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Projecting the African society and cultural values: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

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Abstract

Since literature is acknowledged as a reflector of the modern or contemporary society, it is therefore not out of place to claim that a writer's experiences, community or society influences his or her work. Individual writers have pertinent themes that drive their focus in their creative works and these themes more often align with the society. Hence, to separate the society from literature is to take life from an individual. Achebe's quest to present the theme of social disintegration and misplaced cultural identity undoubtedly presents the setting of the Nigerian community to his readers. This paper aimed at investigating the techniques that Achebe employs and critically reviewing his presentation of the African society and cultural values in his creative work; *Things Fall Apart*. Again, it analyzed and appreciated the relevance, the creativity and inventiveness of African writers in writing on the various subject matters and themes that reside in the African society and depict the African values or culture. The findings revealed that Achebe successfully uses diction, figurative language, proverbs, characterization and narrative technique to project the African society and cultural values.

Keywords: Achebe, African values, culture, Igbo tradition, *Things Fall Apart*

Public Interest Statement

There is no gainsaying the fact that this study is very significant in that it offers readers the opportunity to continuously engage in the long standing debate on the Africaness of the African novel. African writers however, seek to establish autonomous forms of literary works which though reflect the legacy of European works yet largely reflect the pre-colonial modes of expression of the African cultural values. One is given the understanding that African writers still have the opportunity to make their works African through the exhibition of the African culture in their works.

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Introduction

Individual writers have pertinent themes that drive their focus in their creative works and these themes more often align with the society. Chinua Achebe for example, in his quest to present the theme of social disintegration and misplaced cultural identity undoubtedly presents the setting of the Nigerian community to his readers. There is no doubt that foreign audience will find such a creative piece fascinating and educative. Many more African writers have the tendency of presenting the African society and its values either subtly or steadily. This assertion makes it judicious to accede to Mwangi's (2012) article "Modern African Literatures in European Languages", where he posits, "if there is the existence of any unifying contexts in the continent's diversity of literary works it would be the legacy of European Colonial presence, the pressures of colonialism, the modernity on traditional African cultures and the challenges of nation-building processes." This clearly shows that African writers differ in their approach towards literary works in terms of their choice of words and employment of techniques as well as the influences with which they produce these works.

African writers seek to establish autonomous forms of literary works which though reflect the legacy of European works yet largely reflect the pre-colonial modes of expression of the African cultural values. An example is Chinua Achebe's mode of expressions in *Things Fall Apart* which prioritizes the expressions of the cultural sentiments and values of the Nigerian community, equally employing proverbial sayings: a key emblem of the African society, without necessarily reflecting the European legacy of producing Literature of aesthetic value through a vivid and gratifying description of nature and its disposition.

This research work analyzes and appreciates the relevance, the creativity and inventiveness of African writers in writing on the various subject matters and themes that reside in the African society and depict the African values or culture. The researchers keenly seek to analyze and interpret the ways in which African writers use creative means to help communicate important truths to the community, delving into their significant style of presenting the African society and cultural values in their creative works. Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* which is set in pre-colonial Nigeria will be the primary text for this research. It will further investigate the techniques that Chinua Achebe employs and critically review his presentation of the African society and cultural values in his bid to project it. Again, the cultural norms, nature, practices or traditions of Africans which steer into fictional work will be examined.

Literature Review

African writers extensively portray their societies and their values as well as socio-economic setting through Literature. Many critics have diverse reservations on the creativity of Literature based in Africa. According to Joseph (1996, p. 304), "the African concept of Literature includes oral Literature, while European Literature often stresses on a separation of art from content, the African awareness of the art is all inclusive." He posits that, traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. And so, rather than write and sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking cue from oral Literature, use creativity for defined purposes aside aesthetic reasons. He argues that, without denying the important role of aesthetics in African Literature, we need to keep

in mind that, “in Africa, the object of art is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the community it helps to build.”

Some African writers began by telling stories about self, the immediate community or village, the nation or the newly formed working classes while many others began by recounting the personal experiences of schooling in the Western communities. With the voice of ordinary people, the novel claims to be the legitimate voice or broadcaster of the African community, continually recounting the African History. The African novelist tells stories to entertain and educate people in a way they understand. Like the storyteller in the traditional Oral Literature, the writer holds the audience bemused by the beauty of the narration, giving pleasure and also teaching morals and beliefs of the community, race or nation.

The question, “what is art?”, appears very illusive as many literary theories posit varying presuppositions. A critical analogy is Leo Tolstoy’s view of art as a depiction of life and experiences that an artist goes through contrary to Oscar Wilde’s assertion of art as a complete imaginary work. According to Tolstoy (1904, p. 96), “Art means the union among men, joining them together in the same feelings and indispensable for the life and progress towards the well-being of individuals and of humanity.” Tolstoy believes that, all art causes those to whom the artist’s feelings is transmitted to unite in soul with the artist and also all who receive the same impression. A good art, according to him, must be infectious in the sense that, the artist must transmit feelings that he has gone through effectively so the audience may go through similar feelings. The degree of infectiousness is however unquestionable as he suggests three conditions for the degree of infectiousness of art. These are: individuality, clearness and sincerity. This assertion elaborates the argument that this research work seeks to raise that, the African novel is the creative or aesthetic forum through which writers or artists channel their experiences and individual motivations in the sincerest and clearest way by presenting the real African society, culture and values which will seek to not only enlighten but unite all people in experiencing the same impressions the artist has of these values or culture.

Kalu (1999) examined unfamiliar literary texts and historical references as well as the Igbo cultural element that Achebe has succinctly appropriated as thematic materials. The researcher carefully examined the plot structure, setting, language use and characterization of the African novel as employed by Chinua Achebe. He equally analyzed the historical, socio-cultural and political issues that affect or influence the conception and purpose of *Things Fall Apart*. What Ogbaa sought to do in his research work was to review the culture and the conflicts between the Igbo community and the Europeans of Achebe’s time. Ogbaa identified a different hybrid genre of the novel in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a quality he calls “Africaness”- distinctive in terms of its verbal art, cultural elements and content. These elements he observed separate the African novel from the European or British corpus of the novel.

Likewise, Wehrs (2008) undertook a literary study which explored the origins of political reflection in the twentieth century African Fiction - both in colonial languages and indigenous languages. The researcher examined seven pioneering narrative representations of pre-colonial African history and society which included Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. According to Wehrs, “Achebe transfers the resistance to summative forms of thoughts and conducts that circulated

within Igbo oral discourse and social practice into novelistic representation, thereby making novelistic art a medium for communicating an ethical critique of the issue of colonialism and practices.” What Wehrs’ research work sought to do was to examine the colonial-era or pre-colonial era representations by authors who were writing mostly from within societies that were colonized and whose recreations of the past reflect indigenous accounts and communal memories. Wehrs concludes his study by exploring how much Chinua Achebe’s depiction of pre-colonial Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* may be seen as a peak of the ways of representing pre-colonial history developed in earlier fiction or folklore.

This study will be much concerned about studying the ways in which African writers use creativity to help communicate important information and the relevance or significance of associating issues of colonialism, modern socio-cultural and political issues as well as societal beliefs, customs and traditions which is contrary to what these researchers or scholars sought to do in their research works which were to critically examine the nature and the advancement of African Literature; its development over the three remarkable periods and the major thematic concerns that is reflected in the works of these African writers.

Things Fall Apart: Projecting Africa

The culture of a community or group of people is believed to be the elements that define them dissimilarly from other groups of people from other human societies. Culture entails a totality of traits, characters and beliefs that are peculiar to a people. According to Aziza (2001),

Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other groups of people, for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs (p. 31).

A community’s culture co-exists with its indigenous beliefs and ideas about what is good, right, fair and just. Societies undoubtedly place value on certain principles they deem just and acceptable. These values shape their interrelation and association to certain circumstances in their lives. What society places values on is considered important make up of that community and are referred to as cultural values. Effortlessly and consistently, readers recognize presentations of these values basically through the writer’s use of language or choice of words, style of narration, character development and plot.

Language forms part of one of the primary media through which humans communicate. Creative writers’ major asset for producing creative works is language. Writers vary in their use of language to create specific effects on their readers. Diction also entails all the figurative forms of language relevant to communicate a particular theme or idea to readers. It is the important tool that forms the basis of all literary works and it directs the focus of a writer in terms of what to and what not to include in a work. Chinua Achebe, for instance, uses his words skillfully to describe

incidents in the plot and create imagery that do not only maintain excitement and interest in the reading of the text but also steadily represent aspects of his society which he seeks to epitomize. Achebe basically shows the world how the Igbo people live through his vivid descriptions effected through words.

By its nature, the novel is a composition of words which by choice play a significant role. Comparatively, though the novel is a transition from the oral folktales into a more literal culture, however, its descriptive feature is not lost. This is in the sense that, like the storyteller who holds his audience's attention with the craft of his words which is descriptive and meaningful, the novelist stands in the similar position to communicate meaning to his audience through written words. Achebe, for instance, is successful as a writer in painting a communal portrait of his society by including descriptions of a full range of social activities, including various rituals, songs, proverbs and storytelling. An example is the vivid image he paints of the egwugwu (judgment) ceremony:

An iron gong sounded, setting up a wave of expectation in the crowd. Everyone looked in the direction of the egwugwu house. Gome, gome, gome, gome went the gong, and a powerful flute blew a high-pitched blast. Then the voices of egwugwu, guttural and awesome. The wave struck the women and children and there was a backward stampede. But it was momentary. They were already far enough where they stood and there was room for running away if any of the egwugwu should go towards them. The drum sounded again and the flute blew. The egwugwu house was now a pandemonium of quavering voices: Aru oyim de de de de dei! Filled the air as the spirits of the ancestors, just emerged from the earth, greeted themselves in their esoteric language... (p. 62)

Further, language forms part of the major aspects of people's culture. We see the depiction of Igbo culture in the novel as a result of the fact that, although the novel is written in English language, many Igbo words are present. Achebe's choice to include Igbo words in the novel sets all arguments straight that, although the novel was written in the period of post-colonialism and the Igbo community had gone through a major cultural transition, the writer had a primary motivation to depict the culture without romanticizing it and to also present its important aspects. A clear case in point is his inclusion of words like:

Amadioha - a god of thunder and lightening

Nno - an expression of welcome

Chi - a guardian spirit

Umunna - a wide group of kinsmen

Ekwe - a wooden drum

Obi - the living quarters of the family head

The appearance of Igbo words educate and incite the curiosity of Achebe's readers from other communities or regions to know and appreciate the Igbo culture through his linguistic representations.

Again, the wide use of figurative languages adds to the dexterity and creativity of the writer as vivid images are created through meaningful comparisons. For instance, the use of simile in: "Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish" (p. 1) is quickly progressed in the same paragraph with: "Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (p. 1). Achebe's use of this figurative expression in describing this particular character in the opening chapter creates imagery that enables the reader to imagine what he is communicating. He compares Okonkwo's fame to a bush-fire in the season of harmattan, something which hints at his impulsion to not leave out the 'Africaness' of his narration or description because harmattan is peculiar to West Africa. Also, his comparison of clan – "the clan was like the lizard; when it lost its tail" (p. 121) – and Okonkwo to lizard and fish respectfully makes the visual experience of his readers realistic and perceivable in the sense that, the descriptions of Achebe's central character and the comparisons drawn between his personality and tangible elements of the society make the analogy more rational and not far-fetched. Most of Achebe's figurative comparisons, however, are undertones of the realities of the society which he is representing. For example: "He was a flaming fire" (p. 108), ultimately, signify the writer's deliberate decision to present a typical African man with a fiery personality and charisma. Some underlying societal values of his community are communicated in his figurative comparison of a clan to a lizard.

Moreover, the question of gender inequality in the Igbo community is also vividly painted through imagery that helps readers decipher what the people value and do not value in terms of the role men and women played in the pre-colonial Igbo community. It is apparent that men in the pre-colonial Igbo community were more respected and honored than the women. Fathers, for instance, gave preeminence to sons more than they gave to daughters. The masculinity of and the hardworking disposition of a son was an admirable feature a father wished to behold. Achebe's description of the difficulty in cultivating yam crops is followed with a figurative expression that seeks to draw a comparison between a male and female in terms of societal roles. This is expressed as:

Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house. It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes. His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like cocoyam, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop. (p. 16)

It is Achebe's use of simple sentences that gives readers the chance to reason in between communicated messages and his figurative expressions that give readers vivid visual experiences and understanding in a relational yet creative way. Furthermore, there is the representation of the African culture by the writer's incorporation of Igbo proverbs in his novel. Proverbs generally form part of the African linguistic culture. They are noted to be "not very long statements and they carry figurative meanings which are aligned to some specific context in which they are used"

(Essuman et al. 2021, p. 93). Emphasis on the wisdom and grandeur in proverbs explains the Igbo community's value for them. The novel inculcates these proverbs to highlight the important aspects of the African community. Nevertheless, the figurative nature of these proverbs add to the mastery of creativity of the writer and establishes the novel as an extraordinary creative work that is appreciated for its "Africaness" in so many decades. The statement "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (p. 5) clearly gives an insight into the value the Igbo community has for proverbs as being absolutely indispensable in speech. Here, a character by name Okoye gives an expression to "the importance of proverbs among the people of the Igbo community as an art of conversation obviously expressed by very highly knowledgeable men" (Essuman et al. 2021: 99). Achebe emphatically states in his narrative comments that, "among the Igbo people the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten."

Likewise, Achebe uses these proverbs to communicate important values and beliefs of not just the Igbo community but the African race in particular. For example, the proverb: "if a child washes his hands he could eat with kings" is popular among not just the Igbo community but the Ashanti community of Ghana. This portrays how Achebe's reflections of his community simultaneously represent the culture of other African communities. The above proverb explains the Igbo community beliefs of superior and subordinate relationship in the social setting. It proves the society's respect for subordinates who are able to groom themselves to stand right before the prestigious members of the community. The proverb: "A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" also portrays the similar value and respect people of the Igbo community have for the conduct of humility. The dexterity of speech or speaking was considered art as proverbial sayings were considered to be a way of communicating wisdom or morals in a remarkable way.

More so, Achebe also represents storytelling or the oral tradition as precisely the kind of ritual and inherited craft passed down within the daily communal life. Walter (1968) offers insight into the distinction between an author and a teller through Achebe's novel. He illustrates the importance of the teller of the story whose hand-prints cling to the vessel of the story. According to him, in drawing the dissimilarities between Ikemefuna and Nwoye's storytelling craft, stories take on accidental marks of each teller who repeats them.

Evidently, Nwoye hears Ikemefuna tell stories and he thinks to himself: "Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folktales." Moreover, according to the narrator, "even those which Nwoye already knew were told with new freshness and the local flavor of a different clan" (p. 34). In this line of thought, Walter (1968) believes that Achebe suggests that the ways that stories take on accidental marks was as a result of change as people travelled in space and time. Authorship of a novel authenticated the writer of the story as the owner which however is not the case in storytelling. Achebe therefore, emphasizes the difference between the novel and the story equally highlighting its importance in the lives of the people. He possibly also hints at the infiniteness of the story, something that a printed text attempted to emulate as something that ought to be retained and not discarded.

Again, Achebe's characters reflect the Igbo culture and beliefs as far as naming is concerned. For instance, the character, Ezinma, Okonkwo's reincarnate daughter, helps Achebe to portray the Igbo beliefs in reincarnation. Again, all Achebe's characters maintain Igbo names so that, the only point we see an English name was when the Britishers arrived on the Igbo land. Moreover, Achebe's decision to give his characters Igbo names even though at the time he wrote his novel, the Britishers had colonized the land years on is a factor to consider. This is in the sense that, Achebe, no doubt, had a passion to tell of his community in its entirety; and in the greatest detail he could afford. This is because Achebe's characters gave him an advantage to reveal the underlying values that will more likely be overlooked by people of his community or more especially his foreign audience.

However, to the more inquisitive reader, these names, personality and roles of characters give the needed information on the community's culture and beliefs. For instance, the name Ezinma means 'the future looks good' in Igbo. Achebe's choice of Igbo names steadily gives his foreign audience the chance to appreciate the Igbo names and the underlying beliefs and meaning associated with these names as we see depicted in the novel.

In the novel, Ezinma's role as Okonkwo's reincarnate daughter who consistently dies and comes back to be born gives credence to the belief that, names have influences on an individual's life as Ezinma turns out to be the child among the many who lived longer and brought joy and compensation to her mother and father. We see Okonkwo's love and value for his daughter who looks more like her father and is known for her brave and daring disposition. Ezinma appears to be Okonkwo's hope of a good future although his wish to have had Ezinma as a son was impossible. Moreover, the role played by Ekwefi and Ezinma as female characters and as wife and daughter portrays the gender imbalance and stereotypes that existed in pre-colonial and the indigenous African society. Women or wives played supportive roles to men. A wife doubled as a homemaker and played supportive role on the farmland of her husband. Some women traded farm products harvested by husbands. The portrait of the Igbo community Achebe painted was that of a typical patriarchal society that consists of a male dominated power structure throughout the organized society. The Igbo community lacked a centralized political structure as people lived in autonomous villages and towns, ruled by council of elders. Members organized themselves in patrilineages organized along lines of descent from a father to his son.

Along with the patriarchal superiority in the Igbo community, Achebe focuses on his protagonist Okonkwo and his desire to live his life as a strong masculine figure with a title worth revered. The novel shows the domination of men in the pre-colonial Igbo community and the lengths that men are willing to go to avoid appearing feminine. Women were however, perceived to possess superior spiritual well-being and so women headed most traditional cults and shrines. In the novel for instance, the oracle is served by a female, a priestess. A woman's rightful position was to support her husband and remain under his authority submissively. Women again were considered weak and were given menial work on the farm. This explains the reason why people considered lazy men who shy away from hard work as feminine and referred to them as 'women' - Agbala. However, Achebe does not fail to acknowledge that women have similar abilities and

disposition and can have brave and hardworking personalities as their fellow men. Ezinma, for example, is a female who is known for her smartness and braveness, something that is more contrary to her gender. In contrast to Nwoye therefore, Ezinma has a more audacious disposition, something her father wished was in Nwoye.

In another breath lies the writer's style of presenting his characters. *Things Fall Apart* is a novel full of characters whose roles and personalities contribute significantly to the development of the plot. The novel depicts an Igbo community with Igbo inhabitants whose livelihood and values are things appreciated and held in high esteem. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator comments generally on the major character in the story, Okonkwo, in a descriptive and admirable way that elicits readers' attention to a possibly typical Igbo young man who is to be respected for his hard work and gallant personality. Readers get the first impression of the Igbo community's values through the sharp contrast drawn between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka. This sharp contrast is drawn through the writer's way of laying emphasis on the values the Igbo community uphold and those they don't. Unoka being a lazy man is not given any respect by people in the community. He is laughed at by all because of his huge debts and poverty which resulted in his inability to feed his wives and children. The Igbo people emphasize personal achievements through hard work. The level of disregard this community has for lazy Unoka is evidently clear in this statement: "Unoka the grown up was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer. (p. 2). These metaphoric descriptions of Unoka portrays hatred towards his attitude by the community.

Similarly, the writer presents the economic systems of the Igbo people. The economic systems of the Igbo community as Achebe practically depicted even though things had changed at the time of his writing the novel, reinforces Achebe's choice to represent the practices and culture of the Igbo people through writing. Achebe ensures his characters are placed in significant positions which each contribute to his purpose of presenting the African society, particularly the Igbo community. For instance, Achebe's characters Ezinma and Ekwefi help Achebe to clearly weave into his novel the craft or art of storytelling as part of the Igbo community. He succeeds in presenting the art of storytelling as a ritual that is fully integrated into the communal life of the people as a source of entertainment and as a moral tradition.

Moreover, a novel involves a complete narration of incidents and events resulting from the writer's imagination. The writer has the choice to choose any type of narrative style for the desired purpose for which he chooses it. The narrative style of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is the Third Person Narrative. This style of narration positions the writer as a central observer who sees all things from the angle he is positioned and lets his audience into the events of the story. In this novel, Achebe holds the whole story. He is the bearer of the entire story as he is liberated from the events and conflict of the story. The scope of his knowledge in the events of the story, thoughts and opinions of characters is not limited. This enables him to share all things he desires his audience to know. The novel, for instance, discloses or begins with Achebe giving a vivid description of Okonkwo as:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements... Okonkwo's fame had grown like bush fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him severe look. He breathed heavily and it was said that when he slept his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. (p.1)

Achebe's choice to use the Third Person Narrative technique to tell the story of his novel prepares his readers for an adventure and a description of incidents and events through a central observer's eye. Achebe decisively has much insight he wants his audience to gain of his culture and this is attainable through the use of his point of view. Significantly, the narrative style is the important tool which the writer uses to inform his audience. Right from the onset, we gain insight into Okonkwo's character and personality as being distinct from his father's. Readers are also led into day to day livelihood of the Igbo people, their religion, socio-political systems and structure, their social institutions, beliefs and values as well as the Igbo resistance to colonial rule.

Conclusion

To conclude, novels attempt to provide important moral lessons to readers. The primary function and power of art to the African writer is art that is moral or ethical. The identity of the novel in the African Igbo context is possibly a degeneration of oral tradition and yet an acknowledgement of the influences of the Igbo stories and culture in written works. Works of fiction create their cultural context which in no doubt is a portrayal of the real society. This is what enables Achebe's work to speak to its time much more than other novels could. *Things Fall Apart* exclusively concerns the imposition of colonial rule and the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe. It is a work that seeks to address the crisis of culture generated by the collapse of colonial rule. Achebe's role as a writer is to help his society to regain confidence in itself and put away the complexities of the years' degradation and indignity. In an attempt to project the African society and cultural values, he successfully uses diction, figurative language, imagery, proverbs, characterization and narrative technique. These literary techniques and style enable the writer to project the cultural values of Africa. This makes readers of the novel *Things Fall Apart* be informed and appreciative of the Africa societal and cultural values. Achebe has therefore remained the first to show in the structure and language of his novel, that the future of African writing does not lie in imitations of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral traditions.

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