

# Against the Tide: A Deconstructive Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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## Abstract

The scholarship on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* dwells disproportionately on the novel's preoccupation with the twin issues of the place of women in precolonial Igbo society and the disruptive arrival of the first Europeans in an African community. The consensus seems to be that the novel degrades the place of women in traditional society, while it exalts African tradition over European culture with which it came into contact. The present study exhumes these positions with a view to investigating them. Using the deconstructionist model of Jacques Derrida as its framework, the study identifies the binary oppositions constructed around the handling of these thematic preoccupations and upturns the assumed hierarchies which, on the surface, they seem to embody. The study arrives at the finding that the twin positions, which appear to have solidified into a consensus among the overwhelming majority of scholars on the novel, namely that it denigrates women and demeans the white man, are either an exaggeration or a misapprehension. The study finds that the conversation around the novel has by no means reached a foregone conclusion as the novel is susceptible to new and innovative readings, especially revisions of earlier seemingly unassailable readings.

**Keywords:** authentic African novel; binary opposition; Chinua Achebe; deconstruction; patronising attitude; *Things Fall Apart*

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* occupies an unmistakably pre-eminent position both in its author's oeuvre and in the canon of modern African literature. Indeed, there is a clique in African literary scholarship, typified by such stalwart critics as Charles



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Nnolim, J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada and Ernest Emenyonu, that persists in the view that although the novel is not, chronologically speaking, the first published novel in sub-Saharan Africa, it nonetheless is the first authentic African novel. Although this point may appear debatable or even tendentious, especially in view of the fluid semantic boundaries of the word “authentic”, what seems less uncertain is that Achebe’s novel, by nearly unanimous acclaim, inaugurated a tradition. If this tradition is not in modern African literature as a whole, then it fits specifically into the narrower confines of the African novel. This tradition is often designated the “anti-colonial” novel. Allusions to Achebe’s alleged glamourisation of pre-Western-contact African society, represented by the fictional Umuofia, as well as the author’s equally alleged valourisation of the person of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, are blithely cited to legitimise this view of the novel.

In addition to its much-vaunted anti-colonial stance, the novel, as well as its author, has had to weather a relentless storm of charges of male chauvinism, sometimes euphemistically couched as the over-celebration of African masculinity. In this regard, the charge, often levied by feminist-oriented critics, is that Achebe’s novel deliberately effaces women from its fictional world or downplays their role in the social scheme of things to reduce them to mere “things”, invisible appendages to the men to whose shadows the author perpetually consigns them. Wanton cases of wife-beating, the denial of personal identity to the female characters, not to mention what appears on the surface to be a patronising authorial attitude to the female characters, all of which seem to suffuse the fictional world of the novel, are all evidence for the critics of this persuasion.

As is to be expected of a cultural artefact of such monumental proportions as *Things Fall Apart*, the debate on the novel can hardly be said to have been closed with one critic or members of a given critical school having the last word on the import of the novel. Indeed, any new reading of the novel, especially if it satisfies the all-important, daunting, criterion of freshness, enriches the novel and broadens the perimeters of scholarship on the novel. The need for readings of this kind becomes even more urgent when it is observed from a review of the existing literature on the novel that the twin views summarised above (i.e. that the novel is anti-colonial and anti-feminist) have largely passed unchallenged, unexamined and have, therefore, calcified into a critical dogma.

The desire to undertake a counter-conventional reading of the novel by re-examining the foregoing views about the novel forms the background to this article.

### **Critical Scholarship on *Things Fall Apart***

The ripple set off by the entry of *Things Fall Apart* into the pool of African literary scholarship continues to widen. Literary scholars of nearly every imaginable ideological temperament have studied the novel using a theory or approach suitable for their critical

school. From formalism to Marxism, from post-colonialism to feminism, from traditional sociological approaches to stylistics, from disability studies to eco-criticism, the entire gamut of critical approaches appear to have been tested on this novel. Accordingly, a review of existing literature on the novel is bound to be unwieldy, if not downright overwhelming. The approach adopted here, to get around this challenge, has been to review only those articles or books which treat aspects of colonialism (including cultural nationalism) in the novel, as well as those which are concerned with gender issues. One possible effect of this approach is that what the review may lack in terms of breadth, it will make up for in terms of depth.

The centrality of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* hardly requires any close reading to notice. Besides the fact that his name is the very first word in the novel, the narrative also ends with the rites for his interment, which somewhat sets him up for consideration as the “author and finisher” of the novel. Perhaps it is for this reason that the German translation of the novel bears his eponym. Not surprisingly, a thorny issue which dominates the literature on the novel relevant to the present study is the determination of the “true” extent of Okonkwo’s importance in the narrative. Two schools emerge regarding this question: the one whose members regard him as embodying the values of Umuofia and the other whose members read him as a social deviant in the community. Innes (1992, 32) posits the attitude of the former school when she asserts that:

His world is that of the nine villages, from Umuofia to Mbaino. ... His values are those of his society, recognizing “solid personal achievements” and approving those who thus bring honour to their village. ... As such, he embodies not only the values and assumptions of his community, but also its traditions, its history, its past; and the present must be seen as growing out of that past, a product of it, as Okonkwo is seen as a product of his community and its structures.

Her comment perhaps derives from the same sensibility as that of Udumukwu (2004, 328), who maintains that, “Okonkwo, in his epic stature, embodies the wisdom and values of his community as well as its individual foibles”.

What emerges from the foregoing assertions is that in certain scholarly quarters, Okonkwo is deemed inseparable, both literally and metaphorically, from his Umuofia community. One possible implication of this claim for the present study is that any possible “deconstruction” of the fictional universe of Chinua Achebe, as captured in *Things Fall Apart*, can take the form of a “deconstruction” of either the character of Okonkwo or the community of Umuofia.

Contrary to the above, however, the latter school insists that although Okonkwo occupies a crucially important locus in the novel, he cannot be equated with the community. This view is embodied in the claim by Wright (1990, 78) that, “the interplay of individual and communal lives in the novel offers no support, however, for the view

that Okonkwo, as the ‘great man’ of Umuofia, is a symbolic embodiment of or personification of Ibo [sic] values. On the contrary, Okonkwo is out of step with the village values which he sees himself as upholding”.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, Wright (1990) acknowledges a bond between the individual and the community in the novel. According to him, “the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* modulates, through its interchange of narrative voices, from the communal life of the village to the individual consciousness and back again, so that the two interpenetrate” (Wright 1990, 77).

Wright’s comments imply, among other things, the multiplicity of interpenetrating voices in the novel. This polyphonic attribute of the novel opens it up to multiple interpretations. Following Wright, the present critique attempts to pay closer attention to some of those voices that are usually ignored, muted, or regarded as faint because they are seldom overt, electing instead to manifest themselves by the indirect medium of implication.

Furthermore, there exists a preponderance of gender-oriented readings in the literature on *Things Fall Apart*. A good deal of the scholarship in this vein bemoans Achebe’s putative degradation of women in the novel. One notable exception, however, is Bestman (2012) who offers an alternative reading of the novel. Using the framework of *womanism*, as domesticated in the African milieu by Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Bestman trenchantly argues that Achebe is completely innocent of the glorification of patriarchy with which some critics frequently charge him. After noting that “womanism encapsulates the principle of gender complementarity” (Bestman 2012, 156), she goes on to identify instances in the novel where the two genders complement each other. She cites the role of women in agriculture, law enforcement and the spiritual life of Umuofia, as well as the arrangement of huts in the compounds of the people, to substantiate the claim of gender complementarity that she makes for the novel.

Regarding Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, she culls extra-textual authorial corroboration to disavow any claim that his attitude to women generally, and his wives particularly, is a model in his society. Alluding to a BBC interview, she quotes Achebe as returning the following unflattering verdict on his creation: “Okonkwo was not an Igbo paragon. He was in many ways a misfit. He was a one-sided man, neglecting the feminine aspects of culture. He was too anxious to succeed” (Achebe as quoted in Bestman 2012, 170). She attributes Okonkwo’s eventual fall from the Olympian heights he had attained by dint of hard work to this “neglect”, maintaining that his “anti-women position is the exception, not the norm” (160). For proof that Umuofia, unlike Okonkwo, does not condone wife battering, she recalls the guilty verdict as well as the fines slammed on Ezewulu by the adjudicating masked *egwugwu* (the all-powerful and dreaded spirits) during his trial for the offence.

The present study intersects with Bestman's at many critically important points. Crucially, though, both differ slightly in findings but markedly in approach. Whereas her study is built upon Okonjo-Ogunyemi's womanist framework, the present one is founded on Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist framework. Similarly, some of the interpretations she gives to data collected from the novel are the direct opposites of the interpretations given to the same data in the present study. For example, she cites Okonkwo's naming of his second offspring in exile, Nwofia, as a slight on his maternal kinsmen. The present study does not discern any slight in this gesture. In addition, gender is just one of the thematic preoccupations of the novel, which the present study deconstructs; the other (i.e. anti-colonialism) is not shared with Bestman's essay.

Regarding the treatment of colonialism or, more specifically, of cultural nationalism in *Things Fall Apart*, a profusion of literature is available. Emenyonu (1991), for example, puts the tragic end of the novel down to the tactlessness of the white missionaries and their side-kicks, the administrators, especially their over-zealous court messengers. He characterises the conflict in the novel as one arising from culture contact when he points out that, "*Things Fall Apart* is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into, and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured" (47). Armed with this observation, Emenyonu reaches the conclusion that "the universality of its thematic preoccupation as a study in colonial diplomatic blunder must not be missed by the perceptive reader" (51). Emenyonu's conclusion can hardly stand a test of balance, as he heaps all the blame for the "diplomatic tactlessness" that precipitates the tragic end of the novel on one party in a two-party conflict. Perhaps he has glossed over the wisdom of Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle, who provides a more nuanced account of the culture contact in the novel in his analysis of the reaction of the people of Abame to the white man who misses his way and strays into their village. The present study does not intend to judge, but will attempt a more balanced look at the ramifications of the culture contact and conflict in the novel.

Opara (2012, 24) characterises the novel as a "putative item of 'rebranding'", noting that it arose out of its author's desire to correct the negative portrayal of Africa and Africans by European writers in their works about the continent. She provides the following account of the origin of the novel: "Africa had been branded dark, immature, inhuman and primitive by white colonialists on a civilising mission. Chinua Achebe maintains that he felt impelled to write the novel after reading the negative portraiture of Africa in colonial literary works by Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad" (26). Such accounts harp on what is considered the novel's cultural nationalism, the belief that the novel valorises African culture and liberates it from European denigration. Here, the novel is being wrenched from its familiar aesthetic domain and transferred to an unwonted political domain where it is co-opted into the project of decolonisation. The present study intends to steer a different course by showing that projects of this kind, by

some quirk of unintended consequence, occasionally end up playing into the hands of Africa's cultural traducers by "accidentally" confirming the stereotypes constructed about the continent.

The evaluation of Irele (2001) of the novel manifests the same tendency noticed above in Opara's. According to Irele, "the work has acquired the status of a classic, then, by reason of its character as a counterfiction of Africa in specific contradiction to the discourse of Western colonial domination and its creative deployment of the language of the *imperium*" [emphasis retained] (Irele 2001, 116). The implication of Irele's cultural nationalist claim for the novel in the preceding comment is that the novel owes its status as a classic of world literature more to its *theme* than to its *style*. Though not intended, this detracts from the merit of the novel as an aesthetic product. More relevant to the present study, however, is Irele's observation about the ambiguity surrounding the person of the protagonist of the novel—a point to which the essay intends to return presently. Irele notes: "Despite the novel's contestation of the colonial enterprise, clearly formulated in the closing chapters and highlighted by its ironic ending, readers have always been struck by the veil of moral ambiguity with which Achebe surrounds his principal character and by the dissonances that this sets up in the narrative development" (Irele 2001, 116). As stated above, the present study shall return reiteratively to this ambiguity in the character of Okonkwo.

## **Deconstruction as Theoretical Approach**

This study shall appropriate and utilise for its textual analysis the tenets of deconstruction. Deconstruction is one of the many strands of what is designated as poststructuralism in literary studies. Poststructuralist theories are a group of literary theories arising from structuralism, especially the structuralism espoused by the Swiss-French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Poststructuralism represents a break from de Saussure, a revision of his ideas. Chief among these ideas is de Saussure's drawing of a binary opposition between *langue* and *parole*, where the former denotes language as a system, which includes its underlying principles or grammar, whereas the latter refers to a particular instance of language use, or an utterance. He also analyses the nature of the linguistic sign as consisting of a signifier and a signified. Whereas the signifier designates the acoustic or sound image of the sign, the signified designates the concept for which the sound image stands. It should be noted that the signified is not the same as the physical object that the signifier refers to; that physical object is termed the referent by de Saussure. According to de Saussure the nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, as there is no inherent attribute in a signifier that justifies a certain speech community's use of it to designate a particular signified. Similarly, de Saussure posits that meaning is relational and based on difference. By this he means that no word is meaningful in isolation, but derives its meaning in relation to other words which are related to it as substitutes.

Deconstructionists have since appropriated and modified some of the seminal ideas of de Saussure. For example, they do not envisage a stable bond between the signifier and the signified. Rather they conceive of the sign as consisting of multiple free-floating signifiers. This implies an acknowledgement of the instability of meaning. The implication of this for literary criticism is the rejection of any such thing as **the** interpretation of a literary text, since a text, like the sign, consists of a multiplicity of free-floating interpretations.

Deconstructionists also maintain that Western thought is plagued by binary oppositions which are hierarchical, privileging one half of the duo over the other. The most common of the binary oppositions according to the deconstructionists is the one between speech and writing. Deconstructionists note that Western culture privileges speech over writing because of the belief that speech precedes writing and the belief that speech allows for the speaker's voice to be heard, which can reveal more about the speaker than the spoken words themselves. They call this phonocentrism and have sought to reverse the order of this binary opposition. Binary oppositions are also important in any deconstructive reading of a text, since they are always present, either asserted or implied, in the text.

Norris (1991, 3) is essentially acknowledging the indebtedness of deconstruction to structuralism when he posits that “deconstruction is avowedly ‘post-structuralist’ in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively ‘there’ in the text”.

The practical modalities for a deconstructive reading are neatly set out by Barry (2009, 70–71) and bear extensive quoting. According to Barry, deconstructionists do the following:

1. They “read the text against itself” so as to expose what might be thought of as the “textual subconscious”, where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.
2. They fix upon the surface features of the words—similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a “dead” (or dying) metaphor—and bring these to the foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning.
3. They seek to show that the text is characterised by disunity rather than unity.
4. They concentrate on a single passage and analyse it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a “univocal” reading and the language explodes into “multiplicities of meanings”.
5. They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called “fault-lines”, a geological

metaphor referring to breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement.

In what follows, we shall attempt to re-read *Things Fall Apart* from a deconstructionist perspective, which dislodges surface meaning with deeper meaning and highlights significant shifts in the meaning of a text.

## Deconstructing Binary Oppositions in *Things Fall Apart*

### Male vs Female

As the existing literature on the novel bears out, gender is a major preoccupation in *Things Fall Apart* (hereafter cited as *TFA*). There is, for instance, an alarming recurrence in the novel of violence against women, ranging from wife-beating to near homicide, especially in the household of Okonkwo. As the narrator puts it, “Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife” (*TFA* 21) who abdicates her motherly and wifely responsibilities by going to braid her hair and leaving her family unfed. When she returns, “he beat her very heavily” (*TFA* 21). Also, for merely cutting a few leaves off a banana tree to wrap some food, Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, receives “a sound beating” (*TFA* 27) from her husband who has been “walking aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger” (*TFA* 27), seeking a vent for his anger. Similarly, Okonkwo shoots and narrowly misses killing Ekwefi, because she as much as makes a joke about his poor marksmanship. In addition, the entire *egwugwu* (the all-powerful and dreaded masked spirits) have to convoke to adjudicate in the dispute between Mgbafo and her husband Ezewulu, after she leaves her marital home following a severe beating—one in a series—from him that nearly results in her death.

It is plausible, though facile, to conclude from the foregoing and countless other examples from the novel that *Things Fall Apart* privileges male over female in this binary opposition. Such a conclusion is debatable as the evidence in the novel does not prove it to be conclusively true. It should be noted that the fictional society of the novel does not condone such acts of violence against women. As the masked spirits rule in their verdict in the case of Mgbafo vs Ezewulu, “it is not bravery when a man **fights with** a woman” [emphasis added] (*TFA* 66). The corollary to this is that it is, in fact, cowardice when a man **beats** a woman, more so when she is his wife. In a society where bravery is so valued that Okonkwo can even kill his foster son for fear of being perceived as cowardly, this verdict can be reckoned as the nearest thing to a death sentence.

Besides, outside of Okonkwo’s and Ezewulu’s households, wives tend to fare a lot better. There is, for example, the household of Nwakibie, a distinguished clansman who gives Okonkwo the initial yam seedlings with which Okonkwo launches his farming career. In this household, the wives even participate in the ceremonial drinking of palm-wine in their husband’s *obi*. It is said of Anasi, Nwakibie’s first wife, that she “was a



middle-aged woman, **tall** and **strongly built**. There was **authority** in her bearing and she looked every inch the **ruler** of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family” [emphases added] (*TFA* 14). She certainly does not come across from the above description as an inferior being. There is also Ndulue and his wife Ozoemena. He has taken three out of the four titles in Umuofia, and has led Umuofia to several triumphs in war and yet is still so attached to his wife that “he could not do anything without telling her” (*TFA* 48). This hardly supports the notion of inferiorisation of women in the novel.

Similarly, the charge that *Things Fall Apart* privileges male over female, glosses over the jurisprudence of Umuofia. Among the people of Okonkwo’s clan, as in many other societies, there is often a gradation of wrongdoing. All offences are not regarded with equal severity. Significantly, the male/female binary opposition is used by the people in their construction of a typology of murder. Manslaughter, or accidental murder, is considered female and penalised less harshly than homicide, or deliberate murder, which is characterised as male and carries a terminal forfeit. Accordingly, when Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills a clansman, the narrator concludes, “the crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent” (*TFA* 87). Here, again, is another rebuttal of the charge that the novel prioritises male over female.

Consequently, in order to escape the wrath of both the gods and his fellow clansmen, Okonkwo has to flee with his family. He elects to seek refuge in Mbanta, his motherland. This is significant. As his maternal uncle, Uchendu, sagely puts the matter in perspective:

It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (*TFA* 94)

Persuaded by Uchendu’s avuncular wisdom, Okonkwo “had called the first child born to him in exile Nneka — ‘Mother is Supreme’ — out of politeness to his mother’s kinsmen. However, two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia — ‘Begotten in the Wilderness’” (*TFA* 115). Not to put too fine a point on it, this translation of the second name is grossly misleading. We argue that whereas the meaning of the “nw(a)” (Igbo for offspring [note: not “son”]) prefix in this name is beyond debate, the import of the “ofia” suffix is open to alternative translations. It could mean anything from the very harmless “forest” or “bush” to the derogatory “wilderness”, which the authorial voice settles for in this context. What should be borne in mind is that Okonkwo’s clan is known as “Umuofia”, which also contains the “ofia” suffix. If the word were pejorative as the authorial voice in the novel presents it, would Okonkwo’s clan, proud as its people are, have borne it for several generations? What seems far more

plausible, in this instance, is that by naming his son “Nwofia”, which, we insist, means “descendant of Umuofia” (the name is most likely a shortened form of “Nwa-Umuofia”), Okonkwo merely asserts the “citizenship” of the child. This, therefore, cannot plausibly count for an instance of female degradation.

Even at the level of spirituality, there are enough examples to reverse the claim to male superiority in the male/female hierarchy in *Things Fall Apart*. For example, Umuofia is an agrarian society, which means that it draws its sustenance from the earth, the soil or the ground. Not surprisingly, we are told that “Ani [‘the earth goddess and the source of all fertility’] played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. In addition, she was also in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth” (TFA 26). It is clear from the foregoing that Ani occupies the most important position in the pantheon of the people. Her remit embraces such crucially important subjects as fertility and justice; she is the receptacle of the remains of the departed ancestors; and as a liminal demiurge, she is the link between the living and the dead. It beats the imagination that a people who accord such an omnipotent position to a female deity can be accused of placing maleness above femaleness. Furthermore, even powerful male deities choose female priestesses as the intermediary between them and the people. Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, is an example. Of this oracle, it is said that, “people come from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers” (TFA 12). It is a measure of the importance of the woman that it is only to a woman that this deity reveals himself, for, as the narrator tells us, “no one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess” (TFA 12).

It should be recalled also that Umuofia whose martial prowess is the subject of lore among the nine villages that make up the clan ascribes its skill at prosecuting war to a “potent war-medicine” (TFA 8) and “the active principle in that medicine had been **an old woman** with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi-nwanyi*, or **old woman**” [emphases added] (TFA 8–9). Similarly, when the people of Umuike, whose market is characterised as the commercial nerve centre in the fictional world of the novel, “wanted their market to grow and swallow up the markets of their neighbours ... they made a powerful medicine. Every market-day, before the first cock-crow, this medicine stands on the market-ground in the shape of **an old woman** with a fan. With this magic fan she beckons to the market all the neighbouring clans” [emphasis added] (TFA 79). It would appear that the most potent medicines in the novel are those with an active female ingredient at their core. This is, in fact, a case for female inclusion.

Much has also been made of the novel’s alleged denial of identity to female characters. It has been said that whereas the male characters are usually identified by their names, the same courtesy is not extended to the female characters by the narrator as they are

often merely identified as *abc*'s wife or *xyz*'s mother. Again, whereas some female characters are so identified in the novel, there are sufficient examples to render this a non-issue. "Anasi" (*TFA* 14), Nwakibie's first wife, is identified by her name. So, too, are "Ojiugo" (*TFA* 21), Okonkwo's youngest wife; "Ekwefi" (*TFA* 28), Okonkwo's second wife; and "Ozoemena" (*TFA* 47), Ndulue's wife, among others. Besides, the culture portrayed in the fictional world of the novel does not indicate, even remotely, that there is anything demeaning about identifying a woman as a wife or mother. What is important to note, in this regard, is that among the people of Umuofia, it is expected that "the birth of ... children ... should be a woman's crowning glory" (*TFA* 54). We argue that with this equation of motherhood with royalty (notice the deployment of the metaphor of "crowning"), any reference to a woman as a mother, instead of demeaning her, in fact, does the opposite—it elevates her.

There is also a semiotic dimension to the male/female binary opposition in the novel. This involves the deployment of "signs" to represent either gender. For an agrarian community it is not surprising that these "signs" are drawn from farming. Accordingly, *yam* is characterised as male and *cassava* as female. The narrator reports, for example, that the young Okonkwo's mother and sisters "grew women's crops like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (*TFA* 16). Elsewhere, we are told that "yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king" (*TFA* 24). Given the seeming importance accorded to yam in the above extracts, it is possible to cite this as proof of the prioritisation of male over female in the novel. However, this will not be entirely accurate. It should be taken into account that on special occasions in the novel, the menu is never complete without *foofoo* (which is obtained from cassava), whereas pounded yam (which is a derivative of yam), is so commonplace, its absence from the menu may even pass unnoticed. Besides, contemporary science has shown the infinite resourceful cassava as a crop from which many by-products can be obtained. It is a crop that has no useless parts since everything from the stem and leaves of the plant to the peel of the roots is valuable. This, in fact, is an apt analogy for the various roles of a woman in the society. She is a daughter, sister, wife, mother, priestess, farmer, trader, and nurse of her husband and children, among many other roles. Besides, whereas yam is described as "exacting" (*TFA* 24), cassava, by contrast, is characterised as benevolent—it is not very taxing to cultivate and is hardly affected even by drought, unlike yam.

## **The White Man vs the Black Man**

There are many variations of this binary opposition, such as European vs African, coloniser vs colonised, and foreign vs local. Importantly, the popular belief, especially among the majority of the scholarship on the novel, as well as the author's attitude as expressed in interviews and extra-literary treatises, is that *Things Fall Apart*, being a counter-discourse to years of European denigration of Africa, prioritises Africa over Europe in the hierarchy that characterises this binary opposition. Achebe has been

labelled a cultural nationalist for what is considered his celebration of African values in the novel. He himself has admitted in the novel, as well as the sequel to it, that his objective has been didactic, to teach his African readers “that their past — with all its imperfections — was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe 1973, 4).

The foregoing claims are by no means unassailable. Take, for example, the author’s claim that the pre-colonial past of the African “was not one long night of savagery.” How does this claim square with his portrayal of pre-colonial life in the novel? What, if not savagery, is the word for the killing of twins on the assumption that they are evil; the mutilation of the corpses of infants on the assumption that they return to torment their parents; the murder without a motive of a white man who misses his way and strays into Abame; the use of the skulls of war victims as trophies and wine glasses; the wilful segregation of some members of the community on the grounds that they are *osu* (outcasts); or, more specifically, the killing of Ikemefuna? When this is squared with the fact that it is the European Christian church, which operates in the name of God, that fights to liberate the people from these practices, it becomes less difficult to discern this gaping hiatus between authorial intention and the finished literary product.

Furthermore, as is apparent from the literature on the novel, Okonkwo is often regarded as the embodiment of African values. This, then, necessitates a closer look at his character. True, he is a tribute to the rewards of hard work. He is also justly celebrated for his “solid personal achievements” (*TFA* 3) and his “prosperity was visible in his household” (*TFA* 10). Yet, there are many unsavoury sides to his character that can hardly be regarded as a credit to African culture. Besides the undignified circumstances of his death (his friend, Obierika, says “he will be buried like a dog” [*TFA* 147]), there is the even more significant fact of his almost complete lack of any aesthetic sensibilities. Okonkwo, it seems, is concurrently guilty of philistinism and *bardicide*. Those he appears to loathe the most are people who display an inclination towards the arts, since for him this disposition is incompatible with manliness. Accordingly, he despises his father, a troubadour who “was very good on his flute” (*TFA* 4) and “had a sense of the dramatic” (*TFA* 6); he kills Ikemefuna who “had an endless stock of folk tales” (*TFA* 25); and he disowns his first son, Nwoye who has been attracted to Christianity because of “the poetry of the new religion; something [he] felt in the marrow” (*TFA* 104). The only time Okonkwo displays any appreciative attitude towards art is when he hears the drumbeats summoning the village to the *ilo* (square) to witness the annual wrestling contest. According to the narrator, he “moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth” (*TFA* 30). It should be noted that it is not the sonority of the drumbeats that interests Okonkwo, but the fact that the act of drumming reminds him of his days as a young wrestler. The foregoing trait of Okonkwo only reinforces the view, often purveyed by some European cultural supremacists, that the African is devoid of artistic sensibilities.

When Obierika pays his maiden visit to Okonkwo in exile and is taken to greet Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, a conversation inevitably ensues (recall that "among the Ibo [sic] the art of conversation is regarded very highly" [TFA 5]) which soon touches on the sacking of Abame. What is important in the context of this study is a particularly startling, almost Freudian, verbal choice of Obierika's. Here is how he describes the arrival of the search party for the white man who has been murdered by the people of Abame: "one morning three **white men** led by a band of **ordinary men like us** came to the clan" [emphases added] (TFA 98). This is quite significant for power relations between white and black in the novel. Notice that the white men are only three, yet they *lead* a band of black men. Notice also that in Obierika's own words, the black men are *ordinary*, which implies, of course, that the white men are *extraordinary*. Recall, too, that the speaker has been characterised as "a man who thought about things" (TFA 87), which is to say that he could not have been speaking flippantly. With this attitude towards the white man, it is not surprising that the same Obierika delivers the most scathing verdict yet of the ultimate triumph of white over black in the novel. Here is how he puts it:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (TFA 124)

If any doubts remain of the victory of black over white in the novel, the gloating of Mr Kiaga, the missionary at Mbanta and the sidekick of the white man, dispels it. There is an unmistakable ring of triumphalism around his boast: "they also said I would die if I built my church on this ground. Am I dead? They said I would die if I took care of twins. I am still alive" (TFA 112).

The foregoing examples are only a few of many more that undercut the claim to cultural nationalism, often made for *Things Fall Apart* and gainsay the assertion that the novel places black, African or the colonised above white, European or the coloniser in the binary opposition linking these two sets of variables.

## Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has attracted an avalanche of literary criticism. The majority of such criticisms seem to take for granted the claim that the novel denigrates women and attacks the white coloniser. The evidence in the novel, however, supports an alternative reading, which shows the above reading to be debatable, if not downright wrong. The novel does, in fact, accord women and femaleness some pride of place; or, at the very least, the claim that the novel treats women and femaleness unfairly is grossly exaggerated. Similarly, the argument that the novel punctures the claim to racial

superiority often made by white European supremacists with regard to Africa is also grotesquely overstated.

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