

The european and african narrative techniques used in 'things fall apart' and 'pe...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The structure of the African novel is seen to be made up from two different frameworks, the external, or international, and the indigenous “ mode of discourse and artistic expression.”

1 Therefore, the typical African novel contains elements in its narrative which stem from European colonisers as well as from the customs of other African writers. The African element may even contain certain Arabic influences due to the vicinity of Arab-speaking countries. One may find such characteristics concerning the way the narrative is told to the reader in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o ‘ s *Petals of Blood*. The main focus of this essay shall be on determining which European or African narrative techniques are made use of in the novels and to analyze how they enhance the manner by which the story is delivered.

When looking at *Petals of Blood*, the reader will initially be struck by how the story is told in flashbacks from the past, rather than in narration from the ongoing present. Although nowadays flashbacks are made use of very frequently (it is said that this narrative technique originated in the Arabian Nights stories), making use of flashbacks in Achebe’s and wa Thiongo’s books part of the African element. While the story of Ilmorog and its inhabitants is told from a future point of view, the past events develop one after the other chronologically.

2 The book starts off with a reference to the present-day Ilmorog, where four people are placed under arrest, and the reader is shown a newspaper excerpt from the *Daily Mouthpiece*, announcing the death of three important Kenyan men.

3 The following chapter takes the reader back twelve years and the development of Ilmorog is gradually shown, while the story of how the four murder suspects met each other, is slowly pieced together. The flashback method is used in order for the first chapter which takes place in the present, to make sense in the reader's mind once the novel is finished. Therefore, the reader is kept in a state of curiosity and ignorance of what is fully going on, until the very end.

This enhances the reading experience of the book, which comes to resemble a detective murder mystery. Another possible reason why the author specifically picked the flashback narrative in order to reveal the events which took place throughout the twelve-year gap between the present and Munira's emergence in Ilmorog is that the past would demonstrate what led certain actions to take place.

4 Again, this is to facilitate the reader's understanding of the ending. The reader is able to link Munira's "night vigil on the mountain"

5 Announced on the first page of the novel and also Wanja's cries about a fire

6 To the final flashback where Munira heads towards Ilmorog Hill after he sets Wanja's whorehouse on fire

7 On the other hand, the use of flashbacks is not as prominent in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; however, one may find important instances of this narrative technique, for example in the first chapter when Okonkwo's

father is described as a “ failure” whose “ wife and children had barely enough to eat”

8 And also in chapter nine, when Ezinma directs the medicine man to the “ exact spot” where her ‘ iyi-uwa’ is buried.

9 In the first flashback mentioned, the reader is allowed a peek inside Okonkwo’s past so as to understand his persistence to become the epitome of masculinity in Umuofia and the surrounding nine villages. The flashback narrating Ekwefi’s numerous miscarriages and Ezinma’s ‘ iyi-uwa’ gives more light to Okonkwo’s family history, and enlightens the reader about certain traditions and superstitions in Okonkwo’s tribe, since this relates to the theme of the friction between African and European religions.

Just as in *Petals of Blood*, the flashback narrative is employed in Achebe’s novel in order to give the reader necessary information to understand the various characters’ decisions and performance in the novel. Another aspect associated with African narrative techniques is the way that African writers do not create simply one hero or protagonist throughout the entire book. In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Petals of Blood*, one may find that the main hero of both novels is the “ collective entity” of both Ilmorog and Umuofia.

10 The idea of a collective hero is closely linked to one of the main themes which characterizes both Achebe’s and wa Thiongó’s books – the idea of struggling against the invading colonizers. It does not fight the closure of a thematic past, which goes against Fanon’s beliefs of the need to recover their past and debunk the colonial myth that African history and culture is

unimportant. The element of the collective hero, however, suggests a continuing struggle and unity in spite of the changing times and conventions.

11 Ngugi endeavored to find a narrative technique which would urge the people to gather together and inspire them to fight for their own rights. This element is also evident in Fanon when he insists that the colonized writer must become “ a galvanizer of people” rather than letting them slide into passivity.

12 Fanon called this kind of narration “ literature of combat,” as it inspires awareness at a national level and encourages the struggle for liberty.

13 Therefore, the author uses literature as a collective voice belonging to the Africans, in a plea for rights and freedom. In *Petals of Blood*, one may see the element of the collective hero take place several times.

Plot-wise, this can be seen in the journey of the inhabitants of Ilmorog towards Nairobi, in order to ask the MP for help. The people of Ilmorog were of the idea that “ it is [their] turn to make things happen.”

14 One may also view the songs sung by the community as another characteristic of the collective narrative technique, as the songs unite the entire village through language. A good example occurs during the festivities for the ceremony of the circumcision, where Njugana sings a couple of verses, and is answered by a chorus.

15 The element of the collective voice is present also in *Things Fall Apart*; certain critics have also pointed out that the narrator of this novel has “ no

persona at all," nor is it given an age, sex, or any other attributes by which it can be described.

16 This narrator is often described as a character who exists in events which carry a meaning to the members of a particular settlement, and who also represents these communities' preoccupations and ideologies.

17 Therefore, the narrator is disembodied because his purpose is to symbolize the whole settlement in general. Like the narrator of *Petals of Blood*, the narrator in *Things Fall Apart* is there to give a voice to the people of Umuofia.

The unity which binds the community is seen throughout the novel, for instance in the way that the " ekwe talk[s] to the clan" in order to announce Ezeudu's death to the entire village, not just to one specific individual.

18 This shows how separate beings contribute in the making of one unit - their clan, in this case Umuofia. On the other hand, community events, such as wrestling matches, are accompanied by songs sung by the present crowd, in order to honor the winner.

19 This aspect is identical to the songs sung by the people of Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood*. Both novels include this narrative technique, in which the author is giving the community a shared spirit, since they can unite not only in their celebrations, but also in their struggle for a better life.

One further feature worth considering is the use of foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing is used in order to develop tension in the novel, as it hints to

the reader what events may take place later on in the narration. It also creates coherence throughout the novel. Examples of foreshadowing appear in old texts such as the epic of Gilgamesh and in Sophocles's Oedipus the King

20 Making foreshadowing intrinsically a European narrative technique, unlike the use of the flashback and the collective voice. Foreshadowing may be found in both *Petals of Blood* and *Things Fall Apart* and it gives the reader an idea of certain important themes or events going on in the novels.

The first epigraph for 'Part One' of *Petals of Blood* is a biblical quote which speaks of how "a white horse...came forth conquering" and again of "a pale horse: and he that sat upon him, his name was Death..."

21 These quotations from the Book of Revelations foreshadow the destruction which follows the colonization of Kenya by the Europeans, and how the Africans end up being oppressed by their conquerors. One may see the word 'Death' as a metaphoric death of African history and culture, as seen in the episode of Chui's appearance as the headmaster of the school in Siriana. Chui "did not...want to hear any more nonsense about African teachers, African history, African literature, African this and African that,"

22 And his outward appearance is described as "a black replica of Fraudsham."

23 This biblical imagery evoking the idea of an apocalypse, as well as the idea of a "worm-eaten flower"

24 Suggests an external force draining the life and resources out of Kenya.

This metaphor makes more sense to the reader when it becomes clearer that Ilmorog and Kenya are being exploited by the European colonizers and by the Kenyan elite, who seek to please the afore-mentioned conquerors for their own benefit.

25 The fact that the colonizers are aiming not to bring the light to the African nations, but to kill off anything which may help their development, is foreshadowed from the beginning of the novel, and the events of the novel strengthen its resonances.

The element of foreshadowing in *Things Fall Apart* is coincidentally also related to colonialism. Obierka describes the white colonizers as being as white as a "piece of chalk" and that according to hearsay, they "have no toes."

26 Machi responds by joking that one of these rumored white people is Amadi, a leper. Achebe concludes the chapter with the comment that "the polite name for leprosy was 'the white skin'."

27 The fact that it is the final sentence for the chapter, leads the reader to wonder whether it holds any deeper meaning, and that it is not just a casual joke or remark. In fact, Richard J. Lane suggests that this may be foreshadowing the invasion and aggression of the colonizers, in quite an intricate manner. Achebe makes it clear that the white chalk is used by guests to draw "lines on the floor" before eating kola nuts. Lane states that the action of marking lines is a symbol of "boundary-making."

28 This foreshadows the episode of the white man as a guest in the area, and given a reputedly cursed piece of land in the Evil Forest to build their church, outside the limits of their community. As time went by, the ' guest' started to infiltrate the land as the colonizers' beliefs and ideologies spread among the Africans

29 For example Nwoye forsakes his former life and family to embrace Christianity

30 Thus the white colonizer starts to ' chalk' down his own boundaries of his own while conquering more ground. The idea that the white skin is a reminder of leprosy also foreshadows how the colonizers will spread among Umuofia and the neighboring villages like a disease.

31 In fact, while Okonkwo was in exile, Obierika brings him the news that " Abame has been wiped out."

32 The colonizer here is very similar to leprosy, as the latter obliterates body parts, and the Europeans have annihilated an entire village. One must remember how a village is very much like a body as every individual is required to make the settlement whole, and therefore, Achebe's image of the leprosy used to foreshadow the colonizers' destruction, is very apt. The fact that foreshadowing, a European narrative technique, is used by both Ngugi and Achebe specifically to make the reader aware of the devastation brought about by the Europeans themselves, is very ironic and telling in itself. The reason why the authors opted for this method to construct their

novel is perhaps to reach out to the international readers, and to show other Europeans what is actually going on in Africa.

An important element one must discuss when looking at *Petals of Blood* and *Things Fall Apart* is the point of view through which the narration unfolds. Ngugi decided to tell his story through a multiplicity of viewpoints, where the past of the four main characters - Munira, Karega, Wanja and Abdullah - is exhibited to the reader as the narration unravels. While the reader is conveniently placed in one of the characters' minds, and therefore allowed to see the world through his or her perspective, the elements which built up this particular protagonist start to emerge and connect with the present, allowing the reader to make sense of the situation. A relevant example can be seen in Wanja's unconscious mumbling in the hospital when saying, "Fire...Fire...My mother's sister...my dear aunt."

33 At a later stage in the novel, the reader is privileged to learn through her point of view, that Wanja's fear of fire stems from the fact that her aunt, who was a freedom fighter, was killed by a fire.

34 Ironically, it is fire which frees Wanja from the immoral constraints of the whorehouse.

35 The manner by which Ngugi executed his novel is very popular in contemporary literature, especially those found in Europe and America, therefore his choice of perspective is another European feature in his novel. On the other hand, while the sense of multiple perspectives is not prevalent in *Things Fall Apart*, this does not mean that its point of view is not complex

enough to analyze. Written with misleadingly simple vocabulary, the narration is mostly channeled through the omniscient third-person narrator, as the teller of the story is aware of everything the characters think and feel. One may note how for instance in the introductory statement, “ Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond...Umuofia to Mbaino”

36 The main character’s description completely lacks any authorial comments. According to Dannenberg this suggests that Achebe is using an omnipresent narrator who is made up of what the local people say about Okonkwo and his achievements.

37 When the narrator goes on to describe Okonkwo’s behavior towards his family, he comments about how he “ ruled his household with a heavy hand” and how his wives and children “ lived in perpetual fear” of his tempestuous personality. Here the narrator is speaking his own voice and that of Okonkwo’s families, giving the reader two different sides of Okonkwo on which the reader may ponder.

38 Therefore, the narrator seems to be giving the reader snippets of what different people are thinking at the time, rather than what the author himself thinks. The reader will be able to construct the characters and the plot solely through what is going on on the novel. The third-person omniscient point of view is one of the most flexible narrative techniques and is widely used in both European and African literature.

One may see, therefore, how both Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o made use of both African and European narrative elements when writing their books. A reason for this may be the fact that the variety of elements contributes towards the universality of the book, as it makes its content familiar with both African and European readers. Therefore, the message of the book is effectively and efficiently delivered to readers from a wider geographical area, as the use of both African and European elements allows more readers to engage the books in a better manner. One may safely assume that the purpose of both books is that people are made aware of the real objectives of the colonizers and what the colonized Africans are going through, and this message must reach not only the African reader but the European as well.

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