

## The Depiction of Okonkwo's Tragic Situation through Symbols: An Analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate how Achebe utilized various symbols to project the protagonist, Okonkwo's, forthcoming tragic situation in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. I utilized the concept of the symbol as a theoretical perspective to analyze the text. Here, I argued that Achebe used various symbols in the novel to reflect the protagonist's forthcoming devastating situation. The discussion has identified that Achebe used multiple symbols, such as Okonkwo's involvement in killing Ikemefuna, Ezeudu's son, ash, fire, and so forth, which symbolized Okonkwo's forthcoming devastating situation. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the role of symbols in projecting the forthcoming tragic condition in the life of protagonist Okonkwo and provide a clear direction for further exploring the role of symbols in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*

## INTRODUCTION

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was published two years before the decolonization of Nigeria, and the narrative of the novel was set in the late 19th century, depicting the Nigerian Igbo cosmology before and after their colonization by the British colonizers (Whittaker & Msiska, 2007). The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, attempted to protect the traditional Igbo community from the encounter of British colonial forces (Okpewho, 2003); however, because of various tragic flaws, he became incapable of maintaining the integration of his clan; instead, he was compelled by the situation to commit suicide (Jweid & Abdalhadi Nimer, 2016). In his novel, Achebe depicted Okonkwo's failure to maintain the system and order in his clan, although he considered him a man of action and powerful enough to deal with the adverse situation. At the same time, Achebe exposed various events and situations as symbols in the narrative that singled out the protagonist's forthcoming tragic situation in the novel. Therefore, in this article, I argue that Achebe utilized certain symbols in the novel *Things Fall Apart* to project the protagonist's forthcoming tragic situation in his life. The proposition of this argument was that Achebe showed various objects, colors, and events in the narrative of the novel, and after such events and descriptions of objects, something terrible happened in the protagonist's life; therefore, there must have been a symbolic connection between them; thereby, Achebe utilized certain symbols to project the future in the life of the protagonist. The objective of this study was to investigate the novel to explore the answer to the research question of how Achebe utilized certain symbols in the novel to project the protagonist, Okonkwo, into tragedy. This study has a wider significance as it depicted a certain symbolic connection between events and the protagonist's life and established the foundation for further exploration of symbolic significance in the novel.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

Several studies have reported various themes such as colonization, feminism, the reflection of Igbo culture, cultural hegemony, and so forth in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, Alam (2014) claimed that Achebe's novel depicted two contrastive pre-colonial and colonial worlds of the Igbo community and argued that the main purpose of Achebe's writing this novel was to explore the Igbo people's lost traditions and values. This indicated that Achebe's focus on the resistance and exploring the hidden historiography of the Igbo people strengthened their consciousness of injustice against them. The analysis of Ilyas (2020) reflected that colonizers attacked Igbo people's religions, promoting Christianity over them to establish cultural hegemony. In

doing so, the colonizer attacked their (Igbo) people's polytheist religions and social integration. In addition, Whittaker and Msiska (2007) argued that the fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and the cultural identity of the Igbo people were the result of the weakening of the indigenous culture by a colonial power. Moreover, Mengara (2019) concluded his study by indicating that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was a reflection of colonial penetration in Africa. In contrast to this, the previous study by Kenalemang (2013) claimed that Achebe reflected his balanced views on the Igbo people by depicting their strengths and weaknesses. In the same way, the study of Dannenberg (2009) claimed that *Things Fall Apart* exposed the multiple voices by subverting all binaries and including the various voices in the novel, which represented the colonial and colonizers' perspectives.

In addition, by focusing on colonial and postcolonial issues, Achebe did not ignore the issues of women in the Igbo community. Thus, various critics unpacked the issues of women and their exploitation by both patriarchal and colonial forces imposing their ideologies on them. For instance, Mostafae (2016) claimed that women were exploited in Igbo society by constructing and imposing a false ideology on them that made them feel inferior to men. Moreover, the study of Olugunle (2018) argued that the novel *Things Fall Apart* exhibited domestic and social violence against women, assuming them to be inferior. However, the study of Umezurike (2021) argued that Okonkwo's son Nwoye questioned the traditional gender role by rejecting himself as a man in the traditional sense. Furthermore, Ugochukwu (2014) argued that the protagonist Okonkwo was sexist and misogynist as he exploited women and deprived of them to their basic human rights, which depicted the real situation of the pre-colonial justice system on Igbo land.

Moreover, focusing on Okonkwo's downfall, various studies reported multiple responsible factors, such as the study of Strong-Leek (2001), which claimed that Okonkwo's great obsession with being masculine, unlike his father, was the main reason for his downfall and self-destruction. However, the study of Avestan and Mordaunt (2022) reported that Okonkwo's search for his own recognition and being a man of anger led him to fight against British colonial domination in his Igbo land, which ultimately led him to destruction. By exploring the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Yu (2021) argued that Okonkwo represented traditional African manliness, which encouraged him to fight to protect the culture, values, and dignity of Igbo land, and that his ultimate suicide reflected the death of traditional values and the spirit of Africa. In addition, Asikaogu (2018) by exploring the Igbo culture, argued that Igbo people would have a responsibility toward their family, society, and God. In addition, (Okoro, 2008) argued that "Chi", as a personal God of Igbo people,

symbolized their success and failure instead of their hard labor. In the same way, Kammampool and Suuk (2019) argued that the kola nut ritual in Igbo society symbolized friendship, respect, and hospitality. Moreover, (Khan et al., 2018) claimed that symbols played a vital role in Ibo society to make sense in the processes of socialization, meaning-making, and identity formation.

Hence, the above literature reflected various critical perspectives, including issues related to postcolonial themes, exploitation of women, depiction of Igbo culture, symbolism, and so forth. The symbolic interpretation of the novel depicts the role of symbols in socialization, friendship, hospitality, and so forth. However, issues such as how the protagonist, Okonkwo's tragic situation, was depicted through symbols were almost ignored. Therefore, I argued that Achebe employed certain symbols to reflect the protagonist's, forthcoming tragic situation in the narrative. Thus, this paper aims to investigate Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* to find out the answer to the research question of how Achebe utilized certain symbols to project the protagonist Okonkwo's tragic situation.

## METHODOLOGY

This article focused on the role of symbols in projecting the protagonist's tragic situation, was based on qualitative interpretative research design, and utilized the concept of symbols as a theoretical perspective. Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, was purposively selected as the primary text of this study, and primary information was collected by analyzing the text itself. In addition, secondary data were gathered from various documentary analyses such as theses, books, journal articles, and so forth.

The term symbol was defined as the use of physical objects or events that would reflect some qualities or abstract notions. It was further defined as "the term 'symbol' is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or events, which in its turn signifies something itself (Abrams & Harpham, 2014, p. 320). The use of symbols in literary texts facilitated the author's ability to express their ideas in an economical way and assisted the readers in understanding secondary layers of meaning by providing more creative space. Exploring the application of symbols in literature and art, Weller Emler claimed that "the symbol is the thing it stands for, and when the symbol is at once a symbol and the thing it stands for, it is itself a reality, and its meaning is conveyed with the force of an event" Emler (1956, p. 48). This indicated that symbolic expression would be more realistic for referring to a certain meaning within itself. In addition, the symbolic meaning of an object, unlike its general meaning, provided a connection with the metaphysical level of meaning due to its inner affinity with it (Cirilot, 2006). The above-discussed concept of symbols

assisted me in analyzing how Achebe utilized the symbols to project the protagonist's tragic situation in *Things Fall Apart*.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the analysis and discussion of *Things Fall Apart* in investigating how Achebe utilized certain symbols to project the tragic situation of the protagonist, Okonkwo, utilizing the symbol as a theoretical perspective.

### Symbols and Okonkwo's Tragic Situation

Okonkwo was a tragic hero (Nnoromele, 2000; Varadharajan & Ramesh, 2016) who faced various tragic situations in the story. The story of the novel is divided into three parts: in the first part, he depicted the harmonic cosmology of the Igbo people, incorporating their detailed lifestyle and culture before their encounter with British colonial forces; in the second part, he exhibited the protagonist Okonkwo's exile for seven years by accidentally killing Ezeudu's son and the first arrival of a colonial missionary in the village of Mbaino; and in the third part, he unraveled all the devastating consequences created by a colonial encounter with the Igbo people, focusing on the protagonist Okonkwo's arrival in his village, the disintegration of once harmonious Igbo society, and finally his suicide. Here, I argued that Achebe utilized certain symbols, such as his involvement in killing Ikemefuna, the accidental gun blast and death of Ezeudu's son, fire, and ash, just to name a few, that ultimately signaled his forthcoming tragic situation.

Achebe utilized several symbols to project a forthcoming tragic situation in the life of the protagonist. For instance, Okonkwo was suggested that he should not participate in the act of killing Ikemefuna by Ezeudu, who was the oldest man of Umuofia, as "that boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death [...] they will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there"(Achebe, 1958, p. 54). However, Okonkwo got involved and killed Ikemefuna. It was narrated:

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak (Achebe, 1958, p. 57).

This extract indicated that Okonkwo committed a great immoral act by killing Ikemefuna, who was living with him and believed him to be his real father. Here, my argument is that the act of killing Ikemefuna symbolized his various tragic situations, most fundamentally his own death. In other words,

this symbolized the ending of his own sense of humanity and morality; thereby, Okonkwo's existence with dignity and respect in his clan was ended with his involvement in killing Ikemefuna. In addition, after this incident, Okonkwo faced various unfavorable conditions in his life; therefore, there must be an internal association between his act of killing Ikemefuna and the forthcoming catastrophic condition of his life. Furthermore, his "machete", a weapon that he used to kill Ikemefuna, symbolized his inner sense of cruelty and inhumanity, which manifested and damaged his moral, ethical, and social sense of being. In addition, an accidental explosion of Okonkwo's gun killed Ezeudu's son, which made his situation worse. It was narrated:

Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral [...] in the center of the crowd a boy laid in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen year- old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart (Achebe, 1958, pp. 116-117).

The above narrative depicted how Okonkwo became responsible for the death of Ezeudu's son; however, it was an accidental case, nevertheless adequate to symbolize a further bitter situation in the life of Okonkwo. In addition, Okonkwo's weapon, "the gun", symbolized further destruction in his life; as a result, as it was narrated, "The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land (Achebe, 1958, p. 117). This extract further indicated that he had no space in his own clan and that his personal image and fame, including all his property, were devalued as he had to be exiled for seven years. Seven years later, returning from his motherland, he observed that his ideal Igbo communities were transformed due to Christian colonial intervention; thereby, the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son symbolized Okonkwo's devastating situation and his failure to protect the integrity of his clan.

Moreover, the novel further unveiled several other symbols, such as fire, ash, and so forth, symbolizing the approaching devastating situation in the life of Okonkwo. For instance, the word ash appeared twice in the novel when Okonkwo indicated his own son Nwoye by stating to him, "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (Achebe, 1958, p. 109) and while referring to messengers as "ashy buttocks" (Achebe, 1958, p. 196) in the sense that they had ash-colored shorts. Here, the very word "ash" symbolized the destruction and chaotic situation of Okonkwo's missing the whole controlling power to deal with such an adverse situation. He did not receive the support of his men to fight against

colonial intervention in the clan, and as a result, he hanged himself. In addition, Achebe utilized other symbols in the novel, such as "roaring flame" (Achebe, 1958, p. 108), "flaming fire" (Achebe, 1958, p. 108), and "living fire" (Achebe, 1958, p. 109). The above mentioned "fire" indicated Okonkwo. Ferber (1999), in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, showed that the term "fire" could have various positive and negative symbolic meanings, such as destruction, lust, aggression, wisdom, life, youth, and so forth, depending on the context. In the context of this novel, I argued that fire symbolized Okonkwo's aggression, which ultimately led him to destruction. In addition, after the death of Ezeudu's son by the explosion of Okonkwo's gun, his houses were burned down. It was narrated, "They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals, and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers" (Achebe, 1958, p. 117). Here, the term "fire" symbolized Okonkwo's destruction and loss of his image and prestige, which made him leave his clan for seven years. Thus, the terms "fire" discussed above symbolized his aggression and the destruction of Okonkwo; therefore, he lacked the proper understanding of the situation. In fact, "Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action" (Achebe, 1958, p. 64). He focused on physical force instead of having patience to make his thoughts mature. It was narrated as "whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists" (Achebe, 1958, p. 8). Therefore, the word "fire" symbolized his real nature of aggression, which led him toward destruction. As I argued, Achebe used various symbols that would be adequate to project Okonkwo's approaching tragic situation. In addition, these findings, to some extent aligned with the study of Avestan and Mordaunt (2022), depicted how Okonkwo's nature of aggression ultimately led him to destruction.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion reflected that the novel *Things Fall Apart* depicted various symbols that projected Okonkwo's forthcoming tragic situation. This study aimed to investigate Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to find the answer to the research question: how did Achebe utilize certain symbols to project the protagonist's forthcoming tragic situations? As I argued, this study reflected various symbols, such as his involvement in the act of killing Ikemefuna and Ezeudu's son by an accidental explosion of his gun, the depiction of "ash" and "fire", and so forth, which symbolized Okonkwo's forthcoming tragic situation, such as the loss of his social image, support, and strength, and finally his own life. In addition, the findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the role of symbols in projecting the forthcoming condition in the life of

protagonist Okonkwo and provide clear direction for the further exploration of symbolic significance in the novel.

### ADVANCED RESEARCH

This research still has limitations so that further research is still needed on this topic.

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