

RETHINKING POSTCOLONIALISM: A STUDY OF CHUKWUMA OKOYES *WE THE BEAST*

By

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Abstract:

Postcolonial studies is an essential area of study in literary research that explores the indigenous perspectives marginalized or erased by colonial domination. Although there has been significant scholarly attention on postcolonial themes in various literary forms, there is a pressing need to interact more with dramatic texts that address postcolonialism. This paper firmly examines the play *We the Beast* by Chukwuma Okoye through the lens of postcolonial theory to explore themes of postcolonialism in Nigeria. The study uses content analysis and literary discourse to analyze how Okoye weaves postcolonial themes and motifs into the play's fabric. By examining specific excerpts from the text, this study sheds light on how postcolonialism shapes the play's narrative structure and character dynamics, providing a better understanding of its thematic underpinnings. This research firmly emphasizes the importance of incorporating postcolonial perspectives into analyzing literary works, particularly those depicting childhood experiences of the Nigerian Biafra war. It offers valuable insights into the enduring trauma of colonialism on African societies and cultures, particularly Nigeria, more than half a century later after the civil war.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Africans, "We The Beast," Nigeria-Biafra war.

Introduction:

Throughout history, European powers have often utilized partitioning and exploitation to acquire various territories. Through the use of forceful tactics, such as the slave trade and cultural annihilation, African nations were subjugated for centuries, their resources exploited, and their cultural identity erased. The impact of colonialism on African societies was profound and enduring. It was characterized by the imposition of colonial borders, the suppression of indigenous cultures, and the systematic dismantling of traditional institutions. As a result, any form of performance activities in the continent was denied and subjugated. Before the emergence of whites in African territories, theatrical performances had always been a part of African traditions and cultures (Ogunba, 1978). Notwithstanding, Osameka and Eze (2024) recount that "colonialism brought with it the impression that African cultural heritage was inferior and that the drama focus of the colonialists was superior" (186). Like every world society, especially every colonized territory, Africans entertained themselves through dramatic exhibitions ranging from ritualistic performances and festivals to annihilating the gods and the ancestors, mythical tales, and lore. These performances had principles that controlled and established the rules by which they were performed, even though they were not documented in the Western sense of the word on paper. Still, these traditional dramas had their forms, ranging from role-play, children's games, storytelling (folk-tale), dance drama, improvisation, and impersonation (Chesaina & Mwangi 209). To say that dramatic performances were alien in Africa would be tantamount to dismissing the rich cultural heritage and diversity that abounds on the continent. Kene, Igweonu, and Osita Okagbue (2014) affirm the diversity of dramatic activities on the continent and avowed that African theatre and performance are functional. In other words, it is not just entertainment but is often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions—hence, it is performative at its core (2). Entertainment majorly qualifies for drama in the functional aspect of the word, but what entertains and at the same time is didactic imbues the African drama with a more performative

essence, especially since its origin is also traceable to ritual as in the Greek origin of drama. The existence of drama and theatre in Africa has been proven beyond any equivocal doubt to be confirmed before the inception of colonial rule. However, with the exploration and exploitation of the British on African soil, the forms of drama were affected as new forms of drama were introduced during colonisation. For instance, indigenous African theatre did not incorporate a demarcation between the performer(s) and the audience. If one was not a part of the culture, it was often difficult to tell the performers apart from the audience when a performance was happening (Banham 195). Theatre was a communal engagement.

However, the imposition of colonial rule brought about significant changes to African theatrical expressions, introducing new forms and dynamics that reshaped traditional practices through colonial mentality and literary adaptation. Thus, Etherton observed, "In taking over European concern to rework the great dramatic works of the past, African playwrights have also taken over this particular historical perspective." (2012:106). This eloquent indictment remains evident in the works of the first generations of African scholars, such as Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi through to Femi Osofisan and Ahmed Yerima. It continues to trend beyond the 2020s. The adventure of Europeans on African soils affected the theatrical renditions of many African languages, cultures, and identities. The profound effect of colonialism still abounds with us today. In John Elijah Okon's observation, "Colonialism made the Europeans assume attitudes of superiority and a sense of mission at the detriment of their African counterparts, and thus, African dignity, personality, and identity were trampled upon." (2014: 25). But notwithstanding the effects of the British presence in Africa, many African playwrights and dramatists today are still in the habit of infusing their indigenous elements into their dramatic productions, even though the impacts of the British are such that cannot be easily done away with in the theatrical offerings of these playmakers.

Chukwuma Okoye's *We the Beast* has been selected for this paper due to the very limited work that has been done on it, especially concerning postcolonialism. Adopting the content analysis method, the paper examines the impact of colonial encroachment on the Igbo culture, amongst whom the playwright is a native.

Tenets of Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism emerged in literary discussion around the 1950s and 1960s (Kumar, 2024). At the heart of postcolonial theory is the desire to dismantle the hierarchies and binaries inflicted by colonial philosophies on their colonies, which often involves erasing their culture and identity, mainly through historical narrative and literary expression. The method of the colonialists remains ruthless and unapologetic that Achebe (2000) had to respond to Dylan Thomas who had malignantly trashed Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Achebe described the likes of Thomas among those "who never went to Africa" but still made disparaging remarks about Africans and Africa.

This theory challenges Eurocentric narratives and seeks to restore agency to marginalised voices, allowing them to reclaim their cultural and socio-political heritage. Bag (2024) observes that postcolonialism draws criticism on the "ruthlessness, and the methods of exploitation by colonisers, and the inequalities and impoverishment that emanated (1410). The exploitation from the colonial experience resulted in what Mira Pallav D'Cruze (2023) termed postcolonial identity cited as "a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by the aftermath of colonialism. It encapsulates the intricate processes through which individuals and societies navigate self-definition complexities amidst the remnants of imperial influence." Adigun (2019), like many earlier works, demonstrates the European influence on intellectual balance, evident through the characters' speech, mannerisms, and dress patterns. Language for interpretive banter for and against tradition and postcolonial inheritance becomes the cross and albatross.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism

In the contemporary African context, the scars of colonialism are a repeated decimal in most scholarly discourse that borders on the continual existence of the African people, mainly as it affects her cultural and performance history. The consequential effects of colonialism run deep and continue to shape the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the African people.

Because postcolonial theory offers invaluable insights into the legacies of imperialism and the ongoing struggles for decolonisation and self-determination, it becomes the most appropriate theory for this study. As a body of thought, postcolonialism primarily concerns itself with making accounts for the historical, artistic, economic, social, cultural, and political impact of the colonial rule of Europe on colonised territories around the globe (Elam, 2023). As Rana explains, it is “an academic discipline that analyses, explains, and responds to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism.” To put it rather tersely, postcolonialism tries to criticise the effect of Europe on its colonial subjects. As one will observe, the agenda of postcolonialism is quite simple. It is to bring down the partition wall separating the coloniser and the colonised. It sets to pull down strongholds that have been erected, ideologically and practically, to make a set of people in any given nation feel inferior, subjugated, and not on par with other cultures. While describing what postcolonial literature is, Tonny Myers states:

Postcolonial literature is produced by countries that gained independence from colonial rule in the twentieth century. In 1900 the British Empire covered a pink swathe of the globe that included the Indian sub-continent and other parts of Asia, much of Africa, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and many Caribbean islands as well as numerous and scattered smaller possessions (2005).

Postcolonialism is a literary theory, and by literary theory, we refer to the body of methods and ideas that are deployed in reading literature (Brewton, 2023). It is a portrait of the elementary principles through which we attempt to understand any work of literature. As a literary theory, postcolonialism is used, like other literary theories, to formulate the relationship between an author and their work by developing the import of race, gender, and class from the perception of “the author’s biography and the analysis of their thematic presence within texts” (Brewton, 2023). As a literary theory, postcolonialism in these past years has been used to more or less explain that a literary work can be seen as a product of an author’s culture and not just about the author *per se*.

In the words of Alan Lawson (1992), “Postcolonialism is a politically-motivated historical-analytical movement (which) engages with, resists, and seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in the material, historical, cultural, political, pedagogical, discursive, and textual domains.” As a culture that imposed itself on others that it considered inferior to it, what the European culture did was to trample on the values and morals of its colonies. This trampling, bastardization, subjugation, and relegation is what postcolonialism is preoccupied with accounting for, exposing, and setting right. Though the prefix ‘post’ is before the word ‘postcolonial’, the term does not only imply what happens after the Europeans exit their colonies. This is a misconception of what the term means. Helen Gilbert *et al.* (1996) expatiate on this better in their book, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*:

Post-colonialism is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept meaning the time after colonization has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state.

Thus, the focus of postcolonialism as a literary theory transcends the post-independence era of once-colonized domains to the new forms that colonialism is taking on previous European colonies—imperialism, neo-colonialism, etc. This, however, does not entirely rule out the possibility of post-colonialism, which also focuses on post-independence times. As Indramohan *et al.* (2012) point out, the contemporary endeavour of postcolonialism is to “speak of the new intellectual life and a force on a par with the Western minds.” This would mean that postcolonialism contemporarily also tries to put the works from colonized regions on the same intellectual pedestal as the Westerners. As a rebuttal to the claim by

some that Africans lack cognitive ability, the theory amongst Africans is used to show that Africans can also demonstrate intellectualism.

As Laura Chrisman (1999) likewise opines, the colonial history of a nation cannot be isolated from its contemporary literature, and this would also apply to the kind of play texts written by playwrights in the previous British colonies. While enumerating some of the themes of postcolonialism, Baldwin (2022) notes that they include racism, freedom/independence, the future, change/transformation, colonialism, oppression, nationalism, and identity. Similarly, Rana (2021) avers that marginalization, identity, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, hybridity, mimicry, etc., are elements of postcolonialism.

The postcolonial theory has been chosen in this paper to discuss the plight of the characters in the play as an impact of colonialism because they represent the whole Igbo race. As one of the fixations of postcolonialism is to expose how colonialism and imperialism, and now, neo-colonialism, have affected the colonized, the text shall bring to bear, through the experiences of the characters, the repercussions of colonization and amalgamation (a mere by-product of colonization) to an ethnic group.

We The Beast: A Postcolonial Overview

The playwright of the selected play, Chukwuma Okoye, is a professor at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His areas of specialization include dance and choreography, costume and makeup design, African theatre and performance, and postcolonial theory. His published works include the position of African theatre concerning the debates on cultural and literary studies, dance in contemporary Nigeria, and Igbo masquerade theatre. Chukwuma Okoye has written several plays, one of which is *We the Beast*, which won the Association of Nigerian Authors Drama Prize in 1991. The play is set during the Nigerian Civil War, fought from the 6th of July 1967 to the 15th of January 1970. This assumption about the setting of the play is drawn from some lines of some characters in the play. In page 13 of the play, the dialogues below show the period in which the play is set.

1st SOLDIER: Until you carry your Settima.

All: Until I carry my Settima.

1st SOLDIER: **Join Ojukwu for war front.**

All: **Join Ojukwu for war front.** (2002)

The assumption about the timing of the play is safely drawn due to the mention of the name Ojukwu. During the Civil War, the Biafran troop was led by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who also headed the secessionist state of Biafra. Thus, it is not a hasty conclusion to infer that the play is set between the 6th of July 1967 to the 15th of January 1970. To corroborate that, the lines below from page 14 of the play give more premise to the conclusion that the play is set during the Nigerian Civil War.

They all begin to twist as ordered.

1st SOLDIER: **Biafra win the war**

All: Armoured car, shelling machine, heavy artillery bomber! **You can never defeat Biafra** (2002)

To add to the aforementioned, the dialogues between Ike and his wife, Chioma, on page 42 of the play substantiate the inference about the setting of the play.

IKE. But these boys... Surely we can manage somehow. This cannot go on forever. **Biafra cannot hold on much longer.** It is a miracle that it has managed to survive this far. This war shall be over soon.

CHIOMA. You said this right from the very beginning of the war. **It's already two years and the war still rages on.** The reality of the situation is that we must survive it no matter what it takes. We are in the stark reality of war and the only evidence of victory is survival. To be victorious is to be alive at the end of the carnage (2002).

Throughout its history of warfare, Nigeria has only faced Biafra as an opponent once, which occurred between 1967 and 1970. Thus, it is safe to conclude that Chukwuma Okoye's *We the Beast* is set during the Nigerian Civil War.

The play, a period piece, is written to recount and expose the destruction of lives and properties, family and communal anguish, pain, sorrow, and other kinds of horror that the Igbo community experienced during the time. The war was fought between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist entity that declared separation from Nigeria in 1967 due to reported cultural, political, ethnic, economic, and cultural tension. With the war televised globally, images and footage of starving and underfed Biafran children surfaced on Western media. Young and teenage boys were engrafted into the war (Uchendu, 2007), and the inexperience of most of these boys led to their untimely deaths. In page 12 of the play, the playwright recounts:

"... Young boys between the ages of ten and eighteen years... dressed in virtual rags and looking unbelievably haggard, march in, in two files, with some equally wretched-looking young soldiers in command." (2002)

The war saw the death of many young boys who were drafted into the war. Coupled with that, there was also the loss of lives of both young and old, men and women. It is no gainsaying that the Igbos felt the brunt of the war more, as over 30,000 Igbos were lost to the war, which is "described as the first black-on-black genocide in postcolonial Africa" (Korieh, 2012). It is essential to look at the play text that documents these experiences from the perspective of postcolonialism, especially as the playwright is also a postcolonial scholar and an Igbo man.

The allusion to postcolonialism abounds and can be seen evidently in the text. Many postcolonial scholars have mentioned that language is crucial in postcolonial discussions/studies (Shakib, 2011). Without too much argument, language and literature are integral ingredients of national identity (Menang, 2001). Since colonization, most former colonies have tried to retain the language of their colonisers, giving it importance above their indigenous languages (Atalianis, 2004). In the case of the English language, the acceptance and adoption of the lingua franca in most former British colonies might be a consequence of the global reputation and regard that the language commands (Hornikx *et al.*, 2020). Nigeria, as a former colony of the British Empire, has also been drawn into accepting the English language as the primary mode of communication. This can explain why the play is written in the coloniser's language instead of Igbo, the playwright's language.

The use of English as the mode of expression in the text is postcolonial. As some African scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Abiola Ire, and Obiajunwa Wali, amongst many others, have argued, any piece of literature written in another language except African languages does not pass to be acknowledged as African literature (Ukam 2018). While that may be a rather extreme stance on the subject, what we can agree on is the fact that the colonial impact of the British can still be felt in African literature today.

On the subject of the play focusing on the Civil War, the playwright highlights another postcolonial impact on Nigeria. Following the exit of the British from Nigeria, which is a conglomeration of different ethnic entities, each was in the bid to have a presentation at the central level of government. The Igbo ethnic group in the Eastern region of Nigeria was forced to declare its independence from Nigeria because it felt that it could no longer continue to coexist with other ethnic entities, thereby announcing its exit from Nigeria. A significant reason for the secession was due to the over-domination of Muslim Hausa-Fulanis of the Northern part of Nigeria in the federal government. (McCauley, 2017). The Igbo felt left out and marginalised from what should be their shared heritage. The war later became an option due to "a military coup, a counter-coup, and anti-Igbo pogroms in the Northern part of Nigeria" (Plotnicov 1971). It

is also believed that the control over the Niger Delta oil production played a significant role in the declaration for secession (Anwunah 2007). Though already free from British rule, the Igbos saw the need for further freedom from the federal government of Nigeria. It would appear that the taste of freedom called for more freedom. However, the call for war by the Biafrans knew the loss of lives of many Biafrans. Ike recounts this in the following line.

IKE: ...As a matter of fact, it's a long time since I saw a living man. This war has killed us all. And here you are talking about survival. Chioma, it's already too late to survive (38).

The war experienced the death of both young and old as many underaged children were even conscripted into the Biafran army. To save themselves from witnessing the horror of war and dying untimely during the time, many able-bodied men were forced to put up acts that could prevent them from being drafted for war (Daly 2017), as seen in the case of Ike, who feigns madness.

IKE. While we rest I must tell you about myself. You must not mind the way I look now lest you cast me off for a mad man. I may be anything in this insane many natural reasons. I have yet to get into the part properly, though they say I carry it well. That's the reason they have continuously failed to conscript me into the army. But it's really very difficult to play this part on so wide a stage as life. Strangers insult your intelligence by actually believing you are mad... (2002).

IKE: My senses are perfectly in shape. I started playing this dramatic role of a madman only to avoid conscription into the army (35).

In most former colonies of the Europeans, postcolonial discussions are never complete without mentioning the impact of the colonisers' religion on indigenous religions. In the case of Nigeria, Christianity has had a noticeable effect on native religions, which can be seen in the day-to-day verbal expression of the people. As it is amongst Africans to invoke the supernatural in each of their conversations, it will be observed in *We the Beast* that this is still the case. In the following discussions in the text, the impact of Christianity can be marked:

IKE (*calmly*): Chioma, please get hold of yourself and stop all that screaming. Surely God is not asleep (2002).

They fall down on their knees beside the body, execute the sign of the cross and begin to pray silently (2002).

Religious beliefs oftentimes determine human expectations. As engrained in the Christian faith, Jesus, the central figure of the Christian faith, is coming back again, and at his coming, humans, particularly Christians, will be made perfect from all of their imperfections. This belief is not native to Africans. It is strange to African religions, particularly the Igbo culture where the play is set. On page 45, Ike's response to Officer shows how much Christianity has affected the belief systems of Africans and their perception of others as incomplete.

IKE: Anyway, it's not yet the Second Coming when blind men like you shall be made whole; when the dead shall be awoken (2002).

As already mentioned, postcolonialism aims to set aright the cultural, social, economic, and political structures that have been tampered with through colonial invasion. Before the advent of the whites in Africa, Africans have always had their forms of dramatic performances (Chesaina & Mwangi 2004), and African indigenous performances can be seen in music through dirges. In the text, the playwright uses dirge, which is considered an element of total theatre aesthetics (Zenenga 2015).

Everyone is moved by IKE'S vacant countenance. They move to him sorrowfully. A faint dirge rises in the background (2002).

OLD MAN walks gently to BOY and picks him up. As dirge rises from the background he exits (2002).

Similarly, using proverbs in the text reinvents the typical Igbo dialogical exchange. As Adewole (2020) describes it, proverbs, to the Igbo people, are “essential elements of traditional rhetorical strategies.” Proverbs are sufficiently used in the text in the postcolonial spirit of the playwright. Instances include the following:

IKE: Mad or not, it really makes no difference to me. I was going to tell you good people the story of my life. This tragic condition has bent me double-over like the proverbial crayfish bent over by the condition of being roasted. My story is a pathetic one... too too pathetic (2002).

1ST WOMAN: ...You offer leprosy a handshake, and it longs for an embrace (2002).

IKE. The bird with a soft head does not engage in a wood-pecking contest... (2002).

*The play is replete with postcolonial elements. While most playwrights still write today with the impact of colonialism felt in their writings, they still try to write with features from their indigenous cultures. With *We The Beast*, Chukwuma Okoye has demonstrated the liveliness of traditional African dramatic elements even in present times.*

Conclusion

In concluding this research, it is crucial to note that despite the developments that have followed the Nigerian Biafra War and the eventual attainment of independence, the Nigerian masses have consistently suffered hardship and identity misplacement. The hybridized acculturation of traditional and Western drama that emerged during the early part of independence has remained a recurrent idiosyncrasy in how we write and portray our cultural identity in our plays and dramatic performances. Chukwuma Okoye's *We The Beast* is written to reflect the struggle of the Igbo people during the Nigerian Civil War. It engages a desperate desire to redefine the form and content of our performance identity and change the Nigerian performance narratives by depicting characters in their actual reality in grappling with the questions of identity in times of crises and violence. The main character in the play, Ike journeys throughout by engaging the tensions and attendant trauma imposed on him by the war as he struggles between tradition and modernity. Ike faces the complexities of navigating multiple choices by struggling to hide behind falsehood in the face of terror and violence.

In conclusion, this research highlights the enduring impact of colonialism on African societies, particularly Nigeria. Despite the attainment of independence, the effects of colonialism are still felt today, as evident in the challenges faced by the Nigerian people. Chukwuma Okoye's *We The Beast* offers valuable insights into the complexities of navigating multiple cultural influences and the struggle to assert cultural autonomy in a postcolonial context. It crafts a

narrative that bears witness to the struggles and resilience of the individual, as seen in the character of Ike and his wife Chioma, whose individual struggles mutate their individuality and force them into a psychological abyss of no return. Their struggle for self-assertion, self-preservation, and identity loss typifies the plight of the average Igbo man during and beyond the tumultuous period. Through the characters' experiences, the play delves into themes of personal identity and the traumatic legacy of colonial violence. Through its rich narrative and nuanced characterisations, the play is replete with the legacy of colonialism and its ongoing impact on Nigerian society. By conducting a postcolonial analysis of Okoye's work, this research article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity, power, and resistance in postcolonial literature.

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