



Cultural Repressiveness in British Raj as depicted in *Sea of Poppies* and *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper explores the theme of cultural repressiveness during the British Raj as depicted in two prominent literary works, "*Sea of Poppies*" by Amitav Ghosh and "*Things Fall Apart*" by Chinua Achebe. Both novels provide poignant narratives that shed light on the devastating impact of British colonialism on indigenous cultures and the resulting loss of cultural identity. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh takes readers on a journey through the opium trade in India during the colonial era. Amidst this backdrop, the novel delves into the clashes between the dominant British colonial powers and the diverse range of characters from various cultural backgrounds. It vividly illustrates how the British administration sought to suppress local cultures, languages, and traditions. Through the characters' experiences, the novel highlights the erosion of cultural identity and the profound disconnection felt by those who were subjected to the repressive forces of colonial rule. Similarly, *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe explores the impact of British colonialism in Nigeria. As the British colonial powers exert their influence, traditional African customs, beliefs, and systems are undermined and marginalized. Achebe poignantly captures the anguish and turmoil faced by Okonkwo and his community as they grapple with the erosion of their cultural heritage and the loss of their autonomy. Both novels offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of cultural repressiveness under the British Raj. Through their evocative storytelling, Ghosh and Achebe highlight the lasting consequences of cultural repression, emphasizing the importance of understanding the historical context and the profound impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures.

1. Introduction

Colonialism refers to a system in which one country or a group of countries establishes political, economic, and cultural dominance over another region or territory, often geographically distant from the colonising power. It involves the establishment and maintenance of colonies, typically with the intent of exploiting the resources and labour of the colonised area for the benefit of the colonising power. In colonialism, the colonising nation exercises control over various aspects of the colony's governance, economy, and society. This control is often achieved through military force, political manipulation, and economic coercion. The colonisers imposed their laws, institutions, and customs upon the colonised population, leading to significant cultural, social, and economic changes in the affected region.

Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines colonialism as "the system or policy of a nation seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or territories." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy uses the term "to describe the process of European settlement and political

control over the rest of the world, including the Americans, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia."

British colonialism represents one of the most extensive and influential colonial enterprises in history. The colonial powers sought to establish overseas territories to exploit natural resources, expand markets, and extend their geopolitical influence. The motivations behind colonialism varied, including economic gain, religious missionary work, strategic military positioning, and the spread of European civilization. While the colonial powers benefited economically and politically, the colonised regions often experienced significant exploitation, oppression, and cultural subjugation. The British Raj, spanning from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, was a significant chapter in the history of colonial rule. During this time, India, and parts of Africa, such as Nigeria, fell under British control, experiencing profound changes that reshaped their social, political, and cultural landscapes. In the book *Orientalism*, Edward Said says that the colonisation of the Europeans marks the colonised countries as victims of subjugation. "A line is drawn between two continents.



Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant” (1978, p57). The colonisers' monological viewpoint became popular because Europeans consistently viewed "the other" as inferior. The British used their religion or culture as one of their main tools and weapons to conquer and build colonies throughout the world. By spreading Christianity and influencing the natives' culture and religion, they drastically changed the lives of the locals. Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* adds, “This century climaxed ‘the rise of the West’, and the Western power allowed the imperial metropolitan centers to acquire and accumulate territory on a truly astonishing scale” (1993, p6). Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are literary works that explore the subject of cultural repression and provide moving narratives that highlight the intricacies and effects of colonial dominance. Frantz Fanon in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* analyses, and states that “Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, recognize the unreality of his ‘nation’, and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure” (1963, p190).

The Novel *Sea of Poppies*

Sea of Poppies published in 2008, is a historical novel that takes readers on a journey across the Indian Ocean while examining the lives of many characters who are thrown together aboard a ship during the height of the opium trade. As characters from many backgrounds negotiate the turbulent seas of British colonisation, Amitav Ghosh's story eloquently captures the collision of civilizations. The author sheds light on the destructive effects of imperial power on indigenous cultures through their personal experiences. By exposing how the British Empire forced its beliefs, language, and practices on the Indian populace, Ghosh creates a vivid picture of the clash of cultures. The narrative shows how native traditions and belief systems are replaced by the hegemonic force of British imperialism, eroding cultural autonomy. Amitav Ghosh presents a diverse cast of characters who confront the cultural repressiveness imposed by British colonial rule in India during the 19th century. One notable character is Deeti, a lower-caste woman who experiences the loss of her cultural autonomy as she is forced into a life of indentured servitude. Deeti's indigenous customs, beliefs, and rituals are suppressed as she becomes entangled in the opium trade and is subjected to the dominant British worldview. Another character Raja Neel Halder, a zamindar and high-caste Indian grapples with the clash between his traditional Indian identity and the influence of British education and Western values. He is affected by English

culture, language, and education. He hires a British tutor for his son to learn English and complete his entire studies at an English school because he is influenced by English culture, language, and education. “the Raja had hired a British tutor for his son, to make sure that he had a thorough schooling in English” (2008, p88). But he is trapped by Britishers and found guilty of forgery. His property is seized and he is sent to Alipore jail. The British East India Company's policies, including land reforms and taxation, threaten his control over his estate and disrupt the traditional power structures he benefits from. The colonial authorities attempt to impose their own cultural norms, values, and legal systems upon the native population. As stated by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, “There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (1978, p36). British colonialism has a significant impact on the local economy. The opium trade, which the British imposed upon India, destroyed regional industries and traditional economic structures. The opium traffic destabilises the local market and lowers the value of Raja Neel Halder's crops, whose livelihood is dependent on agricultural production. This conflict brings to light how British colonial practices exploit and disrupt the economy. “the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts” (p29). Zachary Reid, another prominent character in the novel represents a clash with British colonialism in several ways. He is a mixed raced seaman who embodies the clash between his diverse cultural background and the rigid social hierarchies imposed by British colonialism. Born to a British father and an African mother, Zachary faces marginalization and discrimination from both British and Indian societies. His mixed heritage challenges the colonial notion of racial purity and exposes the inherent racism and cultural biases of the time. As an indentured servant aboard the *Ibis*, Zachary experiences firsthand the exploitative nature of British colonialism. Indentured servitude is a system that replaces slavery but still subjected individuals to harsh working conditions and limited freedom. Zachary's journey on the *Ibis* represents the coerced migration and forced labour that characterise the colonial era, highlighting the economic exploitation and dehumanization inflicted upon marginalized communities. “many of the girmityas were in a trance of fear: it was as if they had just woken to the realization that they were not only leaving home and braving the Black Water- they were entering a state of existence in



which their waking hours would be ruled by the noose and the whip” (p405). Cultural repressiveness is also clearly seen through the character of Paulette a French Orphan girl raised by Jodu’s parents’ who were Indians but later taken after by Benjamin Burnham and his family after her father’s death. Paulette is forced to marry an old English judge; she escapes in disguise as an Indian woman on Ibis and starts working as a migrant worker. She challenges the traditional gender roles and expectations in the colonial era. Her struggle with her identity reflects the tensions and conflicts experienced by individuals who find themselves caught between different cultural influences imposed by colonialism. Although she prefers Indian customs, cuisine, language, and culture, she is compelled to accept English customs and beliefs, speak English rather than Bengali, eat English food rather than Indian, and dress in gowns rather than sarees. “To buy a new dress was beyond her capabilities, not just because she had no money, but also because she could not trust her own taste in memsahib fashion” (p247). She is compelled to adopt English behaviour and a different way of thinking. As mentioned in the novel “The bearers and khidmutgars sneered when her clothing was not quite pukka, and they would often ignore her if she spoke to them in Bengali” (p123). “When draped upon Paulette, those finely tailored gowns had a tendency to slip and flap; memsahib costume of this kind being, in any case, unfamiliar to her, the lack of fit greatly compounded her discomfort” (p128). Paulette’s character illuminates the challenges faced by individuals who find themselves caught between different cultural worlds and their attempts to preserve their unique identities. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* mentions, “his inevitable, painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism. The sari becomes sacred, and shoes that come from Paris or Italy are left off in favour of pampooties, while suddenly the language of the ruling power is felt to burn your lips” (p178). The natives are forbidden from practicing and preaching their religion. Even the support of their religion and the worship of their gods are prohibited. Baboo Nob Kissin is a good example of this. He worships Lord Krishna and desires to construct a temple, but later he joins the Ibis and is persecuted by the British. He says, “One of my forefathers was initiated into the love of Krishna by Shri Chaitanya himself. I alone was not able to fulfill my destiny: it is my misfortune... ‘Even now I am searching Lord Krishna left and right’, continued the gomusta” (p138). These characters of the novel provide powerful insights into the multifaceted dimensions of cultural repressiveness under British colonial rule.

The Novel *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart published in 1958, is Achebe’s debut novel. It portrays Igbo society’s way of life, with a focus on Okonkwo and his family, the main protagonists of the novel. While the book primarily focuses on Igbo society, it indirectly addresses the broader theme of cultural repressiveness under the British Raj in India. Achebe transports readers to pre-colonial Nigeria, where the advent of European missionaries and bureaucrats marks the start of a tremendous transformation. The complex social institutions, traditions, and religious beliefs of the Igbo people are shown in the novel, as well as their conflict with British imperialism’s advancing armies. The internal conflicts that the protagonist, Okonkwo, faces as he battles the loss of his cultural identity and the dissolution of his community are expertly portrayed by Achebe. As the novel unfolds, the reader witnesses the erosion of cultural foundations, the disintegration of community bonds, and the disempowerment of individuals striving to maintain their identity in the face of an overpowering colonial presence. Fanon examines and states that “Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, recognize the unreality of his ‘nation’, and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p190). Okonkwo embodies the traditional values, customs, and cultural norms of Igbo society in pre-colonial Nigeria. He strictly upholds the values of hard work, strength, and masculinity that are highly esteemed in his culture. Okonkwo’s ancient beliefs, however, clash with the foreign ideals and cultural impositions introduced by the colonisers as British colonialism expanded into his culture. The arrival of Missionaries and the White men in Umuofia try to establish their existence by transforming the religion of the natives and by preaching Christianity. “During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan... The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them” (1958, p101). He fiercely opposes the influence of the colonisers, viewing it as a threat to the stability and integrity of his community. In the introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, renowned French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre analyses that, “the Church in the colonies is white people’s Church, the foreigner’s Church. She does not call the native to God’s ways but the ways of the white man, of master, of oppressor” (p32). His inner struggle and eventual downfall can be seen as a metaphor for the wider impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures. His tragic end in the novel can be seen as a reflection of the devastating consequences of cultural repression. He ultimately fails



to adapt to the changing times and succumbs to the overwhelming force of the British colonisers. Obierika while seeing the dangling body of his friend Okonkwo remarks, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (p151). The influence of Whites and their culture is clearly seen and visible through the character of Nowye, a son of Okonkwo who becomes a symbol of resistance and personal transformation. He plays a significant role in exploring the effects of cultural repressiveness on individual identity and familial relationships. His interests and inclinations differ from the traditional path set by his father. Nwoye starts as a young boy who struggles to meet his father's expectations of masculinity and traditional Igbo values. As the story progresses, Nwoye begins to question and challenge the beliefs and practices of his community, particularly in response to the arrival of Christian missionaries. The new ideas and perspectives presented by the missionaries' appeal to Nwoye's curiosity and offer an alternative to the cultural repressiveness he has experienced within his community. His departure from traditional Igbo customs in favor of Christianity represents a rejection of cultural repressiveness and a search for personal liberation. His conversion to Christianity serves as a powerful symbol of his rebellion against the cultural repressiveness and oppressive nature of the traditional Igbo society. His rejection of his father's values and the Igbo customs further deepens the divide between them, straining their relationship and ultimately leading to Nwoye's departure from the family. As mentioned in the novel, "But he was happy to leave his father. He would return to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith" (p112). Achebe manifests cultural repressiveness through the character of Obierika, who is a close friend of Okonkwo and one of the prominent characters of the novel. He plays a significant role in the novel by offering a contrasting perspective to Okonkwo's rigid adherence to traditional values and customs. Obierika's character exemplifies the resistance to cultural repressiveness and the importance of critical thinking and questioning prevailing norms. He is a rational individual who challenges the colonisers' cultural superiority. He questions the validity of their beliefs and practices, recognizing the value and richness of the Igbo culture. When the missionaries arrive in Umuofia, Obierika is initially curious about their beliefs and practices. However, as he witnesses the damaging effects of their presence, such as the division it causes within the community, he becomes skeptical of their intentions. Throughout the novel, Obierika is shown to have a keen sense of observation and a deep understanding of his own culture. He recognizes the resilience and strength of the

Igbo people and their ability to adapt and survive. His insights challenge the notion that the colonisers' culture is inherently superior. Obierika's refusal to abandon his traditions demonstrates his strong sense of identity and his determination to protect his cultural heritage. He is one of the few members of their clan who backed Okonkwo in his fight against the English and their way of life. These characters serve as illuminating examples of the novel's exploration of the complicated issues surrounding cultural erasure, the difficulties associated with forming identities, and the unwavering spirit of people who fight for their freedom and cultural survival.

The Impact of Cultural Repressiveness

The impact of cultural repressiveness during the British Raj in India and the colonial period in Africa had profound effects on the indigenous populations of both regions. The imposition of British cultural values and practices led to a loss of cultural autonomy for Indian as well as African people. Native traditions, languages, and belief systems were marginalized or suppressed, and the British sought to replace them with their own cultural norms. Both novels depict how the suppression of indigenous beliefs and practices was a result of cultural repression under colonial control. Native practices and traditions were regarded by the colonisers as inferior and they imposed their own cultural and religious systems. As Fanon in his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* mentions, "In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values" (1963, p33&34). The imposition of the colonisers' cultural norms often led to the marginalization or erasure of native languages. In *Things Fall Apart*, the introduction of English and the influence of Christian missionaries contribute to the decline of the Igbo language. Similarly, in *Sea of Poppies*, the influence of the English language and culture is clearly visible through the character of Raja Neel Halder who wants to provide English schooling and education to his son. Cultural repressiveness disrupted social structures and traditional systems of governance. In both novels, the arrival of the colonisers destabilises existing power structures and introduces new hierarchies that favor the colonisers. This often resulted in the loss of self-governance and the alienation of native leaders and rulers. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* says, "Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government...having merits of their own..." (1978, p32). Native resources were exploited for the benefit of the colonisers, leading to economic dependence and inequality. The loss of control over economic systems and the introduction of cash-crop agriculture often



disrupted local economies and led to socio-economic disparities. These impacts encompass the suppression of indigenous beliefs and practices, the loss of language and identity, the disruption of social structures, economic exploitation, and the resilience of cultures in the face of repression. These novels shed light on the complex dynamics of cultural assimilation, resistance, and the long-lasting effects on indigenous communities.

2. Conclusion

Through the lenses of *Sea of Poppies* and *Things Fall Apart*, the exploration delves into the theme of cultural repressiveness during the British Raj. It examines how these literary works illuminate the loss of cultural autonomy, the erosion of traditional practices, and the struggle for cultural preservation and liberation in the face of overwhelming colonial power. The narratives serve as potent reminders of the enduring impact of colonialism, inviting readers to critically engage with the complexities of power, resistance, and cultural identity in post-colonial societies. Both novels illustrate how colonial powers sought to impose their cultural norms, erode native identities, and exploit resources for their own gain. They highlight the resistance, resilience, and cultural resurgence of indigenous communities, as well as the intergenerational trauma and the enduring effects of cultural repression.

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