

The Resistance to Reality – Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: Both Chinua Achebe and Virginia Woolf are prominent writers for their revolt and subversion against the hegemony and authority. This article aims to reflect and compare how Achebe and Woolf resist to realistic society respectively by a strategy of “writing back” and stream of consciousness in *Things Fall Apart* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. The two novels reassert the identity and agency of marginalized groups, such as women and the colonized, within traditional structures.

Keywords: *Things Fall Apart*; *Mrs. Dalloway*; The Other

1. Introduction

As Chinua Achebe in his essay “The Truth of Fiction” suggests that “Art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him” (139).^[1] In other words, man as the existence in the real world is compelled to face and follow the rules, however, he can build another world with different orders through art, or more specifically fiction. Achebe points out the transcendence and transgression of art, which has the power of challenging, changing and even subverting reality. And one of the productive and non-violent ways for resistance is writing. For the literature in the twentieth century when writers tried to establish new orders by disrupting the patriarchy and hegemony, there are two representatives for resisting the authority, one is Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) which revolts against the male-dominant society by means of a new narrative – stream of consciousness, the other one is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which rewrites and represents the Western imagination and description of Africa and African cultures with the strategy of “writing back”. Both of the novels reclaim the identity and subjectivity of the Other in old orders such as women and the colonized.

2. Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, in a colonial discourse, Africa is depicted as the Otherness from the perspective of European, and one of the examples is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), as Edward W. Said says, “much of Conrad’s narrative is preoccupied with jungle, desperate natives, the great river, Africa’s dark life” (165),^[2] which stereotypes the characterizations of Africa and is unfair and lack justice to the native Africans and the readers. Even Achebe once in his essay “An Image of Africa” criticized Joseph Conrad as “a bloody racist” (9).^[3] In order to deconstruct the colonial discourse which portrays Africa as a dire, primitive and wild society. Achebe, as a Nigerian native writer, restores and shows a complex African society where there are multiple clans with their unique cultures and practices in a counter-discourse.

3. Deconstructing Colonial Discourse in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, on one hand, he manifests an organized Umuofian community with the diverse aspects of humanity in Igboland, Africa. They have their most divine deity – Ani, the earth goddess, who “was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct” (Achebe 27), and “she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth” (27).^[4] The majesty of nature and their ancestors maintain the disciplines for Umuofia, which rebuts the inaccurate image of a disordered Africa society. The belief for the earth goddess also restrains Umuofians’ behaviour. For example, Okonkwo unintentionally kills the eldest man Ezeudu’s son at his funeral, which is considered to be offensive and disrespectful to Ani so that he and his family are on exile back. Although they do not have a complete legal system like modern society, the absolute authority protects various clans from conflicts in favour of the unity of the whole Ibo society. It also avoids dictatorship of humans to some extent, when Okonkwo, the clan leader, cannot be exempted from exile.

The diversity of the characterization for Umuofians, especially the protagonist Okonkwo, is another way for resistance to the simplification of African people in a colonial discourse. He is valiant and full of masculinity. Even though his father leaves nothing for him, he stands on his own feet, becoming an excellent wrestler and the respected clan leader. Meanwhile, his persistent defense of the Umuofian belief reveals

his ignorance and eventually results in his tragedy. Even though he loves Ikemefuna and admires his quality of manliness, he ignores Ezeudu's persuasion and participates in killing him because he is afraid that other villagers would consider him to be emotional and weak, which for Okonkwo, is feminine and weak. However, after Ikemefuna's death, he cannot fall asleep nor feels like eating because of his grief for Ikemefuna. The complexity of Okonkwo represents the group of people who have intense faith in the whole orders of Umuofia. Although the reverence for the earth goddess brings harmony to Umuofia, it is also oppression for humanity, which to some extent compels people to follow the rules made by deity without standards of morality such as Okonkwo assist in killing his adopted son. As how Shehla Burney defines the resistance against the colonial discourse, "Resistance is not practiced only through works of literature but is also evident in the pull away from separatist nationalism toward an integrative view of human community" (107).^[5] Achebe's practice in the characteristics of Okonkwo and the manifestation of the dark side of Umuofia are another way of resistance. Rather than being a nationalist who speaks highly of the heroic and masculine spirits of Okonkwo, he gives a comprehensive view of the African traditional cultures and Africans. It indicates that resistance is not merely aware of the misinterpretation from the West, but also is the introspection on a nation's culture and its influence on the people. Likewise, Burney points out that "[t]he key point is to recognize that imperialized people were not only 'prisoners in their own land', but were also conscious of being imprisoned by structures of race and class, and also gender" (108). In other words, if the colonized people want to resist, it is not enough to realize the fact that they are being colonized or take themselves as victims of colonialism; it is very necessary for them to reflect on the societal system on their own. Because only when the colonized people find out the reasons for being colonized will they know how to fight back. That is why Achebe depicts both sides of Africa to awake the colonized African people as well as regaining the subjectivity of Africans.

On the other hand, the European invasion of the clans is narrated from a relatively neutral point of view by Achebe even though he could have spent the whole book in denouncing the colonizers' criminal acts of aggression in a raging tone. The colonization starts with the proselytism of Christianity. And this is how Achebe writes about the communication between the first missionary Mr. Brown and the local: "Whenever Mr Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learnt more about their different beliefs" (130). The narration shows that Achebe does not contend for either Mr. Brown or Akunna – one stands for the European civilization, the other one represents the original African civilization. For Achebe, it seems that he is more like an outsider watching the gradual invasion.

Moreover, there is not much narration about the immediate confrontation between African people and the colonizers but Achebe writes about the fear of Umuofians after they hear about six male Umuofians are caught by the European: "Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run" (143). The unknown and powerlessness occupy the Umuofians, and with the death of the most passionate person – the suicide of Okonkwo, Umuofian society finally falls apart.

Writing back to the African cultures and people, Achebe disrupts the assumptions of Africa led by the Europeans and challenges the colonial discourse. More importantly, as the previous colonized, Achebe is conscious of the reasons for becoming the colony as he cites W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" in the inscription of *Things Fall Apart*: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer", where "the falcon" alludes to the group of Umuofian people who lose their belief while "the falconer" symbolizes the other group of people who are faithful to Umuofian society. Regardless of Europeans' invasion, the loss of conviction leads to the collapse of Umuofia. In this sense, Achebe creates a new order for the colonized writer to "write back" to the colony.

4. Rewriting Patriarchal Norms in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Another novel, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, is also the practice for creating a new order, but different from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it is to revolt against the patriarchy. In her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf claims that "[I]t is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (104).^[6] What Woolf tries to indicate here is that writers should cast their sex aside and not to label any side of sex when they are writing, which is considered to be androgyny by Elaine Showalter in "Virginia Woolf and the flight into androgyny" of her *A Literature of Their Own* (1977).^[7] In regard to Woolf's opinions on writing, she puts it into practice in *Mrs. Dalloway* by creating three independent women characters to overturn women portrayed as an object.

The main storyline revolves around Mrs. Dalloway's one-day preparation for her party at night with her flashbacks of her past. Clarissa, namely Mrs. Dalloway as the protagonist, her relations with Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway reclaim a woman's subjectivity in choosing her partner, which resists the old rule that women did not have free choice in love and marriage. Peter once had a romantic relationship with Clarissa when she was young. However, in her reminiscence, she seems to be troubled by Peter's possessive personality: "...with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable..." (Woolf 8).^[8] In contrast to living a life which is occupied and controlled by a man, Clarissa has her own ideal marital concept – "[f]or in marriage a little license, a little independence, a little independence

there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house” (Woolf 8). Rather than questing for some impractical dreams and having an unstable life with Peter, Clarissa chooses Richard to fulfill her ideal state of marriage where she possesses freedom, peace and spiritual independence on her own. In this sense, Woolf breaks the inequality in marriage choice, claiming women’s independent position in marriage instead of being her husband’s possession.

Showalter further defines Woolf’s idea of androgyny as “full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements” (263). This concept undercuts the binary oppositions between female and male such as light/darkness, night/day, sun/moon. Every pair of words is taken as opposed to one another and the latter one is superior to the other because, from the patriarchal perspective, women represent the weaker and passive side while men represent the dominant and positive side. Woolf’s portrayal of another female character Sally Seton represents the concept of androgyny. The first description of Sally is in Clarissa’s flashback, “[i]t was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn’t got it herself, she always envied—a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in English-women” (Woolf 36). It emphasizes that Sally is unlike a common English woman because she dares to say and do anything. She is flamboyant and possesses the qualities of boys, which are both revealed from her behaviour and her political ideology. For example, Sally ran without clothes when she forgot her sponge for the bath. Women were supposed to keep private of their bodies, however, Sally ignored and broke off the order. She also desires to perform herself like riding her bike around the platform and smoking a cigar. Those kinds of behaviour were bold and inappropriate for women. In this sense, Woolf endows Sally with traits that were supposed to be on men, which reinforces the feminist idea that women should not be considered to have contrary traits to men and any gender should not be assigned with the fixed qualities.

Not only Sally’s boldness, but also her plentiful interests and her foresight of the society and politics show her androgyny, which also influences her friend Clarissa in their girlhood. Sally has a unique taste for flowers, picking hollyhocks, dahlias and making them float on the water of a bowl. Affected by Sally, Clarissa reads books by Plato, Morris and Shelly. It is evident that to some extent, Sally plays the role of the persona of Clarissa – her ideal woman image, as all the descriptions of Sally from Clarissa’s memories are intriguing with her personal love for Sally. With Clarissa, Sally regards marriage as a catastrophe. She cares about women’s rights with the awakening of feminist consciousness, suggesting marriage, for women, is a kind of restraint under the power of men. In a discussion with Clarissa, they propose that they can “reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out” (Woolf 36). All of the topics that they discussed reflect that Sally, as a woman at that time, had an intense feminist sense to speak in the same way as men did, concerned about politics and social systems. Sally, who takes on traits from men, overturns the traditional women figures and effectively eliminates the biased opinions on women by her androgyny personality.

Another example of the independent woman is Mrs. Dalloway’s daughter, Elizabeth Dalloway, who symbolizes the new generation of women and the future of feminists. Elizabeth refuses to be attached with the feminine labels, she prefers “being alone in the country with her father and the dogs” rather than going to parties in London. She dislikes it when people compare her to “poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies”, which “makes her life a burden to her” (Woolf 147). The quality of androgyny is more obvious in Elizabeth, disrupting the fixed characteristics of women such as being feminine, submissive and effeminate. She also hopes to be a doctor, a farmer, or maybe go into Parliament like her father, which represents equality in the profession for men and women. Even though at that time women were more possible to be in domestic rather than having a job and it was less possible to have a position in the political field as Elizabeth says she may work for Parliament. Elizabeth’s teacher Miss Kilman says to her “every profession is open to the women of your generation” (149). The multiple choices for professions reveal that women should not be restrained in domestics and should have free choice for any field, which broke the old order and strived for more women’s rights at that time.

Clarissa, Sally and Elizabeth represent the awakening awareness, expectation and future prospects for feminism. By creating female characters who have masculine traits and independent female thoughts, Woolf uses the concept of androgyny to revolt against the patriarchal society. The subjectivity of women is regained and reclaimed through rewriting the female images by Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*. It also reverses the relations between men and women under the power of patriarchy. The woman is no longer charged and restrained by the power while man is no longer the dominant party. In the whole novel, women are in a more equal and objective position rather than being depicted as the Other.

5. Conclusion: The Power of Writing in Reaffirming the Other

Both Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* are attempting to disjuncture the old orders that are stemmed from the hegemony either of colonialism or of phallogocentrism, challenging the power to seek for and set up an equal society by reaffirming the identity of the Other – the colonized and females. It is the process of rewriting, for postcolonial writers, they are overturning the Western image of Africa as a primitive, derogatory and savage area by showing an authentic Africa and African people in their own terms; for feminist writers, they are regaining the subject of women who once were always taken as the object in the literary canon, and undermining the binary opposi-

tions between men and women. In this sense, writing can be considered as the most powerful way to resist any kind of power in the way of rewriting the canon and reconstructing the unequal orders.

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