

Principles of Literary Study

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Office hours: Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A or by appt.

April 27, 2026. Achebe (4).

upcoming

- ▶ course evaluation: <https://sirs.rutgers.edu/blue>
 - ▶ eat sugary snacks as you fill it out
- ▶ paper due next Monday at 10 p.m.
- ▶ exam Monday 5/11 9–11 a.m.

review

- ▶ “Mother is Supreme”: complexities of gender
 - ▶ Okonkwo is not representative
 - ▶ but valuing the feminine doesn't mean equality for women
- ▶ the coming of the missionaries
 - ▶ changing points of view, changing protagonists
 - ▶ interpretation (of language and culture) as a problem

the missionaries

At last the day came by which all the missionaries should have died. But they were still alive....And for the first time they had a woman [convert]. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child.

Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance. (151)

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He [Okonkwo] had called the first child born to him in exile Nneka—"Mother is Supreme"—out of politeness to his mother's kinsmen. (162)

protagonists

Mr. Kiaga stood firm, and it was his firmness that saved the young church. (157)

the matter of colonialism

One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (208–9)

Okonkwo/Umuofia

Okonkwo's machete descended twice...

He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?" (204–5)

mediators again

He had just sent Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was now called **Isaac**, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru. (182)

The men of Umuofia met in the marketplace and decided to collect without delay two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to appease the white man. They did not know that fifty bags would go to the court messengers, who had increased the fine for that purpose. (197)

Quayson: motive

All these critical formations in relation to Achebe's work can be perceived as united in subtle maneuvers that take the culture of the realist novel as most truthfully inscribing the space and time of history. (122)

This reading of *Things Fall Apart*, then, is offered as a means of exposing the gap that exists between the realist African text and the reality that it is seen to represent. (125)

Reading "culture" out of a novel is valuable but inadequate. (133)

It is in the attitude of women to the *egwu-gwu* that the hierarchy of power is unmasked. The *egwu-gwu* emerge to sit in judgement with “guttural and awesome” voices. And the sounds of their voices are no less mystifying than the sounds that herald their entry:

Aru oyim de de de dei! flew around the dark closed hut like tongues of fire. The ancestral spirits of the clan were abroad. The metal gong beat continuously now and the flute, shrill and powerful, floated on the chaos.

And then the *egwu-gwu* appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwu-gwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was

a terrifying spectacle. Even Mgbafo took to her heels and had to be restrained by her brothers. (63)

It is interesting that in its presentation of the scene the narrative betrays its attitude to the relationship between women and power. Significantly, the *egwu-gwu* are described in an idiom of grandeur, the “tongues of fire” recalling the dramatic events of Pentecost recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 2.1-4. And the women’s “instinctive” flight at their emergence can be read as the awestruck response to these masked ancestral spirits. A few lines later, however, the women reveal they have more knowledge of the reality behind the masked spirits than they care to express: “Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwu-gwu* had the springly walk of Okonkwo.... But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves” (64-65). The narrative paints the scene with so much detail, objective distancing and humour, that it is impossible not to regard it as of the clearest “realistic” vintage. But the “thoughtful silence” of the women before this all-important masculine institution is ironic. The narrative works both to reveal the “natural” and “instinctive” female attitude to Power and also to ironize the pretensions of the masculine social institutions. But it is important to note that the irony does not work to radically undermine the hierarchy at the centre of the power structure because the women constrain themselves to “thinking” their knowledge, but leave it unexpressed.

(in our ed.,
88–89)

(Quayson,
127–28)

how to probe a fissure

It is then highly problematic that Ezinma vanishes from the story after the return from exile, and is never referred to again. It is as if to suggest that in the crucial exercise of delineating the climactic consequences of the meeting of the two cultures at the end of the novel, there is no space for women. (131)

The contact between the colonizing and the traditional cultures is attended by a subtle construction of the male–female polarities which this time are not hierarchical but rather intermingle and change places in restless slippage. (132)

how to stage a dialectic

At the level of metonymic realistic description, a certain ironized patriarchy governs the construction of the fictional Umuofia....But at the level of symbolic conceptualization...the male-female hierarchy that has governed the text completely collapses....*Things Fall Apart* thus explores a loving image of Umuofia at the same time as it reveals a dissatisfaction with the values of the society it describes in such detail. And this is undertaken at a more subtle level than the mere explication of content can reveal. (133)

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The very choice of the metropolitan language for the writing of post-colonial literatures secretes liminality into the inaugural act of post-colonialist representation itself. (124)

Achebe's language

It did not occur to him [Achebe] that he was the first great African writer in the English language....Shortly afterwards he came to London on a course at the BBC. He showed it [*Things Fall Apart*] to his course officer who sent it round to Heinemann's. Heinemann's normal fiction reader read it and did a long report, but the firm was still hesitating whether to accept it. Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There were no precedents.

Alan Hill, interviewed by Kristen Holst Petersen in 1990, rpt. in *Things Fall Apart*, ed. F. Abiola Irele (New York: Norton, 2009), 148–49. This is possibly mythologized.

Maybe someday I will, myself, translate *Things Fall Apart* into the Igbo language. Just to show what I mean, though, for me, being bilingual, the novel form seems to go with the English language. Poetry and drama seem to go with the Igbo language.

“Chinua Achebe, *The Art of Fiction No. 139*,” interviewed by Jerome Brooks, *Paris Review* 133 (Winter 1994). He never did translate it, though he did write other works in Igbo.

next

- ▶ Ben Okri, selections from *Prayer for the Living*: print them all out
 - ▶ don't recognize something? [look it up](#)