



## Subaltern retrieval of a fragmented colonial past: A comparative study of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract

This research paper examines the representation of colonized subjects through a comparative study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). While Conrad's narrative captures the psychological decay of imperial agents, it simultaneously renders the African subject silent, marginal, and symbolically othered. Achebe's novel emerges as a deliberate counter-narrative that restores agency, voice, and cultural memory to the very people erased in colonial discourse. Using postcolonial and subaltern frameworks (Spivak, Fanon, Said), the paper argues that Achebe's text not only interrogates the colonial archive but also retrieves a fragmented cultural past, thereby repositioning the African as a thinking historical agent rather than a mere backdrop to European moral drama. Through thematic, structural, and ideological comparisons, this study reveals how the two texts together chart a movement from colonial representation to subaltern self-representation.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial representation, subaltern agency, colonial discourse

### Introduction

Colonial literature, particularly the European modernist canon, has long grappled with the moral contradictions of empire. Yet, in doing so, it often rendered the colonized world voiceless. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remains emblematic of this trend—celebrated for its stylistic brilliance yet critiqued for its dehumanizing portrayal of Africans. In response, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reconstructed the cultural and historical landscape of pre-colonial Nigeria, challenging the epistemic violence of colonial myth-making.

This study explores how Achebe retrieves a fragmented colonial past by dismantling the distortions embedded in Conrad's text. The research underscores the shift from colonial discourse to subaltern agency, revealing how narrative ownership becomes a political act of reclaiming identity. Central to this analysis is the juxtaposition of Conrad's Eurocentric moral universe against Achebe's ethnographically rich portrayal of Igbo society.

### Literature Review

Scholars have long debated Conrad's position in the colonial project. Cedric Watts (1980) [7] argues that Conrad's novella exposes the hypocrisy and moral corruption of imperialism. Conversely, Achebe (1975) famously condemned *Heart of Darkness* as "thoroughly racist," pointing out that it denies Africans their humanity and speech. This critique aligns with Gayatri Spivak's seminal question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Conrad, the African characters are represented only through movement, sound, or grotesque imagery, leaving them no subjectivity.

Achebe's intervention challenges this limitation. Through meticulous narrative construction, he restores historical and cultural agency to African subjects. According to Dennis Walder (1996) [8], *Things Fall Apart* does not exoticize or idealize the Igbo, but presents a "quietly but firmly positive" portrayal of their social world. Together, the two novels provide a dialectic: Conrad's colonial erasure versus Achebe's subaltern reclamation.

### Representation of the African Subject

In *Heart of Darkness*, Africans exist as abstractions rather than fully realized humans. Conrad describes them in fragments: "black rags were wound round their loins...each had an iron collar on his neck, & all were connected together with a chain." Such imagery functions not to depict lived experiences but to signal the darkness and moral ambiguity of European imperial agents. The African is a "shadow" against which European heroism or depravity is measured.

Achebe reverses this paradigm. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo community inhabits a complex social world governed by ritual, justice, economics, and religion. The novel's characters, such as Okonkwo, Nwoye, and Ekwefi, are psychologically and culturally fully realized. Through their voices, debates, and conflicts, Achebe asserts the humanity and agency denied by colonial literature.

### Narrative Authority and Subaltern Voice

Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, frames Africa through a Eurocentric lens, presenting it as inscrutable and morally ambiguous. Africans remain the silent Other, incapable of narrating their own history. This reflects the central postcolonial critique: colonial discourse controls representation and erases indigenous subjectivity.

Achebe strategically reclaims narrative authority. His omniscient narration belongs to an Igbo consciousness rather than a European observer. Storytelling, folktales, and proverbs function as mechanisms through which African voices assert authority over their cultural history. Achebe's text, therefore, becomes a political as well as literary corrective to Conrad.

### Retrieving a Fragmented Past

Conrad's Africa is ahistorical, frozen in an eternal present of wilderness and barbarism. This mirrors what Patrick Brantlinger describes as the "myth of the Dark Continent"—a colonial fantasy that denies African agency and history. Achebe counters this by meticulously reconstructing Igbo social structures, kinship networks, gender roles, religious

beliefs, and economic practices. The novel retrieves a past fragmented by colonial disruption and silencing. By restoring cultural memory, Achebe challenges both Conrad's literary representation and the broader colonial epistemology.

### Colonial Encounter and Its Consequences

In *Heart of Darkness*, colonialism is depicted primarily through the moral corruption of European figures such as Kurtz. The suffering of Africans is presented as background, rarely given narrative focus. Kurtz's degeneration symbolizes European hubris and the moral bankruptcy of imperialism rather than African experience.

In contrast, Achebe foregrounds the effects of colonial incursion on Igbo society. The novel documents the disintegration of political structures, social cohesion, and cultural practices. Okonkwo's personal tragedy mirrors the larger societal collapse, illustrating how colonialism disrupts identity, agency, and collective memory.

### Ethical Purpose and Ideological Stance

Conrad's critique of imperialism is limited by narrative perspective; moral evaluation is imposed by Europeans, leaving Africans as objects rather than subjects. Achebe's ideological stance is corrective: his purpose is not merely literary but political and cultural. He restores dignity, counters stereotypes, and asserts the right of Africans to narrate their own history. His novel functions as resistance literature, reclaiming narrative space and cultural memory.

### Thematic and Structural Comparisons

Both novels explore the psychological and social consequences of colonialism, but their approaches diverge

- **Conrad:** Uses allegory, symbolism, and psychological realism to explore moral corruption within Europeans. Africans remain silent, symbolic, or grotesque.
- **Achebe:** Employs ethnography, omniscient narration, and proverbs to give agency, depth, and historicity to Africans. The focus is cultural survival and self-definition.

This contrast underscores the evolution from colonial narrative dominance to postcolonial reclamation.

### Conclusion

The juxtaposition of Conrad and Achebe highlights a shift from colonial erasure to subaltern retrieval. While Conrad captures the psychological collapse of imperial agents, Achebe restores voice, agency, and cultural memory to African subjects. *Things Fall Apart* reconstructs a fragmented past, challenges racialized stereotypes, and foregrounds the consequences of colonial disruption.

By reclaiming narrative authority, Achebe not only intervenes in literary discourse but also performs an act of historical and cultural justice. Together, these texts illustrate a trajectory from colonial silencing to subaltern self-representation, emphasizing the political and ethical importance of storytelling in postcolonial literature.

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