

**A Postcolonial Study of Western Systemic Oppression in *Things Fall Apart and Beloved***

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in English

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**Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately acknowledged and cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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**Approval**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the postcolonial dimensions of systemic oppression within the Western context as depicted in two seminal literary works, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The analysis delves into the portrayal of colonialism's enduring impact on indigenous cultures and the subsequent internalization of oppressive ideologies by the colonized. By employing a postcolonial lens, the study shows the multifaceted manifestations of systemic oppression, ranging from cultural erasure and economic exploitation to the psychological ramifications of the African American experience during and after slavery serve as important case studies, revealing how these authors engage with the aftermath of colonial domination and its far-reaching implications. The comparative analysis seeks to highlight the shared threads of Western systemic oppression present in both narratives while emphasizing the resilience and agency of the oppressed in confronting and resisting the oppressive structures. Through an examination of the characters' struggles and the cultural landscapes they navigate, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of postcolonial literature and its critical implications for contemporary discussions on systemic oppression and cultural resilience.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Motherhood, Memories, Identity, Colonialism, Cultural hybridity, Religion, Trauma, Fear, Racism, Alienation.

## **Dedication**

With profound humanity, I dedicate this undergraduate thesis to those whose unwavering support and encouragement have been the guiding lights throughout this scholarly endeavor. My deepest gratitude extends to my family, whose belief in my potential and sacrifices made this pursuit possible. To my dedicated professors and mentors, your wisdom and guidance have been instrumental in shaping my academic growth. To my friends, thank you for your support and shared laughter that provided respite during challenging times. This thesis stands as a testament to the collective efforts of those who believed in me, and I am profoundly thankful for the privilege of walking this academic path with such a supportive community by my side.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction:

“The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others.”

- Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*).

This quote is taken from the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic, who is widely regarded as one of Africa’s most influential and celebrated writers. He gained international acclaim for his debut novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is considered a classic of African literature. His works explore the effects of colonialism and the clash between traditional African cultures and European influences. Apart from his debut novel, his notable novels include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966). In addition to his literary contributions, Achebe was an advocate for African literature and cultural identity. He worked as a professor at various universities, including the University of Nigeria, Bard College, and Brown University. Achebe’s impact on African literature and his effort to promote African voices in the literary world has left a lasting legacy. His novel *Things Fall Apart* is set in pre-colonial Nigeria and it explores the conflict of cultures and values between Igbo people, the indigenous population, and the European colonizers who arrived in their land later. This quote reflects the central theme of cultural clash and relativism that can be seen throughout the novel. It suggests that what one group of people considers morally right or virtuous may be viewed as morally wrong by another group. Hence, in the novel’s context, it highlights the cultural differences and misunderstandings that occur when the Igbo culture and the European colonial values collide. In the Igbo society portrayed in the novel, certain traditions, customs, and beliefs are deeply

ingrained in their cultural context. They consider them “good” and necessary for their society. However, when European colonizers who represented a different set of values and beliefs arrived in Igbo land, they often labeled these same customs and practices as “abominations” or unacceptable. Hence, this quote emphasizes the idea that morality and cultural values are not universal but are shaped by one’s cultural and societal context. What is considered virtuous or acceptable in one culture may be seen as immoral by another culture. It depicts the challenges and conflicts that arise when different cultures come into contact and attempt to impose their values and beliefs on one another as shown in the novel.

Therefore, Achebe’s novel suggests that while people may acknowledge that cultural histories shape customs, this awareness does not necessarily always result in the fostering of cross-cultural empathy or sensitivity. Instead, each culture often persists in upholding its traditions and values, even if doing so means undermining, conflicting with, or even ultimately eradicating the customs and values of another culture. Achebe’s portrayal of the clash between the Igbo culture and British colonialism serves as a commentary on the devastating effects of Western imperialism on traditional African societies. The novel further highlights how the imposition of Western values, religion, and governance disrupts and ultimately leads to the downfall of Igbo life.

European colonizers did not only force their systemic oppression on African cultures and values, but they also succeeded in dehumanizing every individual’s identity through slavery.

“That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you’re so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others

lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing”.

- Toni Morrison (*Beloved*).

This passage is from the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison (1931-2019) was an American novelist, editor, and professor, best known for her powerful and critically acclaimed works that explore African-American experiences. Her notable novels include *Beloved* (1987), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and *Song of Solomon* (1977), which earned her the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her other significant works include *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Tar Baby* (1981). In addition to her successful writing career, Morrison was an influential editor at Random House, where she played a key role in bringing attention to African-American literature and voices. She overpowered great works by authors such as Toni Cade Bambara and Angela Davis. Morrison received numerous honors and awards throughout her career, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, becoming the first African-American woman to win the prestigious award. She also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. She left her legacy as one of the most influential and celebrated African-American literary figures. Morrison's novel *Beloved* is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873, and it explores the life of a Black woman named Sethe, a slave from Kentucky in her pre-civil war days. In this quote, the character Sethe reflects on the profound impact of slavery and the dehumanizing treatment she and other enslaved individuals experienced at the hands of white people. She expresses the idea that white people, particularly those who were slave owners, had the power to treat enslaved Black individuals as if they were entirely disposable and devoid of humanity. Enslaved people were seen as property to be used at the discretion of their owners, with no regard for their

feelings, well-being, or individuality. In the passage, she also highlights the different ways in which white people could harm enslaved individuals. This harm includes physical abuse (“kill or maim”), but also the psychological and emotional harm of degrading and humiliating them (“dirty you”). Enslaved people endured such profound mistreatment that it shattered their self-esteem and self-worth. The dehumanizing treatment made it difficult for them to have a positive self-image. The extreme brutality of slavery pretty much led enslaved individuals to lose their sense of identity and self. The trauma and degradation they endured made it challenging for them to protect and cherish their worth and heritage. However, despite trying every motive to dehumanize and destroy the enslaved individuals to their core, Sethe, a Black slave woman, and a mother, finds solace and a sense of purpose in her children. While white people might subjugate her to degradation and harm, her love for her children remains a source of strength and resilience. She holds onto her identity and humanity through maternal love and caring for her offspring.

Hence, this passage from *Beloved* strongly conveys the dehumanizing effects of slavery on enslaved individuals, emphasizing the physical, emotional, and psychological violence they endured. It also portrayed the astounding resilience and love of a mother who clings to her identity and humanity through her connection with her children. Toni Morrison’s writing here therefore shows the complexity of the human experience in the context of slavery, where suffering and love coexist in a deeply oppressive and unjust society.

One of the main reasons for choosing these two novels for this paper is to examine how despite belonging to completely different periods, both novels portray Western systemic oppression of black individuals. In comparing the time settings of these two novels, *Beloved* is set in post-Civil War America. It emphasizes the aftermath of slavery and the struggles of African Americans in a

racially divided society. On the other hand, *Things Fall Apart* is set in pre-colonial Nigeria. It highlights the collision of traditional Igbo culture with the early stages of European colonialism. Therefore, both novels examine the consequences of external forces on the lives of their respective protagonists and communities. However, they do so within different cultural and historical contexts.

These novels are often analyzed as postcolonial novels as they explore the profound impact of colonialism and its aftermath on the lives of black individuals like - Sethe (from *Beloved*), Okonkwo (from *Things Fall Apart*), and their communities. Some significant characteristics that are affected by periodic Western oppression are- parent-child relations, gender relations, inter-racial relations, and family relations. Both novels depict Western systemic oppression as a pervasive and destructive force that impacts the lives of the characters and their communities. While *Beloved* focuses on the enduring trauma of slavery in post-Civil War America, *Things Fall Apart* explores the devastating effects of British colonialism on pre-colonial Igbo society. Therefore, these novels offer powerful narratives on the lasting effects of colonialism and systemic oppression on marginalized communities and individuals.

### **1.1: The Purpose of this Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and analyze the authors' perspectives on colonialism and the struggle of African people against Western systemic oppression. By exploring the historical, social, and psychological factors of post-colonial African literary characters from *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, this paper will expose the damaging consequences of Western systemic oppression.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology:**

#### **2.1: Research Questions**

The research utilizes a qualitative textual methodology to address its research questions while incorporating articles, essays, textbooks, and book reviews. Given the focus on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the research aims to substantiate and clarify its questions through examples from the texts.

#### **2.2: Data Collection Method**

This study employs a qualitative research method characterized by an inductive and subjective approach. The qualitative method seeks to develop theories by exploring meaning based on collected data.

#### **2.3: Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are postcolonial theory and psychoanalytic theory. The research delves into the impact of colonization on African and African Americans from two different timelines and places, examining how it led to their suffering and affected relationships among the African communities. These aspects will be demonstrated through textual analysis.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Literature Review:**

This chapter will provide a review of some available literary works on postcolonial study of Western systemic oppression and the two selected novels - *Things Fall Apart* and *Beloved*.

#### **3.1: Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism refers to the academic and cultural discourses that critically examine the historical, social, political, and cultural legacies of colonialism. It emerged as a theoretical framework to analyze the effects of colonial rule on colonized societies, identities, and cultures. Additionally, it explores the ongoing power dynamics and relationships between former colonizers and colonized nations. In an article titled “What was Postcolonialism?”, they quoted Stuart Hall’s definition of Postcolonialism. He said “So, *postcolonial* is not the end of colonization. It is after a certain kind of colonialism, after a certain moment of high imperialism and colonial occupation - in the wake of it, in the shadow of it, infected by it - it is what it is because something else has happened before, but it is also something new”(Mishra et al. 377). The same article further explains that the term “Postcolonialism” is a newly coined term that evolved from pre-existing elements to encapsulate what appears to be a distinctive period in global history. It represents a diversity of experiences, insights, aspirations, and dreams emerging from a previously marginalized part of the world. Capitalizing on new circumstances, it seeks to explore alternative perspectives to the narratives of the colonial era. This endeavor establishes an entirely different standpoint from which to critically examine both the past and the future (378).

### **3.2: Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory is an intellectual framework that emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the legacies of colonialism. It encompasses a diverse range of academic disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, history, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Postcolonial theory seeks to analyze, deconstruct, and critique the impact of colonialism on societies, cultures, and individuals. Prominent figures associated with postcolonial theory include Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K, Franz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, and Toni Morrison among others. It is important to note that postcolonial theory is a

broad and evolving field. Hence, scholars within this framework may approach their studies from various perspectives and disciplines. The article titled “CHAPTER SEVEN: Conceptual Frameworks in Postcolonial Theory: Applications for Educational Critique” claims that “Postcolonial theory operates on the notion that imperialism and colonial domination have affected the whole world, not simply the colonized nations. The cloak of colonialism and imperialism literally covered half of the globe [...], but also had implications for the rest of the diasporic world” (Burney 173-174).

For instance, in the first fiction of this paper, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe explores the collision between indigenous African cultures and the forces of European colonialism. The novel portrays the complexities of cultural exchange, the erosion of traditional values, and the challenges faced by individuals and communities as they navigate the profound changes brought about by colonization. Applying postcolonial theory to this example involves examining how Achebe deconstructs colonial representations of Africa, challenges stereotypes, and explores the effects of colonialism on identity and power structures. The novel becomes a lens through which scholars can analyze the broader historical and cultural implications of colonial encounters.

The second fiction of this paper *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is another fiction that can be seen through the lens of postcolonial theory. By doing so, this paper can emphasize the historical context of slavery, its aftermath, and the oppressive structures that persist. The novel delves into the oppressive legacy of slavery, demonstrating how characters navigate the complexities of freedom and identity in a society still marked by the shadows of colonization.

### **3.3: Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic theory is a psychological framework that was developed by Sigmund Freud and later expanded upon by other theorists. It is a comprehensive theory that seeks to explain human

behavior, motivation, and mental processes. While the theory has evolved and has been criticized, it has had a significant impact on the field of psychology. The article titled “SIGMUND FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY” mentions that -

“According to Freud, the conscious mind is aware of the present perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings. [...]. Under the conscious mind, a preconscious mind carries the available memory. From this preconscious mind, a person can retrieve memories into the conscious mind. [...]. All the things, which are not easily available at the conscious level, such as our drives or instincts, memories, and emotions associated with trauma. [...]. Freud’s psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the importance of the unconscious mind and it governs the behavior to the greatest degree in persons (SIBI 76).

In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian concepts can be applied to understand the character’s motivations, conflicts, and the impact of cultural change. While the author did not explicitly use psychoanalysis in his writing, one can interpret the character’s behaviors and the narrative dynamics through a psychoanalytic lens. Again in *Beloved*, Morrison applies a narrative that invites psychoanalytic interpretations. By doing so, it explores the complexities of trauma, memory, and desire. The character’s psyches and the broader societal psyche are interconnected. This makes psychoanalysis a valuable view for understanding the psychological dimensions of the novel.

### **3.4: A Postcolonial Study of the Novels**

A postcolonial study of Western systemic oppression of Black individuals or communities involves an examination of the enduring effects of colonialism and imperialism on people of African descent across the world. This critical approach focuses on understanding how historical

legacies of colonial domination, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation continue to shape the lived experiences of Black individuals and communities in various ways.

A postcolonial analysis begins by acknowledging the historical context of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. This forcibly displaced millions of Africans to the Americas and other regions. These historical events laid the foundation for systemic oppression of Black communities. Colonialism and slavery often led to the disruption of African cultures and identities. The forced assimilation of African people into European cultural norms and systems has had lasting impacts on their sense of identity. European colonial powers established racial hierarchies that perpetuated the idea of white superiority and Black inferiority. These hierarchies continue to influence societal structures and perceptions. Moreover, it leads to systemic racism and discrimination. Colonialism and the slave trade were further driven by economic interests, and black communities were systematically exploited for their labor and resources. This legacy of economic exploitation can be seen in persistent economic disparities and poverty, among black individuals and communities. Postcolonial studies also examine instances of cultural appropriation. Western cultures have borrowed elements from black cultures (ex: afro hair, attires) without proper acknowledgment or understanding. As a result, they often end up commodifying and disrespecting them. Next comes the imposition of European languages and educational systems during colonialism which has had a profound impact on Black communities. Postcolonial scholars explore how language and education continue to shape access to opportunities and social mobility. In the article “African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism”, the author mentions how “the colonial experience” overemphasizes the use of the European English language over indigenous language in literary and cultural production. Doing so passively or aggressively erases all the other forms of expression in African culture such as

oral literature. Writing literature only in European English destroys the practice of literature written in African languages, oral literature, and many other forms of cultural forms.

Furthermore, it creates a great cultural dilemma on which form to choose for the people who lived under colonialism. The dilemma of choosing indigenous or foreign (Barber, 3).

This dilemma was also present in Chinua Achebe. However, as he mentioned at the conference of African English writers, he decolonized African literature by writing in Africanized English rather than European English. Following his footsteps, many writers from colonized countries began to decolonize their literature and share their own “colonial experience” (Achebe). The novel *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe’s pride work that successfully portrays Africanized English. It introduces the importance of oral literature, Igbo culture, and many interesting African proverbs mixed in Africanized English.

Black individuals and communities have a rich history of resistance to Western systemic oppression. The history includes movements for civil rights, decolonization, and anti-racist activism. A postcolonial study highlights these acts of resistance and agency through global literature. In the article “African-American Resistance to Colonization”, the author mentions how Africa’s resistance to colonization and any form of enslavement has been co-opted by white scholars who wished to bear the European conscience. Despite the concern being around the African history of resistance, these scholars distorted this history to favor the oppression and enslavement of African people (Forbes, 210). This sort of characterization can be seen in Rudyard Kipling's poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899). This poem urges the white population to conquer the non-white population and think of it as the white man’s burden to carry this responsibility of control and civilizing the colonized.

Postcolonial studies further acknowledge the complex intersections of identity, culture, and belonging in diasporic contexts. The African diaspora, resulting from slavery and migration, has created diverse Black identities and communities across the globe. There are also the intersections of race, gender, class, and other identities in shaping the experiences of Black people. For instance, when the English missionaries arrived at Igbo land, their practices and culture created a sort of identity crisis for the protagonist, Okonkwo. Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, Okonkwo's whole view of life, norms, and practices revolved around his village Umuofia. Anything that involved his village was acceptable and good to him. As if he was "glued to his tradition". However, any changes or practices outside his village created doubt and fear in him. Therefore, when the Europeans arrived at Igbo land to colonize them, it greatly affected Okonkwo's identity as a strong warrior in his village, their religious practices, culture, and freedom (Sengova, 337-338). The Diverse Creation of Black identity from slavery can be seen in Morrison's novel *Beloved*. I found an article that analyzes the issue very precisely.

The article titled "Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", explains how most characters from the novel were either born or pushed into slavery. They had to endure the enforced dehumanization of the ideology of slavery. We already learned much from the history of enslaved people that this inhuman treatment does not eliminate the potential for experiencing some degree of individuality. However, in the novel, the systemic denial and suppression of Black identity by the slave owners, lead to the internalization of this oppressive debate. Further consequences of slavery, result in an inability to develop strong self-esteem when the individual is no longer enslaved (e.g. Sethe and Baby Suggs). Therefore, even though the abolition of slavery marks the beginning of a "post" colonial era for African Americans, their status continues to be shaped by

the colonial ideologies of slavery. This ongoing struggle between enslaved and free creates an internal dilemma of one's self-identity (Elliott, 181). Hence, this intersectional lens helps to understand the multiple layers of systemic oppression.

Both novels were written based on real-life stories and expectations. Chinua Achebe wrote his novel *Things Fall Apart* to publish literature based on the perspective of blacks rather than white Europeans. He focused on the decolonization of African literature that white European writers like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* previously distorted. In Conrad's novel, he dehumanized Africans, misrepresented African culture, and glorified the European colonization of them. In one of Achebe's lectures entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", he claimed that *Heart of Darkness* depicts Africa as a contrasting realm, seen as "the other world," standing in opposition to Europe. Hence, consequently, they stand opposite to civilization. The novel portrays the African continent as a space where human intellect and sophistication which are highly regarded in Europe, are ultimately ridiculed by prevailing primal and savage behavior (Achebe, 15).

In addition to this lecture, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as a response to Conrad's mockery of the African continent and represented the true image of Africa. He portrayed that just because the culture and practices of Blacks are different than the whites, does not mean they are wrong or should be bashed by other cultures. He proposed harmony and respect for all cultures among each other. Contrary to Achebe, Toni Morrison wrote her novel *Beloved* based on the true story of a black slave woman named Margaret Garner. In 1856, Margaret escaped from the Kentucky plantation where she worked as a slave. She escaped with her husband Robert and their children to Ohio. However, soon after they reached Ohio to seek refuge, their owner and law officers caught up to them. With the fear of having her children experience the horror of slavery,

Margaret attempted to kill her four children. She succeeded in killing her youngest daughter who was barely two, and injured the other children. This story was published in many news articles by white people who described Margaret as a cruel and crazy mother. However, Morrison recaptured the level in her novel from the perspective of the black slave mother. She applied the story to her character named Sethe who was an equally loving mother. However, due to her being a black slave, she knew that her children would have to go through the same brutal fate as her. Hence to prevent that, she killed her youngest daughter “Beloved” to save her from that misery. Through this novel, Morrison tried to portray the silent horror and brutality black slave women had to endure. In the article titled “‘Margaret Garner’: A Cincinnati Story”, it is further explained how the situation for African-American enslaved women was far more difficult than the others (e.g. Margaret Garner and Sethe). It exposes how when a married slave woman gave birth to children, the father had no legal rights to the children, even if he was a free or white man. Similarly, the mother too, had no rights on her child as they “Belonged” to the white slave owner. The slave mothers had little time to take care of the children during infancy. Both the enslaved mother and her children were considered the property of her white owner. The owner had complete freedom to use them however they pleased, regardless of how cruel or immoral it might be. They could be sold, traded, disposed of, or even killed at the owner’s discretion, without any legal protection. Discovering these dark histories of enslaved women, Morrison wrote her novel *Beloved* to explore the complex and painful experiences of African-American slave women, shedding light on their strength and the lasting scars from their past (Wolff, 420).

### **3.5: Author’s Opinion on Western Systemic Oppression**

Both Achebe and Morrison expressed their opinion on Western systemic oppression through their narratives in the novels. The article titled “Challenging the Colonial Stereotypes or

Conforming to Them: Investigating Achebe's Intent in *Things Fall Apart*" discusses his opinion on this topic. In Achebe's groundbreaking novel *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative describes the British colonial power's takeover of Igbo society in Nigeria. They did it in the name of providing effective governance, stable administration, enlightening education, religious equity, and flourishing trade and commerce. Achebe further illustrates how these obnoxious noble intentions ultimately lead to disastrous consequences for the African psyche. This further resulted in divisions among the indigenous people, fostering hatred, doubt, and confusion among them. The novel also challenges the Western perspective that attempts to portray Africans as devoid of anything worthy of pride. Additionally, the novel authentically shows the rich and diverse customs and traditions of Igbo society through the experiences of Okonkwo. He is an Igbo individual who like his society, becomes a victim of the clash between cultures and the colonial intrusion. Achebe also celebrates Okonkwo's passionate opposition to British colonialism as he strives to uphold the innate impulse of the native people to resist oppression. Simultaneously, it raises significant questions about his obsession with "masculinity" and his "fear of failure and weakness," which ultimately contributes to intolerance and instability within the society. The novel further explores the hardship of exile, the yearning of the diaspora to connect with their roots, the psychological turmoil of witnessing one's society crumble, and the trauma of being misunderstood by one's clan and family (Islam and Shuchi, 10-11).

Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* expressed how the whites systematically oppressed the blacks by entitling themselves as the "definer" and referring to the blacks as the "defined". The article titled "Solidifying the White Domination through Racism and Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," further elaborates with examples of how the white slave owners systematically maintained the "master-slave" relation by applying the concept of "dominance-

submission” in the novel. White domination is applied through the forced enslavement of blacks. The white owner Mr. Garner of Sweet Home plantation would accuse his slaves of petty thievery and punish them inhumanely regularly for little to no doings (Thohiriyah, 90-91). This sort of treatment dehumanized the enslaved blacks and created a very complicated inferiority complex in their psyche. In the novel, Morrison shows this systemic oppression as a pervasive and enduring force that continues to shape the lives of her characters’ even after they escape the brutality of physical slavery. The character Sethe in particular, is haunted by the trauma of her past.

Moreover, the ghost of her murdered daughter, Beloved, serves as a powerful symbol of the lingering effects of the collective trauma and suffering of all African Americans, who were subjected to the inhumanity of slavery. Morrison does not limit the novel to just showing the physical violence and dehumanization of slavery. She also explores the psychological and emotional exhaustion of individuals and communities due to slavery. The character Sethe’s desperate act of infanticide is a big example of how the system of slavery devalues and dehumanizes the bonds between family members. The horror of slavery forced her youngest daughter Beloved to be murdered by her mother. The ghost chased away her sons and her only remaining daughter Denver had a complex relationship with her mother due to Sethe being chained to her dark past. This demonstrates how the dehumanizing effects of slavery extend beyond the physical realm to deeply affect the emotional and psychological well-being of those who endured it. The author again shows how systemic oppression is perpetuated through the denial of history and the erasure of the experiences of African Americans. The character Paul D. struggles with the feeling of rootlessness and a lack of a personal history. This is a direct result of the systemic destruction of the African-American family structure during slavery.

### 3.6: Author's other books that relate to the topic

Several other literary works by Toni Morrison and Chinua Achebe relate to the topic of this paper.

Toni Morrison was a renowned American author known for her powerful literary works that often addressed themes of Western systemic oppression. The majority of her works relate to African-American experiences. I will discuss some of her most notable works that concentrate on Western systemic oppression. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a novel by Morrison that explores the journey of Macon "Milkman" Dead III, as he searches for his roots and identity. This journey is symbolic of the struggle many African Americans face in a society that has historically denied them their cultural identity and heritage. The novel further illustrates through the characters how systemic racism affects every aspect of life, from economic opportunities to social interactions. Moreover, the dynamics within the Dead family reflect the generational trauma and inheritance of systemic oppression. Morrison explores how the older generation, represented by Macon Dead II, and the younger generation, represented by Milkman, grapple with the weight of their family's history and the impact of systemic racism on their lives. The novel also portrays the strength and resilience of the African-American community. Despite the hardships and injustices they face, characters like Macon Dead I, Pilate, and Guitar demonstrate a determination to survive and find meaning in their lives by searching through their family history (Price). This underscores the importance of community in the face of systemic oppression.

The next work is Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The novel explores how systemic oppression, especially racial prejudice, can lead to the internalization of self-hatred among African Americans. The character Pecola Breedlove's obsession with obtaining blue eyes as a symbol of beauty and worthiness exemplifies internalized racism. Her desire for blue eyes

reflects the broader societal message that whiteness is the standard of beauty (Darden).

Moreover, it highlights how systemic oppression can erode one's self-esteem and self-worth. The characters in the novel, including Picola, Claudia, and Frieda, are subjected to racial prejudice and discrimination which deprives them of their humanity. Pecola in particular, is reduced to an object of desire. They are devalued and objectified based on their race. Morrison does not only address racial oppression but also how it intersects with gender and class oppression. The Breedlove family's poverty and instability compound their struggles, showing how multiple forms of oppression intersect to create even greater hardships for marginalized individuals. All the while *The Bluest Eye* reveals the harsh realities of systemic oppression, it also portrays the impotence of community and empathy. The friendship between Claudia and Frieda, as well as their concern for Pecola, illustrates the potential for solidarity and support within oppressed communities. Hence with all concern, the novel critiques the cultural values and beauty standards composed by Western society. It challenges the notion that Eurocentric beauty is the ideal and exposes the harm caused by such narrow and discriminatory standards (Sami, 626).

*Home* (2012) is another fiction by Morrison that is set in the 1950s. This time is marked by racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. The novel portrays the racial injustices that African Americans faced during this era, including Jim Crow laws, racial violence, and limited opportunities for economic and social advancement. The characters in the novel, especially Frank Money, experience the systemic racism of this period, highlighting the pervasive nature of this oppression. Frank is a Korean War veteran who returns to the United States after serving abroad. The novel examines the challenges faced by African American veterans who fought for their country but returned to a racially segregated society that denied them the full benefits of their service. This highlights the hypocrisy of systemic oppression in a

nation that asks its citizens to defend its ideals while rejecting those same ideals to certain groups. Lastly, like most of her novels, Morrison explores the themes of family and community in *Home*. The characters in the novel find strength and support in their bonds with one another (Cohen). It also shows the determination of those who strive for liberation and equality in the face of adversity.

*Sula* is another fiction by Morrison that is a complex and multifaceted novel that can be analyzed as a response to Western systemic oppression in the context of African American history and culture. *Sula* is set in the early to mid-20th century. This was a period that was marked by intense racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. It takes place in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, where African Americans face various forms of oppression including economic inequality, limited educational opportunities, and social marginalization. The novel delves into the lives of two main characters, Sula and Nel. They represent different responses to systemic oppression. Sula chooses a path of non-conformity and independence, challenging societal norms and expectations. On the other hand, Nel conforms to traditional roles and expectations. Their friendship is tested and ultimately broken (Blackburn). This highlights the tensions and betrayals that can rise within marginalized communities when individuals make different choices in response to systemic oppression. Sula's rejection of societal norms is seen as a betrayal by Nel and the community. The character Sula embodies a defiance of Western expectations of proper femininity and morality for African-American women. Her unconventional behavior challenges the restrictive roles imposed by systemic oppression. This emphasizes the importance of individual identity and self-expression. Morrison uses symbolism and metaphor throughout the novel to convey the effects of systemic oppression. For instance,

the “bottom” where Sula and Nel grow up is a symbol of poverty and marginalization. The “birthmark” on Sula’s face is a metaphor for her uniqueness and defiance of societal norms.

Other than fiction, Toni Morrison also wrote non-fiction to express her views on different characteristics of Western systemic oppression. It is known as *The Origin of Others* (2017). In this literary work, she examines how Western literature and culture have historically constructed and perpetuated racial and ethnic stereotypes. She also portrayed the consequences of such portrayals on marginalized communities. Throughout this book, Morrison gives multiple examples of how African Americans are treated beyond inhumanely due to being “Black”. The story of Margaret Garner was one of them. She shared how a biography of the historical Margaret Garner was published ten years after her novel *Beloved* was published. The title of the biography was - “Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South” by Steven Weisenburger (Morrison, 81-82). The white writer introduced Margaret as a murderer who killed her children as an act of vengeance towards the unfaithful father. However, Morrison perceived it differently. She understood the agony and pain that women must have felt when she recognized her children would also have to live the brutal life of slavery. Which is why, she tried to free them of the same horrible fate she experienced by taking their life herself. Such motherly sacrifice was distorted and misrepresented by the white people who supported the slave system. Therefore, in response to all their criticism and mockery, Morrison advocated the action Margaret took and rewrote her noble story in her novel *Beloved*.

Morrison included many more real-life examples of black individuals experiencing lynching, harassment, police brutality, and false accusations under the supervision of eugenics in the twentieth-century United States of America. She gave the example of Isaac Woodard who

was a black veteran in 1946, U.S. (59). Despite serving the country with his life in his hands, he was treated inhumanely due to his race and was punished brutally under an “all White Jury”. The consequences of this continuous oppression of black individuals forced many communities to flee from their homes in search of a safer place. Morrison writes “they fled to ‘free’ land and established their own hierarchy of color, ranking the deepest black - ‘blue black’ - skin as a definitive mark of acceptability”(64). *The Origin of Others* therefore serves as a critical response to Western systemic oppression by analyzing how literature and narratives have contributed to the marginalization and dehumanization of certain groups like African Americans. Morrison calls for a reevaluation of how we perceive and present “the other” in Western society.

Similar to Morrison, Achebe also wrote novels other than *Things Fall Apart* that highlight the Western systemic oppression. His novel *Arrow of God* (1964) is a brave response to colonialism in Nigeria and it provides multiple examples of how colonialism impacted indigenous societies. The novel vividly shows the disruption of traditional Igbo culture by British colonialism. For instance, the clash between the Igbo spiritual system and Christianity was introduced by the British missionaries. The character Ezeulu, the chief of Ulu, initially resists the missionaries. However, some members of his community like Nwaka, converted to Christianity, highlighting the cultural divide caused by colonialism. The British colonial administrators wielded authority through force and manipulation. For instance, the British District Officer, Captain Winterbottom, exerts his power by coercing Ezeulu into serving the colonial administration while causing tension and resentment within the community. The novel also shows how colonialism eroded indigenous cultural practices and beliefs. One example is the disruption of the Igbo New Yam Festival, a crucial cultural event. The British colonial authorities prohibited the festival, leading to a loss of cultural identity and communal unity

among the Igbo people (Manji, 630-631). As *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the narrative from the perspective of the Igbo people. This challenges the colonial narrative that often portrayed Africans as inferior or primitive. By showcasing the Igbo perspective, the novel counters the dehumanizing narrative of colonialism.

## **Chapter 4**

### ***Analysis of Things Fall Apart***

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a postcolonial study that explores the impact of Western systemic oppression on Igbo society in pre-colonial Nigeria. The novel begins by showing the Igbo values predating the arrival of European colonial power in the village. The Igbo people had their own distinct culture, values, and dignity, and they coexisted with other cultures of the nine villages. They resisted the influence of Western government and Christianity to protect their tribal dignity. Achebe portrays the Igbo land as situated in the Eastern region of Nigeria during the period spanning from 1850 to 1900. This was just before and after the arrival of white men in Nigeria. The primary settings of the novel are Umuofia and Mbanta. These are the two main villages forming part of the 'nine villages' amalgamation. The narrative unfolds in three parts. The first and crucial part describes Umuofia before the arrival of the white missionaries. The second part narrates Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta which is his mother's village. He gets exiled due to his transgressions against the earth goddess. It also details the introduction of the white men to the nine villages their establishment of the Church, government, and trading systems, and their gradual exploitation of traditional tribal life. The third part delves into the struggle between change and tradition, impacting the villagers and leading to the demise or falling apart of the tribal system, as well as the death of Okonkwo.

The novel heavily depicts the destructive consequences of European colonialism. Moreover, it emphasizes cultural disruption, unequal power dynamics, the imposition of Western values, economic exploitation, dehumanization, resistance, and the enduring legacy of colonization. Through the view of the Igbo people, Achebe provides a critical examination of the complexities surrounding cultural clash, oppression, and the lasting effects of Western influence on indigenous societies.

#### **4.1: Power Dynamics**

The power dynamics in *Things Fall Apart* are multifaceted, encompassing traditional Igbo structures, individual achievements, spiritual influences, and the disruptive forces of colonialism. Achebe's exploration of these dynamics provides a well understanding of how power operates within the cultural and historical context of the novel. However, as the focus of this paper is to examine how European colonialism disrupted traditional societies, I will first analyze the power dynamics between the Europeans and the Igbo people in the context of the novel.

The Europeans' technological, economic, religious, and political dominance created a power imbalance that significantly impacted the social fabric of the Igbo community.

The European missionaries in the novel introduced firearms, such as guns and rifles. These weapons gave them a distinct advantage in battles. On the other hand, the Igbo people primarily use traditional weapons like spears and machetes. Hence, their ill-equipped to encounter the firepower of the Europeans. This technological disparity shifts the balance of power during confrontations. Aside from firepower, the Europeans are also advanced in military strategies as well as naval power than the Igbo people. For instance, during conflicts, they strategically deploy firearms to create fear and demoralize the Igbo warriors. The battle of Mbaino is one such

instance where the Europeans' superior tactics contributed to their dominance. When the first white missionary arrived at Umuofia, the natives were alerted by the sudden foreign appearance. The elders therefore consulted their Oracle to seek whether the foreign presence was a good sign or a bad one. The Oracle told them that the white man would break the Igbo clan and spread destruction among them. The bad omen immediately caused the Igbo people to kill the white man and tie his "iron horse" (bicycle) to one of their sacred trees (Achebe p.138). Unfortunately, right after the murder of the white man, the oracle again said to the elders that more white men were on their way to destroy and avenge their clan. The saying became true when two months later three groups of white missionaries, accompanied by British soldiers, arrived at the Abame market where the first white man was killed. Using firearms, the missionaries killed the town's adult population as a punishment for the earlier incident. The Abame incident recalls a tactic occasionally employed during the colonial subjugation of Igboland. This was only a single response to the killing of a single white man by indiscriminately targeting and killing natives in the implicated village. In addition to their firepower, their advanced naval technology allows them to control trade routes and access to the coast. This maritime dominance facilitates the influx of more European colonizers, and supplies, and reinforces their economic control over the region. They also utilize written messages, horses, and later, the telegraph, to coordinate and convey information efficiently. One of the greatest advancements of the European missionaries is the medical introduction. For instance, they introduce vaccines and treatments for diseases like smallpox. This not only improved the health of the European settlers in foreign lands but also contributed to the perception of the whites as possessing superior knowledge and capabilities. Such possession of advanced technology symbolizes Western dominance and progress in the eyes of the Igbo people. The missionaries' ability to bring about change and disruption using

technological power contributes to the superior power dynamics, not just in the military but also in terms of cultural and social influence. Another strategy the white settlers apply is employing local interpreters and African collaborators who facilitate communication and cooperation with the indigenous people. This tactic enhances their ability to gather intelligence, manipulate local power dynamics, and exploit existing divisions within Igbo society.

As the trade networks established by the Europeans enabled them to control economic resources, they gradually took over the broader trade system. This resulted in the Igbo people, who initially engaged in trade on relatively equal terms, becoming economically dependent on the Europeans. This economic influence strengthened the Europeans' control over the indigenous population. After the establishment of a European colonial administration and the imposition of European legal systems through firepower and economic power, everything resulted in a shift of political power. Traditional Igbo leaders who previously held authority, find their influence diminished as the white missionary officials assume control. The District Commissioner's establishment of a court reinforces European dominance in matters of justice and governance. The dominance did not stop there. They exploit existing divisions within Igbo society to further their interests. The use of local interpreters and collaborators, such as the African court messengers, enables the Europeans to manipulate internal power struggles and weaken the unity of the Igbo people. However, despite the overwhelming power of the white settlers, there are instances of resistance and cultural assertiveness. Characters like Okonkwo and other Igbo leaders resist European values while reflecting a determination to preserve their cultural identity and resist external domination.

#### **4.2: Language and Cultural Representations**

Achebe carefully examines the language and cultural representation that divide the Europeans and the Igbo people. This exploration underscores the clash between two distinct worldviews and contributes to the broader narrative of colonialism. One of the biggest challenges between the parties are language barrier. The Europeans, represented by characters like the District Commissioner, often communicate with the Igbo people through interpreters. This linguistic barrier symbolizes the fundamental gap in understanding between the power dynamic and the marginalization of the Igbo language and culture. Moreover, due to the language barrier, the missionaries misinterpret Igbo cultural practices while dismissing them as primitive or superstitious. For instance, the Igbo religious system and the use of masks during ceremonies are seen through the view of European ethnocentrism (judging one own culture against another). This led to a profound lack of understanding and respect for the Igbo way of life. Most of the white characters in the novel, often display an arrogant and paternalistic attitude towards the Igbo people. The condescension is evident in the Europeans' dismissal of Igbo customs and traditions as backward. This attitude reinforces the power imbalance and contributes to the cultural degradation experienced by the indigenous community. The missionaries dismissed many other cultural practices of the Igbo people. Igbo society traditionally accepted polygamous marriages, reflecting their cultural norms. However, the Europeans, viewing this as morally inferior, sought to impose monogamous relationships. This clash is reflected in the novel when Okonkwo's polygamous family is seen through a Eurocentric view. Ceremonial sacrifices (e.g. sacrificing twin children) are yet another cultural and spiritual significance for the Igbo people. But the Europeans, seeing these rituals as barbaric, condemned them. Another practice the whites condemned is the practice of relying on oracles and divination. The Igbo people relied on oracles and divination rituals for guidance. Such practices were dismissed by the missionaries as mere

superstition. The Europeans, lacking understanding or appreciation of the depth of Igbo traditions, sought to impose their cultural values. This led to a profound disruption in the social norms of the Igbo society. One should understand that when the white settlers demolish the cultural practices and traditions of the Igbo people, they demolish their indigenous culture and history altogether.

The introduction of Christianity brings about a clash of religious beliefs and practices in the novel. The clash is a central theme in the novel and leads to profound social and cultural consequences. The European missionaries, representing Christianity, arrived in Igbo land to convert the indigenous people to their faith. They bring a new religious doctrine that challenges the polytheistic beliefs of the Igbo, emphasizing monotheism and the worship of a single God. The Christian missionaries denounce the traditional Igbo gods as false and pagan. They assert the superiority of their own religious beliefs, claiming that there is only one true God. This denunciation challenges the foundational spiritual principles of the Igbo society. They actively engage in converting Igbo individuals to Christianity. They always target the vulnerable, including children and young adults, and gradually gain followers. This conversion effort leads to divisions within families and communities as some members embrace the new faith. When Okonkwo eagerly asks Obierika whether the white man understands the value of their customs, Obierika says -

“The white man is very clever. He came quiet and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won over 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”(p.176).

The clash is particularly evident in conflicts within families, such as Okonkwo's disapproval of his son Nwoyoe's conversion to Christianity. Okonkwo sees the abandonment of ancestral practices as a betrayal of tradition and a threat to the integrity of the Igbo way of life. Some Igbo leaders and individuals resist the encouragement of Christianity. They view it as a threat to their cultural identity and a challenge to their traditional order. This resistance is met with varying degrees of hostility from the Europeans, leading to tensions and conflicts.

After more and more European missionaries settled in Nigeria, they requested land from the Mbanta ruler to establish their church. The elders after discussing amongst themselves, decided to allow the white settlers to establish themselves in a part of the "Evil Forest". "Every clan and village had its 'evil forest'. In it were buried all those who died of evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. [...]. An 'evil forest' was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and power of darkness" (130). The elders thought that anyone with their right senses would refuse. However, the missionaries happily accept the land. Because they understand that the native Igbo peoples will start to doubt their religion once they see the missionaries can handle the evil forest. The elders declare that the missionaries will not last four days in the forest and will be consumed by the Darkness. However, to their surprise, the missionaries overthrew their sacred beliefs and established a religious hegemony over the clan. As a result, they gained more power and control over the native people whereas the Igbo religion was made look as inferior. After the establishment of multiple churches in different villages, the missionaries undertook many native people who wished to convert to Christianity. They first took in the ones who were outcasted or treated badly in the Igbo society. Gradually more and more people converted and the clans started to become less and less united. This internal conflict gives the missionaries opportunities to gain more power over the Igbo society.

The establishment of the European educational system, further emphasizes cultural differences. The curriculum is Euro-centric, promoting Western values and perspectives. The education system becomes a tool for cultural assimilation, eroding the traditional knowledge system of the Igbo people. Moreover, as the language of instruction in the European education system is English, it becomes a significant barrier for the Igbo whose primitive language is not English. Furthermore, the curriculum neglects Igbo history, traditions, and cultural practices. As a result, Igbo students are alienated from their cultural heritage. The educational system fosters a cultural disconnection, leading to a generation that is torn between traditional values and the imposed Western ideals. Since the European education system is different from Igbo education, it often clashes with the traditional wisdom and knowledge of the Igbo. Characters like Okonkwo resist the new education, viewing it as a threat to the values passed down through generations. One of the biggest changes is brought about by the missionaries in this education system. They are not only educators but also agents of cultural change. The education they provide serves as a tool for conversion to Christianity. This contributes to the erosion of traditional Igbo beliefs. The white settlers made sure that education became a marker of social status and power. Hence, those who receive a Western education, gain access to positions of authority within the colonial administration. This creates a power imbalance within the Igbo society while leading to conflicts over authority and influence. Again, the language used by Europeans, particularly in official documents and proclamations, reflects imperialistic rhetoric. Terms like “pacification,” “civilizing mission,” and “manifest destiny” are used to justify the colonization process. This language reinforces the notion of European superiority and the perceived need to bring “civilization” to the so-called “primitive” Igbo society.

The imposition of European legal and administrative systems erodes the Igbo people's autonomy. They replace indigenous forms of governance with their structures, diminishing the influence of traditional leaders and institutions. This loss of cultural autonomy is a central theme in the novel. Thereafter, the clash in language, beliefs, and values contributes to the power imbalances and cultural disruptions experienced by the Igbo community in the face of European colonial influence. The colonial legacy leaves the Igbo people and their future generation to be completely torn from their ancestral heritage, only to feel alienated, lost, and distorted.

### **4.3: Fear and Anxiety**

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe provides insight into the cultural clash between European colonizers and the Igbo people in Nigeria during the late 19th century. Fear and anxiety play crucial roles in the narrative while shaping the interactions between these two groups. The European missionaries are fearful of certain aspects of the foreign land. Europeans, represented by characters like Mr. Brown and later Reverend Smith, exhibit fear and anxiety rooted in ignorance about the Igbo culture. They view the Igbo as "savages" and fail to understand their complex social structures, traditions, and spirituality. Once the arrival of Christianity introduced a new set of beliefs, it raised fear among the Igbo clan who saw their traditional practices threatened. The Europeans, in turn, fear the influence of indigenous beliefs in their mission and attempt to suppress or replace them. After colonial powers established their presence, the missionaries feared resistance and attempted to assert dominance. Using psychoanalysis, one can explore the unconscious desires that drive both the colonizers and the colonized. The missionaries may represent the id, driven by the desire for power and expansion, while the Igbo people grapple with the changes as a clash between the id (unconscious desires) and the superego

(cultural norms and values). For instance, Characters like Mr. Brown, the missionary, may be analyzed in terms of their unconscious desires to impose their cultural and religious values on the Igbo people. Meanwhile, the Igbo people's resistance to these changes may stem from a collective superego, attempting to preserve their cultural identity.

The imposition of colonial rule and the suppression of the Igbo way of life create anxiety among the native population. Other than religious overpower, the introduction of new political and economic structures challenges their existing social order, leading to anxiety and resistance. As a result, the Igbo community fears the loss of their cultural identity as their traditions and customs are replaced by European ideologies. The demolition of their native language, religious practices, and social systems creates a sense of anxiety and disorientation. When they try to resist the colonial changes, they face physical threats and violence from the missionaries. The destruction of the Igbo village of Abame by the British, for example, illustrates the brutal consequences of cultural clashes. Such ways of subjugation build fear and trauma for ages among the indigenous population. The novel thus, explores the complexities of human emotions in a psychoanalytic way and the consequences of historical and cultural encounters are examined overall.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Analysis of *Beloved***

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison, also serves as a postcolonial psychoanalytic study that delves into the enduring impact of Western systemic oppression. It particularly focuses on the trauma of slavery on African American individuals and communities. The novel explores the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of slavery. Through the character's struggles with trauma, identity, and the haunting legacy of historical oppression, the novel delves into the intersection of

personal and cultural psychology. Set against the backdrop of post-Civil War America, *Beloved* examines the complexities of selfhood, the repression of painful memories, and the profound influence of the past on the present.

Moreover, it offers a powerful narrative that intertwines the psychological and historical dimensions of the African American experience. The novel also highlights themes such as the dehumanizing effects of systemic oppression, the struggle for identity and agency, and the haunting legacy of historical trauma. Through a postcolonial view, *Beloved* critically examines the complex interplay between the oppressor and the oppressed. The novel sheds light on the enduring consequences of Western systemic oppression on African American lives.

### **5.1: Power Dynamics**

In *Beloved*, Morrison critically examines the power dynamics between Western oppressors, represented by the institution of slavery, and the oppressed African American characters who have endured the brutality of enslavement. The novel portrays the psychological, social, and historical aspects of power while shedding light on the enduring consequences of slavery. The institution of slavery is depicted as a deeply entrenched power structure that dehumanizes and objectifies individuals. Slaves are treated as property, subjected to physical and psychological abuse, and denied basic human rights. The slave masters wield power through the dehumanization of the oppressed. The use of violence by the masters serves as a means of control. The threat and enactment of physical harm maintain a pervasive atmosphere of fear and submission among the enslaved population. The impact of this violence reverberates throughout the novel, affecting characters like Sethe and Paul D. The treatment of Sethe and the other slaves at Sweet Home plantation, exemplifies dehumanization. Sethe's experience of having her milk stolen by the Schoolteacher for his nephews' showcases how slaves are reduced to mere

commodities, their bodies exploited for labor and sustenance. The slave masters used metal mouthpieces and other oppressive objects to break the slaves.

Moreover, the masters would brand the slaves with the mark of a chokecherry tree. This physical marking is not only a form of identification for the oppressors but also a degrading act that reduces individuals to mere property. Sethe's memory of this branding illustrates the dehumanizing impact of slavery.

After the good former slave master, Mr. Garner passes away, the plantation is overtaken by the Schoolteacher. He becomes the brutalest of them all. He seeks out any chances of violating the slaves of Sweet Home. For instance, he accused Sixo, one of the slave men, of stealing some shoat which he never committed. However, when Sixo tried to defend his innocence, "the Schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined" (Morrison 190). The physical brutality serves as a tool to subjugate and terrify, reinforcing the power dynamic between the Western oppressor and the enslaved. The physical marks, demeaning language, and treatment as commodities illustrate the profound impact of these degrading practices on the characters' sense of self and identity. However, despite the overwhelming power of the oppressors, individual acts of resistance and defense are evident in characters, especially in Sethe. Her decision to kill her child, rather than subject her to a life of slavery, is an extreme act of agency in the face of oppressive circumstances. She chooses death as an act of agency and defiance. This act, though extreme, is a testament to the lengths to which the oppressed will go to resist and reclaim control over their lives. The novel also explores communal resistance within the African American community. Despite the constraints of slavery, characters like Baby Suggs and Sethe find ways to maintain a sense of self and community, demonstrating the resilience of the oppressed against systemic power. "[B]ecause

slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidney, womb, and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart - which she put to work at once” (87). After escaping from slavery, Baby Suggs moved to Ohio and lived as a preacher. She lost everything to slavery but only her heart remained to work for making a living. Despite slavery breaking her physical body and soul, her heart remained faithful and strong. The struggle to define oneself beyond the imposed identity of a slave also becomes a central theme in the novel. Characters like Paul D grapple with the loss of agency and the challenges of forming a coherent identity after years of dehumanization. He struggles with his sense of self exemplifies the impact of the power dynamics on individual identity. Since the oppressor's power leaves a lasting scar on the physical and psyche of the oppressed. The psychological power of the oppressors is evident in the lasting trauma and memories experienced by the characters. The novel suggests that the psychological wounds inflicted during slavery continue to shape the identities and relationships of the oppressed long after emancipation. Morrison shows how the former enslaved characters like Sethe have difficulties overcoming the dark memories of their slave days.

The novel further underscores the lasting effects of slavery through the portrayal of systemic racism in post-Civil War America. The legacy of oppression persists as African Americans face discrimination, segregation, and economic disparities. Systemic racism involves ingrained structures and practices that result in racial disparities and create inequalities. This can manifest in various aspects of the society, including education, employment, housing, and criminal justice. In *Beloved*, the character Sethe encounters systemic racism in the form of discriminatory treatment when seeking employment. The narrative of the novel suggests that societal prejudices persist even after emancipation, affecting the opportunities available to African Americans. The characters who were formally enslaved, are still constrained by systemic racism that limits their

economic and societal advancement. Morrison skillfully weaves the theme of systemic racism in the novel revealing the enduring impact of institutionalized discrimination on the lives of African Americans in the post-slavery era. The novel again shows how systemic racism can persist even after legal and political changes, emphasizing the need for societal transformation and a reckoning with the historical legacy of racial injustice.

One of the most important aspects that represent the horror of Western systemic oppression is the character of Beloved who is a manifestation of Sethe's deceased daughter. She represents the haunting legacy of the past. Beloved's presence disrupts the lives of the characters, symbolizing the unresolved trauma and memories of slavery that continue to exert influence, illustrating how the power dynamics of the past persist in the present. Through these examples, *Beloved* vividly portrays the power dynamics between Western oppressors and the oppressed, upholding the dehumanization, violence, resistance, and the lasting impact of slavery on individual and collective identities. The novel serves as a powerful exploration of the complexities and enduring consequences of historical oppression.

## **5.2: Language and Cultural Representations**

In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the dynamics of language and cultural representation between the Western oppressors (institution of slavery) and the oppressed (African American slaves) are central to the exploration of power, identity, and resistance. The novel delves into how language is used as a tool for control and how cultural representation becomes a means of both oppression and resistance. During the era of enslavement, language has always been a powerful tool of control for the slave masters. The use of dehumanizing language by the Western oppressors, such as referring to slaves as "it" instead of using personal names or proper pronouns, is a stark illustration of linguistic control. This practice not only objectifies the enslaved individuals but

also reinforces the power dynamics that deny agency and personhood. The dehumanizing through language also serves as a means of justifying and perpetuating the oppression. It is well known that slave masters would rename their slaves after having purchased them from slave markets. By depriving the slaves of their real name or any name (referring to as “it”) and individuality, the masters reinforce the notion that they are property rather than autonomous human beings. This linguistic control becomes a potent tool in maintaining the hierarchical structure of slavery. However, despite living through the dehumanizing times of slavery, after emancipation, many former slaves like Sethe, portrayed resistance through language. Her act of naming her children despite the oppressive circumstances, represents a form of linguistic resistance. By giving her children names, she reclaims a sense of agency and identity for them. Naming becomes an assertion of humanity and a refusal to accept the dehumanizing language imposed by the white masters.

The use of colonial language (English) in the novel again highlights the cultural and linguistic diversity within the community of the oppressed. The clash between these linguistic forms emphasizes the struggle for cultural autonomy and the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to the language imposed by the oppressors. Additionally, through the language of the oppressor, the novel also explores the impact of trauma on language. The characters often resort to silences and unspeakable moments to cope with the atrocities of slavery. Trauma disrupts the conventional use of language, and characters like Sethe grapple with the limitations of expressing the depth of their experiences. In the novel, whenever Denver becomes curious about her mother’s past, Sethe shares little bits of her memories from her enslaved days. She could only remember or wanted to remember small bits of those dark days and tell them to little Denver. Because the trauma of enslavement had crippled Sethe’s soul to

gather enough courage and tell the whole journey of living as a slave. Whenever Sethe tells something about her past “Denver knew that her mother was through with it - for now anyway. The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame-signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go” (37). The unspeakable nature of trauma highlights the inadequacy of language in capturing the horrors of slavery. Morrison underscores how certain experiences defy linguistic expression. It emphasizes the profound psychological toll of systemic oppression on the ability to articulate pain and suffering.

Besides language, the novel also explores how the Western oppressors manipulate the cultural representation of the enslaved. African American characters are portrayed as exotic, primitive, and Otherized, reinforcing racial stereotypes. This manipulation of cultural representation becomes a tool for justifying and perpetuating the subjugation of the oppressed. The distortion of cultural representation serves to devalue the identity of the oppressed. By perpetuating stereotypes and portraying the enslaved as less civilized or inferior, the oppressors attempt to legitimize their oppressive actions.

“Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spend their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (leavable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks

planted in them. And it grew. [...]. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own”(Morrison p.198-199).

This manipulation of cultural representation becomes a psychological weapon in maintaining control.

The phrase “The Africans had lost nothing of their past except their right to call it past” reflects the loss of cultural agency experiences by the enslaved. The slave masters deny them not only their physical freedom but also the right to define and narrate their cultural history. Such denial of the right to define their past is a form of cultural erasure. It illustrates how the masters seek to control not only the present and future but also the narrative of the past. This loss of cultural agency reinforces the broader theme of how systemic oppression extends beyond physical constraints to shape the very narratives of identity and history. Toni Morrison intricately weaves language and cultural representation into the fabric of the narrative, revealing the complexities of power, resistance, and the profound impact of oppression on identity. The novel emphasizes how language, both as a tool of control and a means of resistance, plays a key role in shaping the lived experiences of the characters.

### **5.3: Fear and Anxiety**

The novel *Beloved* delves deep into the psychological and emotional impacts of slavery on both the oppressors and the oppressed in the Western context. Fear and anxiety are pervasive themes that runs through the narrative, shaping the lives of the characters in profound ways.

The characters who were once enslaved, especially Sethe and Paul D, carry the weight of their traumatic past. The fear of being recaptured, the anxiety of facing the memories of abuse, and the haunting presence of Beloved symbolize the enduring trauma of slavery. Former slaves especially face the fear of loss of selfhood. The experience of being treated as a property has left

an indelible mark on their identities. Hence, the anxiety of not having control over one's own life and body is a recurring theme in the novel. Another important theme Morrison upheld is the fear of loss in motherhood. Sethe's love for her children is fraught with the fear of losing them to slavery. After eloping from the Sweet Home plantation while pregnant and carrying her children, she took shelter in Ohio. However, the Schoolteacher who became the new slave owner haunted her down with the police chief. He claimed that his property committed an atrocity and he also claimed ownership of Sethe's newborn child Beloved. As Sethe knew the horror of being enslaved, she denied her child to go through the same hellish experience. Therefore, right before the Schoolteacher barged into her abode, she slit her two-year-old daughter's throat and tried to do the same for the other children as well. But before doing so, the police arrived and controlled the situation. Her madness scared the present spectators enough to pardon her from being re-enslaved. Hence, the traumatic experience of killing her child to prevent her from being enslaved showcases the extreme lengths to which the oppressed go to protect their loved ones.

The novel also explores the psychological toll on the oppressors. Characters like Schoolteacher and Mr. Garner are haunted by the guilt of participating in a system that dehumanizes and oppresses others. Their fear and anxiety stem from a subconscious acknowledgment of their moral culpability. Another fear the slave masters always carried was to live in constant fear of slave rebellion. Sethe's act of killing her child, while an extreme response to the threat of slavery, reflects the anxiety of the slave-owning class regarding potential uprisings. But despite all the possible fears, the slave masters engage in a form of denial to shield themselves from the harsh realities of their actions. Their fear lies in confronting the brutality of their deeds and acknowledging the humanity of those they oppress. In the novel, Morrison portrays that -

“[...] anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her*, but not her best thing” [...] (251).

One thing that is common between the master and the slave is that both the oppressed and the oppressors are bound by the legacy of slavery. The fear and anxiety are deeply interconnected, with the past actions of the oppressors haunting them and the oppressed grappling with the enduring consequences of their oppression.

Lastly, the presence of Beloved, the ghost of Sethe’s deceased daughter, serves as a manifestation of the unresolved trauma and inescapable impact of slavery on both sides. The supernatural elements in the novel contribute to the atmosphere of fear and unease. The novel thus, invites us to reflect on the complex interplay of power, guilt, and the lasting impact of historical Western oppression.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

A postcolonial study of Western systemic oppression in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison reveals the pervasive impact of colonialism on both African and African American societies. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe explores the destructive consequences of British colonization on traditional Igbo culture. He portrays the disintegration of indigenous institutions and the resulting cultural disarray. Similarly, Morrison’s *Beloved* delves into the psychological and emotional toll of slavery on both the oppressors and the oppressed in the

Western context. Both novels depict the complex dynamics of power, the loss of cultural autonomy, and the enduring trauma inflicted by Western systemic oppression on colonized or enslaved communities. Through their narratives, Achebe and Morrison contribute to a postcolonial discourse that critically examines the long-lasting repercussions of Western imperialism on diverse cultures and communities.

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