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Who Am I?: How Natives' Mental Trauma Develop During Precolonial and Colonial Eras as Seen in Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth

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Who Am I?: How Natives' Mental Trauma Develop During Precolonial and Colonial Eras as Seen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

Cover Page Footnote

Throughout my studies, I have come across the subject of colonialism in a variety of courses. After all, it is a vital topic to understand the ramifications of, no matter who you are. Within these classes, professors continuously mentioned Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, knowing the importance that award-winning literary works have had in illustrating the significant trauma placed on natives whose homeland was taken over by foreigners. This essay pairs Achebe's historically-accurate fictional piece with the nonfictional accounts Fanon, a French psychiatrist, had seen from his patients that were reeling from the harmful repercussions of colonialism, painting a harrowing picture of the detrimental impact colonialism has on individuals. Due to the wide range of classes that touch on the history and outcomes of colonialism, as well as the importance of the general public understanding the consequences of colonialism, I believe that my essay could be a useful source in understanding the drastic and specific toll colonization takes on the colonized. It also illuminates the ramifications of improper communication disrupting peoples' autonomy.

**Who Am I?: How Natives' Mental Trauma Develop During Precolonial and Colonial Eras
as Seen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth***

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Abstract

Colonialism is a long, brutal process, where natives' identities are uprooted as colonizers establish their influence in a foreign land. Consequently, through the exploration of the natives' response to this upheaval throughout the precolonial and colonial eras, the psychological toll that is placed on the colonized is evident. Such mental trauma that is incited is explored in Chinua Achebe's fictional novel *Things Fall Apart*, which unveils the slowly lost of the natives' identities during the precolonial shift, and the non-fiction work of Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* that details psychological disorders of the colonized due to colonization. This essay will explore how the stripping of natives' autonomy and their sense of self results in the detrimental traumas illustrated within these critically acclaimed texts.

Key Words

colonialism, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, trauma, psychology, native, precolonial,
psychological trauma, race

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Introduction

Colonialism is a process. It begins with the precolonial era, in which foreigners arrive in a distant land and slowly seek to claim it as their own, ignoring the native traditions to instill Western customs. In the colonial era, the period that follows, the colonizers' influence is fully established in the land of the colonized and the natives' identities are in disarray. With this new authority, the indigenous people lose control over their homeland, resulting in mental trauma. In the fictional novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe breaks down the precolonial shift in indigenous society and the psychological toll it takes on the indigenous as they slowly lose their native identity. Once the precolonial society transitions to full-fledged colonialism, the irreversible change in life of the colonized incites distressing mental responses, as specified in the non-fiction work of Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon's studies illuminate Achebe's realistic depiction of the shift of the natives' precolonial lifestyle to Western customs by detailing the painful outcomes colonialism has on natives. Through the reflection of the indigenous society's response to change in precolonial life in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the mental disorders that manifest in natives during colonialism in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, it can be observed how the slow stripping of the natives' autonomy results in the natives' absence of identity in their own culture and mental trauma.

The sudden and unfamiliar process of colonialism becomes a war that involves the involuntary uprooting of the native way of life, leaving the indigenous in disarray. As Fanon explains, colonization is the "substitution of one 'species of mankind by another,'" where one side will always be more dominant due to "mutual exclusion" (Fanon, 2005, p. 4). This is seen within precolonial stages, as Achebe describes that "compromise and accommodation" is denounced by colonizers who suggest such approaches to their peers (Achebe, 1994, p. 184). As Oberika reminds

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* when discussing the white missionaries, the colonists do not speak their language nor fully understand their customs the colonists deem as bad (Achebe, 1994, 176). In the precolonial process, there is no effort from the Other, also known as the foreigners, to hear the voice of the indigenous, which belittles the native's self-worth and the value of their customs. Colonialism is "waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation," resulting in a "psychiatric phenomenon" where natives internally struggle to find their identity (Fanon, 2005, p. 181). Therefore, when the "colonized's defenses collapse" throughout the physical war, "many of them end up in psychiatric institutions," even if they were not actively fighting in the war (Fanon, 2005, p. 182). As the brutality of colonization "disrupts and shatters the world" of the colonized, the trauma outlasts the war (Fanon, 2005, p. 183). This leads the colonized to ask this question continuously to themselves when considering their new world, "Who am I in reality?" (Fanon, 2005, p. 182). The abrupt upheaval of a familiar way of life during the process of colonization contributes to the mental battles that follow those hurt.

As the indigenous way of life comes undone due to foreign influence, the natives believe it is their duty to fight back against the colonizers to defend their independence. This sense of duty to defend against foreigners is seen in the precolonial stages of *Things Fall Apart*. Clan elders spoke that there would be "no peace" until the "abominable gang was chased out of the village with whips." (Achebe, 1994, p. 159). Yet, what ultimately was decided upon was "to ostracize the Christians," demonstrating that moral obligation to defend one's home does not only need to be met with force (Achebe, 1994, p. 159). Another example was when the missionaries asked the elders in Mbanta for a plot of land to build on, the elders allowed them to use the "evil forest," a place "alive with sinister forces" (Achebe, 1994, p. 148). Rather than physically retaliating against the foreigners, the indigenous found ways to dutifully protect their land through nonviolent means.

However, Okonkwo remembered hearing of deeply distressing stories in which white men invaded tribes and killed locals in their hometowns, leaving a disturbing impact on him so that when the white men begin to evade his own clan, he was ready to retaliate. When Okonkwo banded with men in Umuofia to physically fight back against the colonizers, the men received a “few blows on the head and back” by the colonizers and were imprisoned (Achebe, 1994, p. 195). The colonizers do not consider that the “criminality” of the colonized are the “direct result of the colonial situation” (Fanon, 2005, p. 203). Foreigners believe retaliation to defend one’s land is an inhuman response, failing to understand that defensive retaliation from natives is done out of protecting their own autonomy. Similar to the natives’ instinct to retaliate against the foreigners in *Things Fall Apart*, Fanon wrote of a case of two Algerians boys in their early teen years living in a colonial era. They killed their European “best friend,” because “the Europeans want to kill all the Arabs,” and since they could not “kill the 'grown-ups,“ the next best thing to help contribute to the war was to “kill someone like him because he's [their] own age” (Fanon, 2005, p. 199). The boys saw that the reasoning behind the action outweighed the outcome, and they were not “sorry,” as their European friend is now at peace in “Heaven” and they believed that they indirectly fought the enemy (Fanon 200). The boys' reasoning behind the murder is a product of their surroundings, rationalizing this behavior by understanding it as part of their duty to defend their people. In hopes to protect their autonomy and identity, there is a moral obligation amongst natives to defend their home.

When the natives lose the fight the against the Outsiders, indigenous individuals carry enormous guilt. After Okonkwo shares with Obierika his willingness to fight back against the missionaries, Obierika dismally states “it is already too late,” a heavy phrase that acknowledges the foreigners’ dominance in society is now irrevocable due to their inaction and the consequential

blame they must live with (Achebe, 1994, p. 177). Obierika goes on to admit that the “white man [was] very clever,” as he came “quietly and peaceably with his religion” and they were too “amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay,” leading many of the colonized to convert and now the “clan can no longer act like one” (Achebe, 1994, p. 176). They believed their gods and ancestors were lamenting due to the irreversible “shameful sacrilege they are suffering” (Achebe, 1995, p. 203). As the precolonial era transitions into colonialism, a different version of guilt due to inaction takes place. In a case Fanon observed, there was a young Algerian man who became “paranoid due to overbearing guilt that he was not doing enough to help his people.” As he passionately began to pursue a stable career, he began to think his family saw him as a “traitor,” causing him to avoid them and eventually break down, being plagued with “voices crying in his head [saying...] 'Traitor ... coward ... all your brothers are dying'” (Fanon, 2005, p. 202). He reacted to this episode by running up to a group of French soldiers shouting, “I am an Algerian!” while he tried to take a machine gun, looking “to be beaten because that proved they considered [him] to be one of the enemy as well” (Fanon, 2005, p. 203). This man was not given an option to live freely and pursue his dream career, as he would instead be dragged back to feel overwhelming guilt for not standing with his people. Guilt steadily followed those who were inactive in attempting to stop the colonizers as their people lost autonomy, leading those affected by precolonial and colonial actions to carry the heavy burden of this trauma long after the arrival of the colonizers.

For precolonial native groups who were rejected from their own communities and colonization provided potential solace, their conversion had directly hurt their people since it contributed to the growing disunity in the clans. In *Things Fall Apart*, while the missionaries’ presence was a “sorrow” to the clan’s leadership, many thought that “the white man’s god would not last,” believing that the clan’s religion would outlive and overpower the influence of

Christianity. However, the people who originally converted were not those of “title,” but the “efulefu,” who were the “excrement of the clan” (Achebe, 1994, p. 143). They were damned by their own people and as the evangelists gave them more respect than their clan as long as they converted, they found comfort in the prospect of no longer being seen as rejects of society. Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, became one of these outcasts and saw Christianity as a means to avoid the killing he could not make sense of in his clan (Achebe, 1994, p. 147). Questioning the customs deemed him as weak in society's eyes, like the efulefu, but Christianity gave him a place where he could openly try to find peace and understanding. Despite being outcasts, not only was the conversion of the indigenous considered “very depth of abomination” from clan members, but it also led to discord within the clan, as it gave the missionaries an outlet to strengthen their hold in society (Achebe, 1994, p. 152-153). Within colonial society, a similar sentiment follows. Fanon emphasized that the Church’s influence in colonialism calls the colonized to the “ways of the master,” the “white man.” The “final aim of colonization” was to persuade natives it would “save them from darkness,” that darkness being the native’s way of life (Fanon, 2005, p. 149). When people willingly converted to Christianity, they followed the ways of the “oppressor,” abandoning their own community and culture (Fanon, 2005, p. 7). Similar to precolonial religious conversion, society becomes “depersonalized on a collective level,” as communal traditions fade, and the colonized become “individuals who owe their very existence to the presence of the colonizer” (Fanon, 2005, p. 220). The transition of following the white man’s faith by an indigenous people creates irreparable discord within a native land, inciting shame on clan members who refuse to willingly convert.

As Western influence takes hold, there is a progressive ridding of native identity, in which mass conversion is deemed necessary by the colonizers. The “psychological warfare” that occurs

in colonized societies, as Fanon describes, begins in the precolonial stage, when natives turn away from their own culture due to foreigners inciting fear and causing the natives to have an internal battle between what is right and wrong (Fanon, 2005, p. 213). This is seen in *Things Fall Apart* when the white men taught the natives that they worshipped “false gods” and that when they die and face judgement from God, they would be considered “evil” and “thrown into fire” while the “good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom” (Achebe, 1998, p. 145). In return, Umuofia was like a “startled animal [...] not knowing which way to run” (Achebe, 1998, p. 196). By the time the precolonial era turned into full-fledged colonialism, it is drilled into the minds of the natives that “if the colonist were to leave, they would regress into barbarism,” making them become codependent on the colonists out of fear of becoming less than human (Fanon, 2005, p. 149). This psychological shift strips them of their cultural identity. If the colonized had not fully conformed to the colonists’ ideology by the time colonization is in full swing, they would be forcefully brainwashed into adapting. Within certain kinds of torture, the colonized individual is made to “eliminate [any idea of revolution] one by one” and instructed their native land “has never been a nation, and never will be” (Fanon, 2005, p. 214). No matter how long the process may be, the natives succumbing to Western ideology strips them of their national identities as if who they were was meaningless.

As the native culture slowly fades, there is a transition within precolonial and colonial life on who upholds the law and ultimate authority in society. In *Things Fall Apart*, the foreigners founded a church, which established an authoritative system where those who converted to Christianity abided to the word of the missionaries, and a government. Within this government was a court in which the “District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance,” as he refused to acknowledge the customs of the natives and made prisoners of those who “offended against the

white man's law" (Achebe, 1994, p. 174). The court officials were "hated" in Umuofia since these foreigners were "arrogant and high-handed," yet they were powerless to make an impact to stand against them (Achebe, 1994, p. 174). The authority of the native "men of title" were cast aside and were "grieved by the indignity and mourned" their loss of power (Achebe, 1994, p. 175). Even though there were many who saw these "new institutions as evil," their heavy involvement in their daily life caused their influence to be impossible to uproot (Achebe, 1994, p. 183). Fanon suggests that the reasoning behind the colonizers' need to be in leadership stems from a "scientific assessment of the colonized's limited biological possibilities" (Fanon, 2005, p. 226). As they simply do not believe that the colonized can properly govern themselves, the colonizers' aim was to establish themselves as the governing body during the precolonial period so that they would hold once authority colonialism was fully developed. These Western bodies of power do not consider the reasoning behind why crime is taking place, instead being quick to deem it evil. Fanon gives the example of stealing bread, in which the colonizers fail to contextualize the crime. The criminality is blamed on "savagery" due to "how [the native's] nervous system is organized or specific character traits" rather than considering it "the direct result of the colonial situation" (Fanon, 2005, p. 233). The Western governments that take hold in foreign territory strip the indigenous from being able to represent themselves and dishevels their current justice system, since the white men do not deem it adequate. As a result, the Western authority disregards the native's idea of justice and fail to give to them any say when enacting this change.

As the process of transitioning to colonialism aggressively strips the natives of their identity, there are those who grow weary in fighting against the foreigners' reform and accept it, refusing to abide by the new standards of life and dissociate. Within *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo observes and occasionally acts against the colonizers as they take a firmer hold that gradually

dominates the natives. Okonkwo becomes “deeply grieved” as he saw his clan “falling apart,” noticing that the “warlike men of Umuofia” had “become soft like women,” quick to adapt to the will of the foreigner (Achebe, 1994, p. 183). “Worthy are men no more,” Okonkwo decides, as he admits defeat, that his people will no longer defend themselves using force against the outsiders (Achebe, 1994, p. 200). Amid the precolonial struggle, he saw that the clan would no longer have autonomy. Within colonization, Fanon talks about the most common form of defeat and acceptance from the colonized is to understand that this is their life now and to dissociate. The colonized find that “living does not mean embodying a set of values,” such as they once had (Fanon, 2005, p. 232). As their culture is destroyed and their lifestyle must be adapted to that of the request of a foreigner, they do not hold any principles of their own. “To live simply means not to die,” moving through this world without a say in anything that matters (Fanon, 2005, p. 232). As the foreigners take hold of an indigenous land, the natives’ understanding that their world will forever be undone and accept it results in drastic measures to disassociate, whether it is through death or moving through this world without truly living a life of joy in embracing an identity that they were forced to abandon.

The natives’ submission to their new lifestyle that was forcefully brought on by the colonizers can bring such a grief that prompts suicide, an alternative to living in a foreign environment despite never leaving their home. After all, it was this overbearing defeat that brought Okonkwo commit suicide after realizing that his authority and that of the tribe no longer exists. The day prior to his suicide, Okonkwo reasons that if the people of Umuofia decide not to physically fight back against the colonizers and “chose to be cowards, he would go out and avenge *himself*,” not his people who would fail him (Achebe, 1994, p. 199). When the colonizer’s messenger ordered the natives to stop the gathering where the tribe’s leaders were urging the

natives to fight back against the colonizers, Okonkwo was quick to kill the messenger with his machete. Okonkwo “knew the Umuofia would not go to war [...] because they had let the other messengers escape” (Achebe, 1994, p. 205). He chose to stand by his decision to no longer fight for Umuofia, as they “had broken into tumult instead of action” out of “fright” (Achebe, 1994, p. 205). He admitted defeat, believing that the only way he can avenge himself is by committing suicide, as his tribe was now a lost cause. His dear friend, Oberika, accused the colonizers of prompting “one of the greatest men in Umuofia [...] to kill himself,” understanding that it could only be Okonkwo’s defeat in the matter that would prompt this sort of death (Achebe, 1994, p. 208). Okonkwo knew the beliefs of his people, understanding that it is “an abomination for a man to take his own life” and that a “man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen” since his body would then be considered “evil, and only strangers may touch it” (Achebe, 1994, p. 207). In a way, his final act of expressing his disappointment in his clan was to spoil the already spoiled land with his suicide and not doing his people the honor of burying him in the traditional sense that does not involve evil. Nonetheless, as Fanon attests, “the atmosphere of permanent insecurity” in which natives, such as Okonkwo, face when colonizers invade lead to a variety of “mental disorders,” including “many attempted suicides” that stems from lingering trauma of colonial distress that enables these “pathological kinks” (Fanon, 2005, p. 279). Psychologists have found that “when dealing with a patient subject to melancholia” in relation to the aftermath of colonialism, there is lingering “fear that he would commit suicide” to cope (Fanon, 2005, p. 299). Suicide, after all, “is a turning into and against oneself; it implies looking at oneself; it means practicing introspection” (Fanon, 2005, p. 299). Many, like Okonkwo, turn within and question whether it is worth for them in a space where familiarity was stolen. As it is the “objective of the native who fights against himself to bring about the end of domination,” suicide is the ultimate end

of domination, since if one is not living, they are not to be dominated (Fanon, 2005, p. 309). When a native's home is ripped away due to the acts of the colonizers, when all hope of returning to precolonial times are gone, suicide could be the ultimate comfort.

As the colonizers are the ones with the ultimate authority, they are often dictating the colonial narrative, depicting themselves as heroic and silencing the voice of the colonized. Achebe foreshadows the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* when he stated, "what is good among one people is an abomination with others" (Achebe, 1994, p. 141). The harrowing end of the book concludes on how the Commissioner intended to document his time developing the precolonial stages, writing about what he had learned when "bring[ing] civilization to different parts of Africa" (Achebe, 1994, p. 208). In his book, the great and powerful Okonkwo, in which the reader spent a whole book learning about his humanity and struggles, would be a mere "interesting reading[...] a whole chapter" at most (Achebe, 1994, p. 208). A man who has so much complexity would be a case study to the colonizers, an interesting story on how the West influenced Africa. The Commissioner would bring his book back to England, publish it, and his account of Africa would be the standardized account of how noble the West's influence was in civilizing Africa. No one else would know about the culture there and its people and the Westerners would just accept it since they would have no other account of the natives in Africa. The Commissioner acknowledges that "there was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details" in his book, meaning that Okonkwo's story is just one out of many Africans' life stories that would be diluted to a mere paragraph that points out what the West deems as 'flaws' to justify their influence in Africa (Achebe, 1994, p. 209). As in every stage of colonialism, the "ruling species" are "outsiders," labeling the "indigenous population" as the "others" (Fanon, 2005, p. 5). The colonists do not care about what the natives value, as what is "good [for them] is quite simply what hurts

[the colonized the] most” (Fanon, 2005, p. 14). The main objective for the colonists is to “make history,” as their “life is an epic, an odyssey” (Fanon, 2005, p. 15). They believe that they have “made this land,” as if it was not always inhabited by an established group of people (Fanon 15). The colonizers will be noted as heroes in history while the colonized become the ashes of a fallen life. “The colonized subject is a persecuted man who is forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor,” instead left desolate as the colonizers destroy their homes in the name of false honor, using the natives as a means to an end for their personal glory (Fanon, 2005, p. 16). Consequently, “the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories” of their history and culture, forgetting their identity (Fanon, 2005, p. 20). The colonized echo: “I have lost my voice, my whole life is fading away” (Fanon, 2005, p. 192). The colonizers’ stories of colonization are typically the narratives that prevail, a final nail in the coffin for silencing the voice of the colonized by creating long-lasting literature that will prevail over forgotten culture.

Conclusion

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* illuminates how colonialism progresses and negatively effects natives’ identity, resulting in a destruction of the indigenous’ sovereignty and psychological trauma. Foreigners come into an indigenous land and slowly strip the natives of their sense of self and autonomy by allowing them to have no authority to run their homeland. Even if the colonized fight for liberation and achieve such a challenging goal, society will never return to how it was before the arrival of the Other. The natives can move forward to heal, but they cannot undo the past. Colonialism has a lasting effect, meaning that even in an autonomous society for the natives, the lingering effects of the violation of their homeland will trail. As the indigenous search for their identities in a postcolonial world, lingering mental trauma will be grafted into their beings.

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