

Symbolic representation of farm in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Jufran C. Agustin

jufran.agustin@lnu.edu.ph

Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City and Leyte Normal University, Tacloban City, Philippines

Abstract

In this paper, geographical setting is not just seen as a typical element of a literary work. It goes beyond the notion of where the story had happened. This literary analysis argues that the 'farm' in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals a symbolic representation of the Igbo identity. Due to the stereotypical descriptions of Africa and the Igbo society, it is imperative to zoom from the postcolonial lens in order to provide another trajectory in analyzing cultural identity. Utilizing textual analysis on Achebe's most famous novel, specifically on the farm as its setting, the following symbolic representations surfaced: Igbo's hard work and prosperity; Okonkwo's patience, perseverance, and persistence; and his renewed hope and faith after his downfall. Among literary classes, critical thinking may also be achieved if an in-depth understanding of the novel will be closely looked into. Of course, that includes the imperative details associated to the geographical setting of the literary work.

Keywords: symbolic representation, Chinua Achebe, postcoloniality, cultural identity, Igbo society

1. Introduction

Among several countries in the globe, issues on racial discrimination and stereotyping still manifest pervasiveness. This phenomenon is usually seen among countries in the periphery that have been colonized by the immensely affluent nations. In the African continent, Nigeria is just one of the few countries perceived to be a place inhabited by fantastical beasts and cannibals, making it an inhuman racial representation (Corley, 2009). If not an exotic land of primates and adventure, some Westerners think that it is a land of savages, slaves, and backward races. Unfortunately, Africa is often described by media as hopeless, disease-stricken, impoverished, malnourished, and other descriptions which may carry semantic derogations.

In the same vein, specifically on the context of literary writing and scholarship, Africa, without exemption, is still depicted negatively by some authors. As an example, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2015), Africa was unequivocally described as a Dark Continent, inhabited by evil spirits in its forests. Accordingly, Chinua Achebe, also known as the Father of African Novel, considers Conrad's work not a masterpiece or a great work of art for it celebrates dehumanization and depersonalizes a portion of the human race (Leitch, 2001). He is on a critical stance that Conrad's text was in the Western ideology which is a position largely forgiving of or blind to its racism. He added that Conrad might be using an anachronistic criterion, making him not blameworthy for such descriptions in his major literary work and without any prejudice to his writing prowess and talent.

2. 'Things Fall Apart' as a Postcolonial Text

One of the most highlighted novels of Achebe is *Things Fall Apart*. Adjudged as his most effective and successful work in his entire literary career and academic profession, it offers an awakening call for readers, students, media personalities, and people around the world, specifically on the multicultural and societal representation of Igbo society. Certain aspects of the plot, characters, and themes may offer readers alike to change their pernicious perception about the African society. Of course, that includes the coexistence of 'voices and cultures' (Dannenbergh, 2009).

Written during the period when Nigeria was gaining its independence from Britain, the aforementioned literary work is widely used among universities, colleges, and academic institutions around the globe, for their literature classes. Students learn the social, cultural, economic, and even political aspects of Igbo people's lives. It has been translated into several languages and is typically talked about in many literary undergraduate and graduate colloquia.

The writer in modern-day Africa has assumed the role of the conscience of the society, reminding that there is a high cultural ethos that must be upheld both by readers and the community (Ojaide, 1992). One of these prolific writers defending the indigenous Nigerian society is Achebe who has been successful when he published his first novel. His work presents Iboland or western Nigeria between 1850-1900, covering life both before and after the arrival of British colonies and Christian missionaries (Mull, 2017). In this novel, Achebe provides an almost documentary account of the Igbo people's daily life, customs, rituals, and practices. One primordial purpose in writing the novel is to showcase the opposite of darkness and primitiveness of Africa prior to the White men's arrival (Kortenaar, 2009).

The novel was not simply written by Achebe to be an expression of his penchant for writing or for expression of creativity of the mind, but it was purposefully crafted to transform Africa's image among wide Western readers, and eventually correct misrepresentations of Africa in Conrad's novel. In addition, he also would like to display Igbo society's pragmatic, democratic, and effective justice system relative to treating people vis-à-vis the existing laws in their community (Mull, 2017). He also attempts to portray European colonialism and the religion it introduced to the tribesmen, specifically Christianity, and how it affects them collectively. For the Nigerian novelist, Africa has a human soul, with a set of cultures and beliefs, that must be carried with honor.

This paper argues that there are symbolic representations of Igbo people's cultural identity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This aspect of literary analysis and investigation will delve into the geographical setting, specifically the farm, and so with the underlying implications of the scenarios of the work to the Igbo society.

3. Postcolonial Theories in the Literary Work

This practical research paper is anchored on the postcolonial theories. The postcolonial perspectives of Chinua Achebe, the author of the novel himself; Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon were chosen as the theoretical bases of its literary analysis.

Achebe's argument compels large theoretical debates about the canon and about the moral and social values of art. It poses questions on how readers respond to classic works that exhibit racist and reprehensible views. For him, those kinds of literary works should not be considered a great work or a masterpiece. He presupposes a social theory of art, holding that art reflects and propagates social views and values. He underscores literature's pedagogical mission and its ethical and political responsibilities (Leitch, 2001).

Achebe has called for representations of imperialism to shift from European ideas to the perspectives of those colonized. The West, according to the Nigerian professor, should remove in its mind of old prejudices and start to view Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people – not angels but not rudimentary souls either – just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society (Leitch, 2001).

Instinctively, any book which parades in the most vulgar fashion of prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today may be considered deplorable. Achebe continually argues that these misrepresentations keep on fostering the world, giving Africa a negative image and identity. Hence, Africa, has a stereotype image, grip and pervasiveness, and willful tenacity with which the West holds at its heart and which offers no easy positivity for Achebe upon hearing the negative judgment and language.

Homi K. Bhabha, a prominent figure in postcolonial studies, infuses thinking about ethnicity, nationality, and politics with poststructuralist theories of identity and indeterminacy. Bhabha's essay titled "The Commitment to Theory" revises conventional notions of nationality and the colonial subject, showing how both are shifting, hybrid cultural constructions. It also provides a powerful argument for the importance of theory, for the indelible link between theory and politics, and for the use of poststructuralist theory in the tacitly anti-imperialist cause of postcolonial studies (Leitch, 2001).

Bhabha started with a deconstructive critique of the dichotomies of the West and the Orient, the center and the periphery, the empire and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the self and the other. For Bhabha, in order to counteract the cultural and material domination of colonizers, there is a need to accentuate people's publication of novels, poems, short stories, and other literary works. Regarding identity, Bhabha draws on Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic model of colonialism and Jacques Lacan's concepts of mimicry, arguing that there is always an excess in the cultural imitation that the colonial subject is forced to produce. This mimicry in turn both revises colonial discourse and creates a new, hybrid identity for the colonial subject (Leitch, 2001). Bhabha argues that hybridity fosters the larger goal of socialist community while acknowledging cultural diversity. Such social community arises from the unity of groups and movements working in coalition to create a new and progressive hegemony.

Frantz Fanon, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, focused mainly on the impact of racism and colonialism on the black psyche. He, being a critic, was intellectually attuned to the disadvantages that colonialism brings to the colonized country. Based on his personal sociocultural background, he was able to fathom that despite his intelligence, high level of education, and mastery of the French language, he was regarded not as a human being. Instead, he was seen as a specimen of a savage and exotic race which was regarded through stereotypes developed over centuries of racial discrimination.

Fanon also described the various stages of accommodation and alienation that characterize black life in white societies. He introspected that such primitivism was taken by the White colonizers as simply verifying their own stereotypical attitudes towards the Blacks. Consequently, he began to explore the cultural achievements of African civilization, finally achieving a dialectical resolution between Western rationalism and African primitivism (Leitch, 2001).

He particularly concentrated on the intellectuals to join actively in the colonial struggle and to place the building of new postcolonial national identities at the very center of their work. At the same time, he warns these intellectuals to remain aware that the new nation must exist within an international community. As they pursue national culture, they should draw their strength from the African masses, but eschew isolationist or traditionalist solutions and they must maintain an understanding of and sense of connection to the outside world (Leitch, 2001).

Within the matrix of these theoretical and literary trends, this paper is conceived.

4. The Farm in 'Things Fall Apart'

Highlighting on the premise that there are multicultural representations of the Igbo society in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, certain parts of the novel reveal these societal representations and correct the stereotypical features and racial discriminations provided by impressionistic views of some published literary works and articles.

Zooming into the negative depiction of the Igbo society as lazy, rude, violent, savage, and stupid

which Achebe strongly disagrees with, the novel highlights the main character Okonkwo, who is very successful in working at his huge farm to be able to support his family:

He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife (5).

Apart from a symbolic representation of masculinity, it also implies hard work, determination, and persistence not just for oneself, but also for his family or families:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the obi. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it (6).

Such hard work Okonkwo manifested was apparently rooted from the fact that he did not inherit anything from his father whom he immensely dislikes. Thus, it shows that his hard work was not purely a showcase of physical strength, but also of spiritual and religious one:

Near the barn was a small house, the "medicine house" or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives (9).

His perseverance was truly coupled with spirituality. In addition, he has shown patience and persistence, especially in nurturing his own farm for he knows the consequences of timidity and laziness:

Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rain clouds and lay awake all night. In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils (15).

Like any other farmer, he has also faced disappointments and desperations. Unlike the farmer who hanged himself by tying his cloth on a tree branch, Okonkwo manifested so much hope and aspiration and he never gave up on every inch of possibility of letting the seeds grow which he knew may eventually be harvested for their family's benefit:

Okonkwo planted what was left of his seed-yams when the rains finally returned. He had one consolation. The yams he had sown before the drought were his own, the harvest of the previous year. He still had the eight hundred from Nwakibie and the four hundred from his father's friend. So he would make a fresh start (16).

Afraid of suffering from the same plight his father has gone through, he has transcended the value of strength and industry to Nwoye and Ikemefuna. He believes that yam symbolizes manliness and anyone who could not feed his family with yam from one harvest to another does not deserve to be called a man. Hence, he assures that collaborative effort for farm work is manifested among his wives and children, especially during the planting season:

Some days later, when the land had been moistened by two or three heavy rains, Okonkwo and his family went to the farm with baskets of seed-yams, their hoes and machetes, and the planting began. They made single mounds of earth in straight lines all over the field and sowed the yams in them (23).

As opposed to one of the Greek Mythology readings, specifically on Trojan War, on that scene when Menelaus told Hector that women are weak and they are just for breeding, this novel has a different depiction of their ability for women in the village do not only do household chores, but they are also instrumental for making the farm more productive:

As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then

staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late (23).

Lastly, when Okonkwo was punished by the elders and his co-villagers for killing a man, he was exiled and all the things he has sacrificed for worldly title, glory, and fame have vanished. In spite of this unfortunate yet rational judgment of elders, it was his mother and relatives who helped him to start anew in Mbanta and has never forgotten to renew his faith:

Okonkwo was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen he built himself an obi and three huts for his wives. He then installed his personal god and the symbols of his departed fathers (91).

In these aforementioned contexts, the farm does not just reveal a typical representation of a geographical setting. It implies positive attributes of Okonkwo, the main character, and his fellow villagers. A piece of land with a bountiful harvest showcases a sense of perseverance, strength, and hard work which all stem from that innermost desire to succeed, both for himself and his families. This is undeniably reciprocated with utmost respect from his tribesmen and the community as a whole in order to immensely nurture his farm.

Conclusion

Literary texts may be seen in a way that themes are not just labeled, but with a closer look on the geographical setting, such that of a farm in this paper. Details and images become helpful tools for readers to know that tangible objects may also speak for the sociocultural context of the story. As we look into the novel, we can also inhale it by hearing the voice of the place, carrying with them an ideological baggage - an important element as to how the story unfolds. In the same manner, the farm, the yam, the harvest, the grass, and the mud together with how the characters immerse in the setting may also be symbolic representations of cultural identity. Hence, in *Things Fall Apart*, the farm is a representation of Igbo's hard work and prosperity; Okonkwo's patience, perseverance, and persistence; and his renewed hope and faith after his downfall.

As Damrosch (2003) emphasized that literature can be viewed as an established body of classics, an evolving canon of masterpieces, and as multiple windows on the world, Achebe's novel, for sure, belongs to one or two of these categories, making it worthy to be read by literary students and be further studied by literary scholars. Hence, this novel has the transformative energy which may linger into people's consciousness, especially in a 'changing material world' (Williams, 1989). In a postcolonial context, the same effect can be applied through the power of literary education, specifically in propelling cultures and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities (Martin, 2009).

From focusing on farm as a symbolic representation of cultural identity, other aspects of the novel may be looked into. It may stem from a question raised by Dr. Celeste Aida A. Jugo in our World Fiction class: "Can Okonkwo potentially be considered a tragic hero or not?"

With the worthy arguments raised in class, a new literary paper may be penned.

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