

Narrative Techniques in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Richard M. Wafula¹ and Chris L. Wanjala²

¹*Kenyatta University and North West University, Mafikeng Campus*

²*University of Nairobi and North West University-Mafikeng Campus*

E-mail: ¹<rnaminguli@gmail.com>, ²<Cwanjala1944@yahoo.co.uk>

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ABSTRACT This paper begins from the standpoint that most critical works on Chinua Achebe, especially his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, have concentrated on themes and characters. While this is important in the analysis of the novel, narrative technique is equally important. Through using analytical perspectives proposed by Gary Morson, alongside close reading and content analysis of the primary text, the researchers argue that Achebe used techniques that predicted, juxtaposed comparatively and in contrastive positions as the narrative devices that enabled him to communicate the controlling ideas of his novel effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) is Africa's most widely studied creative work (Iyasere 1998). However, literary critical studies of the novel have dealt mainly with issues of cultural importance. Critics such as D.G. Killam (1969), O.R. Dathorne (1975), Gerald Moore (1987) and E.N. Emenyonu (1994) argue that the basic concern of the book is the cultural conflict. Analysis of the literary techniques has been for the most part subsumed under the thematic considerations. While examining themes is indispensable in the assessment of a literary work, technique is equally important in the analysis, comprehension and appreciation of a literary work. Analyses of the style of *Things Fall Apart* as exemplified by Yankson and Traore (1990) are useful so far as they isolate and describe some of the methods that Achebe employs to express his ideas. Traore discusses how the mosquito myth is used in *Things Fall Apart* to depict Okonkwo's relationship with women. On his part, Yankson describes the relevance of speech styles to specific social interactions that take place in the novel. But these critics do not address the question of how the author applies techniques in the context of the entire organizing design of his work.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to identify, isolate and demonstrate how specific aspects of technique are employed by Achebe to make his novel aesthetically more interesting to read. The

researchers intend to show that the narrative technique of *Things Fall Apart* is at the heart of its organizing design.

METHODOLOGY

The method of the study is qualitative. Specifically, the researchers analyse the novel in terms of its wholeness and particularity. Various sub narratives and the way they relate to the Master narratives will be examined. Thus, the researchers' method is akin to the ethnography of speaking in folklore. The examination of various stories within the main story will be analysed in the framework of the narratological concepts proposed by Gary Morson. These concepts are: foreshadowing, sideshadowing and backshadowing (Morson 1994).

OBSERVATIONS

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a device used by the author to intervene consciously in the unfolding pattern of the story. The technique enables the author to prefigure what is going to happen. The use of foreshadowing is conceived on the understanding that the story is already told, and therefore, its structure is preconceived. Morson explains that the very term foreshadowing indicates backwards causality. A spatial metaphor for a temporal phenomenon, it is a shadow cast in advance of an object. Its temporal analog is an event that indicates another event to come (p. 84).

Foreshadowing draws the reader's attention to the design of the author. To illustrate how foreshadowing works, Morson uses Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1996) as an example. He points out that in this play, foreshadowing conveys the temporality that governs the real world. This is due to the fact that the future is never in question (Morson 1996: 59). The myth of Oedipus' patricide and incest is already known and the audience is aware of the outcome from the beginning. The significance of Oedipus' choices as the play develops is underlined by the fact that the audience know the consequences of his actions.

The application of foreshadowing in *Oedipus the King* is marked differently from its use in other works of literature. In Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1989) for instance, the image of fire that Louisa saw frequently adumbrated her suppressed sensitivity and vivacity which later bursts out and led to the collapse of her marriage to Bounder. But the reader is not obviously aware of this until much later in the action of the novel. This, then, implies that foreshadowing does not mean only what the audience or the readers know in total in regard to the results of the narration. It may also mean those signs that the author posts at certain key stages of the work, later enable the reader to understand the characters' actions or choices in their totality.

Sideshadowing

In order for the author to avoid treating a narrative as a mechanical product whose building blocks are predictable from the start to the finish, he introduces sideshadowing. Sideshadowing is a device that conveys the sense that events recounted may not have happened. It casts a shadow of other possibilities of what could have happened. Morson observes that while readers see what did happen, they also see the image of what else could have happened. In this way the hypothetical shows through the actual and so achieves a kind of shadowy existence (Morson 1994: 1-18).

By allowing the reader to visualize possibilities that would have taken place, straight lines of cause and effect are blurred. According to Morson, Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels best typify how sideshadowing is applied technically. Morson insists that in Dostoevsky's works too many facts are presented with an air of mystery and no clear explanation. Characters' voices are heard simultaneously without privileging any

one of them. Consequently, many possible stories are constructed or intimated at the same time.

In associating sideshadowing with the works of Dostoevsky, Morson revisits and modifies some of the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin in the novel. Bakhtin (1981) argued that the dialogic nature of language is best manifested in the novel. According to Bakhtin (1981), novel is the most sensitive genre of literature because it is responsive and sensitive to the flux of social history. The language of the novel is most adaptable to the changing social attitudes. In the novel, testifies Bakhtin, every utterance is spoken in some dialect or speech that carries or implies the attitude of those who speak it at a particular time.

Bakhtin says that the process of creating novels is anti-canonical because it does not permit generic monologue. On the contrary, it persists in the interplay of languages which speak for themselves. The process of creating novels is linked to popular forms of expression that makes meaning relative to the formal ways of communicating. The novel, says Bakhtin, is a way of presenting the world in a mode that is ever examining itself and subjecting its established norms to review. Based on these observations, Bakhtin concludes that Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels are the best manifestations of the dialogic genre (1984). In *Crime and Punishment* (1932) for example, Bakhtin witnesses Dostoevsky's surrender to his characters. Characters are not mouthpieces of the author. They are subjects with consciousness independent of the author. They defy the author's attempt to compel them stick into a preconceived category. Raskolnikov, the most dominant character in *Crime and Punishment* is not an automaton in the hands of Dostoevsky. He has the liberty to create his ideas and consciousness independent of the author.

While Gary Morson agrees with Bakhtin's notions of dialogism in Dostoevsky's novels, he observes that Bakhtin does not specifically identify and describe the technique that Dostoevsky employs to create those novels. It is against this background that Morson posits and illustrates that Dostoevsky uses sideshadowing to write his novels (p. 10). Morson persists that sideshadowing enables Dostoevsky to write free novels in the sense that they refuse to obey a conscious design.

Backshadowing

Backshadowing is a reversal of foreshadowing. Viewing and evaluating the present in terms

of the entire narrative project reveals that all along, the past had contained signs of what eventually happened. Gary Morson explains that those signs that are visible now, could have been seen then. In effect, the present as the future of the past was already immanent in the past (Morson 1994: 234). According to Morson, backshadowing arises out of privileging one's own time over other's time and using it to turn the past into a well-knit story. As a result, loose ends which suggest other possibilities are drastically reduced or eliminated. Backshadowing is most pronounced in the ideas of people who think of history in determinate terms. Official Soviet culture was founded on such backshadowing, especially in its subscription to socialist realism as the format of writing works of literature (Bisztray 1978). In socialist realist writing, character and action are tailored to the demands of a preconceived future. The action of a work involves a conflict between the ruling class and the ruled in the process of which the latter wins through a revolution.

Maxim Gorky's autobiography (1949), for instance described the author's life from childhood until he became an ideologically mature socialist. His physical maturation corresponds to his ideological evolution and transformation. And the stages of growth he goes through are almost directly proportional to the respective modes of economic production that precede socialism. A socialist society that is based on historical materialism takes for granted that there has been a capitalist, a feudal and a communal economic system. By writing a socialist realist work, therefore, the author weaves the past into a well-constructed story whose causal connections are clearly visible, easy to follow and that inevitably leads to a socialist society. Like foreshadowing, backshadowing limits the narrative possibilities that a work of art may take. Both of them limit the freedom of sideshadowing. In many literary works including *Things Fall Apart*, however, it is possible to employ foreshadowing and backshadowing in juxtaposition with the sideshadowing.

DISCUSSION OF *THINGS FALL APART*

Okonkwo as the Narrative Frame of *Things Fall Apart*

Okonkwo is the most dominant character of *Things Fall Apart* whom Achebe uses to depict the fate of Umuofia. Okonkwo's fictional biography is fairly straightforward through the pas-

sage of time. Consequently, he provides the narrative frame of the novel which is the building block of foreshadowing, sideshadowing and backshadowing. Okonkwo is created in such a way that he combines both mythical and conventional human qualities. As a mythical figure, Okonkwo stands for the life and transformation of his society. Most of the values that Okonkwo exhibits and cherishes are also cherished by his society. Foremost among these values are hard-work and bravery. Although Okonkwo is not the original founder of the nine villages of Umuofia, the new life he brings to wrestling matches constitute the society's sense of pride and self-identity in a manner hitherto unknown. It is like a new beginning. His is a straightforward story with minimal but memorable flashback scenes, digressions and interior monologues. Referring to the match in which Okonkwo throws down Amalinze the Cat, Achebe reported that it was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged in a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (p. 1).

On the basis of this statement, the researchers infer that Okonkwo was elevated to a mythical status after he defeated Amalinze the Cat. At the same time, Okonkwo's success is a springboard that transforms his role into the skeletal frame of the narrative in general. Okonkwo's story is an allegorical expression of the experiences that Umuofians undergo. His character and experiences foreshadow the community's experiences. He is a living point of reference of what it means to be a successful person in his society.

The mythical status of Okonkwo is, however, undermined by his wants and emotions as an individual within a particular space and time. As a result, there is a clash between prefiguring the narrative in terms of Okonkwo's mythical frame and what he actually does in the action of the narrative. We understand that Okonkwo's whole life is dominated by the fear that laid deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods, and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of the nature, malevolent red in tooth and claw (p. 13). The cause of Okonkwo's fear is that he is afraid of being considered weak and that he has built a reputation and fame that would go to a worthless offspring. In the aftermath of fearing to be considered weak, Okonkwo violates the laws of the land. He beats his wife during the Week of Peace (p. 29), kills Ikemefuna

(p. 61), shoots dead Ogbuefu Ezeudu's son (p. 124), and finally commits suicide (p. 207). The violations of these prohibitions, especially the last, turn Okonkwo into an outcast. Okonkwo's personal choices alienate his attribute as a foreshadow and create a potential for sideshadowing. Okonkwo's failings that occur at certain important places in the action of the novel gives rise to Obierika as an alternative role model for the people of Umuofia. Obierika is more rational and contemplative than Okonkwo. Through his moderate character, the researchers see a personality who could easily supplant Okonkwo's mythical status. After Okonkwo is banished from his clan for killing a kinsman, Obierika agonizes over the punishment with a view to seeking more logical ways of exacting justice. Achebe says of Obierika that he was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, Obierika sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously, bemoans Obierika for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time, he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed (p. 125).

In the foregoing paraphrase, Obierika questions the essence of the retrogressive customs of his society. He typifies internal dynamics that would have brought about the change in an evolutionary way had Christianity and colonialism not come to Umuofia. By being in disharmony with some practices of his society, he also becomes a 'falcon who cannot hear the falconer'. As another possibility, Obierika represents African societies that accept change rationally without resorting to armed resistance against a new world order.

As a matter of fact, Obierika replaces Okonkwo for a brief moment after the latter disappears from the scene. It is Obierika who leads the District Commissioner's team to the spot where Okonkwo hung himself. When the team comes finally to the exact tree under which Okonkwo's body is dangling, Obierika turns to the administrator and emotionally eulogizes, "That man was one of the greatest in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (*Things Fall Apart* 1959b: 208).

Obierika displays his leadership qualities here. Although he is ordered to shut up by a court messenger, his role clearly shows that he is a diplomat and represents the idea that change would have come differently had Umuofia been led by people with more liberal views with regard to customary practices.

The Locust Invasion

Within the wider framework of Okonkwo's status as a foreshadow and Obierika's continual but subtle presence as a sideshadow, Achebe uses brief events to prefigure what is about to happen in Umuofia. Earlier, in *Things Fall Apart* for example, locusts invade Umuofia (p. 55-56). The invasion adumbrates the coming of Christianity and colonialism. Initially, locusts come in small numbers. Gradually, they descend in a mass and settle uncontrollably on every available twig and branch in the land.

Much later in the novel, while telling the story of how missionaries have settled in Abame, Obierika says, "other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it (the oracle) said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain" (p. 138-139). The locust invasion that takes place in the first part of the novel foreshadows the human events that happen in its third part. Achebe integrates the locust invasion into the very texture of the novel so that change is envisioned both at the cultural level and the natural ecological level.

But the locust invasion is not the only motif that Achebe could have used to develop a sense of foreboding. He could have used other motifs such as protracted inter-tribal warfare, floods or even epidemics to give signs of the uncertainty of the future. The motifs just mentioned are as natural to the setting of the novel as the locust invasion. That the author picks on the locust invasion is a pure chance. In fact the episode of the invasion can be abstracted and thrown out of the novel without mortally affecting the flow of the narrative. Any other happening of the same category and consequence can fit in its place. It is in this sense then that the locust invasion not only foreshadows the coming of Christianity and colonialism to Umuofia but also casts shadows of other signs that could have portended the happening of the same events.

Epigraph from W.B. Yeats as a Foreshadow and a Sideshadow

Achebe takes the title *Things Fall Apart* from the first part of 'The Second Coming', a poem by W.B. Yeats (Norman 1984). That part reads as follows:

*Tuning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things Fall Apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

Yeats' poem provides the frame for understanding how Achebe constructs his novel at the level of ideas. The strategic placement of the epigraph makes it a necessary adjunct for a critical reading of the novel. The part of the poem that has been quoted foregrounds the contents of the novel. As a result of having the quotation, a sense of anticipation is created as to the inter-textual linkage between the poem and the novel. To appreciate *Things Fall Apart* fully, one is called upon by analytical necessity to understand the controlling idea of the poem.

A close reading of 'The Second Coming' shows that the poet is concerned with demonstrating that no civilization can remain static and evolve forever towards perfection. A civilization must collapse from within and be destroyed from without. Yeats insists that what replaces a civilization opposes itself. The falcon's loss of contact implies human beings' separation from ideals that have enabled them to control their lives. It involves an estrangement from traditional ties that have kept life workable. The image of 'the blood-dimmed tide', which does not appear in the epigraph but in the later parts of the poem, refers to the terrible destructive forces that are unleashed towards the end of an era. It is likely referring to war. The state of affairs that emerges from Yeats' description is that of helplessness.

Achebe appears to operate along similar lines. The first part of *Things Fall Apart* describes village life in which human beings are basically in harmony with themselves and with the nature. Their society is held together by cultural values that have evolved over a long time. However, germs of decline and collapse emerge from within and without. Traditions such as human sacrifice and the throwing of twin children in the forest undermine the cohesiveness of the society. Colonial administration and Christianity hasten the process of disintegration that would have otherwise taken a longer time. Because the decay of civilizations is strongly un-

derlined in both the poem and the novel, the epigraph foreshadows what takes place in the novel. In other words, a study of *Things Fall Apart* in terms of 'The Second Coming' is feasible.

Much as Achebe borrows the motif of disintegration from Yeats, he illustrates it artistically in keeping with his unique circumstances. 'The Second Coming' is a poem composed of twenty-two lines while *Things Fall Apart* is a full-length novel. Secondly, the first part of *Things Fall Apart* depicts a society in which life is regulated by clearly definable norms whereas the poem plunges the reader directly into an estranged world.

From this, it is explicit that the writer of the novel works with possibilities rather than subserviently follow the framework provided by the poem. Besides exploring Yeats' concern in a different genre, Achebe modifies Yeats' world in a fundamental way. In the 'Second Coming', Christian religion is being replaced by a nameless pagan religion. On the contrary, in *Things Fall Apart*, it is the pagan Gods that are being replaced by Christianity. Achebe makes Yeats' idea of civilization become subjective and consequently, have a distinctive validity for his people. Embedded in the fact that the poem foreshadows what happens in the novel are the many possibilities that Achebe can choose from and use to explore the theme of the destruction of the civilizations. One such instantiation of choice is how colonialism and Christianity 'slouch towards Umuofia' and turn its world upside down. Achebe is even more particular than this by creating a character, Okonkwo through whom he dramatizes this theme.

Backshadowing in *Things Fall Apart*

While the author employs foreshadowing side by side with sideshadowing as the cases cited above illustrate, backshadowing is not juxtaposed with sideshadowing in a direct and immediate way. A typical instance of backshadowing is shown in part two of the novel when Obierika visits Okonkwo in exile. Obierika tells about the killing of a peaceful explorer by the people of Abame. The impact of the act is a complete annihilation of their village. Commenting on the fact that in killing a man who had said nothing, the people of Abame had been unwise, Uchendu, the oldest man among Obierika's audience says:

Never kill a man who says nothing... Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food.

She went and brought back a duckling. 'You have done very well', said themother to the daughter, 'but tell me, what did the mother of the duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?' 'It said nothing', replied the young kite. 'It just walked away'. 'You must return the duckling', said the mother. There is something ominous behind the silence (p. 140).

This anecdote is part of the folk wisdom of Achebe's people. On account of the fact that it is traditional and therefore already known, the people of Abame should have invoked its authority before deciding to kill the explorer. In killing the explorer, they flout the didactic purpose of the anecdote and subsequently deserve vengeance. The anecdote thus contextualizes the fate of the people of Abame into a well-knit story. It 'foreshadows after the fact' that the people of Abame are destroyed because they do not pay heed to their own well-known guidelines.

Besides Uchendu's anecdote, the author consciously uses backshadowing to justify his entire artistic project. This is openly shown in the last part of the book. On discovering that Okonkwo has committed suicide, the District Commissioner changes from a resolute administrator to a student of African anthropology. He instantly proceeds researching the customs of Umuofia using the elders as his informants. The ultimate statement that he makes after a few minutes of cross-examination is revealing:

The story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. 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 on cutting out the details. He had already chosen the title of the book after much thought. The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes in the Lower Niger (p. 208-209).

The District Commissioner's statement casts a strong shadow on the pedagogical motives behind Achebe's undertaking to write *Things Fall Apart*. In this context, the author criticizes the colonial administrator for assuming he knows much about African culture when he in fact knows very little. He satirizes the administrator light-heartedly for intending to summarize the whole novel in just one paragraph. Since the administrator depicted in this episode is a certain type, he represents all the colonial officials who lack an insider's knowledge of the African culture.

Based on the Commissioner's thoughts, readers can see in retrospect why Achebe describes in detail the various aspects of the culture of Umuofia. These aspects include marriage customs, legal institutions and burial ceremonies. Besides elucidating the values embedded in the cultural practices he defines, the author parades the ugly side some of them embody. Among the figures that Achebe uses to identify and describe both the beautiful and the detestable side of his people's culture, proverbs are most foregrounded. Proverbs are employed to demonstrate that all the actions that are done in the community have some justification no matter what an outsider might think of them. Okonkwo, for example justifies his participation in the killing of Ikemefuna by invoking the authority of the proverb, "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts in his mouth" (*Things Fall Apart* p.67). Okonkwo applies this proverb to argue his case that by killing Ikemefuna, he is merely carrying out the orders of the Earth Goddess and so, he cannot be punished for being a good messenger. Achebe's excursion into the cultural provinces of Umuofia is, therefore, intended to testify that the District Commissioner himself should have known more about those provinces than he does. The District Commissioner backshadows what has already happened and enables the reader to perceive the entire book as a well-calculated response to his statements.

Beyond this point, Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* as a reaction to other complete works. In particular, he reacts to Joyce Cary's novel:

One of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel, Mister Johnson, which was praised so much, but it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of not only the country- but even of the Nigerian character, so I thought if this was famous then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from inside (Quoted in Pieterse p. 4.).

Through entering into dialogue with extant texts, Achebe's novel places those other texts into perspective. *Things Fall Apart* becomes the last tentative systematic statement on the African in the ensuing exchange. Incidentally, although Achebe aims to answer Cary back, his project becomes too large for one book. In addition to *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe sequentially wrote *Arrow of God* (1959) and *No Longer At Ease* (1961). These works in some way discuss

transformations that the African societies undergo. *Arrow of God* depicts how traditional religious practices disintegrate. On the other hand, *No Longer At Ease* discusses the dilemma that faces the young educated Nigerian who has ties both in the rural areas and in town. Since these works react fundamentally to Joyce Cary's novel, they are existing sideshadows of *Things Fall Apart*.

Later critical observations by Achebe himself have tended to verify the fact that his writing is largely functional. Achebe has been quoted in this regard as saying that he would be quite satisfied if his novels (especially those ones he set in the past) did no more than teach his 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. Perhaps, he quips that what he writes is applied art as distinct from pure (1975: 72.).

The foregoing exegetical sentiment aids in placing *Things Fall Apart* in perspective. It demonstrates that Achebe's fictional world is fundamentally built out of ready-made mental constructs. Implicitly, Achebe creates his work as a backshadow of these constructs.

From the analysis Achebe uses foreshadowing, sideshadowing and backshadowing as important techniques of developing the narrative of *Things Fall Apart*. It appeared that whenever foreshadowing showed up, it often juxtaposed with sideshadowing. On the other hand, backshadowing does not seem to be employed side by side with sideshadowing in a direct way. This is due to the fact that backshadowing made sense basically in retrospect. Unlike Oedipus the King who relied almost exclusively on foreshadowing and Gorky's autobiography which depended on backshadowing for its effect, Achebe's novel employed all these techniques. Achebe employed foreshadowing, sideshadowing and backshadowing inter-textually and as a result, he was able to speak to and about other texts. By using the notion of sideshadowing in particular, Morson recasted the Bakhtinian idea of the dialogic novel in real and practical narratological terms. The novel, it is deduced, was born of a refractive context that enabled it to respond to and to anticipate other writings.

CONCLUSION

Gary Morson's analytical perspectives are a viable framework for understanding, interpreting and appreciating the narrative techniques of

Things Fall Apart. Moreover, they show that the pedagogical concerns of the novel are deeply embedded in the techniques the author has used to weave his story.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gary Morson's work is rarely applied to the reading of African literature. Yet researchers in this paper have shown that this theorist provides insights into a narrative theory which can be used to understand other fictional works including those written by the African authors. The version of narratology proposed by Morson can be used as the aspect of story-telling in drama and poetry.

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