

A DECONSTRUCTIONIST READING OF COLONIAL AND GENDER ISSUES IN ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Most scholarly writings on Chinua Achebe's acclaimed novel Things Fall Apart disproportionately focus on two issues: the role of women in pre-colonial Igbo society and the disruptive arrival of Europeans. Critics often argue that the novel both denigrates African women and exalts African culture over European influence. This paper interrogates these positions using Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist framework, identifying the binary oppositions embedded in the text and reversing the hierarchies they imply. The analysis reveals that the conventional interpretations exaggerate or misrepresent Achebe's intentions, as the novel provides nuanced portrayals that challenge these binary assumptions, opening the work to innovative readings and perspectives.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction, Binary Opposition, Things Fall Apart

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* occupies an unmistakably pre-eminent position both in its author's oeuvre and in the canon of modern African literature. Indeed, there is a strain in African literary scholarship typified by such stalwart critics as Charles Nnolim, J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada. Ernest Emenyonu et al, that persists in the view that although the work is not, chronologically speaking, the first published novel in sub-Saharan Africa, it nonetheless is the first authentic. African novel Although this point may appear downright debatable or even tendentious especially in view of the rather fluid semantic boundaries of the word "authentic," what seems less in doubt is that Achebe's novel, by nearly unanimous acclaim, inaugurated a tradition, if not in modern African literature as a whole then, specifically, in the narrower confines of the African novel — that tradition being the tradition of what is often designated the "anticolonial" novel. Allusions to Achebe's alleged glamorization of pre-Western contact African society — represented by the fictional Umuofia — as well as the author's equally alleged valorization of the person of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, are blithely cited to legitimize this view of the novel.

In addition to its much-vaunted anti-colonial stance, the novel as well as its author has had to weather a relentless storm of charges of male chauvinism, sometimes euphemistically couched as the over-celebration of African masculinity. In this regard, the charge often levied by feminist- oriented critics, is that Achebe's novel deliberately effaces women from its fictional world or so downplays their role in the social scheme of things as to reduce them to mere "things." invisible appendages to the men to whose

shadows the author perpetually consigns them. Wanton cases of wife-beating the denial of personal identity to the female characters, not to mention what appears on the surface to be a patronizing authorial attitude to the female characters, all of which seem to suffuse the fictional world of the novel, are all grist to the mill of critics of this persuasion.

As is to be expected of a cultural artefact of such monumental proportions as *Things Fall Apart*, the debate on the novel can hardly be said to have been closed with one critic or members of a given critical school having the last word on the import of the novel. Indeed any new reading of the novel, especially if it satisfies the all-important, if daunting, criterion of freshness enriches the novel and broadens the perimeters of scholarship on the novel. The need for readings of this kind becomes even more urgent when it is observed from a review of the existing literature on the novel that the twin views summarized above, viz: that which regards the novel as anti-colonial and that which considers it anti-feminist, have largely passed unchallenged, unexamined and have, therefore, calcified into a critical dogma to be regarded as given, taken for granted or viewed as received wisdom.

The desire to undertake a counter-conventional reading of the novel by re-examining the foregoing views about the novel all in a bid to plug a critical crevice, admittedly slight and seemingly unnoticeable, on the wall of the scholarship on the novel informs this essay and serves as the intellectual backcloth against which the essay shall unfold.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this essay is to re-examine the categorization of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as an anti-colonial and anti-feminist novel. To this end, the essay shall pursue the following objectives:

- 1) To determine, on the strength of incidents in the novel, whether the attitude of the author can persuasively be said to be opposed to colonialism.
- 2) To evaluate the degree to which the novel can be said to have painted negative image of African womanhood.
- 3) To identify and scrutinize passages from the novel which may, otherwise, be reckoned tangential in the plot, but which nevertheless betray the author's attitude to the subject-matter of the novel.
- 4) To evaluate some episodes in the novel against the author's declaration of intent in some of his essays which have come to be regarded — with some justification — as his literary manifesto.
- 5) To identify and subvert some of the binary oppositions and hierarchies in the novel.

Review of Relevant Literature/Scholarship

The ripple set off by the entry of *Things Fall Apart* into the pool of African literary scholarship continues to widen. Like bees to a hive so has the novel attracted criticism. Literary scholars of nearly every imaginable ideological temperament have studied the novel using a theory or approach suitable for their critical school, from formalism to Marxism, from post-colonialism to feminism, from traditional sociological approaches to stylistics, from disability studies to eco-criticism, the entire gamut of critical approaches

appear to have been tested on this novel. Accordingly, a review of existing literature on the novel is bound to be unwieldy, if not downright overwhelming. The approach adopted here, to get around this challenge, has been to review only those essays or books which treat aspects of colonialism (including cultural nationalism) in the novel as well as those which are concerned with gender issues in the novel. One possible effect of this approach is that what the review may lack in the way of breadth, it will make up for in terms of depth.

The centrality of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* hardly requires any close reading to notice. Beside the fact that his name is the very first word in the novel, the narrative also ends with the rites for his interment which somewhat sets him up for consideration as the „author and finisher“ of the novel. Perhaps it is for this reason that the German translation of the novel bears his eponym. Not surprisingly, a thorny issue which dominates the literature on the novel and which is relevant to the present study is the determination of the “true” extent of Okonkwo’s importance in the narrative. Two schools emerge regarding this question: the one whose members regard him as embodying the values of Umuofia and the other whose members read him as a social deviant in the community. C. L. Innes posits the attitude of the former school when she asserts that:

His world is that of the nine villages, from Umuofia to Mbaino... His values are those of his society, recognizing „solid personal achievements“ and approving those who thus bring honour to their village... As such, he embodies not only the values and assumptions of his community, but also its traditions, its history, its past; and the present must be seen as growing out of that past, a product of it, as Okonkwo is seen as a product of his community and its structures. (32)

Her comment perhaps springs from the same fount as that of Onyemaechi Udumukwu who maintains that, Okonkwo, in his epic stature, embodies the wisdom and values of his community as well as its individual foibles” (328).

What emerges from the foregoing assertions is that in certain scholarly quarters. Okonkwo is deemed inseparable, both literally and metaphorically, from his Umuofia community. One possible implication of this claim for the present study is that any possible “deconstruction” of the fictional universe of Chinua Achebe, as captured in *Things Fall Apart*, can take the form of a “deconstruction” of either the character of Okonkwo or the community of Umuofia.

Contrary to the above, however, the latter school insists that although Okonkwo occupies a crucially important locus in the novel, he cannot be equated with the community. This view finds eloquent expression in the claim by Derek Wright that, “the interplay of individual and communal lives in the novel offers no support. However, for the view that Okonkwo, as the „great man“ of Umuofia, is a symbolic embodiment of or personification of Ibo [sic] values. On the contrary, Okonkwo is out of step with the village values which he sees himself as upholding...” (78). Notwithstanding the foregoing, Wright acknowledges a bond between the individual and the community in the novel. According to him, „the

narrative of *Things Fall Apart* modulates, through its interchange of narrative voices, from the communal life of the village to the individual consciousness and back again, so that the two interpenetrate" (77).

Wright's comments imply, among other things, the multiplicity of interpenetrating voices in the novel. This polyphonic attribute of the novel opens it up to multiple interpretations. Following Wright, the present study will attempt to pay closer attention to some of those voices which are usually ignored, muted, or regarded as faint because they are seldom overt, electing instead to manifest themselves by the indirect medium of implication.

Furthermore, there exists a preponderance of gender-oriented readings in the literature on *Things Fall Apart*. A good deal of the scholarship in this vein bemoans Achebe's putative degradation of women in the novel. One notable exception, however, is Ajoke Mimiko Bestman who offers an alternative reading of the novel. Using the framework of womanism, as domesticated in the African milieu by Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Bestman trenchantly argues that Achebe is completely innocent of the glorification of patriarchy with which he is frequently charged by some critics. After noting that womanism encapsulates the principle of gender complementarity" (156), she goes on to identify instances, in the novel, where the two genders complement each other. She cites the role of women in agriculture, law enforcement and the spiritual life of Umuofia as well as the arrangement of huts in the compounds of the people to substantiate the claim of gender complementarity which she makes for the novel.

Regarding Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, she culls up extra-textual authorial corroboration to disavow any claim that his attitude to women generally, and his wives particularly, is a model in his society. Alluding to a BBC interview, she quotes Achebe as returning the following unflattering verdict on his creation: "Okonkwo was not an Igbo paragon. He was in many ways a misfit. He was a one-sided man, neglecting the feminine aspects of culture. He was too anxious to succeed" (qtd in Bestman 170). She attributes Okonkwo's eventual fall from the Olympian heights he had attained by dint of hard work to this "neglect," maintaining that his "anti-women position is the exception, not the norm" (160). For proof that Umuofia, unlike Okonkwo, does not condone wife-battering, she recalls the guilty verdict as well as the fines slammed on Ezewulu by the adjudicating masked egwugwu during his trial for the offence. The present essay intersects with Bestman's at many critically important points. Crucially, though, both differ slightly in findings but markedly in approach. Whereas her study is erected on Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's womanist framework, the present one is founded on Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist framework; Similarly some of the interpretations she gives to data collected from the novel are the direct opposites of the interpretations given to the same data in the present study. For example, she cites Okonkwo's naming of his second offspring in exile, Nwofia, as a slight on his maternal kinsmen. The present essay does not discern any slight in this gesture. In addition, gender is just one the thematic preoccupations of the novel which the present essay deconstructs; the other, i.e. anticolonialism, it does not share with Bestman's essay.

Regarding the treatment of colonialism or, more specifically, of cultural nationalism in *Things Fall Apart* there exists, as well, a profusion of literature. Ernest Emenyonu, for example, puts the tragic end of the novel down to the tactlessness of the white missionaries and their side-kicks the administrators, especially their over-zealous court messengers. He characterizes the conflict in the novel as one arising from culture contact when he points out that, “Things Fall Apart is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into, and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured” (47). Armed with this observation, Emenyonu reaches the conclusion that “the universality of its thematic preoccupation as a study in colonial diplomatic blunder must not be missed by the perceptive reader” (51). Emenyonu’s conclusion can hardly stand a test of balance, as he heaps all the blame for the “diplomatic tactlessness” that precipitates the tragic end of the novel on one party in a two-party conflict. Perhaps he has glossed over the wisdom of Uchendu, Okonkwo’s maternal uncle, who provides a more nuanced account of the culture contact in the novel in his analysis of the reaction of the people of Abame to the white man who misses his way and strays into their village. The present essay does not intend to trade blame, but will attempt a more balanced look at the ramifications of the culture contact and conflict as well as the gender-construct in the novel.

Chioma Opara characterizes the novel as a “putative item of „rebranding” (24), noting that it arose out of its author’s desire to correct the negative portrayal of Africa and Africans by European writers in their works about the continent. She provides the following account of the origin of the novel: “Africa had been branded dark, immature, inhuman and primitive by white colonialists on a civilizing mission. Chinua Achebe maintains that he felt impelled to write the novel after reading the negative portraiture of Africa in colonial literary works by Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad” (26). Accounts such as this one harp on what is considered the novel’s cultural nationalism, the belief that the novel valorizes African culture and liberates it from European denigration. The novel is here being wrenched from its familiar aesthetic domain and transferred to an unwonted political domain where it is co-opted into the project of decolonization. The present study intends to steer a different course by showing that projects of this kind, by some quirk of unintended consequence, occasionally end up playing into the hands of Africa’s cultural traducers by “accidentally” confirming the stereotypes constructed about the continent.

Abiola Irele’s evaluation of the novel manifests the same tendency noticed above in Opara’s. According to Irele, “the work has acquired the status of a classic, then, by reason of its character as a counterfiction of Africa in specific contradiction to the discourse of Western colonial domination and its creative deployment of the language of the *imperium*” [emphasis retained] (116). The implication of Irele’s cultural nationalist claim for the novel in the preceding comment is that the novel owes its status as a classic of world literature more to its theme than to its style. Though not intended, this detracts from the merit of the novel as an aesthetic product. More relevant to the present essay, however, is Irele’s observation about the ambiguity surrounding the person of the protagonist of the novel — a point to which the essay intends

to return presently. Notes Irele: "Despite the novel's contestation of the colonial enterprise, clearly formulated in the closing chapters and highlighted by its ironic ending, readers have always been struck by the veil of moral ambiguity with which Achebe surrounds his principal character and by the dissonances that this sets up in the narrative development" (116). As stated above, the present essay shall return reiteratively to this ambiguity in the character of Okonkwo.

Theoretical Framework

This study appropriates and utilizes for its textual analysis, the tenets of Deconstruction; one of the many strands of what is designated Poststructuralism in literary studies. Poststructuralist theories are a group of literary theories arising from structuralism, especially that espoused by the Swiss-French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Poststructuralism represents a break from de Saussure, a revision of his ideas. Chief among these ideas is de Saussure's drawing of a binary opposition between *la langue* and *la parole* where the former denotes language as a system, which includes its underlying principles or grammar, while the latter refers to a particular instance of language use, or an utterance. He also analyzes the nature of the linguistic sign as consisting of a *signifier* and a *signified*. Whereas the *signifier* designates the acoustic-or sound-image of the sign, the *signified* designates the concept for which the sound-image stands. It should be noted that the *signified* is not the same as the physical object which the *signifier* refers to; that physical object is termed the referent by de Saussure. According to de Saussure the nature of the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* is arbitrary, as there is no inherent attribute in a signifier that justifies a certain speech community's use of it to designate a particular *signified*. Similarly, de Saussure posits that meaning is relational and based on difference. By this he means that no word is meaningful in isolation, but derives its meaning in relation to other words which are related to it as substitutes.

Deconstructionists have since "hijacked" most of the ideas of de Saussure and "pumped" extra meanings into them. For example, they do not envisage a stable bond between the signifier and the signified. Rather they conceive of the sign as consisting of multiple free-floating signifiers. This implies an acknowledgment of the instability of meaning. The implication of this for literary criticism is the rejection of any such thing as the interpretation of a literary text, since a text, like the sign, consists of a multiplicity of freefloating interpretations.

Deconstructionists also maintain that Western thought is plagued by binary oppositions which are hierarchical, privileging one half of the duo over the other. The most common of the binary Oppositions according to the deconstructionists is the one between speech and writing. Deconstructionists note that Western culture privileges speech over writing because of the belief that speech precedes writing and the belief that speech allows for the speaker's voice to be heard which can reveal more about the speaker than the spoken words themselves. They call this phonocentrism and have sought to reverse the order of this binary opposition. Binary oppositions are also important in any deconstructive reading of a text, since they are always present, either asserted or implied, in the text.

Christopher Norris, essentially, acknowledges the indebtedness of deconstruction to structuralism when he posits that “Deconstruction is avowedly post-structuralist” in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively „there“ in the text” (3). The practical modalities for a deconstructive reading are neatly set out by Peter Barry and bear extensive quoting. According to Barry, deconstructionists do the following:

- i. They read the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the textual subconscious,” where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.
- ii. They fix upon the surface, features of the words — similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a dead“ (or dying) metaphor — and bring these to the foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning.
- iii. They seek to show that the text is characterised by disunity rather than unity.
- iv. They concentrate on a single passage and analyse it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a “univocal” reading and the language explodes into multiplicities of meanings”, and
- v. They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called „fault-lines“, a geological metaphor referring to breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement. (70-71)

Methodology

This work adopts the qualitative approach which deals essentially with literary analysis. Data analysed consist of excerpted passages from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The approach is equally hermeneutical, as attempts to interpret the selected data using the interpretive procedure of deconstruction as earlier enunciated in the theoretical framework. Specifically, its *modus operandi* is the subversion of binary oppositional hierarchies asserted or implied in the novel.

Analysis of Data

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is both the personal story of Okonkwo and the communal story of Umuofia. It narrates Okonkwo’s rise from nonentity to celebrity, ending in his death in tragic ignominy. At the same time, the novel also tells the story of Umuofia’s rise to dominance among the nine villages that make up the clan, its contact with the white agents of British colonialism, the attenuation of communal bond and solidarity attendant upon this contact as well as its eventual defeat in the conflict arising from this inter-cultural contact. As is to be expected in a novel of this kind which presents the contact between two cultures which could not be more different from each other, conflict is one of the most foregrounded elements in the novel. There are interpersonal, intercommunal and interracial conflicts in the novel. These conflicts give rise to a number of binary oppositions in the novel. Some of these binary oppositions are manifest while others are latent in the novel. We shall, next, examine some of these binary oppositions in the novel.

Binary Oppositions in Things Fall Apart:

Male vs Female

As the existing literature on the novel bears out, gender is a major preoccupation in *Things Fall Apart*. There is for instance, an alarming recurrence of violence against women, ranging from wife-beating to near homicide, in the novel, especially in the household of Okonkwo. As the narrator puts it, “Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife” (TFA 21) who abdicates her motherly and wifely responsibilities by going to braid her hair and leaving her family unfed. When she returns, “he beat her very heavily” (TFA 21). Also, for merely cutting a few leaves off a banana tree to wrap some food, Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, receives “a sound beating” (TFA 27) from her husband who has been walking aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger” (TFA 27), seeking a vent for his anger. Similarly, Okonkwo shoots and narrowly misses killing Ekwefi, because she, as much, makes a joke about his poor marksmanship. In addition, the entire egwugwu, the all-powerful and dreaded masked spirits, have to convoke to adjudicate in the dispute between Mgbafo and her husband Ezewulu, after she leaves her matrimonial home following a severe beating — one in a series — from him that nearly results in her death. It is plausible, though facile, to conclude from the foregoing and countless other examples from the novel that *Things Fall Apart* privileges male over female in this binary opposition. Such a conclusion is debatable as the evidence in the novel does not prove it to be conclusively true. It should be noted that the fictional society of the novel does not condone such acts of violence against women. As the masked spirits rule in their verdict in the case of Mgbafo v Ezewulu, “it is not bravery when a man fights with a woman” ([emphasis added TFA 66). The corollary to this is that it is, in fact, cowardice when a man beats a woman, more so when she is his wife. In a society where bravery is so valued that Okonkwo can even kill his foster-son for fear of being thought cowardly, this verdict can be reckoned as the nearest thing to a death sentence.

Besides, outside of Okonkwo’s and Ezewulu’s households, wives tend to fare a lot better. There is for example the household of Nwakibie, a distinguished clansman who gives Okonkwo the initial yam seedlings with which Okonkwo launches his farming career. In this household the wives even participate in the ceremonial drinking of palm-wine in their husband’s obi. It is said of Anasi, Nwakibie’s first wife, that she was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family” ([emphases added] TFA 14). She certainly does not come across from the above description as an inferior being. There is also Ndulue and his wife Ozoeména. He has taken three out of the four titles in Umuofia and has led Umuofia to several triumphs in war and yet is still so attached to his wife that “he could not do anything without telling her” (TFA 48). This hardly supports the notion of inferiorization of women in the novel.

Similarly the charge that *Things Fall Apart* privileges male over female glosses over the jurisprudence of Umuofia. Among the people of Okonkwo’s clan, as in many other societies. there is often a gradation of

wrongdoing. All offences are not regarded with equal severity. Significantly the male/female binary opposition is used by the people in their construction of a typology of murder. Manslaughter, or accidental murder, is considered female and penalized less harshly than homicide, or deliberate murder, which is characterized as male and carries a terminal forfeit. Accordingly, when Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills a clansman, the narrator concludes, “the crime was of two kinds, male and female.

Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent” (TEA 87).

Consequently, in order to escape the wrath of both the gods and his fellow clansmen, Okonkwo has to flee with his family. He elects to seek refuge in Mbanta, his motherland. This is significant. As his maternal uncle, the sagely Uchendu puts the matter in perspective:

It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (TFA 94)

Persuaded by Uchendu’s avuncular wisdom, Okonkwo “had called the first child born to him in exile, Nneka — „Mother is Supreme” — out of politeness to his mother’s kinsmen. But two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia — Begotten in the Wilderness” (TFA 115). Not to put too fine a point on it, this translation of the second name is grossly misleading. It is submitted, here, that whereas the meaning of the “*nwa*” (Igbo for offspring [note: not “son”]) prefix in this name is beyond debate, the import of the “*ofia*” suffix is open to alternative translations. It could mean anything from the very harmless “forest” or “bush” to the derogatory “wilderness” which the authorial voice settles for in this context. What should be borne in mind, here, is that Okonkwo’s clan is called „Umuofia” which also contains the „*ofia*” suffix. If the word were pejorative as the authorial voice in the novel gives it out to be, would Okonkwo’s clan, proud as its people are, have borne it for several generations”? What seems far more plausible in this instance, is that by naming his son “Nwofia” which, we insist, means “descendant of Umuofia” (the name is most likely a shortened form of “Nwa-Umuofia”) Okonkwo merely asserts the “citizenship” of the child. Even at the level of spirituality, there are enough examples to reverse the claim to male superiority in the male/female hierarchy in *Things Fall Apart*. For example, Umuofia is an agrarian society which means that it draws its sustenance from the earth, the soil or the ground. Not surprisingly, we are told that “Ani the earth goddess and the source of all fertility”) played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth” (TFA 26). It is clear from the foregoing that *Ani* occupies the most important position in the pantheon of the people. Her remit embraces such crucially important subjects as fertility and justice; she is the receptacle of the remains of the departed ancestors; and as a liminal demiurge, she is the link between the living and the dead. It beats the imagination that a people who accord such an omnipotent position to a female deity can be accused of placing maleness above femaleness. Furthermore, even powerful male deities choose female

priestesses as the intermediary between them and the people. Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, is an example. Of this oracle, it is said that. „people come from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers” (TFA 12). It is a measure of the importance of the woman that it is only to a woman that this deity reveals himself, for as the narrator tells us, “no one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess” (TFA 12).

It should be recalled also that Umuofia whose martial prowess is the subject of lore among the nine villages that make up the clan ascribes its skill at prosecuting war to a potent war- medicine” (TFA 8) and “the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called agadi-nwanyi, or old woman” ([emphases added] TFA 8-9). Similarly, when the people of Umuoke whose market is characterized as the commercial nerve centre in the fictional world of the novel, “wanted their market to grow and swallow up the markets of their neighbours... they made a powerful medicine. Every marketday, before the first cock-crow, this medicine stands on the market-ground in the shape of an old woman with a fan. With this magic fan she beckons to the market all the neighbouring clans” ([emphasis added] TFA 79). It would appear that the most potent medicines in the novel are those with an active female ingredient at their core.

So much has also been made of the novel’s alleged denial of identity to female characters. It has been said that whereas the male characters are usually identified by their names the same courtesy is not extended to the female characters by the narrator as they are often merely identified as abc’s wife or xyz’s mother. Again, whereas some female characters are so identified in the novel. there are sufficient examples to render this a non-issue. “Anasi”

(TFA 14). Nwakibia’s first wife, is identified by her name. So, too, are „Ojiugo” (TFA 21), Okonkwo’s youngest wife; Ekwefi” (TFA 28), Okonkwo’s second wife; “Ozoemena” (TFA 47), Ndulue’s wife, among others. Besides, the culture portrayed in the fictional world of the novel does not indicate, even remotely, that there is anything demeaning about identifying a woman as a wife or mother. What is important to note, in this regard, is that among the people of Umuofia, it is expected that “the birth of.. children... should be a woman’s crowning glory” (TFA 54). We argue that with this equation of motherhood with royalty [notice the deployment of the metaphor of “crowning”], short of demeaning a woman, any allusion to her as a mother, in fact, elevates her.

There is also a semiotic dimension to the male/female binary opposition in the novel.

This involves the deployment of “signs” to represent either gender. For an agrarian community it is not surprising that these “signs” are drawn from farming. Accordingly, yam is characterized as male and cassava as female. The narrator reports, for example, that the young Okonkwo’s mother and sisters “grew women’s crops like, coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (TFA 16). Elsewhere, we are told that “yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king” (TFA 24). Given the seeming

importance accorded “yam” in the above extracts, it is possible to cite this as proof of the prioritization of male over female in the novel. But this will not be entirely accurate. It should be taken into account that on special occasions in the novel, the menu is never complete without foofoo which is obtained from cassava, whereas pounded yam which is a derivative of yam is so commonplace, its absence from the menu may even pass unnoticed. Besides, contemporary science has shown the infinite resourcefulness of cassava as a crop from which so much byproducts can be obtained and a crop which has no useless parts since everything from the stem and leaves of the plant to the peel of the roots is valuable. This, in fact, is an apt analogy for the various roles of a woman in the society. She is a daughter, sister, maiden, bride, wife, mother, priestess, farmer, trader, and nurse both of her husband and children, among many others. Besides, whereas yam is described as “exacting” (TFA 24), cassava, by contrast, is characterized as benevolent — it is not very tasking to cultivate and is hardly affected even by drought, unlike yam.

The White Man vs the Black Man

There are many variations of this binary opposition, such as European v African, Colonizer vs Colonized. Foreign vs Local, among others. Importantly, the popular belief, especially from the majority of the scholarship on the novel as well as the author’s attitude as expressed in interviews and extra-literary treatises, is that *Things Fall Apart*, being a counterdiscourse to years of European denigration of Africa, prioritizes Africa over Europe in the hierarchy that characterizes this binary opposition. Achebe has been labelled a cultural nationalist for what is considered his celebration of African values in the novel, just as he himself has admitted that, in the novel as well as the sequel to it, his objective has been didactic, to teach his African readers “that their past — with all its imperfections — was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (“The Novelist...” 4).

The foregoing claims are by no means unassailable. Take, for example, the author’s claim that the pre-colonial past of the African “was not one long night of savagery”? How does this claim square with his portrayal of pre-colonial life in the novel? What, if not savagery, is the word for the killing of twins on the assumption that they are evil: the mutilation of the corpses of infants on the assumption that they return to torment their parents; the motiveless murder of a White man who misses his way and strays into Abame; the use of the skulls of war victims as trophies and wine glasses, the willful segregation of some members of the community on the grounds that they are osu (or outcasts) or, more specifically, the killing of Ikemefuna? When this is squared with the fact that it is the European Christian church, which operates in the name of God, that fights to liberate the people from these practices, it becomes less difficult to discern this gaping hiatus between authorial intention and the finished literary product.

Furthermore, as is apparent from the literature on the novel, Okonkwo is often regarded as the embodiment of African values. This, then, necessitates a closer look at his character. True, he is a tribute to the rewards of hard work. He is also justly celebrated for his “solid personal achievements” (TFA, 3) and his “prosperity was visible in his household” (TFA, 10). Yet, there are a lot of unsavory sides to his character

that can hardly be regarded as a credit to African culture. Besides the undignifying circumstances of his death, his friend, Obierika, says “he will be buried like a dog” (TFA 147)], is the even more significant fact of his almost complete lack of any aesthetic sensibilities. Okonkwo, it seems, is concurrently guilty of philistinism and *bardicide*. Those he appears to loathe the most are people who display an inclination towards the arts, since for him this disposition is incompatible with manliness. Accordingly he despises his father, a troubadour who “was very good on his flute” (TFA 4) and “had a sense of the dramatic” (TFA, 6); he kills Ikemefuna who “had an endless stock of folk tales” (TFA 25); and disowns his first son, Nwoye who has been attracted to Christianity because of “the poetry of the new religion; something [he] felt in the marrow” (TFA 104). The only time Okonkwo displays any appreciative attitude towards art is when he hears the drumbeats summoning the village to the ilo (or square) to witness the annual wrestling contest. According to the narrator, he “moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth” (TFA 30). It should be noted that it is not the sonority of the drum beats that interests Okonkwo, but the fact that the act of drumming reminds him of his days as a young wrestler. The foregoing trait of Okonkwo’s only reinforces the view, often purveyed by some European cultural supremacists that the African is devoid of artistic sensibilities.

When Obierika pays his maiden visit to Okonkwo in exile and is taken to greet Okonkwo’s uncle, Uchendu, a conversation inevitably ensues (recall that „among the Ibo [sic] the art of conversation is regarded very highly” [TFA 5]) which soon touches on the sacking of Abame. What is important, in the context of this study, is a particularly startling, almost Freudian, verbal choice of Obierika’s. Here is how he describes the arrival of the search party for the white man who has been murdered by the people of Abame: “one morning three white men led by a band of ordinary men like us came to the clan” ([emphases added] TFA 98). This is quite significant for power relations between white and black in the novel. Notice that the white men are only three, yet they lead a band of black men. Notice also that in Obierika’s own words, the black men are ordinary which implies, of course, that the white men are extraordinary. Recall, too, that the speaker has been characterized as „a man who thought about things” (TFA 87) which is to say that he could not have been speaking flippantly. With this attitude towards the white man, it is not surprising that the same Obierika delivers the most scathing verdict yet of the ultimate triumph of white over black in the novel. Here is how he puts it:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (TFA 124)

If any doubts remain of the victory of black over white in the novel the gloating of Mr Kiaga, the missionary at Mbanta and the sidekick of the white man dispels it. There is an unmistakable ring of triumph around his boast: “they also said I would die if I built my church on this ground. Am I dead? They said I would die if I took care of twins. I am still alive” (TFA 112).

The foregoing and many more undercut the claim to cultural nationalism often made for *Things Fall Apart* and gainsay the assertion that the novel places Black, African or the Colonized above White. European or the Colonizer in the binary opposition linking these two sets of variables.

Summary/Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has attracted an avalanche of literary criticism. The majority of such criticism seems to take for granted the claim that the novel denigrates or mortifies women and attacks the white colonizer. The evidence in the novel, however, supports an alternative reading which shows the above position to be debatable, if not downright wrong. The novel does, in fact, accord women and femaleness some pride of place; or, at the very least, the claim that it treats women and femaleness unfairly is grossly exaggerated. Similarly, the argument that the novel punctures the claim to racial superiority often made by white European supremacists with regard to Africa is also grotesquely overstated. In conclusion, however, it is hereby also submitted that far from being "done and dusted", the conversation on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is still susceptible or open to fresh perspectives.

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