

## African Culture in Achebe's Things Fall Apart: a Stylistic Inquiry

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**Abstract:** African literature is a manifestation of African society, culture, historical and political experience. African literary artists therefore aim at among others, projecting their culture to the world. This is a feat that Achebe and his contemporaries have accomplished with admiration. Thus, an African artist functions in the African society as the recorder of the mores and experience of his people, society and the voice of vision of his time. These are the parameters for judging Achebe in his Things Fall Apart. Working through the canons of the Hallidayan Systemic linguistics and Stylistics, this exploration reveals specifically African admirable and commendable system of government, justice, religion, and respect for life, love and marriage, even before colonization. Though Achebe's hallmark is the revitalization, exposition and celebration of the African cultural heritage, he nevertheless reveals those intolerable aspects of his Igbo culture that needed to be eliminated without hesitation.

**Keywords:** African Literature, Stylistics, Culture and Cultural Revitalization

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has been described in diverse ways. In the first place, literature is seen as the totality of all works of imagination, which project the life of a people. That is why Eyo, Mufuaya and Foy (2011) define literature as a body of written or oral works such as novels, poetry and drama, which use words to stimulate the imagination and unique vision of life of the reader. This therefore means that literature is a creative universal form of expression which addresses the emotional, spiritual and intellectual concerns of human beings. Again, literature is described as any creative, factual or imaginative work about people and what they have done, believe and have created or are willing to create. Osunbade in Awa (2014) is of the opinion that literature mirrors the events of the past, transmits social-cultural values and creates great awareness of the tradition of its enabling society. Osunbade's description of literature is in consonance with the explanation posited by Obichukwu in Awa (2014: 1) that

Literature displays man in his society by trying to explain human experiences and conducts, indicating the past and the present, while peering into the future.

From the eyes of Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009:23) we see literature as

An imaginative act whose expression is dependent on words and through the use of imagination, he selects, orders and interprets life experience, employing words as his basic tool.

Going by the above elucidation of literature, literature is a creative writing which projects the life of a people in a society in the past, present while peering into the future and its main function is education, entertainment, signification and aesthetics. In other words, literature is a "humanistic discipline" which aims at improving man's lot on earth. Consequently, literature does not portray the positive side of human's activities and actions but also the negative consequence for a reversal and improvement of society and people. This calls for a balance representation of views. This onerous task is the position of Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart*.

### II. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

#### *African Literature*

In sequence with the above, African Literature to be specific, is a reflection of African culture in African Society, African historical, political, social and religious experiences. Ojaide in Awa (2015:53) visualizes African literature as

Literary works that articulate the socio-cultural and historical imperatives of the African people which is written by any African who is a citizen of the African country.

African literature therefore are the literary works of the continent, which consists of a body of works in different languages and various genres, ranging from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages such as French, Portuguese and English. Much of Contemporary African Literature reveals disillusionment and dissent with current events. Achebe as a result, wrote vividly in English and his native Igbo of the hardships experienced during the struggle against British colonial rule. Achebe's characters intersperse their speech vividly with proverbs. Generally, African writers taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society (Welker, 2016).

The Western world viewed Africans as inferior set of people who lack self-governance, literacy, intelligence and culture, and are backwards and uncivilized consequently. Thus, Africans were seen as primitive. Looking at the precariousness of the situation, especially where most Africans were trying to run away from their culture to internalize the supposedly superior white European civilization, Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* changes the label on Africans as primordial savages and thus presents African societies with their enviable traditions, ideals, values and behaviour. Achebe thus, as a novelist who is a teacher, subtly educates Africans and non-Africans of the beauty of African culture, and to reinstate a sense of pride in African culture and belief in themselves and so, jettison the years of denigration and self abasement (Achebe, 1975). He consequently portrays the complex, advanced, social institutions of Igbo culture prior to the coming of the white man. All these rhyme with the opinions of Brain in Agatucci (1998) that Achebe creates a portrait of African culture in his *Things Fall Apart*, in order to inform the outside world that African culture contains much value. Invariably and obviously, Achebe aims at conveying to his people and the world that Africans did not here of culture from Europe and that their societies were not mindless after all but have a philosophy and culture of great depth, value, beauty, signification and dignity.

Agatucci also believes that Achebe's intervention at the moment is timely because many Africans at the period were ready to accept the European judgement that African had no history or culture worthy of consideration and internalization. So, Achebe no doubt helped his people and society regain their belief in themselves. He consequently, achieved cultural revitalization in the English Language. Achebe proudly revealed Igbo creative expressions, skills traditional resources which include design, oral history, literature, music, drama, celebrations, indigenous botanical properties and medicine, architectural forms, historic sites, traditional technologies, traditional healing methods, patterns of social interactions and beauty to the world. So it is obvious that Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* represents the cultural roots of the Igbo in order to provide self confidence. All these, he exposed using the English language laced with Igbo Language.

### III. ACHEBE'S LANGUAGE

Achebe expresses the essence of the Igbo culture through language. This attests to the irrefutability of the bond between language and literature. In confirming this opinion, Brain (1993:47) opines that "literature is a manifestation of people's culture and cannot be filtered out or separated from language." Leech and Short (1981:2) affirm to the judgment of Brain by saying that "the smallest detail of language can unlock the soul of a literary work. Hence, literature is language in use and man's supreme use of language is discovered in literature." In line with this, Emezue (2012: vi) holds that "No serious study of language and literature is complete without recourse to language". So, "the language of literature cannot be understood without a proper appreciation of how language works." (Leech and Short 1981).

Achebe writes in English and used the western literary forms unlike other African writers like Ngugi Wa'Thiongo who wrote in his native Gukuju language and rejected the colonial masters' tongue. Achebe (1975) gives his reason thus:

I choose to write in African English to express a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a worldwide language.

As a result, of this impetus, most of the African literary writers, Achebe's literary sons and daughters created a variety of the English language that suits the African environment, purpose and experience. Accordingly, Achebe brags:

I have been given the language (English) and I intend to stretch it to accommodate my African thoughts.

The English language has subsequently become Igbo, Nigerian and African property and in the words of Adebija (2004:20) "English has been applied to African numerous conveniences and sensibilities." As a consequence, Adebija adds, "just as a domestic servant does what his master requires, English language is made to do precisely what Nigerians and indeed Africans want it to do." Therefore, the English language is no longer alien to Africa and since "English is a guest who is not willing to go," Africans and indeed Achebe decides to make optimal use of it in his literary works, especially in his *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe (1975) appreciates the bravery and ingenuity of African writers but bearing in mind that English language belongs to another and the universality of the language, he makes the following proposal:

The African writer should aim to use English the way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that the values as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He shall aim at fashioning out English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences.

Again Achebe further instructs:

English of the African will have to be a new English still in common with its ancestral home but altered to suit the new African surroundings.

In line with these suggestions, Waters (2007: 21) approves and acknowledges Nigerian English as something new, different and unique and suitable for the onerous task for African and indeed Nigerian writers. But Achebe's language extends beyond the ambience of Nigerian English. He writes in the English language and uses Western forms of literary expressions while attempting to construct an image of Africa full of respect and regalia recognizing the demands of cosmopolitan international audience. In consequence, Achebe extends the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought patterns and so expanding by enriching the English language by including some distinctive linguistic features of African orature. Awa (2014:13) consequently maintains:

Interestingly these distinctive features are not limiting factors to the English language or the message of the author but extension as they are new linguistic elements and literary innovations to the English language.

In conclusion, Achebe and indeed, African writers control the English language and other colonial languages by altering the linguistic features and this is a distinctive African style.

#### **IV. STYLE AND STYLISTICS**

Language variations and the distinctiveness of features within and across texts are the purview of stylistics (Awa, 2014). So, Ojaide (1997: 93) sees stylistics as "the correctness, clarity, elegance and appropriateness in what is said or written." It explores the ability of writers to use languages properly by choosing from the linguistic repertoires those formal elements which meet the communicative needs of a particular situation. Style has been ascribed as significant choices by the functionalists while Khalid distinguishes style as individualistic, functionalistic and practical. The individualistic quality of style sees style as the idiosyncratic elements that characterize an author, which accounts for his peculiar selection of language elements that make his writing distinct and unique. Style therefore becomes a person's method of expressing his thought. Hence, style is described as a particular way an individual communicates his thoughts, which distinguishes him from others (Awa, 2014). This agrees with the opinion of Chapman in Idowu (2010) that style is a dress of thought, a person's method of expressing his thought, which distinguishes him from others. So, style refers to personal idiosyncrasies and in conclusion, Agrawal (2010) maintains that style is "how a speaker or a writer says what he says." In all, therefore style can be seen as the management of language, an application of the right word in the right place in order to achieve aesthetics, signification and communication. So, in the words of Askia (2010:10)

Style entails a writer's choice of word, diction, narrative techniques, sentence patterning and structuring, direct translation, descriptive quality; tonal level and speech pattern among other distinctive qualities that mark one out of a crowd of the likes of him.

So, style is the writer's unique way of thinking about his subjects and his unique way of presenting it for specific readers and purpose. It results from linguistic choices, which effectively expressed the writer's unique thought or feeling, thus making writing more convincing (Awa, 2014).

From the foregoing, we deduce that the author is at liberty to use his language as he deems fit. Therefore, style is the totality of a writer's use of language, which is thus, idiosyncratic. Thus, style is the man himself (Emezue, 2012). "Stylus virum arguit" (The style proclaims the man). Leech and Short (1985 : 54) maintain that "Each writer has a linguistic thumb print, which is an individual's combination of his linguistic habits, which somehow betrays him or her in all he writes." This means that a writer stamps his personality on all that he writes. Thus, every writer of literature uses language in his or her own peculiar manner (Abugu, 2010). Consequently, Kamalu (2008) consents that a writer has no style if his linguistic features is not clearly discernible.

Achebe therefore, makes elegant use of proverbs, folktales and religious tenets, which are conveyed through prayers, speeches and songs. This local texture of the language is winsome and natural and therefore brings people closer to reality and more effective. (Larson, 1978)

#### **V. THEORETICAL REVIEW**

This study is anchored on the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar developed by the British linguist M.A.K Halliday. Systemic Functional Grammar is also known as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Hallidayan Linguistics or Systemic Linguistics (SL). In Systemic Functional Linguistics, three strata make up the linguistic system; meaning (semantic), sound (phonology) and wording or lexis grammar (syntax) morphology and Lexis.

Trask and Stockwell (2007) observe that Systemicists ask the following questions:

- (1) What is the writer or speaker trying to do?
- (2) What linguistic devices are available to him to do it?
- (3) What basis does he make his choices?

Eggins (2005) adds that all systemic linguists are interested in language as a social semiotic. This means how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life. Consequently, the systemic linguists advanced four main theatrical claims about language thus:

- (1) That language is functional.
- (2) That its function is to make meanings.
- (3) That these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they are exchanged.
- (4) That the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meaning by choosing.

Thus, language is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic. So, the systemic approach is functional-semantic approach to language. (Eggins, 2005).

Halliday (1975) therefore develops three kinds of social metafunctions.

- (1) Ideational metafunction uses language to organize and express our experiences (perception) of the world around us and about us.
- (2) Interpersonal metafunction uses language to establish and maintain all human relationships.
- (3) Textual metafunction uses language for the internal organization of texts.

Language is used to transmit culture and articulate, ideas and the use of the language depends on context and situation. This inquiry therefore applies the systemic linguistics to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in order to unravel how language functions in this text to unravel the author's personal style.

## **VI. REFLECTIONS OF AFRICAN CULTURE IN ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART**

African literature is a manifestation of African culture, African society, African historical, political, social and religious experiences. Thus, it is a reflection and celebration of African culture (Awa, 2006). Achebe therefore depicts an Igbo society which has dignity and prominence in his *Things Fall Apart*. All the same, Achebe did not forget to present the weaknesses in the Igbo culture that require drastic and immediate change thus, eliminating the gloomy ones for the growth and development of his revered society.

### ***Achebe admires the democratic government in Igbo culture.***

Democracy is a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule directly or through freely elected representatives. So, Abraham Lincoln the 16<sup>th</sup> President of America describes Democracy as "The government of the people, by the people and for the people". This is opposed to dictatorship, where absolute power is vested in a tyrant. Achebe presents the Igbo society that has a democratic system of government. For instance, before important decisions are taken, the elders or "Ndichie" and others gather together at the village square or Ilo or at the market place to take decisions that affect the people or individuals. The community is in control and the collective will and decision of the members of the community prevail. This is what obtains in a democratic dispensation. This is seen in chapter 1, P.9, where the people were informed that a daughter of Umuofia was killed in Mbaino. Collectively the people agreed that Umuofia should follow the law-going to war with Umuofia or offering Umuofia a young man and a young Virgin as compensation for the death of the daughter of Umuofia.

Many others spoke, and at the end it was decided to follow the normal course of action (P. 9)

### ***Achebe describes the Efficient System of Justice in his Igbo culture***

Justice is another feature of democracy. Justice is the legal or philosophical theory by which fairness is administered. Achebe's Igbo system adopts an effective and efficient system of justice. This makes Igbo system noble. Disputes in the community are presented to the elders or the egwugwu, the greatest and respected masked spirits of the land, which is played by the titled men of the clan. This is the tribunal who takes decisions after hearing from the both sides. This is observed in chapter ten of *Things Fall Apart*, where the village holds a ceremonial gathering to administer justice. The village ancestral spirits, known as egwugwu are presented with the case of Uzowulu, who reports that his in-laws took his wife Mgbafor and therefore, request the return of her bride price to him. Odukwe, Mgbafor's brother clarifies that his family took Mgbafor to rescue her from daily brutal beatings by Uzowulu, her husband. He maintains that his sister will return to her husband only if he swears never to beat her again. The egwugwu consult and their leader, the Evil Forest, gave a verdict, that Uzowulu takes wine to his in-laws and begs his wife to come back home. He reminds Uzowulu that "fighting a woman is not braver.

*It is not bravery when a man fights a woman P. 75*

Odukwu is also instructed to accept his brother-in-law's offer and Mgbafor returns to her husband.

To Uzowulu,

Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you P.75

To Odukwe

If your in-law brings wine to you let your sister go with him. P. 75

Trouble erupts as this acceptable system of justice is interfered with by the intrusion of the district commissioners and court messengers, Christianity.

#### ***Chinua Achebe's society also has a highly developed system of religion***

The Achebe Igbo has a highly developed system of religion which worked as efficiently as the Christian religion. Both Christianity and the Igbo religion approve morality, honesty, straightforwardness and respect for the God. This agrees with Rhoades (1993) similarities between the Christian religion and the Igbo religion thus:

- (i) Both systems have only one Supreme God, Chukwu for the Igbo.
- (ii) Both gods have messengers on earth, Christ for the Christians and the wooden idols for the Igbo.
- (iii) Both religions support humility.
- (iv) Both gods are vengeful only when they are disregarded.

But the differences between the two religions reveals that the Igbo society is more tolerant than the Christian religion; indicating that the Igbo are more civilized and superior than the Christians who have come to convert them and bring civilization to them. The Igbo culture accepts to worship the gods and spirits of his Fathers even if the gods are not the Igbo gods but the European religion prefers man to fight for his fellow over religion. In the first place, outcastes were given power. Western religion breaks order in the Umuofia society by taking in outcastes and men without title were given power. Immediately power was taken from the clan by force, Western or Christianity destroys the old methods of justice and order, thereby creating a catastrophic scenario for the clan's former way of life.

#### ***Dignity and Respect for Life in Achebe's society***

The Igbo society has respect and right to life. Thus, a man has an unassailable right to his or her life. They believe that life is awesome. Consequently, killing members of one's own clan or taking one's own life is forbidden, even if advertently done. This is why Obuefi Ezeudu warns Okonkwo not to kill Ikemefuna and even when Okonkwo kills Ichie Ezeudu's son unknowingly, Okonkwo was sent on exile. Thus, Obierika sees Okonkwo killing of Ikemefuna as a crime against the Earth.

It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families ...but of Oracle said that my Son should be killed I neither would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it. (P. 53)

#### ***Celebration of Marriage and Love in Achebe's society***

Achebe also celebrates marriage and love in his *Things Fall Apart*. So, Marriage has been an age long celebration. There is therefore equality between men and women. The Achebe's Igbo society consequently admires equality between men and women. As a result, men like Ogbuefi Ndulue of Ire village who respects their wives are revered. While men like Uzowulu who prefers to beat their wives even in pregnancy are reprimanded as portrayed in these words;

It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena has one mind. I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could do nothing without telling her. (P. 54)

But temperamental ones like Okonkwo describes such tolerant and noble men like Ndulue as "weak" I didn't know that, said Okonkwo. I thought he was a strong man in his youth (P. 54).

Consequently, Okonkwo's family is in turmoil. He is harsh with his wives and children and even kills Ikemefuna because he is afraid of being thought weak like his father and his harshness becomes sacrilegious because he could not even keep the law of the land that forbids him from beating his wife on the eve of the Peace Week. Okonkwo's destruction in the end therefore comes as a result of no peace, love and harmony around him and in him; all culminating in hanging himself. Though, this came as a result of the unjust system of the white men. Okonkwo takes the blame partly because of his defiance of the laws of the clan (William, 1977). A man who loves himself and his family looks before he leaps.

#### ***Achebe also celebrates the beauty of Igbo art, music and poetry in his Things Fall Apart.***

He portrays his Igbo culture and society which flourishes on the pillars of art, music and poetry. It is common to decorate walls and bodies at ceremonies. Even hair is shaved in beautiful patterns. Stories are didactic or moralistic as they teach about the gods and passing on the culture to the younger generations. So, Okonkwo's stories of violence are meant to incite men to strength. Igbo music is very important and different instruments are used at different occasions. Igbo music is very important and different instruments are used on different occasions. It is part of Igbo rituals and usually talents are usually hunted. There are also many gods

and to keep them happy, they obey them. Kolanuts suggests hospitality and are offered to guests while cowry shell is used as money.

***Among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded highly.***

Therefore, language is a very important part of Igbo culture and it is highly stylized by the use of fanciful and didactic proverbs so that points are made without inflicting pains on the listeners during conversations. This is why Achebe says that “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”. This implies that proverbs though highly symbolic, are the only strong weapon of impressing words into the minds of individuals. So, proverbs are matchboxes used to ignite words or conversations because they imbibe some truth. As a result, the Igbo use their proverbs to teach industry and hard work when they say;

If a Child washed his hands, he could eat with Kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and he ate with Kings and Elders. (P. 7)

This proverb reiterates the importance and dignity of labor (hard work). So, the Igbo recognizes that though hard work even a person from a poor background like Okonkwo can overcome his father's laziness to make himself “one of the greatest men of his time”(P. 7). This concurs with the words of Shakespeare in his “Twelfth Night”

Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness. And others have greatness thrust upon them.

Okonkwo did not have greatness thrust on him but achieved greatness through hard work. This is what the Igbo society expects from her citizenry. Again, instead of Unoka to say he would not pay him his debt, Unoka dismisses Okoye subtly by saying

Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. (P.6)

This means that Unoka will pay his large debts before his small ones.

***The Igbo also rebuffs bride.***

So proverbs are also used to teach and establish morality which is the hallmark of the Igbo society. Though, the Igbo respect industry and success they will not tolerate proud men like Okonkwo when they say:

Looking at a Kings mouth, one would think he never suckled from his mother's breast. (P. 21)

Again, to repulse pride, the Igbo use this proverb.

Those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humbled (P. 21)

These proverbs are meted at Okonkwo when he describes a man who contradicts him at a meeting because he had no title. Okonkwo accepted them and apologizes to them. So, the Igbo accept humility and frown at arrogance.

## VII. CONCLUSION

African writers control the colonial tongue by altering the linguistic features of such languages. Specifically, Achebe manipulates the English Language in his *Things Fall Apart* to present the Igbo culture as splendid but not without the cultural storms, which should be purged in order to embrace modernity. So, Achebe's Igbo society know that change and progress are needful and indispensable. They recognize that some of their customs are becoming harmful and unproductive and they are ready to thrust them aside. For instance, when Okonkwo broke the Week of Peace, the punishment meted to him was not as obnoxious as before. He was only asked to make an offering to Ani. Formerly, a man who broke the Week of Peace was dragged through the village until he dies. Again, when Okonkwo was sent on exile, some people were not happy because they felt the punishment was unjust because his offence was inadvertent. The only mercy was that he would come back after seven years. Obierika also thought about his innocent twins that were thrown away.

(P. 100) So, change becomes inevitable because the culture spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve.

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