

African and Chinese Counter-Colonial Fictional Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Retrieval of Indigenous Cultural Identities

Pinkish Zahra	Visiting Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Faisalabad, Pakistan.
Sabir Hussain	Visiting Lecturer, English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Faisalabad, Pakistan. Email; sabir_gilgiti@hotmail.com
Ghulam Murtaza	Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

The oppressive British and chauvinistic Japanese colonialism imposed a hegemonic culture in Africa and China. Things Fall Apart by Achebe and Red Sorghum by Mo Yan demonstrate British and Japanese colonial misshaping of African and Chinese cultures respectively. In response, the indigenous writers sustain their identity and culture crumbling under colonial corrosion. Things Fall Apart deals with the bitterness of colonialism in Africa, while Red Sorghum deals with Chinese colonial experiences. This article addresses the question how these authors, despite their different spatial and temporal contexts, encounter the hegemonic administrative structures and discourse. The principles of intertextuality are exploited to unveil the colonial governance structure and the literary re-assertion of the colonized. Postcolonial theory helps unearth the colonial strategies and retrieval of the colonized identity. Said's 'filiality' and 'affiliative' principles help evaluate how these 'liminal intellectual(s)' encounter the oppressive ideology.

Key Words

Colonialism, Intertextuality, filiative, affiliative, liminal intellectuals, counter-colonialism

Introduction

Colonialism has been a stagnant smudge on the face of oppressive states. This oppressive attitude has been brought about by the Eurocentric approach of Great Britain and the chauvinistic tendency of Japan. In the early decades of twentieth-century more than a quarter of the world was under the siege of Great Britain on whose Empire sun had never set. Africa was among the battlefields of material interests overpowered by Britain. On the other hand China had to give in to Japan.

This research endeavors to unearth the implicit structure of the Eurocentric approach of Britain and chauvinistic propensity of Japan in the novels of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, (1958) and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* (1986). The latter novel deals with the colonial experiences of China in the hands of Japanese State, while the former novel deals with the bitterness of colonialism in Africa in the hands of the British State. Having experienced the tyrannical treatment of oppressive states, and having sensed the danger of extinction of indigenous cultures in the ebb and flow of dominant culture of colonizers, the indigenous literary figures determined to wage a literary war to sustain receding identity and culture. Achebe's and Yan's texts rely heavily on African and Chinese folk traditions. This research exploits the principles of intertextuality in order to unveil the same structure that serves the interest of both the colonizer and colonized. Besides this, postcolonial theory helps to unearth the tactics of colonizers and means of reassertions of colonized.

In the post-colonial era, the writers of the colonized world have been striving to encounter the overarching meta-narrative of West that aims at convincing the world into accepting the supremacy of West in all fields of life. This research, furthermore, investigates the indigenous means adopted by these writers to encounter the meta-narrative of West. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, on the one hand, proved to be a strong critique of Western monarchial attitude in the colonized African regions, yet, on the other hand, its polemical stance strives to convince the world that the savagery and chaotic state of Africa can only be brought into order by the Western civilization. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) encounters this chauvinistic tendency of Conrad by celebrating the indigenous rich culture of Africa. He synthesizes daily happenings with mystical past in order to underline the split of identity in the backdrop of colonial legacy. Yan enunciates the physical torture his countrymen went through which led to the exhaustion of Japanese tyrannical tactics and ultimately to the independence in 1949.

Research Questions

How do the authors, irrespective of their spatial and temporal relations, retrieve their identity and culture while encountering the hegemonic cultural writings?

How do the utterances of both colonizer and colonized intersect in different novels leading them to the neutralization of one another?

Research Methodology

A text is considered to be constructed as a mosaic of different quotations, citations, allusions, borrowings, adaptations, appropriations, parody, pastiche, imitation, and the like; consequently, it is a kind of absorption and transformation of another text. Human activities, dialogues, writings, etc. are appropriation of the same structure which is prevalent in society. In African and Chinese novels we find two kinds of personae: the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors, irrespective of their belonging, resort to the exploitation of colonized with the purpose of draining material resources, while each oppressed in the colonial world, irrespective of his dwelling, determined to revive and preserve the indigenous culture, takes on the colonizer in a similar way. The world is divided into two: the governing world and the governed world; each part of the world transcends the cultural and political boundaries in securing their respective interests. In other words, it can be said that the governing world is transcultural in formulating policies for sustaining their hegemony, and, on the other hand, the governed world is also transcultural in redeeming the receding identity and culture. So there is intertextuality in governing the distant people as well as in encountering the governing hegemonic structure.

This research explores the aforementioned phenomenon with the principles of intertextuality in order to unearth the same structure that serves the interest of both the colonizer and colonized. Moreover, postcolonial theory helps unveil the tactics of colonizers and means of reassertions of colonized. M. H. Abrams defines intertextuality as a creative tool used to signify the various ways in which a piece of literary text echoes, or linked to, other texts, whether by implicit or explicit citations and allusions, or by incorporating some of the features of earlier texts by later texts, or “simply by participation in a common stock of literary codes and conventions” (1999, p. 200).

Intertextuality refers to the presence of effect and literariness in the text of another text. Julia Kristeva, a French linguist, coined the word ‘Intertextuality’ after studying the theory of dialogism by Mikhail Bakhtin. But intertextuality has had a presence in the thoughts and philosophies of great writers since Greek age to modern time. Plato’s concept of imitation highlights intertextuality as the poet copies the creation which itself is a copy of reality. For both Quintilian and Cicero, Imitation is a method of developing personal discourse as well as a conscious intertextual strategy (Bakhtin, 1986). T.S Eliot’s concept of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is also a kind of intertextuality, and his masterpiece poem, *The Wasteland*, is the epitome of Intertextuality which has mashed up not only the literary texts, figures, cultures and antique civilizations but also the languages of the world. He is of the view that no artist, weather a creative writer or a practitioner of any other art carries complete signification of his art in isolation (1963). Julia Kristeva asserts the perspective of Allen that a text is a permutation in the intertextual space of a text wherein, many utterances overlap and intersect one another (2000). It is observable that the utterances of both Japan and Great Britain intersect each other and form a replica with a change of governing bodies. Similarly, the utterances of Chinese, Indian and African novelists intersect and neutralize in order to form a cohesive universal resistance as Rushdie says the empire’s vengeance finds expression through counter writing. It means that writing back involves the process of intertextual dialogue. In order to unearth the deeper structure of colonization which has sustained itself even after the apparent decolonization, besides intertextuality, Said’s conception of “filial” and “affiliative” criticism helps to interpret and evaluate the transcendence of “liminal intellectual(s)” in encountering the oppressive ideology. Liminal intellectuals understand and acknowledge the imperatives of the dominant culture but carry an individual consciousness sufficient to recognize dominant culture and interrogate its foundations. Achebe and Yan also recognize the totalized version of the dominant culture with the individual consciousness of the indigenous culture and traditions. Hence, intertextuality helps in bringing the apparently discrete, disjointed and fragmented utterances found in the texts which are latently ordered and in sync with each other,

Hebel (1989) and William Irwin (2004) are acknowledged as its pioneers; their concept of i) Influence, ii) Quotations and iii) Allusion is of great significance in the analysis of both the works. In influence, one can relate the latest text with the previously written texts especially the classics and it also includes tradition and imitation. Besides this, the influence also includes the incorporation of one or more features of one text by another. Morawski (1970) believes that quotation can be “easily detachable from the new whole” (p. 691) and their salient features are their individuality and accuracy. Alluding to the previous incidents, characters and historical events is a prevalent phenomenon in literature. Most of the writers allude to the classic characters.

When a reader relates a text to other texts he develops a link between these two texts. Sometimes it happens that a writer deliberately draws connections with the prior written text just to emphasize certain points. These allusive references enable the reader to develop a link with his prior knowledge. In this way, intertextuality opens up new frames of meaning within and beyond the social, cultural and political scenario.

Kristeva gave the concept of the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance to clarify the role of the author. The utterance is what one can call how a human mind produces and creates the words and enunciation are those words that are independent of human mind. In this way, various kinds of meanings are produced.

Analysis

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* (1986) reflect both convergences and divergences because these are related to each other in one way or the other and lots of meanings can be deduced from this relationship. Nevertheless, Achebe's work has been authored in the backdrop of British colonial intervention whereas Yan's novel has been written in the backdrop of Japanese brutal occupation. Both texts deal with the derogatory attitude of Britain and Japan. We can make a catalog of convergences and divergences to make this research more comprehensive and more viable.

Both the titles of the novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Red Sorghum* (1986) are significant. The former title echoes W. B. Yeats' famous poem, *The Second Coming*, and it signifies the arrival of Christian Missionaries on African land and its Christianization which brings chaos and disorder in the uncontaminated culture of Africa, while the latter sets the historical background of the invasion of the dominant Japanese forces in China. Red symbolizes the bloodshed and the brutality of the war whereas sorghum signifies the revival of indigenous culture and traditional values. For Yan (2003) sorghum wine is an effective panacea for all types of dangerous germs (p.46). In the above-mentioned quote, "dangerous germs" refers to the colonizers and their attitude towards the colonized whereas Sorghum is panacea to all such infected and dangerous germs.

Mo Yan admits that *Red Sorghum* (1986) is the reclamation of past culture. Yan incorporated many real events to reclaim the past and to assert his political inclinations as well. The novel portrays the contemporary experience of China's socio-cultural life with photographic exactness. Achebe also revives the African cultural values and presents a realistic picture of his social values and norms. He portrays the invasion of missionaries and the inculcation of British cultural and traditional values. It also provides a vivid picture of the whole process of internalization of British hegemonized structure.

The intertextual influence is seen in both novels. Yan and Achebe use land as a trope repeatedly and the repetition of the word "land" does not consolidate the monolithic meaning; rather the meaning epitomizes what Derrida calls iterability. This land takes diverse shapes; from a personified entity of law-giver to a sacred land worth-worshiping; from a source of livelihood to a source of mist and stench and from battleground of bloodshed to the fertile patch of hope and optimism. Hence, Father and Uncle Arhat listen "to the whispered secrets of the land" (Yan, 1986, p. 87), while it binds the people to observe the rules as the earth's decreed is that they, being an offense to the land must be annihilated (Achebe, 1958, p. 68). The intrusion of colonizing forces threatens to change the conception of land and identity but indigenous people are topophilic and they love their land even in dire poverty, they consider it as a source of living. Yan portrays this idea as Yu Zhan'ao was orphaned in his poor boyhood. He with his mother had to earn their living from less than half-acre and they took Big Tooth Yu, his uncle to traded horses and mules. Occasionally helped them economically but not so often (p.41). On the other hand, Achebe's conception of identity is also directly linked with land neither with the state nor with the country "[at] an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land" (p. 8). Both the lands of China and Nigeria seem to have been plagued with the ominous presence of colonizers. Their unfortunate arrival has brought about floods and heavy rains but the only objects that withstood these disasters are indigenous flora as when two or three rains had moistened the land, Okonkwo with his family reached the farm with their matches and hoes, and cereals in their baskets to start their planting (Achebe, 1958, p. 10). Similarly, in *Red Sorghum* (1986), Northeast Gaomi Township is mostly a swampy area though flooded by rains in autumn, tall sorghum straws prevented it from waterlogging and being planted everywhere invariably yielded a bumper crop (p. 16).

Two minor characters from both the novels share similar kinds of anger and its expression is seen in their actions; the subject of their anger is neither the colonizer nor their accomplices but the plants. Ezinma in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) violently shook tree with a stick and then bowed and cut its stem and dug the tuber out (p. 54), while the Father in *Red Sorghum* (1986) found that one of them knelt and fired to a clump of sorghum trees which were violently shaking "under the charge of a stallion" (p. 97). Ezinma shakes the tree violently while father shakes the clump of sorghum stalks violently. The heroes, to preserve and protect his identity, resort to violence to counter the suppressors' barbarity in both the novels. In *Red Sorghum* (1986) a bandit employs ambush to resist

the Japanese convoy. Yan presents both armed and verbal violence, the words and phrases to describe the violence of colonizers/invasers: "Jap dogs!" Commander Yu screamed. "Jap sons of bitches!" (p. 11) are repeated expressions in the novel to show his hatred for the colonizers. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe also highlights the brutal and violent acts of colonizers. They killed the natives violently and violent deaths that had never happened before were a frequent feature (p. 41).

Yan and Achebe portray the native culture simply by using their indigenous language and proverbs and introduce their own vernacular to the reader. Achebe has appropriated the English language; in other words, he has Africanized the English language. This linguistic appropriation has a reason: there are certain ideas and things that are untranslatable. Similarly, Yan, although wrote in his own language yet some words and ideas are untranslatable, he has appropriated the traditional culture in modern writing. Achebe used the word "Obi" several times to show his regional lingual importance. Sometimes he translated this word in terms of hut, apartment or house. Another word "Adichie" is also used by the author. This word 'ndichie' signifies an elder, who wants to know Okonkwo's mission (p. 9). Here he introduced the word 'ndichie' in terms of an elder. He also presents his cultural beliefs and norms in his writing. Yan also strives to preserve cultural identity. He rejects the foreign language and writes in Chinese, his native language and glorifies his 'primitive' culture.

The intertextual convergence is seen in both novels; nostalgic past is a kind of solace and peace especially for some of the old characters. In *Red Sorghum* (1986) Grandma's only hope is past and she glorifies it by considering it as compensation to live in colonial world. For grandma the past was falling to the ground like a ripped, sweet and fragrant fruit and future comprised only a few dimly visible but evanescent patches of light. But all with all her declined mind she was sticking to the freedom movement (p. 29). Achebe also portrays the past in the same manner. In past all the members of different clans are in harmonious relationships with each other. He remembers the good days when people enjoyed friendships in distant tribes (p. 45). Intertextual divergence is also prevalent in both the novels. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) for the perseverance of peace young generation left the old values and customs and adopted the new values. His father informed him that in the past, someone who violated peace was dragged to death in a village, but after some time this custom went out of practice because it was counter-productive. It destroyed peace instead of preserving it (9). Whereas, in *Red Sorghum* (1986), the traditional values and customs are revived in order to create a peaceful environment "Grandma looks for contentedly at Father's exquisite face". She lovingly remembers the sorghum field and its soothing shadows where she met Commander Yu to create him. The irretrievable images of the past run before her eyes like raced horses (p. 28).

Mo Yan argues that children's psyche is framed by their anger and revenge against the Japanese. Yan describes a bare-assed small boy who pissed furiously on the grave and started singing: "The sorghum is red – the Japanese are coming – compatriots, get ready – fire your rifles and cannons" (p. 10). This description shows the anger of the young Chinese boys for whom the home is first priority and violence is the last resort. The Japanese soldiers instill violence in the psyches of Chinese people. The psychological pollution by the colonizers transformed them into two ways: revolutionaries fighting against the colonizers and mimic man accepting the ways of foreign invaders. Similarly, the brainwashing seems to be underway in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) with the arrival of missionaries Umuofia. These missionaries constructed the church, got some converts and were sending them to nearby towns and villages for preaching (p. 47).

In the novel *Red Sorghum* (1986), a number of native people become facilitators in carrying out intrigues against their own brothers in order to please the colonizers. Yan names these Chinese facilitators, 'puppet soldiers' who "came to our village to conscript peasant laborers and confiscate their mules and horses." (Yan, 2003, p. 18). On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, the converts facilitate the colonizers in rendering the plans and its dissemination. Hence the consolidation of empire in both China and Africa is rendered possible with the facilitation of natives.

Achebe's Yan's novels rely heavily on African folk traditions and Chinese oral traditions. Nwachukwu Agbada has once commented on Achebe that he takes up the artistic responsibility of using oral traditional material. This is also a textual strategy overlapping written and oral text (2000, p. 122). Similarly, Yan also endeavors to revitalize the receding culture of China in the hands of oppressors. *Things Fall Apart* represents Igbo culture with its legends, myths, customs, beliefs and folk tales through magic, spells, superstition, and omens. Likewise, in *Red Sorghum* (1986), one observes Chinese customs, values, traditions, and norms; and Yan has repeatedly used the indigenous symbols which have become trope of revival of Chinese glorious past. Moreover, both novelists foreground their folktales aiming at deconstructing the cynical portrayal of Chinese and African history and culture. These folktales embody indigenous epistemology, way of creation and communal experiences.

One of the most important intertextual similarities in both novels is the reappropriation of the colonizers' culture with their own native culture. Hence, Intertextuality has become one of such indigenizing strategies of the novels. Both the liminal intellectuals understand the imposed and dominant culture and also acknowledge the implicit effects on the young generation by the given culture. These liminal intellectuals carry an individual

consciousness to recognize imperial culture and question its foundations. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Nwoye eventually joins the imperial forces with the prospect of finding appropriate Western beliefs and values. Departure from his father's oppressive environment and taking refuge in foreign domination brings him peace. Nwoye's acceptance of hegemonized cultural and religious values inoculated by the missionaries seems to be Said's "affiliative" relationship, whereas, Okonkwo seems to practice the "filiative" relationship by rejecting the Western values and by following his indigenous cultural and religious beliefs. Okonkwo rejects the colonizers' values by cursing and disowning his son for his womanliness. This postcolonial syncretism harmonizes alterities. In *Red Sorghum* (1986) Grandma epitomizes "filiative" propensity by glorifying the indigenous cultural values. She rejects Japanese invaders as well as their cultural beliefs, whereas other characters facilitating the invaders whom Yan labeled as "puppets" embody the "affiliative" tendency by adopting the colonizers' beliefs.

Both Achebe and Yan participate in the global trends of literary intertextuality for many reasons: first, there is an inevitable cultural homogeneity among the different people of different countries; this naturally entails the inclusion of the mythic past, folktales, and traditional and cultural values on which writers model their works. Secondly, intertextual convergence exists owing to the same vicious circle of tumultuous life found in the colonial world around which the existence of the colonized revolves. These authors, despite their different spatial and temporal contexts, reassert their identity and culture encountering the hegemonic administrative structures and literary writings. Hence, writers and their works in various genres share connections and configurations (quoted in Kehinde, 2003, p. 375). Thirdly, Literature is, what Abraham terms, inescapably linked to other texts, and it comes out of nothing. It has its origin in the socio-political context, its enabling environment and the previous texts that void impotence. The intertextual implication is that literature evolves out of literature quite pertinently in the present multi-cultural era, African and Chinese writer also share the themes and styles with earlier texts.

Intertextual uniformity is found in both the texts. Colonialism, irrespective of its spatial and temporal realm of operation, has similar repercussions; it disturbs the social fabric and tranquility of the uncontaminated indigenous culture. In Africa, the whites had brought a lunatic and obsessive religion and also built a trading center that considerably raises the price of kernel and palm oil for the first time (p. 58). The products of their own land are unavailable for the natives because of the intrusion of colonizers. Likewise, in *Red Sorghum* (1986) the natives were in crisis owing to the colonial interference, especially inland affairs. Thus the villagers in the areas along the highways suffer incalculable loss of agriculture and animals (pp. 16, 17). Both the writers wage a war against the colonial mission of subjugation and endeavor to defend their land and customs. The brutality of the colonizers is conspicuous throughout the novel *Red Sorghum* (1986); "they killed, they looted, and they defended their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison" (Yan, 2003, p. 10). In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the savage practices of the colonizers are highlighted and the only ray of hope Achebe sees in "the land of the brave" (p. 40).

There is always an impending fear; fear of the foreign intrusion which will inevitably destroy the peaceful and comfy environment of China but at the same time there is a tinge of hope in the shape of indigenous revolt against the Japanese forces; "[t]he sorghum is red, the sorghum is red, the Japs are coming, the nation is lost, our families scattered. Rise up countrymen, take up arms to drive out the Japs and protect your homes" (p. 44). Yan through his writings initiates a sense of filiative relationship which becomes a touchstone for the upcoming writers and generation of his own country. Likewise, the Africans are filled with animosity for the oppression they have faced yet they are enough courageous to encounter the brutal ways of subjugation. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) 'Ajofia dug his rattling spear into the ground and it shook with metallic life. Then he turned once more to the missionary and his interpreter. "Tell the white man that we will not do him any harm," he said to the interpreter. "Tell him to go back to his house and leave us alone.'" (p. 61). Ajofia further says to the white missionary that they can stay with them if they like the ways of Umuofia (p. 62).

Conclusion

In this paper, intertextual relevance is demonstrated in both the novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Red Sorghum* (1986). Achebe and Yan, despite their different spatial and temporal contexts, participated in nation's decolonizing project and produce counter-colonial narratives. Intertextual allusions, borrowings, adaptations, appropriations, parody, pastiche, imitation, convergences, and divergences are the effective postcolonial weapons in which both the writers reject the claims of universalism imposed by the hegemonic powers and retrieve their indigenous identity. The intertextual theory is employed in order to investigate diversity and cultural differences in literature which highlighted the Saidian filiative and affiliative relationship operational in both the texts. Cultural, religious, social, economic and political homogeneity under the colonial and imperial structures and social, linguistic and cultural diversity within a single colony have brought about both convergences and divergences in literary writings. In other words, both Achebe and Yan do not have the monolithic cultural identities; rather they have dual cultural

belongings; firstly, they are living in the colonizers' world which has been constructed by disseminating the colonial ideology through schooling, religious preaching, and mass media; secondly there is another culture, that of the mythic past of both countries which have been imbibed through local and oral traditions. Hence, the colonial experience has made the Chinese and African cultures hybrid and polyglot.

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