

A Study of Binary Oppositions Found in Chinua Achebe's Short Stories

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Abstract

Nearly every 19th century Western writer was well aware of the empire and had definite views on race and imperialism found in the writing. Living in Ogidi with two cultures: African social customs and traditional religion and British colonial authority and Christianity, Chinua Achebe became fascinated with the dual perspective that came from living at the crossroads of cultures. This research analyses the use of binary oppositions in Chinua Achebe's three short stories "The Madman", "Chike's School Days", and "The Sacrificial Egg" by drawing on Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" (1978) in order to examine how these binary oppositions contribute to the themes of cultural conflict and identity in Achebe's stories, and to explore how Achebe deconstructs the simplistic dichotomies to critique colonial ideologies and societal constructs. Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) provides a framework to analyse how Western discourse constructs the "Other" through binary oppositions, such as East/West, civilized/savage, and modern/traditional. Through a qualitative textual analysis of the selected texts, the research shows that binary oppositions "civilized vs. uncivilized", "rational vs. irrational", "sacred vs. profane", "superior vs. inferior", "honour vs. shame", "order vs. chaos", "Western education vs. indigenous knowledge", "Christianity vs. traditional religion", "individualism vs. community", "English vs. Igbo Language", "modernity vs. tradition", "science vs. superstition", "European vs. African perceptions of disease", "colonial order vs. indigenous culture", and "liveliness vs. emptiness" are employed in three short stories. The research gives insights into the psychological and societal struggles of the society, cultural hybridity between Igbo heritage and European education, and different perceptions and beliefs of Western and African people.

Keywords: Binary Opposition, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Orient and Occident

Introduction

Several scholars and theorists have explored binary oppositions as a literary and cultural concept, building on structuralist ideas and applying them across various genres and contexts. A structuralist concept popularized by Claude Lévi-Strauss serves binary opposition as a fundamental framework in literature to explore contrasting concepts such as good vs. evil, tradition vs. modernity, and male vs. female. These dichotomies are often used to highlight societal tensions and cultural conflicts, providing a deeper understanding of thematic and narrative structures. He introduced binary opposition as a fundamental organizing principle in myths and narratives. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, human thought is structured around dichotomies, such as nature vs. culture and life vs. death, which help societies make sense of their world.

From cultural and postcolonial contexts, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the prominent postcolonial theorists who highlighted how binary oppositions often exclude marginalized voices, particularly women and the subaltern. In her book "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), she emphasized the need to challenge binaries such as colonizer vs. colonized or male vs. female to uncover hidden complexities. For how the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced, Spivak describes as "The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context

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of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”

Homi K. Bhabha is one of the most influential literary critics who critiqued the rigidity of binary oppositions in postcolonial contexts, introducing the concept of hybridity. In his work “The Location of Culture” (1994), he proposed that the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. According to Bhabha, the ‘right’ to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority’.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) provides a framework to analyze how Western discourse constructs the "Other" through binary oppositions, such as East/West, civilized/savage, and modern/traditional. These binaries serve to assert Western superiority and control over colonized people. Edward proposed *Orientalism* as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient and “the Occident”... It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of ‘interests.’” He also states that the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. He mentions *Orientalism* as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. According to Edward, European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

This research aims to analyse binary oppositions in Chinua Achebe’s three short stories "The Madman", "Chike’s School Days", and "The Sacrificial Egg" from “Girls at War and Other Short Stories” (1972) in order to explore how Achebe deconstructs the simplistic dichotomies to critique colonial ideologies and societal constructs.

There are many previous studies related to this research. The research paper titled “Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and the Representation of the East in *Gardens of Water* by Alan Drew” submitted by Yana Maliyana from English Language and Literature Study Program, Indonesia, University of Education Bandung in 2013. The research paper is aimed to uncover the ways in which the Western author, Alan Drew, represents the East culture in the novel “*Gardens of Water*” (2003). The novel is analysed within the framework of *Orientalism* proposed by Edward Said (1978). The results show that the representation of non-western people and cultures confirms orientalist point of view that puts the East and the West in a binary opposition and represents the East as inferior to the West. The study also proves that the author uses typical stereotyping in representing the East in the novel as untrustworthy, rude, barbaric and traditional and also exposes the issue of patriarchy which is usually pinned into the East Culture.

Another thesis titled “*Orientalism in Million Dollar Arm Film* (2014): Binary Opposition of the US and India” submitted by Aliza Cipta Kusuma, English Language and Literature, State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah in 2017, is aimed at showing how the West and the East are depicted through the characterization of characters and images in the film “*Million Dollar Arm*” (2014). The data is analysed by utilizing the theory of film, character and *Orientalism* discourse of Edward W. Said. The results reveal that the West and the East are divergently depicted in a very contrast way. India as the East is depicted as the

Orient which is weak, helpless and ignorance whereas the Los Angeles as the West is depicted as the helper, strong, and important to the East. It is found that the West is the one who makes the East achieve their goals, and without them the East is nothing.

Methodology

The research design of the research is a qualitative textual analysis. In this research, the texts of three short stories “The Madman”, “Chike’s School Days”, and “The Sacrificial Egg” are analyzed in order to identify binary oppositions employed by Chinua Achebe by utilizing Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” (1978).

Data Analysis

Binary Oppositions Found in the Short Story “The Madman”

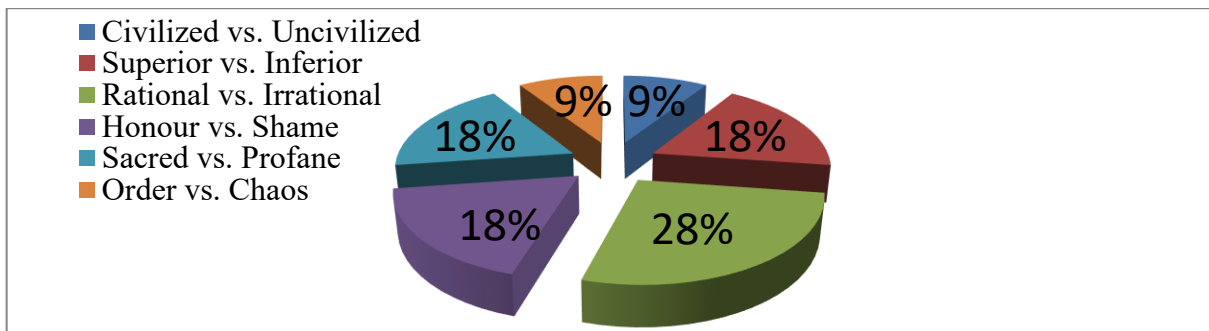


Fig. 1. Percentage of binary oppositions found in the short story “The Madman”

In the short story “The Madman”, binary oppositions “civilized vs. uncivilized”, “rational vs. irrational”, “sacred vs. profane”, “superior vs. inferior”, “honour vs. shame” and “order vs. chaos” are found. Among them, binary opposition “rational vs. irrational” is mostly found in the story because of the protagonist’s own transformation. Nwibe’s former status as a highly respected man in his society changes into public humiliation and mental breakdown. Secondly, Nwibe’s two wives have totally different personalities and attitudes. His senior wife Mgboye has a peaceful mindset whereas his junior one Udenkwo always finds troubles. Most importantly, the main focus of this story is Nwibe’s highly respected status in the town and his own faults and downfall. Because of chasing after the madman and passing the sacred marketplace without clothes, Nwibe becomes an uncontrollably mad person. However, people do not try to understand Nwibe’s conditions but regard him as a mad man. This suggests that being rational or irrational depends on the perspectives and attitudes held by the community.

Binary Oppositions Found in the Short Story “Chike’s School Days”

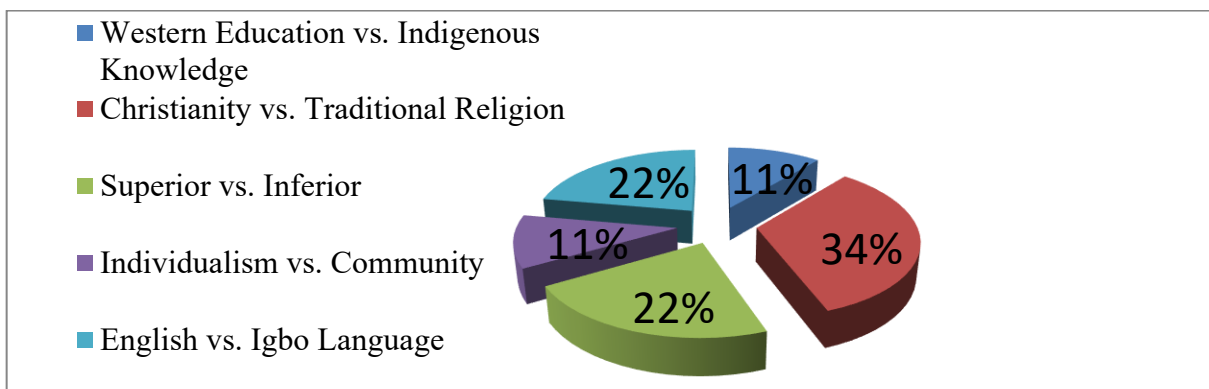


Fig. 2. Percentage of binary oppositions found in the short story “Chike’s School Days”

In the short story “Chike’s School Days”, binary oppositions “Western Education vs. Indigenous Knowledge”, “Christianity vs. Traditional Religion”, “Superior vs. Inferior”, “Individualism vs. Community”, and “English vs. Igbo Language” are found. Among them, binary opposition “Christianity and Traditional Religion” is mostly found in the story because this story highlights mostly on Chike’s parents’ different family background and religion as well as the education system Chike is learning. First of all, Chike’s parents, Amos and Sarah, have different family background. Amos is married to Sarah, who is an Osu that the society thinks as a lower standard. She also reminds her children not to eat heathen food while Amos believes in Christianity. Amos’s mother has recently converted to Christianity. When she hears the news about Amos’s marriage, she meets the diviner to forbid their marriage. At last, it is in vain and she renounces Christianity and goes back to her traditional religion. This suggests that people think that Christianity is superior and rational whereas traditional religion is superstitious and irrational.

Binary Oppositions Found in the Short Story “The Sacrificial Egg”

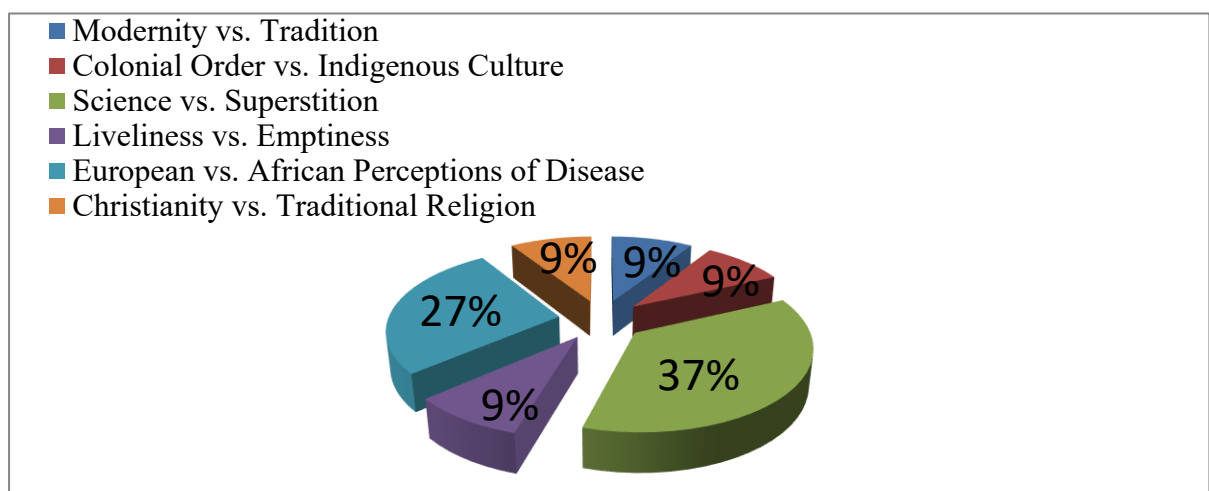


Fig. 3. Percentage of binary oppositions found in the short story “The Sacrificial Egg”

In the short story “The Sacrificial Egg”, binary oppositions “Modernity vs. Tradition”, “Science vs. Superstition”, “European vs. African perceptions of disease”, “Colonial Order vs. Indigenous Culture”, “Liveliness vs Emptiness”, and “Christianity vs. Traditional Religion” are found. Among them, binary opposition “Science vs. Superstition” is mostly found because the story mostly depicts the clash between real and scientific perceptions and traditional beliefs on the smallpox. As Julius is an educated one working at a European trading company, he possesses modern and logic thinking. However, he cannot let go of traditional beliefs. He starts believing that the main reason for the outbreak of the smallpox is the evil deity Kitikpa. When he steps on the sacrificial egg, a ritual object meant to ward off evil, he experiences fear and uncertainty. Moreover, it is still believed that the marketplace called Nkwo is protected by the deity and some beautiful girls coming to the market is not real people but mammy-wota, water spirits. This highlights that science and superstition often overlap, influencing people’s perceptions of fate, disease, and personal responsibility.

Results and Discussion

Binary oppositions from the short story “The Madman” mainly highlight the perceptions of the community of the town. First of all, at the beginning of the story, the protagonist Nwibe is a respectful and powerful man in Ogbu. However, because of the madman, he is publicly humiliated and finally, his honour and dignity turn into shame and everyone gossips about Nwibe as a mad person. This suggests the way the society decides

which is superiority and inferiority. Moreover, binary oppositions from the story mirror their traditional Igbo beliefs. Ogbu society considers the holiness of the sacred and the bad consequences of the profane. Crossing into the sacred marketplace without clothes represents the profane, turning him into an inferior person in the society. In addition, binary oppositions in the story suggest that the opinions and perceptions of the society are fragile and can lead to chaos in people's lives. Nwibe starts with a stable lifestyle, carefully following societal norms. But because of the madman's stupid behaviour, Nwibe becomes barbaric and inferior in people's eyes and it brings the chaos in Nwibe's life.

Binary oppositions from the short story "Chike's School Days" suggest the cultural conflict and different social status through education, language, and religion. At the beginning of the story, it is mentioned that Chike and his sisters are brought up with different education system from the traditional Igbo education system. Chike's exposure to Western education makes him distant from traditional Igbo heritage. His passion on English words highlights how Western education creates a great gap between new generation and their own traditions and norms. Moreover, the religious beliefs of Chike's parents, Amos and Sarah, are one of the prominent themes in the story. Sarah follows indigenous religious practices whereas Amos follows the white men's ways of praying God. The parents' different religions reflect that Christianity is positioned as a civilizing religion while indigenous religions were seen as a superstitious one. Another prominent theme of identity can be seen through Sarah's family background. She comes from Osu, a group of people who has lower status. Amos's mother even didn't give consent for their marriage. The Igbo society has a strict communal norm that forbids marriage between a freedom and an Osu, so deciding to marry an Osu person is unconventional. This shows that family background and identity really matter for Igbo society.

Binary oppositions from the short "The Sacrificial Egg" reflect tension between colonial modernity and traditional Igbo culture as well as religious beliefs. Julius works for a colonial trading company, symbolizing the new economic system imposed by colonial rule. However, he remains connected to traditional beliefs. Although he is an educated person and dismisses traditional beliefs, he has to accept when he realizes the wooden gong of the night-masks. He also believes later that he will get bad luck as he breaks the sacrificial egg. This shows that Igbo beliefs can still influence the society despite Western influence. In addition, different perceptions of disease between European and African people can be seen vividly when there is an outbreak of smallpox. The villagers believe that the main cause of the smallpox is because of the evil deity called Kitikpa. This highlights the superstition and beliefs of African people.

Chinua Achebe subverts the colonial dichotomy by employing binary oppositions and portraying complex and multidimensional characters and societies. Achebe reduces Western narratives in his three short stories. In the short story "The Madman", he reveals that being rational or irrational is not always stable and depends on the perceptions of the society. Nwibe is believed to be respected by the society throughout his life but his uncontrollable anger and madness make him an irrational and mad man whereas the so-called madman is believed to be a sane man. In "Chike's School Days", Chike's education system exposes him to both Western knowledge and Igbo traditions. It shows that only Western education is not enough for individuals to be civilized and progressive. In "The Sacrificial Egg", Achebe contrasts indigenous spiritual beliefs with Western modernity, showing that both systems have their own internal logic and complexities rather than saying one as a more superior one. He also portrays cultural hybridity that neither tradition nor modernity is inherently good or bad. This challenges the idea that modernization is the only path to progress, which is the colonial narrative. Moreover, Achebe portrays the protagonist Julius as a product of colonial

modernity as well as a resident in indigenous beliefs. This duality highlights the simplest dichotomies to

colonial ideologies as being assimilated or resistant. Last but not least, Achebe uses Igbo folklore and culture, challenging the European ideologies that African languages and traditions are inferior and barbaric.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the way Achebe deconstructs the simplest dichotomies to critique colonial ideologies and societal constructs can be explored by analysing binary oppositions in his three short stories. Binary oppositions in Achebe's three short stories give insights into how Western and African beliefs and ideologies are different. Binary oppositions provide the readers with essential information about the psychological and societal struggles of the society, cultural hybridity between Igbo heritage and European education, and different perceptions and beliefs of Western and African people. It is hoped that this research will be of great help and encouragement for those who are interested in studying binary oppositions in postcolonial literature.

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