

# The Influence of Colonialism in African Literature

Neelam Tandon

Associate Professor English  
Lalta Singh Govt Girls P.G.College Adalhaat Mirzapur

---

## Abstract

*African literature has been instrumental in shedding light on the historical injustices and cultural disruptions caused by colonialism. It has also played a crucial role in affirming the significance of indigenous cultures, fostering cultural pride, and contributing to the ongoing efforts of cultural revitalization in postcolonial Africa. African literature demonstrate the dynamism and diversity of the continent's literary output. African writers continue to respond to the ever-changing social, political, and cultural landscapes, enriching the world of literature and offering valuable insights into the African experience. Language and hybridity in African literature capture the diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes of the continent. African writers navigate between different languages, cultures, and literary traditions, creating a unique and vibrant literary tapestry that speaks to the complexities of African identities and experiences. The role of education in African literature reflects the broader significance of education in shaping African societies and identities. It serves as a lens through which writers explore historical, social, and cultural complexities, and it highlights the transformative power of education in the context of Africa's colonial past and postcolonial present. The revival of oral tradition in African literature not only preserves and celebrates cultural heritage but also challenges the dominant narrative forms of Western literature. It allows African writers to tell stories from their own perspectives, using modes of expression that are deeply rooted in their cultural contexts. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Amos Tutuola, and many others have played significant roles in the revival of oral tradition within African literature. Their works have inspired subsequent generations of writers to continue drawing on oral tradition as a powerful means of storytelling and cultural reclamation. Prominent postcolonial African writers include Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Kenya), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), and many others. Their works have played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on African identity, history, and the postcolonial condition.*

**Keywords:** African literature, oral tradition, colonial discourse, Colonialism.

---

## I. Introduction

The advent of colonialism was indeed driven by the aim to create European empires, and the colonial powers utilized various tools to maintain control and dominance over African territories. Education, religion, and colonial niceties were crucial in shaping the colonial discourse and imposing European ideologies and values on African societies. Additionally, Eurocentric literature played a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes and denigrating Africa and its people. However, the emergence of African literature marked a powerful response to the misrepresentations and dehumanization propagated by Western literature. Through African literature, African writers sought to reclaim the stories of Africa, provide authentic portrayals of African experiences, and challenge the dominant narrative constructed by European authors. The influence of colonialism on African literature has been profound and multifaceted. Colonialism refers to the period during which European powers, such as Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and others, established their control over various regions in Africa, which lasted from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. This period of colonization significantly impacted the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of African societies, and these effects are often reflected in the literature produced during and after that era.

## II. Review of literature :

Sharma, I. D. (2006): Colonialism imposed European cultural values and norms on African societies, leading to a disruption of traditional cultural practices. African writers often grappled with questions of identity and a sense of cultural loss. They explored themes of cultural hybridity, blending traditional African elements with Western influences in their works.

Gover, et al., (2000) : Colonialism often distorted or silenced African history and narratives. African writers sought to reclaim and rewrite their history, providing alternative perspectives and challenging colonial representations of Africa and its people.

Justin, N. (2018): The choice of language in African literature became a significant point of debate. Some writers, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, advocated for writing in indigenous African languages as a means of reclaiming cultural identity and resisting neocolonialism.

Das, B. K. (2001): The African diaspora and experiences of Africans living outside the continent also became themes in African literature. Writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (African-American) explored the interconnectedness of African and African diasporic experiences.

## **Influence of Colonialism on African Literature**

### **1. Suppression of Indigenous Cultures:**

Colonial powers attempted to impose their own languages, religions, and cultural norms on the African populations. As a result, many indigenous languages and cultural practices were marginalized or lost. African writers, faced with the threat of cultural erasure, sought to preserve and promote their native languages and traditions through their literary works. The suppression of indigenous cultures in African literature is a recurring theme that reflects the historical impact of colonialism and its aftermath on African societies. African writers have often explored the consequences of cultural subjugation and the efforts to reclaim, preserve, and celebrate indigenous cultures in their literary works. Here are some ways in which the suppression of indigenous cultures is portrayed in African literature:

1. **Loss of Language:** Colonial powers imposed their languages on African populations, leading to the marginalization and sometimes the extinction of indigenous languages. African writers have addressed this linguistic imperialism and its effects on cultural identity. They have also sought to revitalize indigenous languages by incorporating them into their literary works or advocating for their use in education and communication.
2. **Displacement and Dispossession:** Colonialism often involved the forced displacement of African communities from their ancestral lands. African literature has portrayed the trauma of dispossession and the longing for a sense of belonging to the land. Writers have depicted the struggles of people uprooted from their cultural and spiritual ties to the land, highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of such experiences.
3. **Suppression of Cultural Practices:** Indigenous cultural practices, rituals, and belief systems were often suppressed or demonized by colonial authorities. African writers have explored the impact of such cultural suppression on individual and collective identities. They have also highlighted the resilience of African communities in preserving and passing on their traditions in the face of colonial pressures.
4. **Imposition of Western Values:** Colonial powers promoted Western values and ideologies at the expense of traditional African values and customs. African literature has depicted the clash between these two worldviews and the challenges faced by individuals and communities trying to navigate between them. Writers have questioned the validity of imposed Western values and championed the importance of embracing and promoting African cultural heritage.
5. **Cultural Hybridity:** The encounter with colonialism led to cultural hybridity, where African societies absorbed and adapted certain aspects of European culture while retaining their indigenous practices. African literature has explored this complex interplay between cultures, showing how hybrid identities emerged and evolved in the wake of colonialism.
6. **Reclamation of Indigenous Knowledge:** Some African writers have focused on the importance of reclaiming and valuing indigenous knowledge systems, such as traditional medicine, storytelling, and craftsmanship. They have emphasized the significance of preserving these cultural practices as essential components of African heritage and wisdom.

### **2. Emergence of New Literary Themes:**

Colonialism introduced new social, political, and economic realities to African societies. Writers began to address themes of oppression, resistance, identity, and the clash between traditional and modern values in their works. Novels, plays, and poems often explored the struggles of Africans under colonial rule and the quest for independence. The emergence of new literary themes in African literature coincides with historical and social developments in the continent. As African societies experienced colonialism, independence movements, postcolonial challenges, globalization, and various social transformations, their literature evolved to reflect these changes. Here are some of the key themes that have emerged in African literature:

1. **Colonialism and Resistance:** During the colonial period, African writers began to address themes of oppression, exploitation, and resistance. They depicted the harsh realities of colonial rule and the struggles of African communities to resist and challenge the dominance of European powers.
2. **Identity and Cultural Heritage:** African literature has consistently explored questions of identity, both individual and collective. Writers have delved into issues of cultural heritage, hybrid identities, and the

complexities of belonging to multiple cultures. The search for a genuine African identity amidst diverse cultural influences has been a recurring theme.

3. **Quest for Independence:** With the rise of independence movements across Africa in the mid-20th century, literature became a platform to express nationalistic sentiments and the desire for self-determination. Writers played an essential role in inspiring and mobilizing people towards achieving independence from colonial rule.
4. **Postcolonial Realities:** After gaining independence, African literature shifted its focus to the challenges of nation-building, governance, and the complexities of postcolonial societies. Themes such as corruption, political instability, and the legacies of colonialism became prominent in literature.
5. **Diaspora and Exile:** African writers living in the diaspora have brought attention to themes of displacement, exile, and the experiences of Africans outside the continent. They often explore the tensions of maintaining connections with their African roots while adapting to new environments.
6. **Gender and Feminism:** African women writers have made significant contributions to literature by addressing issues of gender inequality, patriarchy, and the struggles faced by women in African societies. Themes related to feminism and women's empowerment have gained prominence in African literature.
7. **Urbanization and Globalization:** As African societies have urbanized and globalized, literature has depicted the challenges and opportunities presented by these changes. Themes of urban life, migration, and the impact of global forces on local communities have been explored.
8. **Social Injustice and Human Rights:** Many African writers have used their works to shed light on social injustices, human rights abuses, and marginalized communities. Their literature serves as a means to advocate for social change and bring attention to pressing issues.
9. **Oral Tradition and Storytelling:** Despite the influence of written literature, African writers have maintained a strong connection to oral storytelling traditions. Themes derived from folklore, mythologies, and traditional stories are often woven into contemporary narratives.
10. **Environmental Concerns:** With increasing environmental challenges across the continent, African literature has started to engage with themes of environmental degradation, conservation, and the relationship between humans and nature.

### **III. Language and Hybridity:**

Language played a crucial role in shaping African literature during colonialism. European languages like English, French, and Portuguese were often used as tools of communication and education by the colonial administration. This led to the emergence of African writers who wrote in colonial languages, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. These writers grappled with the tension between writing in a foreign language and the desire to express their African identity and experiences. Language and hybridity are essential aspects of African literature, reflecting the complex historical and cultural interactions between African societies and colonial powers. Here's how language and hybridity are manifested in African literature:

1. **Colonial Languages and Hybrid Writing:** European colonial powers imposed their languages, such as English, French, and Portuguese, on African societies during colonization. As a result, many African writers began writing in these colonial languages, leading to the emergence of a rich body of literature in English, French, and Portuguese. However, the use of these languages often coexists with the incorporation of indigenous languages, dialects, and cultural expressions, creating a hybrid form of writing that reflects both African and European influences.
2. **Multilingual Narratives:** African writers often employ multiple languages within a single literary work. This multilingualism reflects the linguistic diversity of the continent and mirrors the reality of many African communities where people often speak multiple languages in their daily lives. Writers use different languages to capture nuances, cultural nuances, and the diverse experiences of their characters.
3. **Code-Switching and Code-Mixing:** Code-switching and code-mixing are linguistic phenomena where writers seamlessly shift between different languages or mix elements from multiple languages within a single sentence or paragraph. African writers use these techniques to represent the complexities of cultural interactions and to evoke a sense of authenticity in their narratives.
4. **Reclamation of Indigenous Languages:** Some African writers have sought to reclaim and promote indigenous languages in their literary works. They use their writing as a platform to advocate for the recognition and preservation of these languages, which may have been marginalized during the colonial era.
5. **Oral Tradition and Storytelling:** African literature often draws inspiration from traditional oral storytelling practices. Writers incorporate elements of oral traditions, folklore, and mythologies into their written works, bridging the gap between oral and written forms of expression. This infusion of oral elements enriches the storytelling and reinforces the connection to African cultural heritage.

6. Language as a Tool of Resistance: Language has been employed as a powerful tool of resistance against colonial domination and cultural imperialism. African writers have used colonial languages creatively to subvert and challenge the colonial discourse, asserting their own identities and perspectives.
7. Postcolonial Language Politics: After gaining independence, African countries faced language policy challenges. Debates arose over which languages should be used in education, governance, and literature. Some writers addressed these language politics in their works, reflecting the complexities of language choices in postcolonial Africa.

#### **IV. The Role of Education:**

Colonial powers established formal education systems in Africa, primarily aimed at training a local elite to serve the colonial administration. Education became a means for African intellectuals to gain knowledge and skills that would eventually help them challenge the colonial system. Many African writers were educated within this system, and their exposure to European literature and ideas influenced their own literary output. The role of education in African literature is multifaceted and has been a recurring theme in many literary works. Education played a significant role in the colonial and postcolonial periods, shaping the intellectual and cultural landscape of Africa. Here are some aspects of the role of education in African literature:

1. Colonial Education: During the colonial era, European powers introduced formal education systems in Africa, primarily aimed at training a local elite to serve the colonial administration and facilitate the exploitation of African resources. This type of education often propagated colonial ideologies and suppressed indigenous knowledge and cultures. African writers have critiqued the colonial education system in their works, highlighting its role in perpetuating colonial dominance and cultural subjugation.
2. Resistance and Empowerment: African literature often celebrates the transformative power of education in empowering individuals and communities to resist colonial oppression and assert their rights. Writers have portrayed characters who use education as a tool for social and political mobilization, advocating for independence and social justice.
3. Impact on Identity and Culture: Education, especially in colonial languages, has had an impact on African identity and cultural expressions. Some writers explore the tension between embracing Western education and preserving indigenous cultural values. Education can lead to cultural hybridity, where individuals navigate between different cultural influences, and this theme is often explored in African literature.
4. Access to Education: African literature has addressed the disparities in access to education across different social and economic strata. Writers have depicted the challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as rural communities, women, and the economically disadvantaged, in accessing quality education. These narratives shed light on the importance of equitable educational opportunities for all Africans.
5. Education and Postcolonial Nation-Building: After gaining independence, education became a crucial tool in the process of nation-building. African writers have depicted the struggles and achievements of newly independent nations in establishing their educational systems and defining their national identities through literature and education.
6. Education and Language: The choice of language in education has been a subject of debate in postcolonial Africa. Some countries continued to use colonial languages in their education systems, while others promoted the use of indigenous languages. This language policy has implications for cultural preservation and national unity, which are explored in African literature.
7. Education and Social Change: African literature often reflects on the potential of education to bring about social change and development. Writers have depicted characters who use their education to challenge societal norms, address social issues, and promote positive change in their communities.

#### **V. Revival of Oral Tradition:**

Colonialism led to the suppression of traditional oral storytelling practices, but it also sparked a revival of interest in oral traditions among African writers. They began to incorporate elements of oral storytelling, folklore, and mythologies into their written works as a means of reconnecting with their cultural heritage. The revival of oral tradition in African literature is a significant and impactful trend that emerged as writers sought to reconnect with their cultural heritage and preserve traditional storytelling practices. Oral tradition has been a vital part of African societies for centuries, serving as a means of passing down history, knowledge, and cultural values from one generation to another. With the impact of colonialism and the spread of written literature, there was a fear that this rich oral heritage might be lost or diminished. In response to this concern, African writers began to incorporate elements of oral tradition into their written works, leading to the revival of oral storytelling within the context of literature. Here are some key ways in which this revival is manifested in African literature:

1. Storytelling Techniques: African writers often draw on the storytelling techniques of oral tradition. They use vivid imagery, rhythmic language, repetition, and call-and-response patterns to create a sense of oral

performance in their written narratives. This brings a dynamic and immersive quality to the stories and reflects the orality of traditional African storytelling.

2. **Folklore and Mythology:** African literature frequently integrates folktales, myths, and legends into the plot and characters of their works. These stories may be retold or reimagined, providing a connection to the cultural roots of the communities from which the writers draw inspiration.
3. **Griots and Oral Historians:** Griots, or traditional oral historians and storytellers in some West African societies, play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. African writers often feature griot-like characters in their works, emphasizing their role as custodians of history and culture.
4. **Dialogues and Proverbs:** African literature often includes dialogues that mirror the oral tradition's call-and-response style. Additionally, proverbs, which are an essential part of African oral communication, are frequently woven into the narratives to convey wisdom, cultural values, and moral lessons.
5. **Performance and Oral Adaptations:** Some African writers actively engage with oral performance by presenting their works in public readings or live storytelling events. This approach aligns with the traditional practice of storytelling as a communal and interactive experience.
6. **Community Connection:** By incorporating elements of oral tradition, African writers seek to create literature that resonates with their communities. This can foster a sense of collective identity and cultural pride among readers.

## **VI. Postcolonial Literature:**

After gaining independence, African literature evolved to address the challenges of nation-building, postcolonial identity, and the legacies of colonialism. Writers explored themes of corruption, neocolonialism, and the complexities of post-independence African societies. Postcolonial literature in African literature refers to the body of literary works that emerged after African countries gained independence from European colonial rule. It encompasses a wide range of literary genres, including novels, poetry, plays, essays, and more, produced by African writers who explore the complexities and legacies of colonialism and its impact on postcolonial African societies. Key features of postcolonial literature in African literature include:

1. **Exploration of Colonial Experience:** Postcolonial literature often delves into the historical experiences of colonialism, depicting the exploitation, oppression, and violence that characterized the colonial period. Writers may draw on their own or their community's experiences to shed light on the colonial era's social, political, and cultural ramifications.
2. **Reinterpretation of History:** African writers in the postcolonial era have sought to reinterpret history from an African perspective. They challenge the Eurocentric narratives imposed during colonial times and reexamine historical events, personalities, and cultural practices through the lens of indigenous knowledge and values.
3. **Identity and Cultural Hybridity:** Postcolonial literature reflects the complexities of identity in the aftermath of colonialism. African writers explore the tensions between African and Western influences, the challenges of cultural hybridity, and the quest for a distinct postcolonial identity.
4. **Language and Linguistic Choices:** The language question is central to postcolonial African literature. Some writers continue to use the colonial languages introduced during the colonial period (English, French, Portuguese, etc.), while others choose to write in indigenous languages or use a combination of both. This linguistic choice becomes a powerful expression of cultural reclamation and resistance against linguistic imperialism.
5. **Critique of Neocolonialism:** Postcolonial literature often examines the lingering effects of neocolonialism and economic exploitation by external powers or multinational corporations. Writers critique the neocolonial structures that perpetuate dependency and hinder genuine socioeconomic progress in Africa.
6. **Themes of Nation-Building and Independence:** Many postcolonial works focus on the challenges of nation-building and the struggles faced by newly independent African countries. These narratives explore the complexities of governance, power, and the search for a national identity.
7. **Female Empowerment and Gender Dynamics:** Postcolonial African literature has been instrumental in giving voice to African women and addressing issues of gender inequality, sexism, and the intersectionality of colonial and patriarchal oppression.
8. **Diasporic Perspectives:** Some postcolonial African writers living in the diaspora explore themes of displacement, identity, and belonging, reflecting the experiences of Africans outside the continent.
9. **African Renaissance:** Postcolonial African literature often celebrates the resilience, creativity, and richness of African cultures. It contributes to the broader African Renaissance movement, aiming to reclaim African agency and challenge the prevailing stereotypes about the continent.

### **Some notable African writers with impact of colonialism**

Some notable African writers who have addressed the impact of colonialism in their works include Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Mariama Bâ, and many others. Their literary contributions have not only documented the historical realities of colonialism but also played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around African identity, cultural heritage, and the complexities of the postcolonial world.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Conditions," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "A Private Experience," and Njabulo S. Ndebele's "The Prophetess" are exemplary works that demonstrate the success of African literature in reclaiming African stories. These novels present African characters and perspectives that offer nuanced and complex portrayals of African life, culture, and history. Let's explore each work briefly:

"Nervous Conditions" by Tsitsi Dangarembga: Set in colonial Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), this novel revolves around the experiences of Tambudzai, a young African girl navigating the challenges of education, gender roles, and cultural identity. The novel portrays the impact of colonial education on Tambudzai's family and community, highlighting the complexities of cultural hybridity and the struggles faced by African women in colonial and postcolonial societies.

"A Private Experience" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: This short story explores the unexpected encounter between two women from different ethnic backgrounds during a violent riot in Nigeria. The story humanizes the characters and reflects on the common humanity that transcends cultural and religious differences. Adichie's work challenges simplistic and harmful portrayals of Africa and showcases the complexities and diversity of the continent.

"The Prophetess" by Njabulo S. Ndebele: This novel follows the journey of a young South African woman named Malome, who becomes a prophetess and leads a spiritual movement during apartheid. The novel delves into the effects of colonialism and apartheid on South African society and examines the intersections of traditional beliefs and modern influences. These works and many others in African literature present rich narratives that challenge stereotypes and present a more authentic and nuanced representation of African experiences. By portraying African characters with agency, dignity, and depth, African literature has succeeded in reclaiming the stories of Africa and reshaping the narrative around the continent.

## **VII. Conclusion:**

African literature has played a crucial role in countering the denigrations, history, and myths constructed about Africa by Eurocentric literature during the colonial era. Through authentic portrayals of African experiences and the elevation of African voices, African literature has successfully reclaimed the stories of Africa and offered a more comprehensive and accurate representation of the continent and its people. The works of authors like Dangarembga, Adichie, Ndebele, and many others serve as powerful testimonies to the resilience and creativity of African literature in reshaping the discourse about Africa.

## **References:**

- [1]. Achebe, C. (1987). *No Longer at Ease*. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com>
- [2]. Conrad, J. (2015). *Heart of Darkness*. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com>
- [3]. Das, B. K. (2001). Shiv K. Kumar as a Post-colonial Poet. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com>
- [4]. Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- [5]. Sharma, I. D. (2006). *Essays on Contemporary Literature*. Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh: Prakash Book Depot.
- [6]. Vempala, J. (2003). *Things Fall Apart*. Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh: Prakash Book Depot.
- [7]. Eze, C. (2011). *Postcolonial Imaginations and Moral Representations in African Literature and Culture*. Lanham Maryland: Lexington Books.
- [8]. Justin, N. (2018). African Indigenous Values Identified in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart": A Socio-Cultural Analysis. *International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies*. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v7i2.5>.
- [9]. Gover, D., Conteh-Morgan J. & Bryce J. (Eds.). (2000). *The Post-Colonial Condition of African Literature*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.