



The Impact of Fever in English Literature: A Critical Study of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe and Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

Samima Aktar

Department of English

Government General Degree College, Tehatta

aktarsamima955@gmail.com

Abstract

Fever frequently appears in literature not merely as a medical condition but as a symbolic device representing psychological crisis, spiritual transformation, and social instability. This paper examines the literary significance of fever in two influential novels: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In *Robinson Crusoe*, fever functions as a decisive turning point that leads the protagonist toward repentance and religious awakening. In contrast, fever in *Things Fall Apart* operates within a communal cultural framework associated with Igbo cosmology and traditional spiritual beliefs. Through comparative textual analysis, the study demonstrates that fever functions both as a narrative catalyst and as a metaphor for wider historical tensions. By linking bodily suffering with moral, cultural, and spiritual transformation, fever reveals how literary narratives reflect the fragile relationship between the human body and the socio-cultural world in which it exists.

Keywords: Fever, illness symbolism, colonialism, postcolonialism, repentance, transformation, literature and medicine

Introduction

Illness has always been a powerful motif in literary narratives because it allows writers to explore the vulnerability of the human body while simultaneously revealing deeper psychological and cultural tensions. Among the many forms of illness represented in literature, fever occupies a



particularly significant place. The intense physical condition of fever often produces delirium, hallucination, and emotional vulnerability. These symptoms allow authors to place characters in moments of crisis that lead to reflection, transformation, or revelation. Consequently, fever frequently functions as both a literal medical condition and a symbolic representation of emotional or spiritual turmoil.

In many literary traditions, illness represents the moment when the human body becomes a site of meaning. The physical suffering experienced by characters often mirrors internal struggles such as guilt, anxiety, moral conflict, or existential uncertainty. For this reason, fever frequently appears in narratives where characters undergo dramatic psychological or spiritual changes. In religious literature, fever may signify divine punishment or spiritual purification, while in social narratives it may represent cultural instability or moral corruption within society.

The symbolic significance of fever becomes particularly evident in colonial and postcolonial literature. In colonial narratives, illness often reflects the psychological and moral struggles of individuals confronting unfamiliar environments. In postcolonial literature, illness frequently symbolizes cultural disruption, colonial intrusion, or the breakdown of traditional social systems. Fever therefore becomes an important literary device through which writers examine the relationship between the individual body and the broader historical forces that shape human experience.

This paper examines the literary role of fever in two important novels written in different historical contexts: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Although these texts belong to different literary traditions and centuries, both novels use fever as a crucial narrative element that influences character development and thematic meaning. By comparing these two works, the study aims to demonstrate how fever can function as a symbolic bridge between physical illness and cultural transformation.

Literature Review

The representation of illness in literature has attracted increasing scholarly attention within the interdisciplinary field of medical humanities. Scholars working in this field examine how literary



texts portray disease, bodily suffering, and medical practices. They also analyze how illness becomes a metaphor for psychological or social conditions. Within early modern European literature, illness often appears as a manifestation of divine judgment or moral weakness. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* exemplifies this tradition by presenting illness as a moment of spiritual crisis that leads to repentance.

Critics frequently interpret Crusoe's fever as a turning point in the narrative structure of the novel. During his illness Crusoe experiences vivid hallucinations that he interprets as signs of divine punishment. These visions force him to reflect on his earlier life, particularly his disobedience toward his father and his rejection of religious guidance. As a result of this experience, Crusoe begins to read the Bible regularly and develops a deeper sense of religious faith. Many scholars therefore argue that the fever episode represents the beginning of Crusoe's moral and spiritual transformation.

In contrast, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* presents illness within a very different cultural framework. Achebe's novel depicts the social and cultural life of Igbo society before and during the arrival of European colonialism. Within this cultural context, illness is frequently interpreted through traditional cosmology rather than purely medical explanations. For example, the illness of Ezinma is associated with the Igbo belief in *ogbanje* spirits, which are thought to cause repeated illness or death among children.

Scholars have noted that Achebe uses such representations of illness to emphasize the complexity and coherence of indigenous African belief systems. Rather than portraying traditional practices as irrational, Achebe presents them as part of a deeply rooted cultural worldview that explains human suffering through spiritual and communal relationships. The representation of fever therefore becomes a narrative strategy that allows Achebe to portray the richness of Igbo culture while simultaneously highlighting the disruptions caused by colonial intervention.

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis as its primary research method. The research focuses on close reading of key passages from *Robinson Crusoe* and *Things Fall Apart* in which



fever or illness plays a significant narrative role. Through careful examination of these passages, the study identifies the symbolic meanings attached to fever within each text. The analysis is supported by secondary sources drawn from literary criticism, colonial studies, and medical humanities scholarship.

Comparative literary analysis forms an important methodological component of this research. By placing the two novels side by side, the study highlights the different cultural and ideological contexts that shape the representation of illness. The goal of the methodology is therefore not only to interpret individual passages but also to reveal broader patterns in the literary use of illness as a symbolic device.

Analysis and Interpretation

In *Robinson Crusoe*, fever appears at a critical moment in the protagonist's life. After surviving a shipwreck and establishing a fragile existence on the island, Crusoe initially focuses on practical tasks necessary for survival. However, his sudden illness interrupts this routine and forces him into a state of physical helplessness. During the fever he experiences vivid dreams and visions that appear to represent divine judgment. These visions confront him with the consequences of his earlier disobedience and moral negligence.

The fever episode therefore functions as a moment of spiritual awakening. Before the illness, Crusoe largely interprets his isolation as a matter of misfortune. After recovering from the fever, he begins to view his circumstances through a religious framework. He interprets his survival as evidence of divine providence and begins to cultivate a disciplined spiritual life that includes regular prayer and Bible reading. In this sense, fever becomes a metaphor for moral purification and the rebirth of religious faith.

In *Things Fall Apart*, fever appears within a communal and cultural framework that differs significantly from Crusoe's individual experience. The illness of Ezinma is interpreted through Igbo spiritual beliefs rather than through Christian moral categories. According to these beliefs, Ezinma is an ogbanje child whose spirit repeatedly causes illness in order to torment her mother.

The treatment of the illness therefore involves ritual practices performed by the medicine man Okagbue, who searches for the iyi-uwa object believed to connect the child with the spirit world.

Achebe uses this episode to illustrate the collective nature of Igbo society. Ezinma's illness becomes an event that mobilizes the entire family and community. Rather than isolating the child, the community responds through ritual cooperation and shared belief. This representation contrasts sharply with the solitary nature of Crusoe's illness on the deserted island.

Comparative Discussion

The comparison between Robinson Crusoe and Things Fall Apart reveals how cultural context shapes the literary representation of illness. In Defoe's novel fever reinforces the ideological values of Protestant individualism and personal repentance. Crusoe's illness leads him toward self-discipline and spiritual self-examination. In Achebe's novel, however, illness is interpreted through communal belief systems that emphasize collective identity and cultural continuity.

These contrasting interpretations reflect broader differences between colonial and postcolonial literary traditions. Robinson Crusoe emerges from a period of European colonial expansion and celebrates individual enterprise and survival. Things Fall Apart, by contrast, critiques colonial domination and emphasizes the cultural complexity of African societies before colonial disruption. Fever therefore becomes a symbolic device through which each author explores the relationship between the individual and the community within different historical contexts.

Conclusion

The analysis of fever in Robinson Crusoe and Things Fall Apart demonstrates the powerful role that illness can play within literary narratives. Fever functions not only as a description of physical suffering but also as a symbolic representation of spiritual awakening, cultural belief, and historical transformation. In Robinson Crusoe, fever leads to personal repentance and reinforces the moral framework of Protestant Christianity. In Things Fall Apart, fever reflects the communal worldview of Igbo society and highlights the importance of cultural tradition.



By comparing these two texts, the study illustrates how the literary representation of illness can reveal deeper insights into the cultural and historical forces that shape human experience. Fever ultimately emerges as a metaphor for both individual transformation and collective cultural meaning, demonstrating the enduring significance of illness as a theme within world literature.



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