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Proverbs against empire: Heteroglossia and decolonial realism in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart are not ornamental traces of orality or ethnographic markers of "authentic" African culture. They are structural to the novel's politics of form. Read through a revised Bakhtinian account of heteroglossia and a decolonial understanding of realism, proverbial discourse emerges as a mode of social reasoning, ethical deliberation, political memory, and narrative world-making. Achebe uses proverbs to stage internally differentiated forms of Igbo speech while opposing them to the flattening languages of missionary abstraction, colonial law, and imperial archive. The article shows that proverbial speech operates at three interconnected levels: as social jurisprudence within Umuofia, as a formal device that multiplies ideological accents within the novel, and as an anti-imperial strategy for remaking English into a medium adequate to African historical experience. At the same time, the novel does not idealize precolonial life: it exposes the gendered and hierarchical limits of proverbial authority. The result is a decolonial realism grounded in plurality rather than ethnographic summary.

KEYWORDS: Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, proverbs, heteroglossia, decolonial realism, African literature, orality, colonial archive

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Introduction

At the end of Things Fall Apart, the District Commissioner imagines reducing Okonkwo's life, Umuofia's history, and the violent complexity of colonial encounter to a few sentences in a future administrative book. The scene is often read as Achebe's most explicit indictment of imperial narration, and rightly so. Yet its force depends on what has preceded it: nearly the whole novel has been spent building a world that cannot be reduced to the prose of administrative summary. That world is not made only by description, plot, or anthropological detail. It is made by speech—dense, allusive, communal, contentious, and historically sedimented speech. Above all, it is made by proverbs.

The most quoted formulation in Achebe's novel tells us that proverbs are "the palm-oil with which words are eaten." That line has become almost too familiar; it is often repeated as shorthand for Achebe's relation to orality, or for the supposedly decorative Africanness of his style. Yet the line is best understood not as a picturesque gloss on native custom but as a compressed statement of narrative method. Proverbs in Things Fall Apart do not merely season dialogue. They lubricate social exchange, organize memory, authorize argument, mediate conflict, and instruct the reader in how meaning circulates within Umuofia.[1]

The critical tradition has long recognized the importance of Achebe's proverb use. Scholars have shown that proverbs in African fiction register oral inheritance, encode communal values, and reshape literary English. Those insights remain indispensable. But they are not sufficient for describing what proverbs do in Things Fall Apart. Too often, criticism still treats them as cultural texture, as evidence of oral residue, or as part of the novel's ethnographic thickening of setting. This article argues for a stronger claim: proverbial discourse is structural to the novel's politics of form. It is one of the chief means by which Achebe transforms the realist novel into an arena of competing social knowledges and, in doing so, resists the monologic simplifications of empire.

My central claim is that proverb use in Things Fall Apart operates at three interconnected levels. First, proverbs are a social and political technology within Igbo life. They help distribute authority, conduct deliberation, frame reciprocity, and preserve memory. Second, they function as a formally heteroglossic element within the novel. By carrying prior voices, social values, and situational judgments into present speech, proverbs thicken dialogue with ideological history. Third, they are an anti-imperial aesthetic strategy. Achebe's proverbs remake the English novel from within, enabling it to represent African historical life without either surrendering to colonial categories of legibility or pretending to recover an untouched precolonial purity.

To describe that formal achievement, I use the term decolonial realism. By this I do not mean a stable school, nor a celebratory slogan. I mean a mode of realism that renders colonial modernity from within the speech-worlds it attempts to dominate. Decolonial realism is realist because it is attentive to institutions, conflict, causality, law, kinship, labor, and historical transformation. It is decolonial because it refuses the colonial monopoly on explanation: it lets local categories of value and knowledge shape what counts as the real.[2] Such realism does not deny contradiction. On the contrary, its decolonial force lies partly in its refusal to idealize the colonized community into a harmonious whole.

This article therefore also argues against any sentimental account of proverbial discourse. Proverbs in Things Fall Apart do not simply democratize speech, nor do they guarantee ethical adequacy. Their authority is unevenly distributed. Elders and titled men speak with greater sanctioned force than women, youth, outcasts, or converts. Proverbial speech can consolidate hierarchy even as it resists imperial reduction. Achebe's realism becomes more rather than less compelling because it allows these limits to remain visible.

The essay proceeds in six stages. It first revisits scholarship on Achebe, orality, language politics, and realism in order to identify the precise gap this article addresses. It then develops a theoretical framework that reads heteroglossia through African literary criticism and decolonial thought rather than simply importing Bakhtin as a universal template. The four analytical sections that follow consider proverbs as social jurisprudence, as acts of translation within Achebe's English, as counters to imperial monologue, and as forms marked by internal fractures of gender, status, and historical change. The conclusion returns to the Commissioner's imagined paragraph to argue that Achebe's most decisive anti-imperial gesture is formal: he opposes colonial abbreviation with a realism of layered speech.

Literature Review

Achebe's own essays remain the necessary starting point for any account of language in Things Fall Apart. In "The African Writer and the English Language," he rejects both the fantasy of a pure return to an uncontaminated linguistic origin and the demand that African experience be poured unchanged into metropolitan forms. English, he insists, must be made to bear African experience; it must be, in his memorable formulation, a language altered to suit "new African surroundings." He also resists the crude idea that African writing in English is merely a literal transcription from the mother tongue. What matters is not mechanical transfer but formal pressure: English is bent, stressed, and inflected until it can carry local speech habits, social memory, and conceptual worlds.[3] Home and Exile extends this position by narrating colonial education as both wound and enabling contradiction. Achebe does not deny the violence of colonial language; he writes from within that damage while refusing to concede interpretive authority to colonial discourse.

This position has shaped a large body of criticism on Achebe's cultural and formal importance. Simon Gikandi influentially describes Achebe as central to the "invention" of African culture in modern literary discourse, not because he fabricates a tradition ex nihilo, but because he transforms available idioms into a literary form capable of countering colonial representation. Dan Izevbaye likewise emphasizes Achebe's foundational role in the African novel, especially his negotiation of the oral-literate interface and the relation between communal world-making and narrative form.[4] Such scholarship rightly resists the idea that Things Fall Apart is merely a mirror of a preexisting culture. It is itself a formal act of cultural production.

Work on orality has deepened this account, though not always in ways fully adequate to the politics of proverb use. Emmanuel Obiechina's classic essay on narrative proverbs shows that African novels do not simply insert proverbs as detachable ornaments; they use them as carriers of meaning, value, and structure. Isidore Okpewho's foundational work on African oral literature insists on the artistic density of oral forms and on the mistake of treating them as preliterary residue. Karin Barber, from a different disciplinary location, has powerfully argued that oral and written textualities should not be opposed in simple binaries, since texts circulate through publics, genres, and social acts in ways that exceed medium. More recently, Senayon Olaoluwa has again challenged any artificial opposition between orality and writing in African literature, emphasizing their complementarity rather than mutual exclusion.[5] These interventions are indispensable for understanding why proverbs matter in Achebe. Yet they sometimes stop short of asking how proverbial discourse shapes the novel's political struggle over legibility itself.

A second body of criticism centers on the language question. Achebe is often read against Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose critique of African writing in colonial languages remains essential. Ngũgĩ's Decolonising the Mind exposes the intimate relation between language and domination, and insists that linguistic decolonization cannot be a merely stylistic matter.[6] His challenge remains salutary, especially against easy celebrations of Achebe's English as though linguistic appropriation were automatically liberatory. Yet the opposition between Achebe and Ngũgĩ can itself become schematic. What matters here is not to choose sides but to see that Things Fall Apart stages a different tactic of decolonization: not linguistic exit, but formal pressure from within. Proverbs are crucial to that tactic because they prevent English from operating as a neutral medium.

A third body of scholarship reopens the question of realism. Susan Z. Andrade has shown that realism in African fiction has often been either naively affirmed as transparent social reflection or prematurely dismissed as aesthetically conservative. Ato Quayson, in a major reassessment of Things Fall Apart, argues that the novel's realism should not be treated as simple mimesis but as a restructuring of multiple cultural subtexts. Kwaku Larbi Korang likewise reads Achebe's realism and tragedy as part of a larger project of making a post-Eurocentric humanity. Emily Hyde complicates matters further by showing how flatness, style, and visual illustration complicate any easy opposition between realism and modernist mediation. Russell West-Pavlov, in a more recent intervention, argues that Achebe's novel inhabits both modernist and realist energies rather than choosing between them.[7] These critics have done much to free Achebe from a reductive realism. But even here, proverbs are more often treated as one feature among others than as a central mechanism by which realism becomes plurivocal and anti-imperial.

Recent work on history, law, and colonial narration offers a more direct path toward the present argument. Emad Mirmotahari reads Things Fall Apart as historiographic project as well as historical source, emphasizing its multidiscursive effort to generate knowledge about the past. Neil ten Kortenaar's work on law in Achebe's

novels illuminates the contrast between indigenous reciprocity and the British claim to a monopoly on violence under the sign of the rule of law. Daniel Mengara, meanwhile, analyzes the novel as a staging of successive phases of colonial penetration. These critics show that the novel is centrally concerned with institutions of judgment, narration, and power, not merely with cultural description.[8] Yet the precise role proverbs play in organizing those institutions has not been fully theorized.

Feminist and gender-conscious criticism supplies another necessary correction. Linda Strong-Leek's "reading as a woman" demonstrates how male-centered criticism too often reproduces the novel's patriarchal distribution of visibility, overlooking the violence suffered by women and the significance of characters such as Ekwefi and Ezinma. Rhonda Cobham likewise shows that teaching Things Fall Apart requires confronting both the novel's historical richness and its gendered problematics.[9] Such work is vital for resisting romantic accounts of proverbially mediated communal life. If proverbs are forms of authority, we must ask who is authorized to speak proverbially and whose experience is subordinated within the social worlds proverbs help regulate.

More recent scholarship underscores the continuing relevance of proverb-centered readings. Francis Nyamnjoh explores Achebe's proverbs as resources for thinking African becoming as unfinished and dialogic rather than fixed. Hannah Fagan, in a 2025 essay on the "spectres" of the District Commissioner, shows how Achebe's final scene continues to structure contemporary African historical fiction's relation to archive and authority.[10] These studies point toward the argument advanced here: proverbs in Things Fall Apart are best understood as mobile sites where memory, argument, identity, and contestation converge.

The gap, then, is not that scholars have ignored proverbs, orality, or realism. It is that these matters are too often discussed separately. Proverbs are treated as style; realism as mode; colonialism as theme; archive as ending. What remains insufficiently theorized is the way proverbial discourse binds these concerns together. In Things Fall Apart, proverbs are one of the principal formal means by which Achebe organizes social knowledge, stages heteroglossia, and contests the colonial reduction of African history to administratively useful narrative. Proverbs are not an embellishment added to realism. They are one of the conditions of its decolonial possibility.

Theoretical Framework: Heteroglossia, Decoloniality, and Realist Form

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia remains useful for reading Achebe, provided it is handled critically. In Bakhtin, heteroglossia names the plurality of social languages within the novel: dialects, professional jargons, generational idioms, inherited forms of authority, and competing ideological accents. It refers not merely to multiple voices but to the social stratification of speech itself. Utterances arrive already burdened with prior uses, values, and conflicts. The novel becomes powerful, for Bakhtin, when it can stage these collisions rather than suppress them under a single authoritative discourse.[11]

There are obvious risks in applying this framework to an African novel as though Bakhtin provided a universally adequate theory. His examples and assumptions emerge from European literary history, and his account of the novel often presumes an opposition to epic that does not map neatly onto the oral-literate histories of African verbal art. To read Things Fall Apart only through Bakhtin would therefore be methodologically careless. But to refuse the concept entirely would also be unnecessary. Once revised through African literary criticism, heteroglossia helps name something Achebe unmistakably does: he composes a narrative world in which speech is never singular, where communal norms, gendered authority, religious speech, ritual utterance, colonial administration, missionary theology, rumor, insult, praise, and proverb all contend to define reality.

African oral-literary scholarship helps correct and enrich this use of Bakhtin. Okpewho's insistence on the artistry and internal complexity of oral forms, Barber's attention to textual circulation across oral and written publics, and Olaoluwa's rejection of a rigid oral/written binary all push us to see proverbs not as survivals from a premodern elsewhere but as living, socially mobile forms.[12] Proverbs are especially apt vehicles of heteroglossia because they condense prior speech into present judgment. Each proverb arrives with a history of prior use, a reservoir of communal recognition, and an openness to strategic reaccentuation. When a character speaks proverbially, the utterance is never only his or hers; it is also a citation of collective memory, even when deployed for partisan ends.

To heteroglossia I join a decolonial account of knowledge and representation. Aníbal Quijano's account of coloniality of power remains foundational here because it shows that colonialism survives not only as political domination but as a global ordering of knowledge, race, labor, and authority. Coloniality is epistemic as well

as institutional: it installs Eurocentric ways of knowing as universal. Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, in a different but related register, describe decolonial aestheSis as a challenge to the sensory and conceptual order through which modernity naturalizes coloniality.[13] These formulations do not translate directly into literary method, but they help clarify what is at stake in Achebe's formal decisions. If colonialism works partly by monopolizing what counts as intelligible reality, then a decolonial novel must do more than supply new content. It must reorganize the terms of legibility.

This is what I mean by decolonial realism. The phrase is not intended to replace older accounts of realism in African fiction, nor to claim that Achebe belongs to a fully coherent decolonial school avant la lettre. Rather, it names a specific formal tendency: a realist practice that renders institutions, conflict, and historical transformation while displacing colonial discourse from its position as the sole arbiter of rationality. In Things Fall Apart, reality is not organized by the gaze of empire but by the interactions of kinship, title, labor, ritual, fear, story, law, and proverb. Colonial discourse enters this field and tries to reformat it, but it never fully succeeds—not even in the novel's bleak ending.

This definition matters because the term "decolonial realism" could otherwise become either vague or triumphalist. It does not mean that the novel simply restores indigenous truth against colonial falsehood. Achebe is too subtle for such reversals. His realism is decolonial precisely because it refuses purity. It records internal violence, gender asymmetry, generational conflict, and exclusion alongside colonial aggression. Nor does it imply that proverbial speech is automatically emancipatory. Proverbs can ratify hierarchy as well as contest external domination. The point is that the novel's realism becomes decolonial not by idealizing precolonial life, but by making its internally differentiated social languages the ground from which colonial intrusion is apprehended and judged.

Methodologically, then, this article combines close reading with formal and historicized analysis. It attends to specific scenes of proverb use, to shifts in narrative register, to the relation between English prose and implied Igbo speech, and to the contrast between communal discourse and colonial or missionary language. The aim is not to mine the novel for anthropological data, but to show how its forms of speech are themselves political. Heteroglossia and decolonial realism are not labels placed on top of the text. They are names for the work the novel performs.

Analysis I: Proverbs as Social Jurisprudence and Communal Reason

Things Fall Apart begins by establishing that speech in Umuofia is not merely expressive; it is constitutive. People do not simply state positions. They approach one another through indirection, analogy, and allusive forms that test social intelligence. Proverbs are central to this economy because they link judgment to remembered patterns rather than to abstract rule. In this sense, they operate as a kind of social jurisprudence. They do not replace custom or institution, but they help interpret them in lived situations.

The early exchange between Okoye and Unoka offers a deceptively small example. Okoye visits Unoka to collect a debt, yet he does not begin with the demand itself. He first performs sociability, asks after ordinary matters, and only gradually moves toward the financial issue. The scene is often read as comic evidence of Unoka's fecklessness. But formally, it does more than characterize a debtor. It initiates the reader into a pragmatic world in which obligations are not managed through blunt contractual language alone. The social relation is part of the debt, and the debt is part of the relation. The indirectness of the exchange is not inefficiency; it is a way of situating economic obligation within reciprocity, shame, tact, and communal knowledge.

What makes this scene significant is not only its cultural specificity but its epistemological challenge to a colonial rationality that would later claim to replace such "informality" with transparent law. Achebe does not present proverbially mediated exchange as a quaint alternative to bureaucracy. He presents it as a complex and intelligible mode of reasoning that requires contextual competence. To understand what is being negotiated, the reader must learn how speech works in this world. That pedagogical demand is political. It refuses the premise that African social life becomes legible only when restated in the language of administrative modernity.

The conversation between Okonkwo and Nwakibie develops this point more explicitly. When the older man hears Okonkwo's request for yam seeds, he responds by testing him through anecdote and proverb. Industry, self-making, ancestry, and fortune are all weighed through figurative speech rather than through a purely calculative logic. This scene is usually cited for its famous proverbial lessons about achievement, but

its deeper importance lies in the way it stages the social distribution of trust. Nwakibie does not merely grant or deny a loan. He interprets the moral and genealogical credibility of the petitioner. Proverbs enable that interpretation because they connect present conduct to collectively legible patterns.

Here proverb use is inseparable from hierarchy. Nwakibie can afford the authority of gnomic speech because he occupies a recognized social position. Okonkwo, by contrast, must demonstrate that he knows how to inhabit such speech without yet fully controlling it. Proverbs thus function neither as democratic common sense nor as elite property alone. They are shared, but not equally. They are accessible, yet differentially licensed. Achebe's realism is sharpest when it registers this unevenness without flattening the form into domination. Proverbial speech creates a public ethic, but one stratified by age, gender, title, and accomplishment.

The rebuke Okonkwo receives during the Week of Peace offers a different dimension of this social jurisprudence. When he beats Ojiugo, the community's censure does not appear primarily as a defense of individual domestic rights. The wrong is articulated in relation to ritual time, agricultural renewal, and the communal order presided over by Ani. A modern liberal reader may understandably find such censure inadequate because the wife's suffering is recognized indirectly and unevenly. Yet Achebe's point is not to ask the reader to celebrate the arrangement. It is to show that law in Umuofia is not reducible to brute force or private will. Even Okonkwo's patriarchal authority is answerable to a normative order larger than himself. Proverbially inflected speech is one of the means by which that order is voiced, remembered, and enforced.

The egwugwu trial of Uzowulu and his wife's family makes the juridical function of such speech even clearer. The hearing is public, ritualized, and dramatized, but it is not irrational. Each party narrates grievance, injury, and claim; each is heard through a framework that values restoration over abstract punishment. The key point is not that this process is superior in every respect to modern law. It is that Achebe insists upon its procedural seriousness. Neil ten Kortenaar has shown that in Achebe's novels of colonization, village groups negotiate violence through reciprocity before colonial law claims the exclusive authority of "rule of law." That insight is crucial here.[14] The egwugwu scene reveals that communal jurisprudence already exists; colonial legality does not enter a vacuum but displaces a different legal rationality.

Proverbs are central to that rationality because they mediate between norm and case. They do not operate like codified statutes. Instead, they mobilize analogy, memory, and shared recognition to interpret events. Their power lies precisely in their flexibility: they are stable enough to carry communal authority, yet open enough to be reactivated differently across situations. This makes them ideal instruments of deliberation in a society where law is public, oral, and socially embedded. It also makes them vulnerable to contestation.

That contestation becomes visible in assembly scenes, especially when titled men disagree or when Nwaka uses powerful speech to oppose a political line associated with more established authority. Proverbs in such scenes do not resolve difference; they sharpen it. They permit dissent to appear as culturally authorized rather than merely deviant. This is a crucial dimension of heteroglossia within Igbo society itself. Before colonialism enters as an external force, Umuofia is already internally differentiated by competing emphases, rival judgments, and unequal but real forms of public contest. Achebe's refusal to smooth over such difference is one reason the novel's realism remains persuasive.

The political importance of proverbs, then, lies not only in what they preserve, but in how they organize public reasoning. They are epistemic instruments. They convert memory into judgment, relationship into argument, and social experience into shareable form. In doing so, they oppose the later colonial assumption that African life lacks institutions of rational adjudication until Europe arrives. Achebe's anti-imperial claim is embedded not only in what his novel says about law, but in how its characters speak law into being.

Analysis II: Proverbs, Translation, and the Remaking of English

If proverbs are social jurisprudence within Umuofia, they are also the means by which Achebe remakes English as literary medium. This is not simply a matter of lexical borrowing or local color. Achebe's English does not transparently reproduce Igbo speech, nor does it stand outside it as an explanatory metalanguage. Rather, the novel places English under pressure from implied Igbo idiom, creating a prose whose semantic logic is frequently doubled. The reader encounters English sentences that are perfectly intelligible and yet subtly estranged, because their figurative movement presupposes another speech-world.

Achebe's own statements about language make this pressure explicit. He argues that the African writer's

English must be capable of carrying African experience, and he warns against both sterile standardization and naïve literalism. What matters is not innocence but mastery: English must be transformed, not merely occupied.[15] Things Fall Apart enacts this principle through its handling of proverbs. The proverbially charged sentence is rarely explained away into a neutral paraphrase. Instead, it remains metaphorical, compact, and context-dependent. The reader must inhabit its logic rather than receive a gloss in advance.

The famous statement about palm-oil is again exemplary. It is often cited as a proposition about African eloquence, but within the novel it also functions as a reading instruction. It tells the reader that words in this world are not consumed dry. Social meaning depends upon a mediating substance: figurative speech oils the relation between speaker and listener, assertion and reception, conflict and tact. The proverb therefore names not only a cultural habit but a theory of communication. Achebe turns that theory into narrative form by making proverbs indispensable to the novel's own movement of meaning.

This formal strategy matters because it prevents English from pretending to be a neutral vehicle. A proverb rendered into English is still marked by the density of another linguistic world. Its imagery may be accessible, but its force exceeds dictionary meaning. One must grasp when and why it is spoken, what authority it invokes, what relation it reconfigures, and what prior uses it tacitly cites. Achebe thus creates a layered linguistic experience: the sentence is readable in English, but its full pragmatic life depends on the reader's apprenticeship in an Igbo-oriented economy of meaning.

Obiechina's account of narrative proverbs helps clarify this layering. He shows that African novels use proverbs not only as quoted sayings but as embedded narrative structures, miniaturized stories, and interpretive shortcuts that carry cultural value.[16] In Things Fall Apart, such forms proliferate beyond direct speech. The narrator's idiom often moves with proverbial compression; folktales, songs, and remembered sayings circulate across the text; judgments are frequently cast through analogy rather than explicit abstraction. This creates a textual field where oral and written modes are not in opposition. The novel becomes, instead, a site where writing stores and redistributes the energies of social speech.

Barber's and Olaoluwa's work on the oral-literate interface is especially useful here. Both resist the notion that the written African novel merely preserves a prior oral authenticity. Texts do not simply transfer intact across media; they are reconstituted through circulation, address, and public uptake.[17] Achebe's proverbs exemplify this reconstitution. Once placed in English prose, they do not cease to be communal utterances, but neither do they remain untouched. They become literary devices without ceasing to index social life. That doubleness is central to the novel's formal intelligence.

The difficulty of translating Things Fall Apart into other languages further underlines this point. Recent scholarship on the novel's translation history has shown that proverbs pose unusual challenges precisely because Achebe's English is already a site of cultural and rhetorical mediation. Translators confront not a transparent source text but a text that has itself staged an internal translation.[18] This fact retrospectively clarifies the achievement of the novel's English. Achebe has not simply written in the colonizer's language; he has produced a prose whose very legibility depends on the persistence of what English cannot fully domesticate.

This is where the contrast with Ngũgĩ becomes especially illuminating. Ngũgĩ is right to insist that the language question is political to the core. But Achebe's practice suggests that writing in English need not entail the surrender of epistemic authority if the language itself is remade through indigenous speech forms. That remaking is never complete and never innocent. English remains marked by colonial power, and the novel remains partially answerable to metropolitan intelligibility. Yet proverbs complicate that answerability. They slow interpretation, demand contextual labor, and refuse the easy transparency on which colonial reading depends.

We can now see why proverb use is not a detachable element of style. It is one of the means by which Achebe provincializes English from within. The novel's famous accessibility is therefore misleading if taken to imply simplicity. Its sentences often appear plain, but they are semantically thick. Proverbs give Achebe an English that is neither merely local nor merely universal. They make possible a literary language in which translation remains active rather than resolved. In that unresolved activity lies much of the novel's decolonial force.

Analysis III: Heteroglossia versus Imperial Monologue

The arrival of missionaries and colonial officials does not introduce language into an otherwise homogeneous world. It inserts new social languages into a field already dense with internal differentiation. This is why heteroglossia is a better description of Things Fall Apart than either cultural opposition or tragic collision alone. The novel stages not just two worlds, African and European, but multiple competing modes of speech, each carrying its own assumptions about authority, truth, and community. Proverbs become newly significant in this setting because they sharpen the contrast between plural social reasoning and the monologic simplifications of empire.

Even before white authority consolidates itself, Achebe prepares the ground through scenes of rumor and uncertain report. The story of Abame's destruction, for instance, reaches Umuofia through collective narration, warning, analogy, and partial knowledge. These are not signs of primitive confusion. They are signs that historical events are apprehended through socially distributed interpretation. People reason with incomplete evidence, compare present danger to remembered forms, and speak through stories because empire first appears as disturbance before it becomes institution. Proverbially inflected discourse here is exploratory. It tests possibilities rather than issuing immediate certainties.

The conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna offers one of the novel's most striking examples of dialogic contact. The missionary and the clan elder do not agree, and their exchange occurs within an asymmetrical history, yet each recognizes the other as capable of reasoning. The scene is crucial because it shows that colonial encounter is not always presented in the novel as sheer incomprehension. There are moments of conceptual negotiation, however fragile. Such moments matter because they reveal what imperial domination must eventually suppress in order to become effective: reciprocal argument.

By contrast, Reverend Smith's zealotry marks the hardening of missionary language into moral monologue. Nuance gives way to absolute division. Complexity becomes error; mediation becomes weakness. The transition from Brown to Smith is therefore not simply a change of personality. It is a change in discursive regime. Under Brown, one still glimpses the possibility of dialogic engagement. Under Smith, the space for negotiated meaning narrows sharply. The same narrowing occurs in the colonial court and prison, where local life is reformatted into fines, warrants, and punishable categories.

Kortenaar's work on law is especially clarifying here. He argues that Achebe's novels juxtapose reciprocal village negotiation with the colonial claim to a monopoly on legitimate violence under the sign of the rule of law.[19] In Things Fall Apart, that claim appears not only in institutions but in linguistic style. Colonial administration speaks as if its categories were self-evident. It translates relationships into offenses, public assemblies into disorder, and communal dignity into subjection. The messengers and court officials operate through command, threat, and procedural abbreviation. Their language is thin not because it lacks effect, but because it aspires to eliminate the plurality of meanings through which Umuofia has governed itself.

The imprisonment of the village leaders dramatizes this discursive violence with particular clarity. Their humiliation is bodily, economic, and symbolic, but it is also linguistic. They are addressed as subjects to be managed, not as participants in a shared field of judgment. The fine imposed upon them abstracts injury from context and rearticulates it within colonial legality. Mengara's account of the stages of colonial intrusion is helpful here because it reminds us that empire in the novel proceeds through successive encroachments rather than a single cataclysmic event.[20] Language is one of the key instruments of that progression. Each stage narrows the range of speech that can count as authoritative.

This is why the District Commissioner's concluding fantasy of authorship matters so much. His projected book, with its taxonomic title and promise of pacification, represents the imperial archive in miniature. It will convert living histories into manageable knowledge, producing Africa as an object of administrative comprehension. Recent work on colonial archives in African literature stresses that African writing is often composed with one eye on this archival apparatus, whether to answer, displace, or sabotage it.[21] Achebe's ending crystallizes that relation. The Commissioner imagines a paragraph; Achebe has already written a novel. The difference is not only scale. It is ontological. The paragraph depends on reduction. The novel depends on irreducible plurality.

The Commissioner's monologue is thus the negative image of proverbial discourse. Proverbs condense social knowledge without erasing its situational density; the imperial paragraph abbreviates in order to govern.

Proverbs open utterance onto prior voices; the archive closes history into the voice of the administrator. Proverbs circulate among speakers with unequal but real reciprocity; the Commissioner writes from above and after, converting the dead into data. Achebe's most devastating irony lies in making the reader feel how much cannot survive that conversion precisely because the preceding narrative has immersed us in speech forms the Commissioner cannot hear.

The afterlife of this scene in contemporary African writing confirms its continuing force. Hannah Fagan's recent essay shows how the District Commissioner persists as a spectral figure for later historical fiction, a reminder that colonial narration is never fully past.[22] What Things Fall Apart contributes to that afterlife is not merely thematic anti-colonialism. It offers a formal lesson: imperial authority operates by abbreviation, by substituting summary for social thickness. Achebe counters that power not only by denouncing it, but by building a heteroglossic world in which no single language can finally master the real.

Analysis IV: Limits, Fractures, and Uneven Speech

To argue that proverbs resist empire is not to argue that they are innocent. One of the strengths of Things Fall Apart is that it never turns indigenous speech into a utopian alternative unmarked by force. The public prestige of proverbial authority is unevenly distributed. Elder men, titled speakers, and ritual offices command greater recognized access to authoritative utterance than women, children, outcasts, or those already drifting toward the mission. If we fail to register this asymmetry, the concept of decolonial realism collapses into nostalgia.

Okonkwo himself is a warning against any easy celebration of communally sanctioned masculinity. He is proficient in the codes of speech and status that govern Umuofia, yet he repeatedly distorts them through fear, rigidity, and violence. His horror of weakness narrows his capacity to hear the full range of meanings available within his own society. He treats masculine authority as if it were identical with domination. The novel repeatedly suggests otherwise. He is censured during the Week of Peace; he is unsettled by gentler modes of relation; he misreads both his son and the historical crisis around him. Proverbs do not rescue him from tragic error because wisdom in the novel is social, not automatically personal.

Gender criticism has shown how much depends on reading these tensions carefully. Strong-Leek argues that male-centered criticism often ignores the suffering of Okonkwo's wives and the significance of female characters whose experience is not reducible to his trajectory. She also insists that figures such as Ekwefi and Ezinma reveal forms of relation and resilience underread by patriarchal criticism.[23] That argument is indispensable here. The authority of proverbial public speech does not mean that women are absent from the novel's moral intelligence. It means, rather, that authority and visibility are not evenly aligned.

Indeed, one of Achebe's subtler achievements is to show that women participate in the novel's ethical and cosmological order in ways not fully captured by formal public speech. Ani, the earth goddess, anchors the norm violated during the Week of Peace. Chielo, as priestess, can command actions before which even Okonkwo hesitates. Ekwefi's perception and endurance, and the extraordinary intimacy between her and Ezinma, create another register of knowledge, one rooted less in public jurisprudence than in bodily care, memory, and affective alertness. These are not simply private residues outside politics. They are part of the social real. Yet the novel also makes clear that such forms of authority do not translate into equal access to the prestige of public deliberation. Cobham's pedagogical reflections are useful precisely because they resist two temptations at once: reading the novel as simply sexist and dismissible, or celebrating it as transparent cultural truth.[24] The difficulty is not solved by choosing between admiration and denunciation. Things Fall Apart remains powerful because it stages a society whose normative forms are both meaningful and uneven. Proverbs participate in that unevenness. They can discipline ego and preserve communal memory, but they can also normalize hierarchies that structure whose pain counts, whose reasoning is heard, and whose voice bears generalizable authority.

The same is true of status and belonging. The attraction of the mission for osu, for the socially wounded, and for figures such as Nwoye is not explained solely by external seduction. Colonialism succeeds in part because it enters through fractures already present. The novel does not suggest that converts are simply dupes. Some are responding to exclusions the old order has failed to repair. This point matters for the argument about proverbs. If proverbially mediated communal discourse were fully inclusive, the colonial challenge would appear only as external imposition. Achebe refuses that simplification. His realism insists that empire exploits vulnerability, but also that local orders generate vulnerability of their own.

Ato Quayson's insistence that Things Fall Apart should not be read as straightforward representational transparency is useful here again. The novel is a restructuring of cultural subtexts, not a passive recording of them.[25] That restructuring allows Achebe to preserve the force of proverbial speech while also exposing its limits. Proverbs in the novel are neither simply conservative nor simply liberatory. They are instruments of social intelligence embedded in unequal relations. They oppose imperial monologue, but they do not dissolve patriarchy, seniority, or exclusion.

This is precisely why the term decolonial realism remains useful. The novel's decolonial force does not depend on turning Umuofia into a redeemed alternative modernity. It depends on showing that colonialism confronts a complex society with its own institutions of judgment, its own fractures, and its own contested distributions of voice. By allowing those internal contradictions to remain visible, Achebe avoids the trap of anti-colonial romanticism. The realism is decolonial because it refuses imperial caricature; it is realism because it refuses compensatory idealization.

Conclusion

This article has argued that proverbs in Things Fall Apart are not decorative reminders of oral culture but structural elements in Achebe's politics of form. They matter not only because they "Africanize" English, though they do that. They matter because they organize social reasoning within Umuofia, multiply ideological accents within the novel, and oppose the flattening languages of missionary abstraction, colonial law, and imperial archive. Proverbs are epistemic instruments before they are aesthetic ornaments.

Reading the novel through a revised concept of heteroglossia makes this visible. Proverbs are powerful not because they represent communal unanimity, but because they carry prior voices into present conflict. They make speech thick with memory, analogy, and authority. In doing so, they help the novel stage a world in which reality is not given by one sovereign discourse. This is the core of its formal anti-imperialism. Achebe opposes the colonial will to abbreviation with a narrative committed to socially layered utterance.

The term decolonial realism is meant to name this commitment. It describes a realism that remains attentive to institutions, material life, and historical transformation while relocating interpretive authority away from colonial discourse. Such realism is not the recovery of pristine indigeneity. It is a mode of representing social life from within the speech forms through which that life understands itself. In Things Fall Apart, proverbs are among the chief means by which that relocation occurs. They help English register a world it cannot simply contain on metropolitan terms.

At the same time, the article has insisted on the limits of proverbial authority. Proverbs in the novel are unequally distributed and sometimes complicit with hierarchy. Women, youth, converts, and outcasts do not inhabit the public economy of proverbially authorized speech in the same way that titled men do. Achebe's achievement lies not in concealing this asymmetry but in including it within the same realist frame that contests colonial power. The novel's anti-imperial force would be weaker, not stronger, if it depended on idealizing the precolonial community.

What follows from this reading is a more integrated account of form in Achebe. Proverbs should not be cordoned off as a local stylistic feature while realism is discussed elsewhere, orality elsewhere, colonialism elsewhere. In Things Fall Apart these questions converge. The struggle over empire is also a struggle over what counts as knowledge, who gets to speak for the social whole, and what kind of language can render a people historically real. Achebe's answer is not a manifesto but a form: a novel whose English is continually interrupted and enabled by proverbially mediated speech.

The Commissioner wanted a paragraph. Achebe gave him a world of speaking subjects. That difference remains one of the decisive achievements of African fiction. It reminds us that empire does not only conquer territories; it abbreviates realities. And it reminds us, too, that one of literature's decolonial tasks is to make such abbreviation impossible.

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