Fragmented Imperial Spaces in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*
Abstract

Written in different time periods but set in the time of imperial expansion, E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) offer a critical exploration of British imperialism and its aftermath. What similarities and what differences do these novels have in portraying imperialism? More specifically, do they portray modern imperialism in radically different and mutually exclusive ways since one is set in the center of the British Empire and the other in a peripheral colony? The essay draws on Frederic Jameson’s argument about modernism, and *Howards End* in particular, that the center representatively excludes the periphery in its literary works. By comparing the two novels, the essay explores these issues and asks whether the British Empire is structurally incomplete in its representation in early twentieth century canonical modernist novels? Moreover, does this theory of exclusivity extend to include modern canonical African novels written a few decades later? By analyzing *Howards End* and *Things Fall Apart*, the essay examines the hypothesis that the center and the periphery are indeed mutually exclusive in their literary productions. The conclusions reached require some significant modifications to Jameson’s theory. It was found that *Howards End* does indeed structurally exclude the periphery. However, the same cannot be said for *Things Fall Apart*, which structurally incorporates the center. Thus, Jameson’s theory does not extend beyond early twentieth century modernist novels. Moreover, Forster’s novel, although it does suffer from Jameson’s criticism, shows critical awareness of this disabling disconnection from the periphery.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, modernity, space, symbolism, characterization
*Howards End* and *Things Fall Apart* are novels that have similarities. Both tell stories of social and familial relations. More importantly, however, they both explicitly deal with imperialism. They portray characters that live in societies that are highly influenced by imperial expansion. These characters have differing roles in relation to imperialism and often come into conflict because of these differing roles. Further, they portray and problematize imperialism, albeit with interesting disparities. These disparities can be attributed to the different (one might even be tempted to say opposing) positions they occupy in the British imperial structure. *Howards End* is set in the center (the mother country) of the empire, mostly in its metropolitan capital, London. *Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, is set in the periphery (the colony) of the empire, mostly in the fictional village of Umuofia in what is now Nigeria. The societies both at the center and the periphery of the British Empire have undergone transformations that are largely attributed and linked to imperial expansion (both historically and in the novels of this study). In *Howards End*, the eruption of modernization is vividly portrayed in numerous ways; for example, London is described as rising and falling “in a continual flux, while her shallows washed more widely against the hills of Surrey and over the fields of Hertfordshire” indicating
urbanization and urban expansion (93)\(^1\). Motor and railway vehicles are juxtaposed with “untroubled meadows and the dreamy flow of Tewin Water,” highlighting the marked transformations and a sense of “infinity” (HE 11) brought about by modernity, tempered by a somewhat nostalgic expression of the past. What is more, “[i]n the motorcar” Forster writes “was another type whom nature favours – the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the earth” (284), thereby linking modernity and the sense of expansion it brings with imperialism and imperial expansion. In Things Fall Apart, on the other hand, change is linked with imperialism in a language that evokes encroachment and existential fear rather than a sense of expansion and technological development. Nearing the end of the novel, Umuofia, unlike London, is not portrayed with a sense of expansion but as being “like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run” (TFA 186). Umuofia is indicative of modernization in the peripheries of the empire which is marked by, as Brown eloquently puts it, “the violence with which … cultural traditions have been violently opened up into world history” (Brown 3). Thus, encroachment and violence are important motifs in understanding the novel’s portrayal of modern imperialism in the periphery.

This contrast between the center and the periphery has led critics like Jameson to identify them as “incommensurable realities … of the lord and of the bondsman” (164). Further, Jameson views these worlds as mutually exclusive as far as representing each other in literature. He emphasizes this point more in relation to early modernist novels from the center and writes that in the colonial system there is a “spatial disjunction” brought about by the fact that “a significant segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies whose own life experience … remains unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power” (157). This spatial disjunction results in missing “pieces of the puzzle”, which in turn has its literary reflection in the incomplete representation of the empire and the “structural occlusion” of the colonized other and the periphery. Jameson’s view has two important implications for this study. Firstly, this idea of “spatial disjunction” seems to be in stark contrast to the sense of spatial expansion in Howards End. Secondly, the “structural occlusion” that this spatial disjunction entails suggests that

\(^1\)Hereafter, references to the primary sources will be cited in the text as (HE) for Howards End and (TFA) for Things Fall Apart.
the experience of modernism and modern imperialism are radically different and mutually exclusive in the center and the periphery. This essay is a comparative analysis that aims to examine these two implications in the novels of this study by analyzing the characterizations of certain characters and by examining the discontinuous dynamic of certain spaces of symbolic significance in the novels – namely, London in *Howards End* and the Evil Forest in *Things Fall Apart*.

**Mutual Exclusivity**

Imperialism is implicated to a great extent in *Howards End*. Symbols and reminders of British imperialism are recurrent throughout the novel; references to the Imperial and West African Rubber Company (*HE* 171), the Anglo-Indian ladies that took part in Evie’s marriage celebrations (183), Mrs. Warrington’s return from “the colonies” and her criticism of the empire (185), the Dutch Bible that Charles Wilcox brought back from the Boer War (142), and Paul Wilcox making “his way out in Nigeria” (16), to mention some. This repetitive reference to imperialism in the narrative indicates that it is a recurrent fact in the daily lives of the characters.

Further, some characters seem to be identified with it more than others. The Wilcox men are characterized as having “the colonial spirit” (*HE* 178). The sons, Charles and Paul have taken an active role in imperial expansion and exploitation. Indeed, the Wilcoxes draw their wealth from imperial exploits as shown by Henry’s involvement with the Imperial and West African Rubber Company (171). Henry is also described as a “man who had carved money out of Greece and Africa, and bought forests from the natives for a few bottles of gin” (248). What is more, not only are the Wilcoxes portrayed as profiting from imperialism, but they are also characterized as embodying the values associated with it. Henry’s characterization as a pragmatic materialist illustrates this point well:

> The world seemed in his grasp as he listened to the River Thames, which still flowed inland from the sea. So wonderful to the [Schlegel] girls, it held no mysteries for him. He had helped shorten its long tidal tough by taking shares in the lock of Teddington, and if he and other capitalists thought good, some day it could be shortened again… he felt that his hands were on all the ropes of life, and that what he did not know could not be worth knowing. (*HE* 114)

Henry is depicted here as only being concerned with material gains; he would alter nature as long as it proved profitable. To this end, he craves control and has a limited
comprehension of other things that may be irrelevant or may hinder his commercial and imperialist activities such as mystery and morality and does not think such issues are worth grasping. Moreover, he is suspicious of emotionality and sees it as a weakness, a value that he instils in his son Charles (HE 79), making it a distinctly male gender trait. Indeed, two recurrent words that are used to depict Henry’s character are “fortress” and “wolf-pack”. He is metaphorically depicted as occupying a fortress from which he addresses others in a domineering and dismissive way; a symbol of his patriarchal and imperial authority (84). The “fortress” also represents his protection “from the world” (79). Further, his unscrupulous ways of solving problems are described as drawing their “ethics from the wolf-pack” (249).

As the above passage also indicates, the characterization of the Wilcox men (and particularly Henry) as pragmatic opportunists is in opposition to the characterization of the Schlegel sisters. They are portrayed as not being concerned with the practical end of things and as being more concerned with acts of compassion. This is well illustrated by the way Helen describes herself and her sister to Henry: “[o]ur human nature appears to be the other way around. We employ people because they’re unemployed” (HE 117). They are presented not only as more morally apt but also esthetically cultured and socially liberal people who are interested in art and literature. Thus, the portrayal of Henry as a practical, domineering, and unscrupulous man, who is detached from emotion and the suffering of others clashes with the characterization of the Schlegels as esthetically and empathetically minded women.

This opposition in characterization, however, does not mean that the values and profits of imperialist exploitation are limited to a group of people that the Wilcoxes represent and the Schlegels oppose. Firstly, imperialism is prevalent throughout the novel and even the Schlegels cannot avoid being associated with it. As Harrington observes:

the cultured lives of the liberal Schlegels are not truly independent but result from standing upon ‘islands of money’. The basis of their world, like that of the Wilcoxes, is economic, and they are consequently unable to avoid implication in the Wilcoxian activities of commerce and imperialism. Though they dismiss the Empire, it is the very existence of that same Empire which enables them to move from house to house, to attend debating societies, and take up worthy causes as the Basts. (285)

Further, Harrington interprets the scene where Margaret visits Henry’s offices and finds everything – tables, counters, brass bars – ordinary and not exotic or “West
African” (*HE* 171) as indicating that “activities of empire are naturalized and domestic, inextricably bound up in English everyday living” (284). Despite imperialism being a “difficulty” for Margret and despite the Schlegels’ scepticism of the Wilcoxes’ imperial masculinity, the Schlegels cannot help being part of the imperial structure. Margaret’s recognition of the ordinariness, “even when she penetrated to the inner depths” of the offices, language being reminiscent of imperial exploration, indicates the domesticated nature of imperial commerce (*HE* 171).

It is precisely in this light of domestication that imperialism is presented in the novel. References to the periphery are scant and when they do appear, they are discussed in the context of English identity. The scene where Margaret and Tibby argue about the Wilcoxes (and Paul in particular) is worth citing here. Margaret starts by saying:

“I was thinking of the younger son, whom I once classed as a ninny, but who came back so ill from Nigeria. He’s gone out there again, Evie Wilcox tells me – out of his duty.”

“Duty” always elicited a groan [from Tibby].

“He does not want the money, it is work he wants, though it is beastly work … a nation who can produce men of that sort may well be proud. No wonder England has become an Empire.”

“Empire!” (*HE* 97)

The Empire is discussed here in the context of the work ethic of English men. Although a peripheral colony is mentioned, it is English national identity that is discussed in relation to imperialism. Another scene where a colony is mentioned is when Henry and Margaret are dining at a restaurant and Margaret eavesdrops on the conversations of people seated around her. “‘Right you are! I’ll cable out to Uganda this evening,’ came from a table behind. ‘Their Emperor wants war; well, let him have it,’ was the opinion of a clergyman. She [Margaret] smiled at such incongruities” (134). Here, the periphery is mentioned in the context of a violent struggle with the expansive center. The peripheral colonies are not represented without a reference to the center. Furthermore, there is no portrayal or representation of the peripheral experience and the references to the periphery are overpowered by the references to the center. Thus, Jameson’s view of the incomplete representation of the empire and the ‘structural occlusion’ of the colonized other and the periphery seems to hold.

This is not to claim that the novel is sympathetic toward imperialism. The protestations of Tibby (in the former passage) and Margaret’s smile at “such incongruities” (in the latter passage) point toward the critical stance the novel takes.
toward imperialism. This is done, however, not by the inclusion and discussion of the experiences of the colonized but by critically engaging with English life and culture. The dualisms in the novel can be used to illustrate this point. The seen and the unseen, the city and the country, the inner and the outer are some examples of the dualisms presented in the novel. A particularly relevant dualism is the distinction the narrator draws between “those who have molded … [England] and made her feared by other lands” and “those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen … the whole island at once” (153). This dualistic distinction corresponds with the distinction between Wilcoxian imperial commerce (and the foundational role it has played in molding English society) and the resistance the Schlegels present to this. Indeed, this critique of imperialism expressed through the Wilcox-Schlegel conflict has many interesting facets, but it remains seated in the context of the center, excluding the peripheral colonies. As the dualism suggests, it is “the whole island” and not the whole empire that is “seen at once”.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, in contrast to *Howards End*, is a novel set in a peripheral colony as Britain was establishing its imperial presence there. Umuofia is encroached upon by an expansive and violent empire. Indeed, unlike *Howards End*, violence goes hand in hand with the depiction of imperialism and conflicts relating to imperialism. What is more, it deals explicitly with imperialism from the perspective of the periphery. Whether this perspective is exclusively peripheral is a question that will be discussed here by examining the depiction of imperial expansion in relation to the motif of violence and spatial symbolism in the novel.

As stated previously, the novel is set in a place of violent conflict between the center and the periphery. Representatives of the British Empire brought “the church”, “a government” (*TFA* 164) and “a trading store” (168) among the Ibo. In addition, Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith, and the District Commissioner are the three most discussed representative figures of the colonizers in this novel. Mr. Brown, through his “policy of compromise and accommodation” (174), made his “mission grow from strength to strength” (171) and managed to win many converts without violence. After Mr. Brown, however, violence erupts in Umuofia and becomes a means by which the mission and colonial administration establish dominance. Mr. Smith, who “saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness” succeeds Mr. Brown as missionary in Umuofia (174). Thus, a “great conflict between church and clan in Umuofia … had been gathering
since Mr. Brown left” (176); a conflict which turns violent and results in the killing of an ancestral spirit, the destruction of the church, the imprisonment and brutalization of the leaders of Umuofia, the killing of the messenger of the colonial administration, and finally Okonkwo’s suicide. This eruption of violent conflict between the British and the Ibo is accompanied by the change of the policy of the colonial mission from a non-violent and accommodating one to a violent and alienating one. Thus, imperial expansion is portrayed through juxtaposing different policies by which the center relates to the periphery. Through this, the center is represented in *Things Fall Apart* through the way it establishes dominance in the periphery.

The discussion of violence in the novel, however, does not stop there. As Hoegberg has insightfully pointed out, “[a]lthough Achebe powerfully criticizes the violence of British colonial practices, the British do not enter the picture until after Achebe has explored the internal workings of Igbo culture” (69). Indeed, Ibo culture is extensively discussed and the British only arrive nearing the end of the novel. Moreover, even after the British enter the story, they are presented alongside the Ibo communities they interact with. The motif of violence can, again, be used to illustrate this point. The succession of the violent Mr. Smith is accompanied by the return of the similarly violent Okonkwo to Umuofia. Upon his return, he sees that “Umuofia had undergone such profound change … the new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people’s eyes and minds” (*TFA* 172). “Okonkwo was deeply grieved … He mourned for the clan, which he saw as breaking up and falling apart” (173). This deep grievance that Okonkwo has against the changes brought about by British imperialism is appeased only when Umuofia destroys the church as retaliation against the killing of an ancestral spirit by a member of the church:

> He had spoken violently to his clansmen when they had met in the market place to decide on their action. And they had listened to him with respect. It was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior. Although they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away the Christians, they had agreed to do something substantial. And they had done it. Okonkwo was almost happy again. (182)

Okonkwo is portrayed as an advocate for violent retaliation against the Christians. Interestingly, the clan opposes his extreme advocacy of violence and finally settles on a compromise. Thus, we can see a parallel between the characterizations of Okonkwo and Mr. Smith. Both view the alien other as an intruder; neither is satisfied with the
status quo of non-violent relations; and both advocate violence in response to this intrusion. In addition to this, Okonkwo is happy not only because the clan takes a violent stance against the church but also because he understands this stance as getting back to the “good old days … when a warrior was a warrior”, hinting that violence in the novel, in addition to being linked to Okonkwo’s characterization, is also linked to Ibo tradition. Thus, the novel’s criticism of the center of the British Empire has its reflection in the critical representation of the peripheral colony it is set in.

This point about “culturally sanctioned violence” (as Hoegberg calls it) has stirred some debate among critics. There is disagreement over the extent to which the novel criticizes these acts. Critics like Rhoads have attempted to justify the violence as a legitimate part of Ibo society in the novel, arguing, for example, that the novel portrays it as a necessity for survival. Others argue that the novel is critical on this point, arguing that the novel portrays violence negatively, portraying victims of violence as just that, victims, and that “Achebe encourages in his readers the sort of analysis that leads to positive cultural change by pinpointing contradictions between principle and practice that alienate members of a community and lead to violence” (Hoegberg 78). To address the issues raised in this debate, let us consider this excerpt from the novel where Uchendu explains to Okonkwo why the Ibo say “mother is supreme” even though “a man is the head of the family … a child belongs to his father … and not his mother … [and] a man belongs to his fatherland and not his motherland” (*TFA* 125):

> It is true that a child belongs to his father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (126)

Similar to *Howards End*, we see a dualism at work here. This passage has been interpreted by Rhoads as illustrating Ibo society’s combining of opposing gendered principles, that is, the balancing of the “strong and warlike” male and the “the tender and supportive” female (65). Through this, she asserts that the Ibo culture depicted in the novel presents a counter to male hegemony and violence (65-66). However, it is not so difficult to see the “contradictions” that Hoegberg discusses. Okonkwo’s usual behavior as a violent patriarch, his usual “desire to conquer and subdue” and his usual
support of the idea that “[n]o matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children … he was not really a man” (TFA 50), is ironically subverted here since now (as the analogy of corporal punishment expresses) he is cast in the role of a child beaten by its father and who seeks “sympathy in its mother’s hut”. In other words the man who, in principle, is culturally sanctioned to dole out violence to ensure his authority has become, in practice, on the receiving end of culturally sanctioned violence. By ironically juxtaposing these two opposing states in the character of Okonkwo, it does seem that the novel is taking a critical stance toward Ibo patriarchal violence.

Furthermore, a spatial symbol that lends insight to our discussion of “contradictions … that alienate members of a community and lead to violence” (Hoegberg 78) is what the Ibos call the Evil Forest. Indeed, the Evil Forest is a complex symbol with contradictory aspects and the way it is characterized becomes symbolic of the thin borders between peace and violence and the outside and inside of the community.

Every clan and village had its “evil forest”. In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine-men when they died. An “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. (TFA 140)

On the one hand, the Evil Forest is portrayed as a “dumping ground” of all that is taboo. Tabooed births (twins and ogbanje), deaths (caused by certain illnesses and suicides), and objects are expelled from the clan into the Evil Forest. It can be seen, then, as a space that exists outside the clan, an outside space where expelled objects and bodies are put. On the other hand, the Evil Forest is portrayed as being an integral part of the clan. The narrator tells us “[e]very clan and village had its ‘evil forest’”. It is vital in providing the clan with a space for the disposal of ejects. What is more, the term Evil Forest is also used to name an egwugwu (spiritual representatives of the nine villages of the clan). “The nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Evil Forest represented the village of Umeru, or the children of Eru, who was the eldest of the nine sons” (TFA 85). This further emphasizes the cultural significance of the Evil Forest in that it is associated with the founders of the clan. Moreover, ancestors, or the “living-dead” as Mbiti calls them, have more than a historical and symbolic significance among the Ibo since, even though they have departed, they continue to play a major role in the daily life of the
living (Mbiti 25). The response of a priestess, Chika, to Okonkwo’s father Unoka when he goes to consult her about his failed harvests stresses this point. After he declares his piety and that his failure cannot be attributed to that, the priestess replies “[y]ou have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm” (TFA 17). Both Unoka and the priestess adhere to the principle that prior to individual effort, maintaining good relations with divine and ancestral beings is necessary in attaining success, further stressing the integral significance of the Evil Forest in Ibo life. Thus the Evil Forest is portrayed both as external and integral to the clan at the same time.

This paradoxical portrayal of a space as being both external and integral is interesting in that the Evil Forest is where the Christian missionaries first settle and build a church in Mbanta (Okonkwo’s motherland). The Evil Forest, therefore, is an interesting symbol to examine with regard to imperial expansion since it was the space initially expanded upon by imperialists2.

It was … [the Evil Forest] that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept. “They want a piece of land to build their shrine,” said Uchendu to his peers when they consulted among themselves … “Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory.” (TFA 140-41)

The rulers of Mbanta calculated that it would be to their advantage to willingly offer Evil Forest land to the missionaries in order to keep them out of the clan. The Evil Forest’s externalization aspect comes into play here and the missionaries, like other ejects, are expelled into the Evil Forest because the rulers of Mbanta “did not … want them in their clan” and wished a violent end to them. However, we soon learn that it was a miscalculation on Mbanta’s part. The missionaries had actually unknowingly occupied a space that was integral to the clan. They had occupied a space that was not just vital for the clan’s waste disposal but a space that had a huge cultural significance. The missionaries disrupt the culture of expulsion and erode the potency of the clan’s cultural rituals and by doing so get many converts, among whom are those who were alienated by the clan. The osu, the traditional outcasts of the clan who

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2The term imperialists here is used to refer to the Christian missionaries since they are a part of the swathe of different forces, including settlers, traders, and colonial administrators, that participated in European imperial expansion in non-European territories.
were “taboo[s] forever”, immediately come to mind (148). The narrator states, “[t]hese … osu, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received” (147). The missionaries are effective because they occupy a space that is, paradoxically, both a marginal and central one.

This dynamic captured by the Evil Forest is also seen in the portrayal of those clan members who convert to Christianity. Indeed, as the church grew stronger in Mbanta, more and more converts began to occupy the Evil Forest alongside the missionaries. The narrator tells us, “[t]he clan was worried, but not overmuch. If a gang of efulefu decided to live in the Evil Forest it was their own affair. When one came to think of it, the Evil Forest was a fit home for such undesirable people” (TFA 146). The narrator also states when telling about violence from the clan that was directed at the converts that, “no one could kill them without having to flee from the clan, for in spite of their worthlessness they still belonged to the clan” (147). We can see here that these converts, like the space they occupy, are both external and integral to the clan. Their characterization reflects the spatial symbol in the way they are both externalized and integrated into the clan simultaneously. It points to the profound alienation that a number of clan members faced, despite constituting an integral part of the clan itself.

To pick up on the previous point, the motif of violence is employed in this novel to critically examine both Ibo culture and British imperial culture. Thus, the novel does not structurally occlude the colonizer. On the contrary, it engages both the center and the periphery and provides a critique of both cultures. Fascinatingly, it does so by drawing parallels between the two. Violence is discussed not just as a destabilizing colonial means by which the center opened up the periphery, but is also critically depicted as being part of the culture of Ibo society. Even further, by examining the paradoxical symbolism of the Evil Forest, it is shown that the erosion of Ibo traditional values in the face of an aggressive and opportunistic imperial presence occurs through the interactive roles played by both clan and church in trying to assert control. As aggressive and opportunistic the imperial encroachment was, this critical portrayal of imperial expansion exists alongside a critical portrayal of Ibo cultural violence and alienation. Far from taking an exclusively peripheral perspective, this novel interlocks both the center and the periphery of the British Empire in dealing with imperial expansion. Achebe, through his creative and
insightful approach to the motif of violence and spatial symbolism establishes a standard of comparison for these (as Jameson put it) “incommensurable realities” (164).

Spatial expansion versus spatial disjunction

As concluded previously, Howards End, unlike Things Fall Apart, structurally excludes the periphery in its depiction of the empire. According to Jameson, this is so because “a significant segment of the economic system as a whole is now located … beyond the metropolis, outside … the home country, in colonies” (157). This economic spatial disjunction is responsible for the structural exclusion of the periphery. However, what Jameson does not consider is that the disjunction of the metropolitan center from the periphery is accompanied by the metropolis’s rapid transformation and expansion. How this metropolitan expansion is portrayed in Howards End is critical for our understanding of how the novel deals with imperial expansion since one could argue that the novel in fact portrays the expanding metropolis by highlighting the disjunctive aspects of its expansion. By doing so, it may deal with the cause (spatial disjunction) and not the symptom (structural occlusion) of the incomplete representation of the empire. In other words, the question addressed in the remainder of this essay is whether the novel shows awareness of the disjunction between the center and the periphery in its portrayal of the expansion of London.

In Howards End, London, like the Evil Forest in Things Fall Apart, is a spatial symbol that is somewhat paradoxically portrayed. Urban expansion and transformation is expressed in terms of this metropolitan giant and its surroundings. The city is depicted as in a state of continual “flux” and expansion (93). Further, this expansive city is portrayed not only as engulfing the surrounding countryside but as establishing itself as a cultural and artistic center. The narrator tell us “[t]o speak against London is no longer fashionable. The Earth as an artistic cult has had its day, and the literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town” (93). Even further, the city is portrayed as an inexplicable and transcendent being: “It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men … the earth is explicable … but who can explain Westminster bridge or Liverpool street in the morning – the city inhaling; or
the same thoroughfares in the evening – the city exhaling her exhausted air” (94). The
depiction of this expansive metropolis is put in stark contrast with nature; in the face
of this expansive transformation of the metropolis “Nature withdrew’ and “human
beings heard each other speak with greater difficulty, breathed less of the air, and saw
less of the sky” (93). This depiction of urban expansion has led critics to interpret it as
“Nature’s defeat” and to assert that “the city is a form of death” and a violation of
nature (Stone 260). Further, it is reminiscent of Lewis Mumford’s words about the
metropolis: “[t]he metropolis is rank with forms of negative vitality. Nature and
human nature, violated in this environment, come back in destructive forms” (260,
qtd. in Stone). Modern metropolitan life is portrayed with a mixed sense of spatial
expansion (in itself a rather positive image) and encroachment of the city on
inviolable spaces. Furthermore, London’s expansion not only encroaches on these
spaces but also disconnects Londoners from them; nature withdraws and people are
isolated from nature and each other. Thus, the cultural ascendency and expansion of
the modern metropolis is juxtaposed with the violation of and disconnection from
spaces of natural and human life.

This portrayal of metropolitan expansion suggests that Forster does show
awareness of the disjunction between the center and the periphery. His portrayal of
the expansion of London is tempered with its disjunction from its peripheral spaces.
This critical depiction of the expansion of the metropolitan center may be interpreted
as a commentary on imperial expansion and the disjunction with the periphery
associated with it. However, does the novel make the connection between
metropolitan and imperial expansion more explicit? The following passage is useful
in linking London as an expansive “tract of quivering grey” to imperial expansion
(94):

At the chalk pit a motor passed … In it was another type whom Nature
favours – the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the
earth. It breeds as quickly as the yeoman, and as soundly; strong is the
temptation to claim it as a super yeoman, who carries his country’s
virtues overseas. But the Imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He
is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though
his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey.

(HE 284)

There is thus a clear parallel drawn between urban and imperial expansion. Their
expansiveness (which, again, by itself seems virtuous and “super yeoman” like) is
described by an adjective used commonly for both, “grey”. What is more, the “motor”
referred to in the passage links imperial expansion with the metropolis since motor vehicles are highly associated with metropolitan life. In the above passage, cosmopolitanism resulting from imperial expansion results in the inheritance of a “grey” earth by the imperialist, although he is not aware of it. Besides this, the imperialist is referred to as a “destroyer”. This portrayal is reminiscent of the points raised earlier about the portrayal of the expansion of London. The first point about the violation of spaces expanded upon is a theme that unites the two expansions. The second point about disconnection, however, is more subtle. There is no clear declaration that the imperialist is disconnected from the spaces he expands upon (unlike the Londoner). However, the imperialist’s ignorance about his own status as “destroyer” and his complete absorption with his own image as the carrier of his country’s virtues overseas implies that he is disconnected from the world overseas, at least with regard to the destruction he is causing.

Indeed, the epigraph, “Only connect …,” seems to refer to this sense of disconnection (HE). These are words that are associated with the Wilcox-Schlegel conflict and particularly Henry and Margaret’s nuptial struggles. The narrator states “Margaret greeted her lord [Henry] with peculiar tenderness … Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of a rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion” (162). The narrator continues to state “[o]nly connect! That was the whole of her sermon … [l]ive in fragments no longer” (163). Henry is unable to connect and it is Margaret’s role here to save him from this inability. “But she failed” the narrator states, because of his “obtuseness … [h]e simply did not notice … that Helen and Frieda were hostile, or that Tibby was not interested in currant plantations: he never noticed the lights and shades in the greyest conversation” (163). This obtuseness marks Henry’s disconnection with the things and people around him. Moreover, Henry is a personification of both the imperial and the metropolitan. Not only does he show all the familiar Simmelian symptoms of metropolitan life (impersonality, “calculating economic egoism”, antipathy) (185-88, qtd. in Whitworth), but he also shows the disconnection from areas surrounding the metropolis discussed earlier. During their brief stay in Oniton, Margaret falls in love with the place and wishes to move there with Henry after their marriage and contemplates “the conversion of Henry … to a rural life” (191). It is in rural spaces that “one might see life steadily and see it whole … connect” the narrator states (235). Henry, however, is oblivious to her concerns. His is an existence of practical
acquisitions of property and he has a limited understanding of sentimental and esthetic attachment. Thus, this dynamic of disconnection captured by the symbolic metropolis, London, has its reflection in the Wilcox-Schlegel divide and Henry’s embodiment of the metropolitan and the imperial and his obtuse disconnection with his surroundings (a metropolitan and imperial trait as discussed earlier).

Jameson’s argument about “spatial disjunction” is interesting to examine with these points in mind. The disjunction between the peripheral colonies and the home country/metropolitan center, and the resulting incomplete representation of the empire, seems to be acknowledged in Forster’s portrayal of spatial expansion. In his portrayal of urban expansion he associates it with violation of and disconnection from the spaces engulfed by London. The novel then depicts imperial expansion in a similar language used for the metropolis. A parallel is drawn between the metropolis and imperialism in their violation of and disconnection with the spaces they expand upon. A further parallel is drawn between this metropolitan/imperial dynamic and Henry’s characterization (and the Wilcox-Schlegel conflict): that is, his personification of both the metropolitan and the imperial and his disconnection from his surroundings. These features are a significant modification of Jameson’s theory. *Howards End* does indeed show an incomplete literary representation of the British Empire brought about by the disjunction between the center and the periphery. The novel seems, however, to be aware of this disjunction. It does not address it by imagining and representing the existence of the peripheral colonies but rather by critically portraying spatial expansion and by emphasizing its effects of disjunction and destruction.

To sum up, while *Howards End* structurally excludes the peripheral colonies of the empire, *Things Fall Apart* incorporates the center in a fascinating way. Achebe interweaves the story of the expansive center and the encroached upon periphery through his insightful approach of the motif of violence and the discontinuous dynamic captured by his spatial symbol, the Evil Forest. His approach vividly illustrates the social fragmentation of space in Ibo culture. This image of fragmentation, in turn, constitutes Achebe’s portrayal of modern imperialism. What is more, Forster’s portrayal of his own spatial symbol, London, makes the assertion that his novel (and literary genre) is disconnected from peripheral colonies rather simplistic. Through his subtle manipulation of metropolitan expansion and the sense of spatial expansion associated with it, and by mixing with it a sense of disjunction
and destruction, Forster skilfully demonstrates critical awareness of the spatial disjunction that accompanies imperial expansion.

These findings have important theoretical implications with regard to modern imperialism. Insisting that the experience of modernity and modern imperialism in the former imperial centers and the former imperial peripheries are mutually exclusive and incommensurable is to miss a great deal of how the experience has been conceptualized. In the novels of this study, we see that the disjunction is not so much between the center and the periphery as in the experience of modernity and modern imperialism themselves. Paradoxically, it is this sense of disjunction that accompanies modern imperialism that deteritorializes and unites the experiences of the center and the periphery.
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Works Cited


