

Indigenous oral
storytelling narrative
and hybridity in
postcolonial african
lite...



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A Stylistic Analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* .

' Because Achebe is able to capture the flavour of an oral society in his style and narrative organisation, *Things Fall Apart*, is able to represent successfully the specificity of a culture alien to most Western readers.

(JanMohamed, 1984) This analysis will examine the validity of the statement and attempt to corroborate if the narrative does indeed transcend '...the Manichean relations' between the colonizer and the colonized.'

(JanMohamed, 1984)

The novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1930 - 2013) is a post-colonial text in which Achebe attempts to reassert his culture's[1]oral storytelling narrative over a Eurocentric literary model via the application of language and syntactical hybridity. In the process of doing so he appropriated the colonising language. He has always insisted that he had no option but to utilise it in the writing of his book. This was due to the colonizing culture altering the indigenous oral traditions to better suit Western notational practices. Achebe has spoken about the effect colonization had on his native language:

He (Archdeacon Dennis) had this notion that the Igbo language—which had very many different dialects—should somehow manufacture a uniform dialect that would be used in writing to avoid all these different dialects. Because the missionaries were powerful, what they wanted to do they did. This became the law. But the standard version cannot sing. There's nothing you can do with it to make it sing. It's heavy. It's wooden. It doesn't go anywhere.' (Brooks, J, 1994)

In the text extract presented (Appendix, 1.) for analysis Okonkwo is meeting with his friend Obieika. This is not long after Okonkwo has carried out the honour killing of his adopted son. Though the priestess to the Gods said that it must be done, Okonkwo took it upon himself to personally carry out the act. This has left him feeling troubled, and so he seeks to speak with his friend who questions as to why Okonkwo felt it was a personal obligation to deliver the killing blow. The two men are both respected, Okonkwo for his strength and bravery. He is the model of an alpha male within a society where martial prowess is revered. Obieika is not a warrior in any measure equal to that of his friend though he is respected for his eloquence and wisdom.

While analysing the text particular focus will be placed on examining how Achebe has implemented an oral story telling narrative using a hybrid of Western discourse and his own culture's oral tradition. It is imperative to note however that although he is attempting to create this mind style it can only ever be a symbolic representation due to the indigenous language of the region's tribes having been westernised by the Archdeacon Dennis during the colonisation of Africa. (Ekechi, 1978,)

One must also keep the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in mind when examining the syncretism of the language used by Achebe and how the linguistic modes that a person utilizes, when speaking, directly governs their cognition. (Carroll 1956, p. 137) states ' The fact of the matter is that the " real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group'. This does not mean that a culture with only an oral tradition is any

less able in its cognitive ability as is alluded to in Victorian imperialistic literature[2], it states only that the methodology of thought will differ.

The schema laid out in the narrative is one of two friends meeting. While Okonkwo is the stronger of the two physically, he is aware of his friend's oratory skills and holds him in high regard. This is exemplified by the number of turns each man has within the text, Okonkwo has five while Obieika has four. This indicates a shared level of influence. As there are only two people present in the conversation it is not unusual to have such a balance. (Short, 1996, p. 361)

Conducting a precursory reading before performing a more detailed examination of the lexis establishes that his characterers are flat rather than rounded, and that the speech presentation is entirely direct rather than a narrator's representation of voice or speech acts; The speaker's emotion is expressed through the use of concrete metaphors.

Grice states that the balance of power within a conversation can also be observed using the co-operative principles. (cited in Cole et al. 1975) Neither man overtly breaks the maxims of quantity, quality, or relation to any degree that could be considered deviant in relation to context of the conversation, though it can be discussed that the use of metaphor is breaking the maxim of manner. However, it must be held in consideration that as Achebe is applying linguistical techniques that are customary to a native oral narrative then it is supposed that both men are familiar with this degree of periphrasis.

[3]

When Okonkwo speaks about his son, Nwoye, he questions the boy's prowess and potential to be a man stating: "A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches." This example emphasizes how the representation of feeling is constructed in keeping with the aspect of the text being written as if it is an oral narration; instead of being characterised by the Western theory of roundness Achebe has again employed metaphorical storytelling techniques native to oral narratives.

With the application of scientific methodology, in this instance computational linguistics, it is possible to quantify the lexical density of the text being analysed.[4] Lexical density measures the content in a text by grammatical units and lexemes. Its parameters vary according to register and genre, with speech achieving lesser lexical density scores than a text that has been written by an author; a transcript of a conversation will score lower than a narrative from a novel. (Bresman et al., 2016) On average most literature falls within the bracket of a 50-60% lexical density. The lexical density of the text extract under analysis in this case falls into the 47% bracket (Appendix, 2) indicating that its syntax resembles a transcript of natural speech rather than a writer's approximation of it. Again, as the extract taken from the novel is of two people speaking to one another it is pertinent to raise the counter argument that the data is only validating what was to be expected, albeit with a slightly lower percentage than usually encountered.

In response to this line of reasoning an analysis of the lexical density of each sentence individually was performed to discover the balance within them.

Examination of the results (Appendix 3.) directs attention to the fact that the majority of sentences in the extract are close to equal in their respective

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lexical density and that twenty-one out of a possible thirty sentences are under the lexical density bracket of 50% -60% expected in a Western novel. This, when it is combined with the use of short sentences (Appendix 2.), helps create a schema reminiscent of a story being told in an oral manner as opposed to the Eurocentric model of speech and thought presentation within the text of his colonizers.

That there is equal stress being placed upon each sentence within the discourse between the two men is yet another example of how Achebe is flattening not only the characters within the text but also the language. He alleviates the issues this poses by incorporating leitmotifs. The schema of visiting a friend and how his own actions were only the will of the gods is reinforced with the most common proper nouns being the name of his friend and the word oracle. (Appendix 2.) This is strengthened still further when the frequency of lexical and functional words is scrutinised (Appendix 4.) where it can be seen that the majority of words are functional rather than descriptive. This disruption again corresponds to the pattern of a transcript of a conversation rather than those of traditional clines and imparts a feeling of a story being old rather than of a story being read.

Drawing all the evidence together confirms that *Things Fall Apart* is most certainly a post-colonial novel due to its hybridity of language and the encapsulation of a lexical structure reminiscent to oral storytelling. This is proven by means of the lexical density analysis demonstrating the text's structure correlates closely to that of a transcript of natural conversation as opposed to a written narration of a speech act.

Linking back to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis this spoken narrative style is also evident in how the relatively flat characters presented by Achebe are rounded through their use of metaphor and parables in direct speech rather than having ascribed personal or social role categories.

In conclusion, Achebe symbolically recreates an indigenous oral narrative tradition lost to his country. He achieves this by way of subversion and the appropriation of the English language foisted upon him and many generations of his forefathers. It is precisely this hybridity that allows him to write in such a manner and once again give his native voice a chance to sing.

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APPENDIX

1.

" Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself. No, my friend, he is not too young. A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him."

" Too much of his grandfather," Obierika thought, but he did not say it. The same thought also came to Okonkwo's mind. But he had long learned how to lay that ghost. Whenever the thought of his father's weakness and failure troubled him he expelled it by thinking about his own strength and success. And so he did now. His mind went to his latest show of manliness.

“ I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy,” he asked Obierika.

“ Because I did not want to,” Obierika replied sharply. “ I had something better to do.”

“ You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die.”

“ I do not. Why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision.”

“ But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?”

“ You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.”

“ The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger,” Okonkwo said. “ A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.”

“ That is true,” Obierika agreed. “ But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it.”

2.

Total word count: 352

Number of sentences: 30

Average sentence length: 11

Complex word count (3 or more syllables): 24

Lexical density of the text: 47%

Most common proper nouns: Obierika (4) Oracle (4)

Most common word pairing: the oracle (4)

3.

Lexical density by sentence – Lexical words are in green.

Nwoye is
 old
 enough 62
 1 to .
 5
 impregna
 %
 te a
 woman.

2 At his 33
 age I was .
 already 33

fending

for %

myself.

No my

friend he 50

3

is not too %

young.

A chick

that will

grow into

43

a cock

4 can be

.

75

spotted

%

the very

day it

hatches.

5 I have 40

done my .

best to 91

make

Nwoye

grow into

a man

but there

is too %

much of

his

mother in

him.

Too

much of

his

grandfat 53

her .

6 Obierika 85

thought %

but he

did not

say it.

7 The 75

same

thought

also

%

came to

Okonkwo

's mind.

But he

had long

learned 40

8

how to %

lay that

ghost.

9 Whenever 45

r the .

thought 45

of his %

father's

weaknes

s and

failure

troubled

him he
 expelled
 it by
 thinking
 about his
 own
 strength
 and
 success.

1 And so 40
 0 he did %
 now.

His mind
 went to 55
 1 his latest .
 1 show of 56
 manlines %
 s.

1 I cannot 41

understa
 nd why
 you
 refused
 to come .
 2 18
 with us %
 to kill
 that boy
 he asked
 Obierika .

Because I
 did not 55
 1 want to .
 3 Obierika 56
 replied %
 sharply.

I had 33
 1 somethin .
 4 g better 33
 to do. %

You
 sound as
 if you
 question
 the
 authority 36
 1 and the .
 5 decision 84
 of the %
 oracle
 who said
 he should
 die.

33
 1 I do not. .
 6 33
 %

1 Why 0
 7 should I? %

But the
 oracle
 did not 41
 1 ask me .
 8 to carry 67
 out its %
 decision.

But 16
 1 someone .
 9 had to do 67
 it. %

If we
 were all
 afraid of 33
 2 blood it .
 0 would 33
 not be %
 done.

And what
do you
2 think the 30
1 oracle %
would do
then?

You know
very well
Okonkwo
that I am
not afraid
of blood
2 and if 44
2 anyone %
tells you
that I am
he is
telling a
lie.

2 And let 55

me tell
 you one .
 3 thing my 56
 friend. %

If I were
 you I
 2 would 20
 4 have %
 stayed at
 home.

What you
 have 44
 done will
 2 not .
 5 please 44
 the %
 earth.

2 It is the 42
 6 kind of .

action for
which the
goddess 86
wipes out %
whole
families.

The earth
cannot
punish
me for 54
2 obeying .
7 her 55
messeng %
er
Okonkwo
said.

2 A child's 52
8 fingers .
are not 63
scalded %
by a

piece of
hot yam
which its
mother
puts into
its palm.

That is

2 true 60
9 Obierika %
agreed .

But if the
oracle
said that

my son 26
3 should be .
0 killed I 09
would %
neither
dispute it
nor be
the one

to do it .

4.

Lexical words are in green, function words are in red.

Nouns: 18.47%

Adjectives: 4.55%

Verbs: 13.35%

Adverbs: 6.25%

Prepositions: 10.8%

Pronouns: 13.64%

Auxiliary Verbs: 9.09%

Determiners: 17.04%

Conjunctions: 6.81%

[1]By the term *culture* I refer to a low culture not high. (Wardhaugh, 2000, p215)

[2]Haggard, Kipling, and Conrad being three examples of writers who wrote such literature.

[3]“ Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” (Achebe, 1958, p. 7)

[4]This field of research was originally attributed to the discipline of computer science. It’s application in relation to discourse analysis also allows for the computation of literary lexical density.