The Novel as a Representation of the Igbo Society: an Ethnographic Analysis

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Abstract

Imaginative literature, though a work of art, is a mirror of life. The reader understands the way of life of a people through the author's invented people and locations in literature, referred to as characters and setting respectively. These characters when well managed to cohere with the setting, help the reader to understand himself or herself and other people in real life. The notion that literature is read for the mere entertainment it offers the reader is an illusion. Part of the functions of literature is to educate. In this paper, the researcher aptly considers the relationship between facts and fiction in literature with particular reference to how Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie blend facts and fiction in their respective selected novels. The paper affirms that Achebe's Things Fall Apart marks the origin of modern African Literature and that it x-rays the way of life of the Igbo in the remote past. Adichie's Purple Hibiscus mirrors the way of life of an Igbo in the contemporary Igbo society. The works, albeit they represent different eras of the society, centre on the way of lives of the different peoples of Igbo in different periods of the society.

Keywords: Fiction, ethnography, novel, mirror, x-ray, character, setting

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The term Discourse Analysis entails studying and analyzing the uses of language. According to Thomas (1993), critical discourse analysis may be seen as a reaction against the dominant formal paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s. Fischer (2004) observed that the main aim of discourse analysis is to give an answer to the question how it is possible for us to make sense of what we read in texts, understand what writer means, and recognize a coherent discourse as opposed to an incoherent one. He goes further to say that to arrive at an interpretation of a text; one has to rely on one’s grammatical, formal and structural knowledge. To determine whether a set of sentences do or do not constitute a text therefore, is dependent on the cohesive relation. According to him, one has to know that a text has a texture and this texture is created by the cohesive relations {p3}.

**Things Fall Apart: the Birth of Modern African Literature:**

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is ethnography of the Igbo. Before the novel was published in 1958, the Europeans never believed that anything good could ever come from Africa. They believed that Africa was such a primitive place and that Africans themselves were not different from lower animals. These were well x-rayed in their presentation of Africans as characters in their books set in Africa. Amy Sickle had made it clear that before *Things Fall Apart* was published that most novels about Africa had been written by Europeans, and that such books largely portrayed Africans as savages who needed to be enlightened by Europeans. Joseph Conrad’s classic tale, *Hearth of Darkness* (1899), for instance, presents Africa as a wild dark, and uncivilized continent. George Hegel said that Africa as a continent should not be talked about rather it should be forgotten and never to be mentioned again because it is no historical part of the world. Similarly, Herodotus says that Africa is a place where big serpents and lions live; a place where wild men and women live (Okoh, 2008). In his *Mister Johnson* {1939}, an Irishman, Joyce Cary’s protagonist is semi educated, childish African who, on the whole, reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africans.

Many Africans had written before Achebe. Amos Tutuola had published his *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952, in 1954, Cyprian Ekwensi had published his *People of the City* and before 1958 he had published other novels. However, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958 heralds the arrival of modern African Literature. Critics had it clear that though Achebe was not the first African to write, his novel marks the beginning of modern African Literature. Lindfors (2002) said that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which came after Tutuola's and Ekwensi's was a landmark in African fiction because it rendered a fuller account of African tribal life before European contact than other novels before that. She went further to add that Achebe accomplished that feat by his presentation of African experience from an African point of view rather than from the detached perspective of a foreign observer or with self-conscious, almost apologetic attitude of an insider laboriously explaining his culture to outsiders. By "an insider laboriously explaining..." Lindfors actually refers to Ekwensi. Achebe had of course made it categorically made that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. He broke apart this dominant model with *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that portrays Igbo society with specificity and sympathy and examines the effects of European colonialism from an African perspective.
**Things Fall Apart**  
the Ethnography of the Igbo in the traditional Igbo Society:

Achebe is meticulous in selecting his setting to aptly cohere with his characters. Umuofia is a typical rural area inhabited by people whose philosophies are in line with the setting. With the traditional setting and its inhabitants, Achebe chronicles the rich Igbo heritage. We understand through the chief character, Okonkwo that a typical Igbo man should be industrious because the Igbo or rather, Africans are not lazy people. In the beginning of the novel, we are told that Okonkwo is a brave man. He threw Amalinze the cat in a combat. In spite all odds, he is determined to survive. He goes to Nwakibie and borrows yam seedlings. He marries many wives and his farm land is enormous.

In the view of Emenyonu (1987), Achebe’s novels are set in a historical perspective and reflect the process of change in Igbo society from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s, the first post-independence decade. The first among his novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is set at a time when early Europeans were first coming to Igbo land. The novel is all about European culture contacting and conflicting with traditional Igbo culture. Through the novel, the reader understands that the people of Umuofia depend for their livelihood on men cultivating the soil to plant yam. Unoka, Okonkwo's father is laughed at for not being an ambitious person. This is why his son, Okonkwo determines, as a typical Igbo, not to be as lazy as his father. This dispels the saying in Igbo that the offspring of the snake must be like the snake. The people of Umuofia admire Okonkwo because of his fame. A man who has a big compound with wives, many children, large farms and yam bans is admired in Igbo society.

However, Okonkwo’s over ambition to become fame makes him act like the heedless fly most of the times. First, he fails to heed the advice of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in Umuofia who warns him not take part in the killing of Ikemefuna. Ever since Ikemefuna was brought to Umuofia, he has been living with Okonkwo and he regards Okonkwo as his own father. This is why Ogbuefi Ezeudu warns him that the boy calls him father and therefore, that he should not participate in his killing no matter what. Ezeudu is not however of the opinion that Ikemefuna should not be killed hence the gods had decided that it is time for him to be sacrificed to them. His view is that Okonkwo should not participate in his killing since the boy had lived with him and he calls him father. It is surprising that Okonkwo is actually the person that kills Ikemefuna. According to the novel,

As the boy is about to be killed, Okonkwo looks away. He hears the blow. The pot falls and breaks in the sand. He hears Ikemefuna cry. My father, they have killed me! as he runs towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo draws his matchet and cuts him down. He is afraid of being thought weak (43).

The novel chronicles aspects of Igbo traditions and culture such as the new yam festival, the Egwugwu masquerade cult, wrestling and marriage rites in such a way that a non Igbo who reads it tends to appreciate the way of life of the Igbo in a traditional society. We equally understand that in a typical Igbo society, when certain crimes are committed, it has to be atoned. Okonkwo has to go on self exile when accidentally, his gun explodes and kills Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s son.

The extensive use of the Igbo proverbs gives credence to the novel. Achebe himself believes that a typical Igbo man must be the one who knows Igbo proverbs, understands proverbs and knows how to apply them in natural context, hence he sees proverbs as the oil with which Igbo people
eat words. He also maintains that any Igbo man to whom proverb is used and interpreted, that the bride price paid by his father to marry his mother is a waste.

Nnolim (2009) vivifies that Achebe tells about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan {163}. In the society, men are the most powerful. From the way Okonkwo rules his household, the audience immediately understands that in a typical traditional Igbo society, women’s voice is not to be heard.

Anybody who reads Things Fall Apart, as Fischer says, not only sees and understands the way of life of the Igbo, but sees also The changes which have taken place in Ibo as a result of the encounter between Europeans and Africans during the imperial colonial period. Achebe’s picture of the new yam festival, the Egwugwu masquerade, marriage rites, taboo, rhetoric and the traditional religion practiced by the people vividly reveal to the reader the way of life of the Igbo in a traditional Igbo society.

Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus and Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: the Ethnographic representation of their societies - A comparative Analysis

Like Achebe’s, Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus is a sociological novel. It is all about the way of life of the Igbo in the post colonial era. Nnyagu (2016) has adequately discussed the relationship between the novel and the Igbo in the modern society. He observed that Adichie subtly blends facts and imagination in the novel so that it mirrors the modern Igbo society.

Osunbade (2009), states that like most African writers, Adichie has demonstrated concerns for the happenings in her society. She is therefore, preoccupied with the reflections of the historical and socio political condition of her society. She is particularly concerned with the exposition of the ills (Social, political, economic, and religious) in her society and the attack of their imperfections. The attack is however governed by love for the society rather than by disenchantment with it. Significantly, her works generally enjoy the representation of the fictional reality through her incisive, graphic and apt use of language (40).

Many critics believe that Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus has an affinity with Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. According to Wallaco, (2012), "The opening sentence, an allusion to Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, invites readers to interpret Adichie’s novel in light of Achebe’s exploration of the patriarchy of Igbo culture and the arrival of colonizing Christian missionaries in a traditional village”.

Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus has this beginning, Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurine on the étagère.

The opening of the novel immediately gives the audience the impression that all is not well just as Achebe's title clearly illustrates. It also tells the audience that the novel is either a post independence or contemporary novel for the novel establishes the fact that white man’s religion has come to stay.

Through the naïve narrator, Kambili, Adichie is able to pass across her message as well as explore the way of life of the contemporary Igbo people, represented by Papa Nnukwu and the setting, Abba. Oseloke Obaze vividly describes Purple Hibiscus as a contemporary Nigerian
novel set to mirror the enchanting beauty and richness of the country without shying away from capturing its trauma, tragedy, desperation, resignation and political tribulations. To him, to read *Purple Hibiscus* is to relive life in Nigeria for those who know it and a shock therapy education in the vagaries of everyday life. Obaze’s analysis reveals to the audience at once that the novel is an x-ray of the Nigerian way of life, particularly, the Igbo.

Like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Purple Hibiscus* affirms that in Igbo society, even in the 21st century, women, like snails are to perpetually remain in their shells and never to react against any afflictions. This is well dramatized by the author when Eugene Achike manhandles his wife. This is akin to Okonkwo’s manhandling his wife’s even to the extent of beating one of them during the holy week. Achike beats her every moment which severally leads to miscarriages. In spite that, she remains passive and life continues. It is only on one occasion, when the poor wife can no longer bear the perils that she runs to Aunty Ifeoma in Nsukka where her children had been. After relating to Aunty Ifeoma how she has brutally been beaten, leading to her miscarriage, Aunty Ifeoma advises her to jilt him but she quickly reminds her that if she leaves Eugene, the next moment, another woman would take her position.

**Comparative Analysis of the themes of the Novels:**

In a different dimension, *Purple Hibiscus* shares the same theme of culture contact with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In *Things Fall Apart*, the European came with the aim to impose his culture on Africa, thus the two cultures come together and conflict. In her *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike, though an African represents the white man’s culture while Papa Nnukwu on the other hand, represents the Igbo culture. Though they are father and son, Eugene, like Okonkwo, abhors everything about his father simply because he is a traditionalist. He is a super fanatic, more catholic than the Pope. He is in enmity with his own father and never wishes to have anything with him. Eugene’s wealth is so enormous that his fame, as a rich man, is heard everywhere. He also uses the wealth to help all and sundry, no wonder in Abba, he is given the appellation, Omeluora. He pays school fees for many and pays hospital bills for indigent people even in foreign hospitals yet his own father wallows in penury and dies of illness he could have survived had adequate medical care was given to him.

Like Okonkwo who detests everything about the European, Papa Nnukwu abhors the missionary for corrupting his son. When Aunty Ifeoma reminds him that Eugene’s ill behavior is not because he joined the missionary, after all, she too is a catholic, Papa Nnukwu quickly reminds her that she is a woman and that as a woman, she does not count. This quickly reveals to the audience the belief system of the Igbos in the typical traditional Igbo society about the less importance of women. Albeit she tries to convince him that missionary does not make anybody bad, Papa Nnukwu remains skeptic. According to him, still, I say it was the missionaries that mislead my son. He reminisces and narrates to his daughter a story of his encounter with the missionaries to get her convinced that it is the Christian belief that Jesus and his father are equal that in the actual sense, corrupts the minds of the converts. Papa Nnukwu recounts with dismay, his experience when he says that he remembers the first European that came to Abba, and whose converts called Father John. According to him, the white Reverend Father’s face was red like palm oil because as they say the type of sun in Africa does not shine in the white man’s land. Papa Nnukwu discloses that the white Reverend Father had a helper, a man from Nimo called Jude. He says that in the afternoon the missionaries gathered the children under the ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion. To demonstrate how much he detests the white man
and his religion, he says "I did not join them, kpa, but I went sometimes to see what they were doing. One day I said to them, where is this god you worship? They said he was in the sky. I asked then, who is the person that was killed, the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission? They said the son, but that son and the father are equal. It was then that I knew that the white man was mad. The father and the son equal? Tufia! Do you not see? That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks we are equal" (p.92).

**The Authors' views of Colonisation:**

Adichie, through the voice of Papa Nnukwu gives us a historical rundown of colonialism; how Christianity entered Igbo land. Her view is similar to Achebe’s exposition, using Obierika and Okonkwo to x-ray the ills the coming of the white man has caused the Igbo belief system. Obierika had rhetorically asked if the white man understands the tradition and custom of the Igbo. Okonkwo promptly responds; how can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad {TFA, 125}.

Adichie did not see differently from Achebe, the ills of the western tradition to our society and of course, the individuals. Recall that Achebe had indicted fellow Africans who had joined hands with the Europeans to antagonize them. Obierika laments that what necessitates the defeat of the Igbo is the fact that Igbo people have aligned with the Europeans to fight their people. He says, "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? He blames things falling apart on the betrayal of their own people. He laments that the white man has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (TFA 125). In the same vein, Adichie indicts our people who develop strong penchant for western culture to the detriment of their own tradition. Eugene Achike is typical of such people who believe that their own tradition and culture are barbaric because of their foolish embrace of the white man’s tradition. He seems to forget that even Christianity preaches the love of one’s parents. He abhors his father even till his death because he was a traditionalist. It is a fact that our people are usually more Catholic than the Pope; the Igbo is fond of overdoing things and that is why Eugene Achike fails to realize that Christ did not hate sinners assuming Papa Nnukwu was actually a sinner. Christ had actually come for the sinners to repent. An Igbo reading the novel tends to see in it, the discrimination, in real life, meted by members of a denomination or religion against the other which is prevalent in the contemporary Igbo society. A non Igbo reads it and has an understanding of what happens in the contemporary Igbo society.

**Adichie’s Satirical Strictures:**

Adichie, like other concerned writers, agrees with the Neo-classical writers that literature {satire} is the best tool for tackling ills of the society and individual. She vividly condemns the state of insecurity in the society, poor administration in our institutions and in politics as well, government’s philistine attitudes towards the welfare of her workers among other things.

*Purple Hibiscus*, according to Osunbade, cinematically chronicles the oddities in Nigeria as well as Africa in general. According to him, the novel vividly x-rays the tyrannical trauma of anarchical cum draconian leaderships (both within the family and society at large) being experienced by the Africans. He says that this is vivified through the family of Eugene Achike.
blessed with material wealth, but mined tragically by the cruel abuse of his father turned callous by a conservative form of Catholicism (140).

Adichie dispassionately, through the killing of Ade Coker, akin to the killing of Dele Giwa via letter bomb shows the state of insecurity in the present day society. However, she does not intend to paint the society black, rather she believes that not until the ills in the society are fiercely pointed out and criticized, there would be no reformation. She presents the gory experience of the vulnerable masses of the society when she says that the baby was nearby, and in a high chair, Ade’ wife was spooning cerelac into the baby’s mouth. Ade Coker who had received a letter obviously from the president, was blown up when he opened the package. He clarifies that it has been known to everybody that the letter was from the head of the state even if his wife, Yewande had not said that Ade Coker looked at the envelope and said It had the state house seal before opening it {p212}.

Adichie had earlier pointed out that what eventually leads to Ade’s death is that he never compromised the truth. As the editor of the Standard, Eugene’s newspaper, he always indicts the government where necessary, but the military government never wants the truth to be told so Ade is first arrested and imprisoned for saying the truth. Eventually with the aid of Eugene, he regains freedom only to be killed for not laying his pen to rest.

**The Ills with the Military Rule:**

Adichie is of the view that the worst that can happen to any society is military regime. Not only that the military regime had many innocent citizens unjustly killed, life was made miserable during the military rule in Nigeria, thus Auntie Ifeoma in her tete a tete with Eugene's wife, tells her about the incessant ills the military tyrant is doing to the country. From her statement, one who wasn't born before or during the military regime would tend to understand that military rule is a bad system of governance. According to the novel, Aunty Ifeoma closed her eyes, in the way that people do when they want to remember something unpleasant. She laments that they have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka and that she had spent the night in the petrol station the previous week waiting for fuel. And at the end, that the fuel did not come. Lack of fuel in Nigeria is a shame. Nigeria is a chief producer of petroleum products so it is uncalled for to experience lack of the products as we usually witness it. Adichie is of the view that some people left their cars in the station because they did not have enough fuel to drive back home. Through the mouth of Auntie Ifeoma, the true nature of the society is presented. The filthy nature of the society heralds the bleeding of millions of mosquitoes which is a fact in Nigeria. She tells her brother's wife that if she could see the mosquitoes that bit her that night that she would understand why the bumps on her skin were as big as cashew nuts. {p84}

Adichie’s use of real locations as Abba, Enugu, Nsukka and so on consolidates the fact that she focuses on using satire to correct social ills. Through the vivid illustration of Aunty Ifeoma’s suffering to give Papa-Nnukwu medical attention and the eventual death of Papa-Nnukwu and the incessant strike action in the country, the reader sees how degenerated the country was under the military rule. The author’s massage generally is that strike is not a good thing and that any government that has the well being of her people at heart would never allow her workers to embark on strike. The incessant strikes in the country endanger people’s lives. A lot of people die untimely mainly because their people cannot afford to pay the exorbitant hospital bill in private hospitals. This is well dramatized by the author.
Adichie is of the view that the perennial strike has given the doctors the opportunity to set up their own private clinics which they pay more attention to than the government hospitals where they receive their wages.

**The fate of Widows in a Typical Igbo Society: Adichie's Perspective:**

Widows suffer a lot of social ills in Igbo societies. The ills vary from society to society. Generally, in a typical Igbo society, the women lose virtually every property left by the husband to the husband’s wicked relations. Adichie condemns such act as barbaric. Aunty Ifeoma’s husband has died in an accident but her in-laws in order to leave the poor woman empty handed, indict her of abetting the death of her husband. Adichie, through the voice of Aunty Ifeoma, satirizes the follies of Igbo people who encourage such ill practices.

Unlike in the past when primitive women would swallow every shit from their men counterparts without complaint, Adichie presents women who are ready to fight for their rights. Women in Achebe’s are uneducated and could not fight for their rights. Okonkwo always rules his wives with iron hand. In a dialogue with Mama in Adichie’s, we understand that education has made African women in the modern era to know their rights. Aunty Amaka says when asked when she intends to meet her husband’s people: Perhaps today, although I don’t have the strength for Ifediora family right now. They eat more and more shit every year. The people in his Umunna said he left money somewhere and I have been hiding it. Last Christmas, one of the women from their compound even told me that I had killed him. I wanted to stuff sand in her mouth. Then I thought that I should sit her down, eh, and explain that you do not kill a husband you love, that you do not orchestrate a car accident in which a trailer rams into your husband’s car, but again, why waste my time? They all have the brains of guinea fowls? (p82)

**Conclusion**

Albeit the two novels were written at different times by different authors representing different eras of the same society, they have a lot of affinities. The two novels for instance, centre on the Igbo society past and present. The authors greatly demonstrated their ingenuities in using fiction to paint a true picture of their respective societies. One reading the novels is greatly educated of the different societies. However, while Achebe used the third person point of view narrative to tell his own story, Adichie prefers to use one of her characters in the novel to tell her own story. Kambili the naïve narrator tells the story as she perceives it. In literature, Adichie’s style is refered to as the first person point of view. According to Wilbur (2001), first person point of view is one of the styles of fiction not widely used like the third person point of view. Adichie’s use of first person narrative made her novel unique and natural.

Also the way she punctuates her sentences with certain Igbo words and phrases goes a long way in showing national identity. She borrowed a lot from Achebe in this direction. As one reads both novels, the natural way the proverbs flow makes the stories plausible and credible.

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