A Linguistic Analysis of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: Rhetoric and Stylistic Study

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Abstract

This article analyses linguistically Achebe’s style and rhetoric in \textit{Things Fall Apart}. In particular, his use of ‘‘African English’’, drawing on proverbs, tales, and idioms of the Igbo culture, some borrowings from his native tongue, and some writing techniques used. This novel is written by Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer, and he interposes Western linguistic forms and literary traditions to record and preserve African Oral traditions as well as to subvert the colonialist language and culture.

Keywords: Language, Linguistic stylistic, linguistic rhetorical

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For citation:


Introduction

The area we hope to cover with this article is concerned with the ‘‘Literary Linguistics’’ which is the application of linguistic theory to literature. We intend in our analysis to give the contributions of linguistics to Literature. Literature is written in a language, using the techniques and features of linguistics, such as linguistic devices. Regarding our topic, we aim to analyze Chinua Achebe’s language style and rhetoric in \textit{Things Fall Apart}. One may perhaps ask why we have chosen \textit{Things Fall Apart} instead of another novel by the same author. We justify our choice by saying that this novel reflects the African world, it contains a lot of literary techniques and it is one of the African novels which is the most widely read and studied ever.

Moreover, this article is divided into two main sections, apart from the introduction and the conclusion. The first section deals with Achebe’s biographical notes. Here, we will set out the impact of Achebe’s life on his work. That is why, through Achebe’s life, works and literary
reputation, we will find out his personality. In the second section which is entitled Achebe’s use of language: stylistic and rhetorical devices, we will examine the language used in the novel and point out some stylistic and rhetorical devices, flashback, foreshadowing, imagery, and the narrative mode.

Method

This article analyses linguistically Achebe’s style and rhetoric in Things Fall Apart.

Results

Section I: Achebe’s Biographical Notes

This section records Achebe’s life and works, Achebe and Things Fall Apart, and Achebe’s literary reputation. This description will be done by looking at the general introduction of the novel to have a clear understanding of it.

Achebe’s life and works

In the following lines, we give a biography of Chinua Achebe as is stated in Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (2023):

“Chinua Achebe (born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe; 16 November 1930 – 21 March 2013) was a Nigerian novelist, poet, short storyteller, critic, and professor who is regarded as a central figure of modern African literature. His first novel and magnum opus, Things Fall Apart (1958), occupies a pivotal place in African literature and remains the most widely studied, translated, and read African novel. Along with Things Fall Apart, his No Longer at Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964) complete the “African Trilogy”. Later novels include A Man of the People (1966) and Anthills of the Savannah (1987).


Achebe has also published essays and made criticism and political commentaries which contain some of his contributions to literary criticism as well as the most important of his numerous statements concerning the position of African writers in changing African society. Some of them are:

- The Novelist as Teacher (1965)
- An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” (1975)
- Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975)
Achebe and Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe is most famous for his novel Things Fall Apart, which is said by Larson (1972:28) to be the first classic English novel, which deals with the first years of contact between Africa and the West. In an interview carried out by The Atlantic Online, Achebe explained how the idea for Things Fall Apart came to him: The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery. [...] This continued until the Africans themselves, in the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story. (Achebe, 2000). Similarly, in another interview by The Paris Review, he said: There is that great proverb—that until the lions have their historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. That did not come to me until much later. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It’s not one man’s job. But it is something we have to do so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail bravery, even, of the lions. (Achebe, 1994).

The Things Fall Apart’s title is a quotation from “The Second Coming”, a poem by W.B. Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the central cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere.

As it can be seen, Achebe entitled his novel from the first verse of the W.B. Yeats’ poem. The missionary’s arrival begins the downfall of traditional Igbo society.

This downfall destroys the Igbo way of life, leading to the death of Okonkwo who was once a hero of the village. Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is divided into three parts: the first part, comprising thirteen chapters, is the longest, the second part has six chapters, and the third which is the shortest has six chapters. In this novel, Achebe details the life of Okonkwo. His struggle with his father’s reputation, the standards of masculinity, and the cultural practices of his clan all mirror the leadership and eventual destruction of his clan.

literary reputation

Chinua Achebe’s literary career is the most distinguished of all the major African writers as asserted by Ignace Katuviy Kabasele (1993:3) when he says: “Achebe is one of the giants of the modern African Literature”. He is regarded as the most dominant and influential writer of modern African literature (Gikandi, 2012; Krishnan, 2017), and has been called the “father of African Literature” (Krishnan, op. cit; Mwangi, 2014), “the founding father of African Literature” (Msiska, 2012) and the “father of the African novel in English” (Innes, 1990). In his life, Achebe has received many honors. His fame has spread not only in Africa, but all over the Commonwealth, Europe, and America and Achebe’s works constitute his legacy in literary and political terms, and have ensured his immortality.
Section II. Achebe’s Use of Language: Stylistic and Rhetorical Devices

Through this section, we will analyze Achebe’s use of language, and point out some stylistic and rhetorical devices, flashback, foreshadowing, imagery, and narrative mode. As we have already said above, Achebe was the first to truly develop an African style of writing drawing on proverbs, tales, and idioms of traditional Igbo to provide a legitimate literary voice of post-colonial Africa to emerge.

The language used in Things Fall Apart

Achebe chose to write his works in English. In his essay “The African Writer and the English Language” (1965), Achebe discusses how the process of colonialism all its ills - provides colonized people from varying linguistic backgrounds “a language with which to talk to one another”. As his purpose is to communicate with readers across Nigeria, Achebe uses “the one central language enjoying nationwide currency” (Achebe, 1965: 77-78). Using English also allowed his books to be read in the colonial ruling nations (Ogbaa, 1999:192). Achebe wrote Things Fall Apart in English so that it would have a wider audience, and he could directly respond to other English Literature that portrayed African culture as negative, ignorant, and backward. In Things Fall Apart, the language is simple, clear, and dignified. When the characters speak, they use elevated diction which is meant to convey the sense of the Igbo speech. The novel contains several native sayings and Achebe uses proverbs liberally to communicate cultural values, judgments, beliefs, morals, and attitudes of the Igbo culture. Although written in English, Things Fall Apart uses also many Igbo terms, which can be confusing on the first reading. Achebe uses this Igbo terminology and vocabulary in this novel because he wants to draw his reader’s attention to the problematic relationship between language and cultural identity. That is why through them, we discover Achebe’s roots. Thus, Achebe’s use of Igbo words, Igbo proverbs translated into English and the use of simple structures that are a characteristic of the oral style of narration make up the style of Things Fall Apart.

Stylistic and rhetorical devices.

Throughout Things Fall Apart, there are a lot of literary devices that can be figured out. However, we have solved to match those which the most drew our attention. Furthermore, these devices i.e. stylistic and rhetorical devices are inseparable because they can be used either in style or in rhetoric but it depends on the user’s intention whether he uses it to give an auxiliary meaning to his message or to convince his audience. The most used stylistic and rhetorical devices in the novel are:

Metaphor

For Cohen B. (1963:128), it is “a figure of speech in which one element substitutes for another”. Here are some examples from the novel:

• “His father was agbala” (p.13)
• “His body is evil” (p.186)
• “Black was evil” (p.166)

Simile

A simile can be defined by Assistant Maurice Miema, in his African Literature in English as “a comparison which reveals a similar quality in two elements that are otherwise very different” (Miema, M., 1996). In the same context, Assistant Oscar Miaka, in his Practical Part of African Literature (1995) defines it as “the comparison of one thing to another”. Similes are usually
introduced by the use of Like or As. Let us illustrate the simile with some examples from the novel:

- “The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another” (p.155).
- “He saw the world as a battlefield” (p.166)
- “He will be buried like a dog …” (p.187)

**Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is the most overused and overdone rhetorical device in the world. Generally speaking, it is defined as an exaggerated statement made for effect and sometimes this exaggeration is conscious. Things are represented as greater or smaller than they are. As far as Things Fall Apart is concerned, this exaggeration is shown by the dramatization of beauty such as in:

- “She was called crystal of beauty, as her mother had been called in her youth” (p.156)
- “He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their outhouses could hear him breathe.” (p.3)
- “He knew he was a fierce fighter, but that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion.” (p.22)

**Flashback**

In Literature, we speak of flashbacks when we refer to events that are related out of chronological order. It is just what Pooley calls: “an interruption in the action of a story, play or work of non-fiction to show an episode that happened at an earlier time” (Pooley, 1967:547). Flashback is usually used to provide background information necessary for an understanding of the characters or the plot. Here, we may read the extract from the novel:

“The story was told in Umuofia of how his father, Unoka, had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest … Unoka stood before her and began his story. “Every year, “he said sadly, “before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear. I weed …” (p.15-16)

**Foreshadowing**

Foreshadowing is defined by Pooley as “an author’s use of hints or clues about events which will occur later in a narrative” (op. cit: 548). Here are some examples from the novel:

a) – “The ill-fated land was called Ikemefuna” (p.5) “As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard Ikemefuna cry, “My father, they have killed! “as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.” (p.55)

b)– “Locusts are descending, “was joyfully chanted everywhere, and men, women, and children left their work or play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight.” (p.50)

- “He continued: “During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan. “An albino,” suggested Okonkwo. (p.125)

- c) “Then kill yourself,” said Obierika. (p.129)

- … Why can’t you take him down yourselves? He asked. It is against our custom, said one of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. (p.186)
Imagery or symbolism

In this sub-section, we are going to deal with the use of symbols in the novel. Generally speaking, symbols refer to the representation of a person or an object taking another sense instead of its original meaning. In this context, Pooley (op.cit:556) defines the word symbol as “a person, place, event or object which has a meaning in itself but suggests other meanings as well”. As for Holman (1972:519), a symbol is “something which is itself and stands for or suggests something else.”

As far as the use of symbols is concerned in this novel, we would limit our discussion to
folktales, yams, fire, ash, the drum, and the egwugwu.
- Folktales: To Achebe, folktales- especially those featuring animals- are a symbol of feminity.
- Yams: They are a symbol of masculinity and ability as a provider.
- Fire: For Achebe, fire is a symbol of boundless, potency, life, and masculinity.
- Ash: Achebe links ash to masculination.
- The drum: In Achebe’s view, the drum symbolizes the physical connection of the community of clansmen in Umuofia, and acts as a metaphorical heartbeat that beats in unison, uniting all the village members.
- The Egwugwu: It is a symbol of the culture and independence of Umuofia.

Narrative mode

As far as Things Fall Apart is concerned, the narration mode is the third-person omniscient. Though most of the novel is focused on Okonkwo, the narrator generally provides insight into the thoughts of most characters. This can be illustrated in the novel by referring to the following extract:

“Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinza the cat. Amalinza was the greatest wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umofia to M Baino. He was called the cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old agrees was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.” (p.3).

Conclusion

In our article, we have been dealing with A Linguistic Analysis of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: Stylistic and Rhetorical Study. This novel is written by Chinua Achebe, one of the most well-known contemporary writers from Africa and as it was already said, it contains a lot of literary techniques used by the author. We have restricted our article to two various sections. The first section is entitled Achebe’s biographical notes. The discussion in this section concentrated on Achebe’s life and works, Achebe and Things Fall Apart, and Achebe’s literary reputation. In the second section, we have analyzed Achebe’s use of language and we have also pointed out from the novel some stylistic and rhetorical devices, flashback, foreshadowing, imagery, and narrative mode. As for the novel itself, we remind our readers once again that Things Fall Apart is one of the most widely read and studied African novels ever written. It deals with the clash of cultures and violent transitions in life and values brought about by the outset of British colonialism in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. Published in 1958, just before Nigerian independence, the novel recounts the life of the village hero Okonwo and describes the arrival of white missionaries in Nigeria and its impact on traditional Igbo society during the late 1800s. While reading this novel which is written in simple and vivid standard idiomatic English, the readers
would notice that Chinua Achebe is not only a man with the power of imagination and intensity; but, also an excellent revolutionist.

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