

## **Epistemic Violence and Spiritual Displacement in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Comparative Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

P.Antony Maria Jenobhar\*  

### **Abstract**

*This article investigates the concept of epistemic violence and spiritual dislocation in postcolonial Nigeria through a comparative examination of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). It posits that both novels illustrate how colonialism, in addition to exerting political dominance, systematically undermines indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and cultural identities. Achebe's portrayal of the gradual disintegration of Igbo society evidenced by the weakening of the Oracle, the silencing of ancestral voices, and the neglect of rituals, demonstrates how colonial forces invalidate traditional worldviews. In a similar vein, Adichie depicts the enduring repercussions of colonial rule within familial structures, where rigid religious tenets stifle personal freedom and cultural expression. Highlighting the postcolonial theoretical frameworks, particularly Gayatri Spivak's notion of epistemic violence and Frantz Fanon's insights on psychological alienation, this study unveils how colonial authority reconfigures reality, truth, and self-identity. The tragic decline of Okonkwo and the internal struggles of Kambili and Jaja serve as representations of the wider cultural crisis and identity loss that accompany epistemic oppression. This paper asserts that epistemic violence transcends historical contexts, remaining a pervasive influence in contemporary families and communities. Through resilience, consciousness, and cultural reclamation, Achebe and Adichie propose avenues for resistance and healing against imposed ideologies.*

Submitted: 30.07.2025

Accepted: 29.09.2025

Published 30.09.2025

\*P.Antony Maria Jenobhar, MA Literature, Dept. of English, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Palayamkottai - 627002, India.

©2025 P.Antony Maria Jenobhar, This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

**Keywords:** Epistemic Violence, Spiritual Dislocation, Resistance, Cultural Identity

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has received wide critical attention, views and thoughts, for the way it highlights the colonial views of Africa. Achebe himself said that one of his aims in writings is to help African "regain belief in themselves" after years of colonial misrepresentation (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 44). Achebe restores, representing Igbo society with honesty and depth, rather than through the stereotypes common in colonial literature.

Critics have examined through the lens of cultural change and socio conflict. Simon Gikandi notes that Achebe's strength lies in showing the clash of two worlds, the Igbo way of life and colonial presence. Emmanuel Obiechina, on the other hand, focuses on the tragic collapse of Igbo traditions, which he sees reflected in Okonkwo's personal downfall. These readings make clear that Achebe's writings were about the cultural and political struggles. Post colonial theorists direct through the direction of how colonialism created an impact among the spiritual and psychological aspects of people also the socio conflict within. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, explains that colonialism does not only controls the land and resources but also reshapes the minds of the colonized. He says:

Violence is man re-creating himself. When people like me, they like me 'in spite of my colour.' When they dislike me; they point out that it isn't because of my color. Either way, I am locked in to the infernal circle. They realize at last that change does not mean reform, that change does not mean improvement. ( Fanon 37)

Achebe's novel reflects this idea, showing how Igbo ways of thinking and beliefs are slowly weakened.

Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of 'epistemic violence' adds another perspective, highlights the way how colonialism silences and dismisses non-western forms of knowledge, her theory helps us see the novel in new light, through a different connotation, as a story about the destruction of indigenous ways of knowing, points out that when Christianity replaces Igbo religion, it also changes how reality itself is understood and transformed. Colonialism displaced not only the religious practices but also the foundation of the Igbo people's cultural reality.

This article explores the notions of epistemic violence and spiritual displacement in postcolonial Nigeria by comparing Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. While Achebe portrays the initial imposition of colonial power that dismantles indigenous belief systems and redefines modes of knowledge, Adichie extends this discourse into the postcolonial era, where the residues of colonial authority continue to shape spiritual consciousness and domestic hierarchies. By examining both texts together, the study reveals how epistemic oppression transcends generations, transforming from

overt colonial domination in Achebe's time to internalized spiritual subjugation in Adichie's narrative. Through this comparative lens, the article underscores how both authors engage with the continuing struggle for cultural reclamation, identity, and spiritual autonomy within Nigeria's postcolonial reality.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Epistemic Violence**

In Nigerian context, both Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) reveals the impact of colonialism in religion, patriarchy, and politics silence voices and destroy traditional practices of the native tribe of African lands. When Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie begins her novel with the words, "Things started to fall apart at home. . ." (1), she deliberately echoes Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart*. By invoking Achebe, Adichie emphasizes that the story of colonialism is not yet over. Achebe wrote about the beginning of cultural destruction, while Adichie explores its long-lasting effects in the postcolonial world, revealing that colonialism not only conquered lands but also reshaped minds, religion, and families through epistemic and religious violence.

Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explore the concept of epistemic violence across multiple works, illustrating how systems of power colonial, political, or familial suppress knowledge, language, and culture, shaping individual and collective identities. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, colonialism and Christian missionaries delegitimize Igbo traditions and rituals, portraying them as 'primitive', which destabilizes social cohesion and forces characters like Okonkwo to confront a disconnection from their own cultural knowledge: "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion... He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe, Ch. 22).

Adichie, examines epistemic violence both at the societal and intimate, familial level. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili and Jaja live under their father Eugene's rigid religious rules: "I spoke carefully, choosing my words with fear, because of my father's strict rules and rigid religious beliefs" (Adichie 15). Fear dominates their expression, and the children cannot explore their own identities until exposure to Aunt Ifeoma and their grandfather provides alternative ways of thinking: "I laughed more, spoke without hesitation, and even used Igbo phrases. . . small acts that showed I was beginning to think for myself" (Adichie 175). Adichie focused on the effects that continued among the modern Nigerian families and society whereas Achebe focused on the colonial encounter in the late 19th century Nigeria. Both the writers use family conflict to show hoe epistemic violence breaks continuity, every character been equipped with an implied meaning and cause in the backdrop of the novel. "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion" (Adichie 7). Religion is the key instrument to cause disruption, the generational conflicts, Okonkwo and his son Nwoye represent two worlds, on holding on to the Igbo tradition and practices, the other moving towards Christianity serves the clash, tears apart the family and symbolizes the larger cultural collapse.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates that colonialism was not only a political and cultural disruption but also a profound act of epistemic violence. By portraying the weakening of the Oracle, the silence of ancestral voices, and the abandonment of ritual, which symbolises the legacy of African people, Achebe shows how colonial forces dismantled the very structures that gave meaning and authority to Igbo life. Using Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, we can see that the novel goes beyond recording, transcription of cultural change; it documents the loss of a worldview and the delegitimization of indigenous knowledge. Okonkwo's downfall serves as a symbolism of larger collapse; his tragedy is not only personal but also communal, reflecting the impossibility of survival when the foundations of knowledge and beliefs are eroded. The author reminds us that colonial domination works at the deepest levels, shaping consciousness, identity, and spirituality.

Similar to this, in Adichie's work, Kambili and Jaja are caught up between their father's rigid Catholic faith and Aunt Ifeoma's more open, questioning, and liberal world. "He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes" (Adichie 194). The novel also highlights the disconnect between the abuser's public persona and private cruelty, with one quote noting, "My father wears his faith like the bronze breastplate of God's foot soldiers, while our mother is more like a good cloth coat with a second hand fit" (Adichie 5).

The children begin to grow only when they spend time with Ifeoma and their Grandfather. "Aunty Ifeoma's laughter floated upstairs, and I realized that laughter was not a common sound in our house" (Adichie 68). Just like Nwoye, they represent the younger generation pulled between two systems of belief.

### **Spiritual Displacement and Colonial Disruption**

Before the arrival of the colonisers, the British, Igbo people had a strong and belief system towards the oracles and ancestral beliefs, their gods, ancestors, and the oracles guided decisions in both private and public life. The intrusion of the colonial rule introduces a psychological fracture within the community, the oracle of the hills and caves centralised the matters of conflict, justice and morality. This framework of spirituality was not only a religion but also a way of organizing knowledge and authority in society. The arrival of the English missionaries brings chaos and disruption. Christianity begins to undermine the authority of the Oracle, presenting Igbo spiritual practices as false or evil. Achebe shows this displacement through the silence of ancestral voices and the decline of rituals.

Traditional ceremonies, once seen as binding and sacred, lose meaning as the new religion spreads, the introduction of the church creates a new source of authority, one that competes with and eventually replaces indigenous structures. Colonialism displaced not only religious practices but also the foundations of how they radically lost their cultural identity and religious independence.

### **Epistemic violence and the loss of knowledge**

Gayatri Spivak's concept of 'epistemic violence' helps us read these changes more deeply, epistemic violence occurs when colonial power denies or erases local

ways of knowing, making them seen backward or irrelevant, colonialism silences and dismisses the non- western form of knowledge. Epistemic violence happens when methods are used that lead to the extermination, annulment and destruction of certain knowledge epistemicide.”

Achebe expresses that this process is not just the replacement of one religion with the other but it is a collapse of a whole system of knowledge, silencing, delegitimizing the indigenous voices, colonialism reshapes what counts as truth and authority. Spivak’s theory allows us to examine the colonizer’s claim of superiority, built on making the Igbo epistemology invisible. This violence is subtle but powerful, as it affects the people’s intellect., the pattern they think and act, what they believe and even value themselves.

### **Language as a source of Epistemic Violence**

Language is a central medium through which violence operates, it shapes thought, structures social hierarchies and also defines what counts as knowledge. In both the novels language becomes a battlefield where epistemic violence and cultural survival collide. The use of Igbo proverbs, idioms, and the oral storytelling in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is not just decorative but as a lifeline worldview under siege. Every proverb carries centuries of wisdom, moral guidance and communal experience. The English introduced by missionaries and colonial administrators was rigid, prescriptive, and dismissive of local meaning, positions European ways of knowing as “Universal” and correct, implicitly casting Igbo thought as primitive or irrational. Epistemic Violence, the language, interrupt the people’s reality. “We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa’s sister, Aunt Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product.” (Adichie 13)

Adiche’s *Purple Hibiscus*, language also reflects power and control within the family. In the beginning of the plot Kambili speaks carefully and formally, choosing her words with fear because of her father’s strict rules and rigid religious beliefs. Her voice is limited and her words show the submissiveness rather than her true thoughts or her self – perception. “I spoke carefully, choosing my words with fear, because of my father’s strict rules and rigid religious beliefs” ( Adichie 15). This reflects how colonial ideas and the ideologies can suppress personal expression, shaping how people think and act. As Kambili spends more time with her Aunt Ifeoma and grandfather, her language begins to change. She even laughs more, speaks without hesitation, and even uses Igbo phrases and informal expressions, small acts that show, resembles that she starts to think for herself and feel a sense of belonging. “I laughed more, spoke without hesitation, and even used Igbo phrases and informal expressions- small acts that showed I was beginning to think for myself and feel a sense of belonging” (Adichie 175).

These moments reveal that reclaiming language is not just about words and phrases but about regaining freedom, confidence and a connection towards one’s own culture. Language is deeply tied to who we are, how we think, and how we feel about ourselves. When colonial authoritarian forces impose their language and

ideas, they do more than control speech that's an attempt to control thought, memory and identity of the community.

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 22)

Reclaiming one's own voice becomes a deeply personal act of resistance, a way to heal and reconnect with the world.

The ways people speak, laugh, or remain silent reveal not just the personal feelings but also the power dynamics that shape their lives. In both the novels, the way characters express or fail to express their emotions reflects the impact of moral decay and epistemic violence. "Amaka asked why I spoke so quietly, but I had no answer" (Adichie 31). Silence often viewed as a form of control over the thought patterns, and behavioural patterns, while laughter and informal expressions serve as subtle acts of resistance. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, moments of silence mark the community's disruption under colonial pressure. When did you become a shivering old woman?" Okonkwo asked her. "You are not really old, but you are afraid to speak" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 4). The of ancestral voices, the fading of oral storytelling, and the quieting of traditional rituals show how the colonisers' influence erodes communal bonds and legacy, experienced, shared knowledge. Silence is not neutral as it reflects fear, loss, and the delegitimization of indigenous culture but at the same time, the small acts of emotional expression, such as stories shared among friends or the use of proverbs preserve a sense of identity and continuity, a passing of legacy and cultural heritage.

### **Okonkwo as an allegory of Epistemic Collapse**

Okonkwo's personal story can be read as an allegory for this broader culture and epistemic collapse. His strength and authority come from the traditional Igbo values, hard work, masculinity, dignity and respect towards his ancestors also the adherence to rituals but as colonial power grows, the foundations of Okonkwo's identity begin to weaken. The gods no longer speak with the same force, the clan no longer unites around ancestral authority, and the rituals and deities lost their values and meaning. His eventual downfall often interpreted as a tragedy of an individual who cannot adapt to change, represents a society whose knowledge systems been discredited and dismantled. His suicide, an act considered an abomination in Igbo belief, reflects the final breakdown of the structures that once gave meaning to the life. In such way, Achebe reveals the impact of colonialism but also the impact, alterations in politics, culture but attacks the very roots of existence, knowledge, belief and spiritual belonging.

### **Summation**

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* show that colonialism and strict systems of power do more than take over

land they affect the way people think, speak, and live. Both novels explore how rules, whether from outside forces or within families, can control people, limit freedom, and influence how they see themselves and their world.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tells the story of how colonial powers and Christian missionaries disrupt the Igbo community. The traditions, rituals, and beliefs that have guided the people for generations are ignored or treated as unimportant. Through the character of Okonkwo, we see this struggle personally: his life and eventual downfall reflect the larger problem of a society losing its connection to its own culture and knowledge. When people's ways of knowing and living are dismissed, it affects everyone both individuals and the community as a whole.

Also in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie shows how strict authority can shape life inside a family. Kambili and Jaja grow up under their father Eugene's strict rules and religious demands. They are careful with their words, afraid to speak freely, and struggle to express their true feelings. It is only when they spend time with Aunt Ifeoma and their grandfather, who encourage freedom, questioning, and learning, that they start to find their own voices. Their journey shows how young people can be caught between rules that limit them and environments that encourage growth and self-expression. Both novels also show that this kind of control, called epistemic violence, is not just something from history. It can still happen in families, schools, and communities, quietly shaping the way people think and feel about themselves. Language, culture, and beliefs are deeply connected to identity, and when these are taken away or dismissed, it can harm both individuals and society.

Achebe and Adichie also give hope. By reclaiming their voices, questioning unfair rules, and reconnecting with their culture, people can heal and regain strength. Both novels suggest that with courage, guidance from supportive people, and awareness, individuals can recover what was lost, rebuild their sense of self, and create meaningful lives. These stories remind us that even when people are controlled or silenced, the human spirit has the power to find freedom, confidence, and dignity again

### **Works Cited**

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1958.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Algonquin Books, 2003.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. Doubleday, 1975.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Routledge, 1988. ...
- Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction*. James Currey, 1991.

Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Carroll, David. "Christianity and Colonial Modernity: Epistemic Violence in African Literature." *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010, pp. 45-67 3