

Exploring Brainwashing Methods in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This paper explores the depiction of brainwashing and psychological manipulation in Chinua Achebe's seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*, focusing on how these methods are employed by colonial forces to disrupt and transform the traditional Igbo society. The analysis examines the various techniques used by missionaries and colonial administrators to undermine indigenous beliefs and impose new cultural and religious norms. By closely reading the experiences of key characters—such as Nwoye, Okonkwo, and other villagers—the paper illustrates how these methods create internal conflict and cultural dissonance within the community. The study draws on theories of psychological coercion and social influence to argue that Achebe's narrative reveals the insidious nature of colonial brainwashing, which operates not only through overt force but also through subtle psychological strategies that exploit existing cultural tensions. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications of these findings for understanding the psychological impact of colonialism on traditional societies. This research contributes to post-colonial studies by highlighting the psychological dimensions of cultural change and resistance, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in the colonial encounter.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is widely regarded as one of the most important works of African literature, offering a powerful exploration of the cultural, social, and psychological impacts of colonialism on indigenous societies. Set in the late 19th century, the novel vividly portrays the life of the Igbo people in the fictional Nigerian village of Umuofia, whose way of life is dramatically altered by the arrival of European missionaries and colonial administrators. As Achebe unfolds the story, he provides a detailed narrative of the tensions between tradition and change, illustrating the complex and often devastating effects of colonial intervention on African communities.

One of the less explored yet significant aspects of the novel is the use of brainwashing and psychological manipulation as tools of colonial domination. Brainwashing, or coercive persuasion, involves the systematic manipulation of an individual's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors through various psychological methods. In the context of *Things Fall Apart*, these methods are employed by the colonial forces to undermine traditional Igbo culture and impose new religious and social norms, thereby destabilizing the community and fostering division. This paper seeks to analyze how Achebe depicts these brainwashing techniques and their psychological impact on the characters and society as a whole.

The concept of brainwashing in literature is often associated with overt political propaganda or direct psychological coercion. However, Achebe's narrative suggests a more subtle form of psychological manipulation, where cultural and religious ideologies are used to influence and control the indigenous population. The missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* use both rewards, such as the promise of salvation and education, and punishments, including the threat of eternal damnation and social ostracism, to convert the local population to

Christianity. These tactics create a sense of fear and confusion, eroding the community's confidence in its own cultural practices and belief systems.

This paper aims to address the following research question:

1. How does Chinua Achebe depict brainwashing methods in *Things Fall Apart*, and what are their effects on the characters and Igbo society? To answer this question, the study will employ a close reading of the novel alongside theoretical frameworks from psychology and post-colonial studies. By examining the experiences of key characters—such as Nwoye, who is drawn to Christianity despite his father Okonkwo's vehement opposition, and Okonkwo himself, whose resistance to change ultimately leads to his tragic downfall—this paper will illustrate the psychological strategies employed by the colonial powers to achieve their objectives. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of colonialism in *Things Fall Apart*, highlighting how Achebe uses literary techniques to reveal the complexity of cultural transformation under colonial rule.
2. The paper will also engage with existing literature on the novel, including works that discuss cultural change, identity, and resistance, to provide a comprehensive analysis of Achebe's portrayal of psychological manipulation. In doing so, this study aims to offer new insights into the interplay between psychological coercion and cultural change, contributing to the broader field of post-colonial studies.

Literature Review

The analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been a significant subject within post-colonial literary studies, focusing on themes such as cultural conflict, colonialism, and the psychological impact of cultural change. However, the specific exploration of brainwashing or psychological manipulation methods as employed by colonial forces has been less thoroughly examined. This literature review aims to situate the present study within the broader scholarly conversation, highlighting key arguments and identifying gaps that this paper seeks to fill.

Cultural Conflict and Colonial Impact

Much of the existing literature on *Things Fall Apart* centers on the theme of cultural conflict between the indigenous Igbo society and the invading European colonial forces. Scholars like Patrick C. Nnoromele have discussed the novel's portrayal of the clash between traditional African values and Western ideologies, emphasizing the disruptive impact of colonialism on indigenous identities (Nnoromele 146-156). Nnoromele argues that Achebe's narrative captures the psychological turmoil experienced by the Igbo people as their cultural norms and values are systematically undermined by the missionaries and colonial administrators. This analysis is foundational in understanding the broader context in which brainwashing tactics may be employed. Similarly, Derek Wright explores the novel's representation of the cultural and spiritual disintegration that accompanies the colonial encounter, suggesting that the missionaries' strategies to convert the Igbo people serve as a form of ideological warfare (Wright 42-56). Wright's work provides insight into how religious conversion efforts can function as a mechanism for psychological manipulation, subtly shifting the beliefs and loyalties of the indigenous population. However, his analysis stops short of explicitly framing these efforts as brainwashing, leaving room for further exploration into the specific techniques used to manipulate the characters' minds.

Psychological Manipulation and Colonialism

The concept of psychological manipulation within colonial contexts has been discussed by scholars such as Frantz Fanon, whose work *Black Skin, White Masks* delves into the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized (Fanon). Fanon's theories on the inferiority complex induced in colonized peoples by colonial discourse provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the psychological aspects of brainwashing in a colonial setting. This framework can be applied to *Things Fall Apart* to explore how the missionaries and colonial administrators utilize psychological manipulation to create internalized feelings of inadequacy among the Igbo, encouraging them to adopt new religious and cultural practices. Moreover, Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* introduces the concept of mimicry and ambivalence in colonial discourse, which can be interpreted as forms of psychological coercion that compel the colonized to mimic the colonizers while simultaneously feeling a sense of loss and displacement (Bhabha). This dual strategy of attraction and alienation is evident in *Things Fall Apart* through characters like Nwoye, who feels drawn to the new Christian faith due to its promise of spiritual solace and community, even as he experiences a deep sense of betrayal and loss of cultural identity.

Theoretical Frameworks for Brainwashing and Coercive Persuasion

To further investigate the methods of brainwashing depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, this paper draws on psychological theories of coercive persuasion and social influence. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* provides a sociological framework for understanding how social and religious institutions can shape and manipulate belief systems (Berger and Luckmann). Applying these theories to the novel allows for a nuanced exploration of how the missionaries gradually establish a new social reality for the Igbo people, using both ideological indoctrination and social incentives to convert them to Christianity. The work of Helen Tiffin in "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse" further supports this analysis by examining how colonial texts often employ a 'civilizing mission' narrative to justify cultural domination (Tiffin 95-98). In *Things Fall Apart*, this narrative is enacted through the gradual erosion of the Igbo community's faith in their gods and traditions, a process that involves systematic psychological manipulation to induce compliance and conversion.

Gaps in the Literature

1. While the existing research provides valuable insights into the cultural and psychological impacts of colonialism depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, there remains a gap in explicitly analyzing these impacts as forms of brainwashing or psychological manipulation.
2. Most studies focus on the socio-cultural aspects of the colonial encounter, with limited attention to the specific psychological strategies employed to alter the belief systems of the indigenous people. This paper addresses this gap by closely examining how Achebe portrays the missionaries' and colonial administrators' methods as calculated psychological tactics designed to destabilize the traditional Igbo worldview and impose new colonial ideologies.

Analysis and Discussion

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe presents a nuanced exploration of the psychological manipulation and brainwashing tactics employed by colonial forces to dismantle traditional Igbo society. The novel vividly illustrates how these tactics are used to convert the indigenous population to Christianity and impose new cultural norms, leading to a profound cultural and psychological impact on both individuals and the community as a whole. This section analyzes the methods of psychological manipulation depicted in the novel, focusing on the use of cultural disruption, religious conversion, and social fragmentation as tools of brainwashing.

Colonial Influence and Cultural Disintegration

The arrival of European missionaries in Umuofia introduces a series of cultural, religious, and social changes that systematically undermine the traditional beliefs and practices of the Igbo people. The missionaries employ various brainwashing techniques to destabilize the existing social order and promote their own ideology. One of the primary methods is cultural disruption, where the missionaries challenge the legitimacy of the Igbo gods and traditional practices by labeling them as "heathen" or "barbaric" (Achebe 103). This tactic is a classic example of devaluation, a psychological manipulation technique that aims to diminish the value of the target's beliefs and identity, making them more susceptible to new ideologies.

Moreover, the missionaries exploit existing tensions within the Igbo society, such as generational conflicts and dissatisfaction with certain traditional customs, to create divisions and foster discontent. For instance, Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, is drawn to Christianity because it provides an alternative to the rigid and often harsh expectations imposed by his father and the traditional Igbo culture (Achebe 147). The promise of a more compassionate and forgiving religion appeals to Nwoye's sense of justice and morality, demonstrating how the missionaries manipulate psychological vulnerabilities to attract converts. By offering a new religious framework that seemingly addresses these internal conflicts, the missionaries effectively employ the "foot-in-the-door" technique, gradually influencing individuals to accept more significant changes in beliefs and behaviors.

Character Case Studies: Nwoye and Okonkwo **Nwoye's Conversion to Christianity:**

Nwoye's character serves as a compelling case study of how psychological manipulation can lead to cultural and religious conversion. Feeling alienated by his father's strict adherence to tradition and the traumatic practices of his community, such as the killing of Ikemefuna (a boy who has become like a brother to him), Nwoye becomes increasingly disillusioned with the Igbo way of life (Achebe 61-62). The missionaries exploit Nwoye's emotional vulnerability by presenting Christianity as a comforting alternative that offers a sense of belonging and moral clarity. This approach can be seen as a form of emotional persuasion, where the missionaries use empathy and emotional appeal to convince Nwoye to adopt a new belief system.

Achebe's portrayal of Nwoye's conversion also highlights the psychological tactic of social inclusion as a form of brainwashing. The missionaries provide a new social network that offers support, acceptance, and a sense of community, which Nwoye finds appealing compared to the harsh and often punitive Igbo society led by figures like his father, Okonkwo. This tactic is effective because it leverages the human need for belonging and social acceptance, drawing individuals away from their traditional affiliations and towards the new colonial structures.

Okonkwo's Resistance and Tragic Downfall:

In contrast, Okonkwo represents the psychological impact of resistance to cultural and religious change. As a staunch defender of Igbo traditions, Okonkwo perceives the missionaries' presence as a direct threat to his way of life and his personal honor. His reaction to the colonial influence is one of aggressive resistance, which ultimately leads to his isolation and tragic demise (Achebe 208). Okonkwo's resistance can be analyzed through the lens of psychological fragmentation. The colonial forces not only undermine the communal beliefs but also target the psychological resilience of individuals who oppose them.

Okonkwo's psychological turmoil reflects the internal conflict between maintaining traditional values and adapting to the new colonial order. Achebe uses Okonkwo's character to illustrate the concept of cognitive dissonance—the mental discomfort experienced when holding two conflicting beliefs or values. Okonkwo's inability to reconcile his commitment to traditional Igbo culture with the changing realities brought about by colonialism leads to his eventual breakdown and suicide. This outcome is emblematic of the psychological trauma inflicted on those who are unable to adapt to the new colonial paradigm, highlighting the destructive impact of colonial brainwashing not only on converts but also on those who resist.

Brainwashing Techniques in Context: Gradual Conversion and Psychological Manipulation

Achebe demonstrates several specific techniques of brainwashing employed by the colonial forces to convert the indigenous population and establish control. One such technique is the gradual introduction of new beliefs, often referred to as the "foot-in-the-door" technique. This method involves starting with small, seemingly innocuous requests or suggestions that pave the way for larger, more significant changes. In *Things Fall Apart*, the missionaries initially seek only to build a church on the "evil forest" land, which the Igbo community reluctantly allows, believing that the land is cursed and will harm the missionaries (Achebe 127). When no harm befalls them, the Igbo people's confidence in their own religious beliefs begins to waver, making them more open to listening to and eventually adopting the new religion.

Another psychological tactic employed by the colonial forces is the undermining of existing traditions and the promotion of a new moral framework. The missionaries' rhetoric continually emphasizes the perceived superiority of Christianity over traditional Igbo religion, framing the latter as backward and the former as progressive and civilized. This narrative is reinforced through education, where the missionaries establish schools to teach both religious and secular subjects, gradually instilling new values in the younger generation. This form of psychological manipulation, known as "reeducation," is a powerful tool for altering beliefs and attitudes, as it combines religious indoctrination with practical benefits such as literacy and social mobility.

Psychological Impact on Society: Fear, Division, and Loss of Identity

The psychological impact of these brainwashing methods on Igbo society is profound. Achebe portrays a community that becomes increasingly divided and fragmented as a result of the colonial intervention. The introduction of Christianity creates a clear divide between converts and non-converts, leading to social

fragmentation and a weakening of traditional communal bonds. This division is exacerbated by the missionaries' deliberate efforts to attract marginalized or discontented individuals, such as women and outcasts, who feel excluded from the traditional power structures of Igbo society (Achebe 130).

The erosion of cultural cohesion is further illustrated through the portrayal of fear and uncertainty among the Igbo people. The arrival of the colonizers instills a sense of fear and confusion, as the community grapples with the loss of their traditional ways of life and the introduction of new, often contradictory, beliefs and practices. This fear is compounded by the colonizers' use of both psychological and physical coercion to enforce compliance, such as the destruction of the village's sacred symbols and the imprisonment of its leaders (Achebe 194). These actions serve to undermine the community's confidence in their own cultural practices, fostering a sense of helplessness and submission.

The ultimate consequence of these psychological tactics is a loss of cultural identity and a sense of disorientation among the Igbo people. As the novel progresses, Achebe depicts a society in which traditional values and beliefs are increasingly questioned or abandoned, leading to a crisis of identity and purpose. This loss of identity is most poignantly captured in the character of Okonkwo, whose inability to adapt to the new social order leads to his tragic death. Through Okonkwo's fate, Achebe illustrates the devastating psychological impact of colonial brainwashing, which not only disrupts the social fabric but also leads to the psychological collapse of those who cannot reconcile their traditional identities with the demands of the new colonial reality.

Conclusion

The analysis of brainwashing methods in *Things Fall Apart* reveals how Achebe portrays colonialism as a psychological and cultural assault on indigenous societies. Through the use of character studies and the depiction of cultural and religious conversion tactics, Achebe illustrates the various psychological strategies employed by the colonial forces to undermine traditional Igbo beliefs and practices. These methods include gradual persuasion, emotional manipulation, social fragmentation, and the promotion of new ideologies, all of which serve to destabilize the existing social order and facilitate colonial domination. The psychological impact of these tactics is profound, leading to fear, division, loss of identity, and ultimately, the disintegration of the community. This discussion underscores the importance of examining the psychological dimensions of colonialism in literary studies, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of how colonial powers used brainwashing and psychological manipulation to achieve their objectives. By shedding light on these strategies, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the colonial encounter and the enduring impact of colonialism on indigenous identities and societies.

Future Research Directions

1. While this paper has focused on the brainwashing methods employed by the colonial forces in *Things Fall Apart*, future research could expand this analysis by comparing these tactics with those depicted in other post-colonial literary works. Such comparative studies could reveal broader patterns of psychological manipulation across different colonial contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the colonial project's global impact.
2. Additionally, further research could explore the long-term psychological effects of colonial brainwashing on post-colonial societies, examining how these historical experiences continue to shape contemporary identities and cultural dynamics. By integrating psychological theories with post-colonial literature, scholars can develop more nuanced insights into the enduring legacy of colonialism and the ongoing challenges faced by formerly colonized peoples.

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