultures without becoming less unique. According to him, education is the key to emancipation and empowerment, allowing the Kikuyu to overcome colonial oppression without compromising their unique heritage.

However, Waiyaki faces several challenges along the way. Because they perceive his educational endeavors as a challenge to their authority, the colonial authorities oppose him. These authorities attempt to counteract Waiyaki's effect because they are concerned that educated Africans may one

day turn into leaders who can organize opposition (Shahwan, 2019). However, Waiyaki's conservative peers—led by his father and other elders—see his dependence on Western education as a betrayal of their cultural beliefs. According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1965), they accuse him of assimilating the colonizers' methods and endangering the core of Kikuyu identity.

The tension between Waiyaki's progressive educational philosophy and the community leaders' anxieties exemplifies how polarized resistance is in a colonized society (Shahwan, 2019). In *The River Between*, Ngugi demonstrates how colonialism compels people and groups to make tough decisions that frequently lead to fragmentation and rifts within the community rather than presenting a one front.

The debate around female circumcision, a custom that is ingrained in Kikuyu culture and identity, is a major symbolic component of resistance in *The River Between*. In order to connect with the Kikuyu ancestral legacy and the community's spiritual life, traditionalists view circumcision as an essential ritual that signifies the passage from girlhood to womanhood (Klimková, 2019). The Kikuyu people's identity is anchored by this practice, which highlights the value of maintaining cultural continuity.

However, a foreign set of ideas brought by Christian missionaries denounces customs like circumcision as primitive and archaic. The missionaries want to inculcate European concepts of morality and gender norms in addition to substituting Christianity for traditional Kikuyu beliefs (Busolo, 2010). Thus, the dispute over circumcision serves as a metaphor for the greater struggle between the colonial forces seeking to supplant the traditional Kikuyu worldview and the Kikuyu people.

The Kikuyu community's internal conflict is part of the resistance here, in addition to the straightforward conflict between colonizers and colonized. Some women, like as Nyambura, Waiyaki's romantic interest, are torn between these two conflicting forces: the traditional practices that define their identity as Kikuyu women, and the draw of Christian beliefs that oppose circumcision (Sangita, 2019). This dispute over circumcision serves as an example of the larger battle over which aspects of cultural identity should be preserved and which may need to change in response to outside influences.

Despite not outright opposing circumcision, Waiyaki himself is unable to mediate between the two sides, signifying the challenge of bringing the past and present into harmony. This ideological divide over female circumcision demonstrates how complicated and contradictory cultural values influence resistance to colonialism (Iwuchukwu & Sicherman, 2019). Additionally, it emphasizes how gender shaped colonial and anti-colonial struggles, with women caught in the crossfire of conflicting ideas about modernity and cultural identity (Gikandi, 2000).

The tragedy of *The River Between* is largely caused by Waiyaki's inability to bring the Kikuyu people together around his ideas of resistance and reform. The society is still divided in spite of his attempts to unite traditionalists and reformists. The ideological differences are just too great, and Waiyaki becomes isolated as a result of his incapacity to adequately address the issues raised by both sides (Iwuchukwu & Sicherman, 2019). Traditionalists believe he is too contemporary, while reformists believe he is not radical enough. His terrible demise results from his attempts to strike a balance between adopting Western education and preserving Kikuyu culture.

Ngugi explores resistance in a colonized community through the story of Waiyaki, who fails to unite the Kikuyu community during a crisis. The book highlights the limitations of resistance in a divided society and the conflict between individual and group resistance. Waiyaki represents hope for a better future through education and reform.

Identity in Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe depicts identity as being firmly anchored in Igbo customs, roles, and societal systems. Spiritual beliefs, ancestry, and social expectations are all entwined with an individual's sense of self. Achebe offers a sophisticated examination of identity as a social and individual construct that is both resilient and susceptible to outside disturbances via the prism of Okonkwo's character (ÖZÜN & BAŞKALE, 2019).

Okonkwo's drive and desire to break with his father, Unoka, who was seen as weak and unproductive, characterize who he is. Okonkwo is driven to represent Igbo culture's ideas of power and masculinity because he is determined to be the opposite of his father. He rises to prominence in his society as a leader, a successful farmer, and a renowned fighter. But this inflexible idea of masculinity also contributes to his demise. Okonkwo's identity is closely linked to the expectations of masculinity and success in society, which leaves little opportunity for emotional flexibility or vulnerability. His limited view of identity is demonstrated by his contempt for anything linked to weakness, including his own son Nwoye (Achebe, 1958).

The Igbo community's identity is challenged by colonial authorities and European missionaries, who introduce Christianity and Western administration, leading to cultural and generational division. Nwoye's conversion to Christianity symbolizes a rejection of traditional Igbo identity and his father's ideals, illustrating the fragmentation of cultural identity under colonial influence (Irele, 2001).

The fragility of identity when it is solely bound to tradition is demonstrated by Okonkwo's incapacity to adjust to the shifting cultural context (Shino, 2023). His intense dread of losing the cultural legacy that makes him who he is, is what drives his opposition to the colonial powers. He sees his son and other community members' conversion to Christianity as a personal insult and a violation of Igbo customs.

Okonkwo's suicide, his final act of defiance, highlights how severe his identity struggle is. By ending his own life, Okonkwo admits his failure to preserve his community's identity and rebels against the colonial system that has deprived him of his authority. His passing also represents how colonial imposition caused the traditional Igbo identity to crumble. The intricacy of identity in a society that is changing quickly is shown by Achebe's depiction of Okonkwo's death, where internal disintegration frequently results from resistance to outside influences (*Okonkwo's Resistance to Change in Chinua Achebe's Things... | Bartleby*, 2024).

Achebe's novel explores the impact of colonialism on Igbo identity, highlighting the fragmentation and internal conflicts within the community due to differing ideas about progress and survival, emphasizing the importance of collective cohesion.

Identity in the River Between

Ngugi wa Thiong'o examines the issue of identity in *The River Between* as a complex and frequently contentious part of colonial life. According to Sangita (2019), identity is depicted as dynamic and ever-changing, influenced by personal, cultural, and historical factors. Waiyaki, the main character, represents this struggle as he tries to balance the competing demands of his Kikuyu background with the Western education that colonial forces forced upon him.

Waiyaki's dual persona is a strength and a liability. His Western education, on the one hand, makes him a leader who can successfully negotiate the colonial system and fight for the rights of his people. However, traditionalists see him with distrust as a possible danger to their cultural purity because of his affiliation with colonial schooling. Waiyaki is at the epicenter of a larger ideological struggle between tradition and modernity because of this dichotomy. As Simon Gikandi (2000) points out, Ngugi draws attention to the difficulties African leaders encounter in trying to reconcile these two realities by drawing on Waiyaki's internal and external conflicts.

To further explore identity, Ngugi also uses symbolism. The intellectual and cultural gap between tradition and Western influence is powerfully symbolized by the river that divides the two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu. While Makuyu symbolizes the invasion of Christianity and colonial modernity, Kameno stands for the bulwark of Kikuyu customs. Waiyaki wants to create a single identity for his people, which is shown in his efforts to heal this division. But the river also highlights how hard it is to achieve this kind of reconciliation, highlighting the underlying conflict in juggling two identities (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1965).

The controversy surrounding female circumcision, a custom that is ingrained in Kikuyu culture, serves as another example of the novel's depiction of the complexity of identity. The practice is a fundamental component of the traditionalists' cultural identity and their defense against colonial intrusion (Iwuchukwu & Sicherman, 2019). It is seen by the Christian converts as a sign of backwardness that needs to be eliminated. Waiyaki's unwillingness to have a strong position on this matter makes him unpopular with both sides, underscoring the difficulties of navigating cultural authenticity in a colonial setting. Ngugi used this argument to illustrate how colonialism compels the colonized to make difficult decisions, frequently at the price of their own autonomy and coherence, as Gikandi (2000) notes.

Waiyaki's struggle to unite his tribe exemplifies the complexities of colonization, as it demonstrates the struggle of African civilizations to reconcile tradition and modernity, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* are two novels that explore the struggles of colonial-era African communities in maintaining their cultural identities. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* highlights the consequences of resistance, as colonial power undermines social systems, leading to cultural breakdown and individual hopelessness. Ngugi's *The River Between* explores the internal struggles of colonized civilizations, highlighting the clash between tradition and modernity. Both novels provide insights into the flexibility and resiliency of African cultures, offering a nuanced perspective on colonial and postcolonial African societies.

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