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Symbolisms and Motifs as Metaphors for Visualizing Themes in *Things Fall Apart* By Chinua Achebe

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Abstract

This paper is the discussion of symbolisms and motifs as metaphors for themes in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The major aim of the paper is to extract the various symbols and motifs in the novel and to see how they contribute to bringing out the messages of the novel. Achebe's novel is full of Igbo oral tradition, symbols and motifs. Symbolism and motif are important elements in literature and are used in an artistic manner to bring out images and indirect allusions to express ideas, emotions and meanings. Symbols can be conventional or non-conventional. Symbolism and motif help under the surface to link the story's external action to the theme. Although there are many symbols and motifs that can be conceived from the text, the paper dwells on those symbols and motifs that help toward the interpretation of some themes in the novel.

Keywords: Symbolisms, Motifs, Metaphors, Visualizing Themes, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe

Introduction

Symbols and motifs are relevant in the literature of cultures, nations and genres. They help to reveal themes in works of art. In a compiled and edited work, *Literature and Society in Africa*, by David Ker, it is stated that "A work of art should speak for itself.... All the great creations of literature have been symbolic and, thereby, have gained in complexity, power, depth and beauty" (141). This paper seeks not only to thrust into the long celebrated beauty of the novel of Achebe but to visualize symbols and motifs as metaphors for the themes in the work because *Things Fall Apart* has so much spoken for itself through its use of symbols and motifs.

Symbols and Motifs

Conceptualizing symbols and motifs, simple though in their appearances, are tasking. Their analyses, explanations and interpretations may largely depend on perspectives and conventions. For the sake of this paper, a literary perspective is briefly defined to lay a base for the textual analysis. Symbol, according to M. H. Abrams and Godfrey G. Harpham, in literary discussion, is "applied to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event in which in its turn signifies something or suggest a range of reference, beyond itself" (394). Citing Richard C. in Edward Okoro, he describes symbol as "a sign which points to the presence of another with additional value(s) according to the intentionality of the user" (56). Hence, Perrine in Fadaee reinforces the fact that "a literary symbol is something that means more than what it is. It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning

in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well” (Fadaee 20). It should be noted that there is a distinction between sign and symbol: while signs provide simple information, symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge. It can be seen that man operates not only on the level of signs but also at the level of symbol to interpret or visualize meaning of scenario, life and society. Symbolism in literature is an artistic style of using symbolic images and indirect allusions to express ideas, emotions and state of mind.

Symbols are sources of insights into African orientation to life. Andrew Ifeanyi confirms this by saying that symbolism is a basic feature in the African literature that includes the oral tradition. In as much as characterization, dialogue and plot in a narrative work are there on the surface to move the story along, symbolism work under the surface to link the story’s external action to the theme. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe gave preeminence to the functions of names, rituals, animals, spirits, gods, stories, and even gestures and events in the novel. This brings to the mind of a reader the messages Achebe is trying pass across through these symbolic imageries he employs in his novel.

Motif on the other hand is, as defined by Abrams and Harpham, “a conspicuous element, such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature” (229). In another related discourse, motif “is a repeated element, a dominant or recurring idea in an artistic work that has significance at the symbolic level in any literary narrative” (Pinto 712). Motif therefore is an image, sound, action, or other figure that has a symbolic significance, and contributes toward the development of a theme. Pinto further points that, “One of the literary techniques used by authors to give clues to theme or reinforce ideas they want to emphasize is motif” (712). It strengthens a story by adding images and ideas to the theme present throughout the narrative. While a symbol might occur once in a literature to signify an idea or an emotion, a motif can be an element or idea that repeats throughout that piece of literature. Motif is closely related to a theme but is more of supporting role to the theme than the theme itself. Pinto clarifies themes and motifs thus,

Themes and motifs are interchangeably used to refer to the running thread of the work.... Themes are the matter or content... motifs, on the other hand, are repeated elements that indicate their themes. In other words, motif is a device is employed to craft theme... themes are abstract and conceptual, wherein motifs are tangible and concrete (712).

Consequently, while themes are almost always universal, and they usually illuminate something about society, human nature, and the world, a motif reinforces the theme through the repetition of a certain narrative element.

It is important to point out that there is a distinction between symbols and motifs. While symbols are images, ideas, sounds, or words that represent something, motifs on the other hand are images, ideas, sounds, or words that help to explain an idea or theme of a literary work.

Symbols and Motif and their Metaphors for Themes in *Things Fall Apart*

The title of the novel is in itself, symbolically derived from a line in poetry by William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” “... Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere

anarchy is loosed upon the world...” The significance of this has to do with the Christian notion of the “second coming” of Christ. The title is also significant because the case of Yeats’ poem looks like the case of Chinua Achebe’s novel, since the Igbo society and its ways of life and tradition is damaged by the end of the novel where nothing appears to stand anymore.

One of the symbolisms to be considered is the Okonkwo character. It is important to note that, as posited by Ker, “The protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is not Okonkwo, but Umuofia” (125). Ker further argued that although Okonkwo is a major character in the novel but he is presented in contrast to more fascinating protagonists. Okonkwo is only but a tool for realizing a goal. It is from this interpretation that this paper is to further view Okonkwo as not just a character but a symbol in which a theme of the novel can be visualized. In one way, the Okonkwo symbolism is a kind of attribute that is exhibited to some extreme in the personality of an ambitious hero in an African Igbo society. He lives in a society where a man’s success is determined by his achieved fame and the work of his hands. Okonkwo achieved these through wrestling and hard work over time. Thus he can raise his head among his clan men. He is a great man “whose prowess was universally acknowledged” (Achebe 31). Okonkwo courageously fights against ideologies opposing what he valued. He deeply opposes Christianity. He is a symbol of tradition. He does not accept the new religious and social order brought by the British missionaries. He represents a section of the traditional people who are against the new reality to stick to their old fashioned. He exerts his masculinity and is against anything connected to femininity. Christianity embodies and stresses the qualities Okonkwo considers to be womanish and sees the missionaries as a “lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens” (Achebe 128).

Conversely, his father Unoka and his son have traits of weaknesses. Nwoye, accepts Christianity. He possesses the trait of feminine behavior as fought against by his father. His conversion to Christianity is to strengthen the symbol created by Achebe. His conversion was the last pain Okonkwo would endure. Due to his son’s rejection of his lifestyle, the only option left is to cease living. The new name given to Nwoye is significant because it affirms his acceptance to Christianity. The name Isaac is symbolic as it can be seen as an analogy of the Biblical Isaac where an animal was substituted for Isaac, his son, to Abraham. The christening of Nwoye to Isaac portrays his complete conversion which is a sign of liberation from the limitation of the family creation. Nwoye symbolizes wind because he quickly converts. He represents change. He is ready to accept transformation.

From the Okonkwo and Nwoye symbolisms, we are able to visualize the theme of social change and tradition which forms an important message in *Things Fall Apart*.

The second symbolism to be seen in this discussion in *Things Fall Apart* is the “yam” crop. Yams are crops grown exclusively by men. “Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (Achebe 18). “Yam stood for manliness” (Achebe 26). A man whose barns are full of yams is a great man and it shows much about his work ethic. They are symbol of masculinity, wealth, respect and ability as a provider. Okonkwo begins to gain his status in the clan after he borrows and plants yam seeds in chapter three. The sole aim of growing yams is to acquire wealth and feed the family. Growing yam is however labour intensive. Nwakibie, a man who is wealthy with barns of yam, with nine wives and having the highest title, will not give out his yam seeds to lazy young men. From this symbolism, the theme of masculinity is visualized. Okonkwo

emphasizes on masculinity that he is often ashamed of his own father who is a musician and lazy instead of being an active and violent man. He laments being unable to inherit any yam from his father and his father was unable to acquire any title. Okonkwo does not like his son Nwoye for possessing Unoka's attribute. Okonkwo's masculinity makes him cruel and ruthless even in his domestic affairs.

The next symbolism is locusts. They represent the arrival of the white men and missionaries. In chapter fifteen the oracle states directly that the white men are locusts. In chapter seven, real locusts arrive in the village, appearing as a cloud blocking the sunlight. Throngs of them descend and the whole land turns into the brown earth color of the many, hungry swam. Okonkwo and others view the locusts as a delicacy and munch on them happily. This appearance and enjoyment by the clansmen of the real insects strengthens the symbolism used in chapter fifteen. In chapter fifteen, one white missionary comes to the area. The oracle reveals that white man will spread destruction. The people kill the man. He is soon followed by many more foreigners, until their presence is felt in all the villages. Like locusts, they bring benefits like education and health services, yet also devour the clan's traditions and culture. The language Achebe used in describing the locust invasion illustrates their symbolic status. As cited in <https://ivypanda.com>, "Repetitive style brings the prominence on the pervasive presence of locusts and a hint of in the manner which the white settlers would occupy Igbo's land by surprise". It is noted that locusts are so heavy and that is why they broke the branches of a tree. That is a symbol of how traditions and culture of the Igbos would fracture on attack by colonialism as well as white settlement.

The locusts' symbolism leads us to the visualization of the theme of social disintegration. Although the first part of *Things Fall Apart* reveals the social and cultural life of the Igbo people, it exposes the beginning of disintegration and the formation of a new social setup after the arrival of Mr. Brown and other representatives of the white people. The whole social fabric falls apart after the people accept a new way of life. The invasion eroded the values of the Igbo society. These reasons drove Okonkwo to kill the messenger and commit suicide while he tries to resist the invasion of the alien culture. This climaxes the social disintegration and its evolution into a new social set up.

Another symbolism from the novel is "fire". Fire represents Okonkwo's rage and combustible nature. His nickname is "Roaring flame" which explains his defining traits. The narrator declares that whenever he could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. As Okonkwo laments the loss of Nwoye in chapter twenty-four, he acknowledges that even the most powerful fire produces cold useless ash. Okonkwo is fire, strong and fierce while Nwoye is ash, weak and lazy. The fire symbol leads to the visualization of the theme of ambition and grandeur in the novel. Okonkwo's disenchantment of his father's behavior leads him to the adoption of aggressive manly trait of a roaring flame. This drives his ambition of becoming a head in his clan. He demonstrates quality of grandiosity and strives for greatness within his clan; thus, he starts transforming his nature and becomes more ruthless.

The last symbolism to be considered is the Egwugwu. The Egwugwu are masked dancers who impersonate the forebears of Umuofia and the ancestral gods. Their role is to settle problems by judging the case. They serve as a court. An illustration of their role is the case of Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo. They are a symbol of culture, justice and the spirit of

Umuofia. However, the coming of the white man displaces the Egwugwu and is replaced by court messengers; hence their symbol of culture, dispensation of justice and the spirit role is lost. This symbolism is a metaphor to visualizing the theme of sense of justice. The sense of justice and dispensation of justice gives stability to society as shown by *Things Fall Apart*. Although there are different institutions and traditions for dispensing justice to the people, the Egwugwu represents both the physical and conscience form of justice since it represents culture and the spirit of the Umuofia people.

One of the Major motifs in *Things Fall Apart* is *Chi*. Throughout the novel, *Chi* is pointed out towards the understanding of Okonkwo as a tragic hero. The *Chi* is an individual's personal god, whose merit is determined by the individual's good fortune or lack. The clan believes that "a man could not rise beyond the destiny of his Chi" (Achebe 104). In chapter four, the story reveals that according to Igbo proverb, that "when a man says yes his Chi says yes also" (Achebe 21). From this interpretation, individuals will their own destinies. In another way, it can be explained that Okonkwo's tragic fate is the result of a problematic *Chi*- a thought that severally occurs to Okonkwo in the novel. Okonkwo seems either more or less responsible for his own tragic death. Okonkwo shifts between two poles: when things are going well for him, he perceives himself as master and maker of his own destiny; when things go badly; he automatically disavows responsibility and asks why he should be ill-fated. This motif is a metaphor for the interpretation of the theme of free will and fate in the novel. A human's *Chi* is always in harmony with his will. It is aligned with the way that a person can control his own destiny like Okonkwo. However, at several points, it appears that Okonkwo uses his free will but does not have control over his life as fate sends him to an exile, drives him to kill the messenger and finally, suicide. These events defy this notion that there is a free will in the Igbo society.

Another motif is the animal imagery. There is the presence of animals in folklore to reflect the environment which they live before European influence. The mythical account of how the tortoise's shell came to be bumpy is a logical explanation of natural phenomena. Another animal image is the figure of sacred python. Enoch's alleged killing of and eating of the python symbolizes the transition to a new form of spirituality and a new religious order. Enoch's disrespect of the python clashes with Igbo's reverence for it, epitomizing the incompatibility of colonialist and indigenous values. This motif helps us to see the theme of tribal beliefs and customs. This belief and custom is invaded by the colonialist.

Conclusion

This paper discusses symbolisms and motif in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as metaphors for visualizing themes in the novel. It is seen that symbols are images, ideas, sounds, or words that represent something, motifs on their part are recurring images, ideas, sounds, or words that help to explain an idea or theme of a literary work. Although there are many symbols and motifs that can be conceived from the novel, the focus of the paper is on those symbols and motifs that are visualized to have certain themes embedded in them. The paper tries to view some characters like the major character- Okonkwo, and Nwoye as rather than merely characters, symbols that help to explain themes. While Okonkwo is seen as a symbol that represents tradition and masculinity, Nwoye is a symbol that represents change and weakness.

Other symbols are yam representing the theme of masculinity, locusts representing the theme of social disintegration, Egwugwu representing sense of justice and fire representing ambition and grandeur. *Chi* is a motif that helps in the visualization of free will and fate and animal imagery is a motif that is a metaphor for the theme of tribal beliefs and customs. From this, it can be recommended that to appreciate a work of art and to grasp the themes of a story, it is important for a reader to align with the symbols and motifs, both the conventional and the non-conventional ones, to interpret and to visualize messages embedded in the work of art.

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