



# Unearthing the significance of semiotics in the Novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.

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## Abstract:

The role of African Literature has taken a position of importance in the context of world literature and the contributions from the array of African-origin writers were apparent in its development. The multifarious publication of books under the title of African Literature pervasively introduced the readers of the world to comprehend situations from the context of the natives. Unanimous reflections on culture and traditional bond, in addition to the belief system, were sensed extensively in the early writings to let the world know, the real nature of the fellow citizens and their way of living to unravel the mystic portrayals of European writers and their perceptions on the colonies. Chinua Achebe was one such determined author of importance who managed to unmask the truth in his work *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe stood as a twenty-eight-year-old writer when his first book was published and it literally swept the readers off with astonishment as it stood as a testimony of African living with a spirit to uncover the realistic pictures of the land through mapping the habitual portrayals of Umuofia, which is now called Nigeria with a knack of elaborating the cultural significance and customary rituals through various semiotics. It shall be understood that the novelist has had made use of inferential symbols widely in the novel to enunciate on the incidents authentically by capturing the emotions of the natives appropriate to suit the objective through bringing in the situation right in the African context and associating the same with the tone of genuineness. In the light of the above-said information, this paper implores to figure out symbols explored in the novel, not restricting with the peripheral signs but also focuses on the relevance of inferential proverbs and thematic songs as manifesting signs of wisdom and a celebrated art of linguistic African culture, the representation of feminine gender with a slaying undertone, Objectifying the

presence of spirits and the ritualistic methods as markers of hermeneutic significance and the prejudiced polarity in thoughts were broadly reconnoitered with respect to the intrigue focused on the world of Igbo land.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, signs, symbols, proverbial representations

### **Introduction:**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things Fall Apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

The opening lines of the Novel *Things Fall Apart*, are an extraction from W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* which turns out to be an optimal foundation for the narration and referentially stands as substantiation for the intrigue by Achebe, as the poem is an oeuvre of the signification of signs infused through its inferential symbols about the second coming of Jesus Christ. In the light of bringing out meanings with regard to symbolic representations in the literary tradition, Achebe stands as a natural artist to portray his Igbo land with a flair of analogies. Moreover, the underpinning objective lies in the fact of unfurling the significance of his native land and its tradition to the future generation as he was not convinced with the African identification bestowed by the colonizers to the world as confessed in one of his non-fiction works *Novelist as a Teacher* "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my 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"(Achebe 245).

The reference of semiotics is an integral part of the novel discussed, as it stands as an amalgamation of signs and symbols as signifiers to promulgate the undeniable cultural veracity of the civilization. Ferdinand de Saussure, a renowned structuralist, defines semiotics as the science of signs, explicitly within a particular cultural context. It is claimed that the signs act as the bearers of communicative codes which shall be encoded and decoded by a specific set of people. Semiotics has been a part of various theories that originated in the latter half of the twentieth century. By bridging the linguistic aspect of the language as a sign, Ronald Barths, brings out the value of deconstructing a work through its linguistic discourse (Occum, 2017). Furthermore, he states that the involvement of gestures, images, and melodic sounds roots the conceptual framework of semiotics which positions to elaborate the contextual songs ingrained in the plot of Achebe.

The study of the derivation of meaning out of the signs is generally defined as Semiotics and it is important to understand the fact that the sign may not necessarily stand as the signified since it depends on the understanding of a specific contextual community. We shall note the distinctions of the terms such as Icon, Index, and symbols listed by Charles Sanders Peirce to comprehend how the signs are equated with the objects

intended. He claims that 'Icon' dedicates to representing the palpable qualities of the object mentioned in the narration, whereas the significance of 'Index' lies in its implied association with the object projected in a rational way. The position of 'Symbol' has a special place in the discussion as it never intends to mirror the actual projection but has an inherent connection rather deal with the conventional integration which shall be deciphered only through the understanding of the communal context under which the target text is placed (Occam 2017).

With the framework of Things Fall Apart, the explorations of significant identifiers in terms of Icon, Index, and symbols is imperative to substantiate the representations of semiotics that are casually crocheted while crafting his plot narration. The Explicit symbols such as Fire, Yams, Locusts, and Kola Nuts are discussed in the following paragraphs along with the discussion of some implicit ideologies which is notified as symbols of significance to satisfy the objective of this research paper.

The protagonist of the Novel is Okonkwo who is known for his valor and strength. Considering his fervor in executing his masculinity in an impressive way, people of Umuofia nicknamed as the 'Roaring Flame' (Achebe 141) which stands as a synonym to his stronghold in exercising power as a male in his village. While his stay in Mbanta as a part of his Exile, his son Nwoye found his way to join the missionaries which devastated Okonkwo where he strung an analogy of Ash (as an effeminate symbol) to his son for his cowardly decision.

Okonkwo was popularly called the "Roaring Flame." As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was flaming fire. How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? Perhaps he was not his son. No! He could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teach her! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply. (Achebe 141).

Following the thread of Fire, comes to the importance of Yam in the village of Umuofia where it is yet again associated with the power of masculinity. The life of Okonkwo started with a humble beginning. His career in farming progressed by borrowing 800 yam seeds from a person called Nwakibie (19), who held the highest title reflecting the prowess in successful commerce and agile social involvements in the village Umuofia often was considered as a role model to the aspiring youngsters of the same. Okonkwo believed in choosing Yam, as he knew of its inferential connection from his traditional context. "His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (35). The character of Okonkwo was desperate to stand as a man of success unlike his father Unoka who was branded as a man without titles but with the shame of being a debtor. In fact, men

without titles were actually called Agbala(18) which is equivalent to a woman's stature. The villagers felt that fame comes through 'solid personal achievement' (10). The character of Unoka might not have reflected directly in the novel's proceedings, but it shall be understood that Okonkwo turned into a man of rigidity as his father's failure hit him hard and led him to have a determination not to repeat any of his father's traits irrespective of its ethical values. The Plot reveals that Unoka is a Man of Music whose rendition in flute shall sway people off to the land of dreams (9). The childhood of Unoka was a collection of happy memories but his adult life fetched him only failures according to the norms drafted by the corresponding village heads. Unoka preferred to celebrate life with music rather than choosing to behead people in the tribal wars between the villages. The fellow villagers felt that such a living is an effeminate attribute and never extended any respect to such personalities. To the worst, he was abandoned in the Evil Forest (21) when he was ailing from a swollen stomach as it may bring terrible ill luck to the village of Umuofia.

Perhaps down in his heart, Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. (Achebe 17).

The analogy of the inclusion of Locusts in the novel with the colonizers' interference is a notable move of Achebe through his appropriate narration. The villagers were extremely happy to find the presence of locusts around their fields irrespective of its trait of destroying the crops since the villagers usually crunch the locusts as an evening snack,(Subtly moved away by its immediate gain than realizing its potent evilness) but the locusts also carry ill-luck, according to the traditional believes, as a symbol of catastrophe to bring fetch destruction which eventually turns true with the arrival of White men and their missionaries to convert the tribes into folks of civilized men, corresponding to their ideologies.

"Locusts are descending,"... At first, a fairly small swarm came. They were the harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly-moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining stardust. It was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty. (54)

The above-intended paragraph rightly points as an analogy to the missionaries, who initially came to survey the land, eventually sketched to bring the land of nine villages under its control through the incorporation of law and order. The initial resistance triggered the British government leading them to charge the innocents at the village called Abame (127). Later seeped into the other eight villages to extend their superior nature descending like a swarm of locusts, evidently spoilt the place where they descended. However,

according to Prof. Kristen Over, in one of her lecture series on the symbols in *Things Fall Apart* that “like locusts they bring some benefits education and medicine but at the same time they also devour the clans' traditions and culture” (Over, 2020)

Moving to the next symbol of importance, Kola Nut, which stands as a convincible symbol of fortune. “He who brings kola brings life” (10). The presence of Kola is an embodiment of hospitality to shower the gesture of brotherhood in different facets. Kola Nut shall be presented as a sacrifice to the spirits in the Una, on the other end, it may be extended as an agreement to a marriage bond.

He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed around for all to see and then returned to him. He broke the nut saying: We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest, and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.”(32).

The bag of Cowries, the medium of monetary exchange is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. It is exchanged in bags particularly as a bride price, after a negotiation with the number of sticks between the parents of the Bride and the prospective Bride Groom. Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them. “They are thirty?” he asked. Obierika nodded in agreement (70). Once the agreement is done, the marriage is fixed with mutual concern. The involvement of Palm-Wine has an equal contribution parallel to Kola Nut. Palm-Wine is predominantly used on almost every occasion right from birth to death.

Stepping into the process of analyzing the presence of proverbs is an important step while conferring semiotics in the novel. The involvement of proverbs to communicate than using normal usage of words is considered as the highest form of civilization since the very process of connecting with thoughts seems to be symbolic in the land of Umuofia. They claim that proverbs are like Palm-oil which eases the truth that is pointed out in the conversation without directly offending the opponent. It shall be noted that there is a higher chance of one turning ignorant with this culture if he does not belong to the clan. Notable proverbs used in the novel are enlisted below.

“Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them” (12), talks about priority under first come first served bases). “Age is respected among his people, but achievement was revered” (12) (the custom of hard work and perseveration), “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (12), suggesting that a reliable and pure man shall achieve great heights. “When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk” (15), emphasizing the love for the tranquil night. “Looking at a king’s mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast” (29), suggesting the stronghold of a person on his command and work. “A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very

day it hatches” (56) provides a significance of a child’s growth from his/her early stages of development. “When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth” (68) stresses the parental influence on children as they eventually grow up. “If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others” (117) refers to the mistake of an individual and its magnitude to spoil the others in the community that they share.

The relation of the proverbs takes us to analyze the incorporation of songs in the needed situations where rhythmic narration made sound reflection of emotions than the use of mere words in order. The songs mostly relate to the most important instances of life like winning an occasion, marriage, childbirth, and death. Let us unfurl a few songs that are mentioned in the narration.

Okafo will wrestle for our village.  
 Has he thrown a hundred men?  
 He has thrown four hundred men.  
 Has he thrown a hundred Cats?  
 He has thrown four hundred Cats.  
 Then send him word to fight for us. (51)

The above poem praises the extraordinary talents of Okafo, a wrestler, in a repetitive mode of question and answer to stress on his talents. The next rendition is a customary marriage song sung at the latter part of the marriage ceremony.

If I hold her hand,  
 She says, don’t touch  
 If I hold her foot,  
 She says, don’t touch (111)

The next number is a death song exclusively written for women which comprises the toiled life and adds the shreds of philosophy while singing it in chores.

For whom is it well, for whom is it well?  
 There is no one for whom it is well? (124).

Considered the symbols of proverbs, let us move to ponder on the idea of ‘Chi’ mentioned in the novel as a composition of an individual’s personal God/spirit. People in Heathenism worship idols or deities who are said to have supernatural powers to cure pain in suffering men. Chukwa, the Creator, is their greatest Deity. Similar to Hinduism in India, Africans have a plethora of representative deities, each expressing distinct attributes. For instance, the spirit Ala, also known as Ani, the Goddess of the Earth and Arbiter of Morality is

worshipped for the good cultivation of grains. The Igbo cosmology was known for its chi ritual. This chi was reportedly equated to a guardian Angel, rather than a private supernatural entity that dictates each individual's fate. This chi was apparently compared to a guardian Angel, rather a private supernatural presence that determines the destiny of each and every individual. There is a number of rites and rituals exclusively practiced in African culture which enhance the beauty of life and provide additional attention to the aesthetic nature which lies behind every work carried out by an African. "Every person has an individual chi who created him, its natural home is somewhere in the region of the sun, but it may be induced to visit an earthly shrine, a person's fortune in life are controlled more or less completely by his chi" in the collection of Essays called *Morning yet on creation Day: Chi in Igbo cosmology* (145 Achebe)

The Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his chi agreed. And not only his chi but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands (30).

In addition to the involvement of 'Woman' as a symbol apparently turns to suggest a good share of weak space amidst the narration. On the other hand, it shall be notified that during Okonkwo's stay at his motherland Mbanta, he realized the significance of womanhood, not on a larger scale but at least to a certain extent. "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. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme showed him another way of looking women" (124).

With reference to Symbols highlighted in the framework, it shall be emphasized that they carry two significations, one at the primary level and the other at the secondary. In terms of Hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur states that "any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first" (12). Similarly, we find that the symbols mentioned in the papers are solely related to their contextual secondary referential interpretations to yield meaning from the drawn narration.

### **Conclusion:**

The paper thus reveals the interest of Igbo people with reference to symbols and the special connotation that it seeks to bring in the significance of understanding the context of Igbo culture which was beautifully captured by Achebe and he was true to the core that his novels were the attempt to study the culture of Africa in his non-fiction, *Novelist as a Teacher* in order to uncoil the events of the historic moments to position the life of African tradition in its actual nature.

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