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Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha and the Language of Ambivalence in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe, the contemporary Nigerian novelist is one of the most outstanding figures in modern African Literature. What bestows him such a credit might be taken to be his attempts to use literature as a discursive tool in the way of de-colonization. Precisely, what Achebe does in his novels is providing an alternative discourse which can depict not only an authentic picture of native African life with all its complexity, but also dynamic native characters in such a context with all their human and existential conflicts. Thus, it can be claimed that what makes Achebe's novels different from the other novels produced at his time is the specific language he adopts; a language which is able to give birth into a kind of 'ambivalence' and can structure, in consequence, a discourse capable of drawing on the postcolonial condition his people face as inheritors of 'hybridity' and 'otherness'. Accordingly, the present study intends to investigate the language, or discourse, adopted by Chinua Achebe in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by approaching them through Homi Bhabha's theory of 'Ambivalence', as it seems to be much illuminating in the case.

Keywords- Ambivalence, Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha, Hybridity, Otherness

Introduction and Methodology

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. (Achebe, *African Writers* 100)

Chinua Achebe, the contemporary Nigerian novelist is, by no doubt, an outstanding figure in the realm of African postcolonial literature. What credits him such a status might be claimed to be his ability to come up with the emerging controversies, during the 1950s and

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1960s, by different writers and critics, in the way of grasping a proper means that could pave the ground for constructing a new national African literature. As a matter of fact, the spirit of the age, or the post-colonial condition, had brought about Africa with a negative view of Euro-centric historiography and literature as well as a kind of narrow-mindedness or radicalism, common among most western ethnographical works produced by non-native writers. Thus, the age was to feel the need for a kind of refreshment through a new literature that could act as a powerful de-colonizing device. Such a device was, in reality, not something easy to grasp since a native African literary figure, like Achebe, not only had to decide about how to fulfill the mission of teaching or educating African readers (“Novelist” 45) through adopting a perfect language but also to make use of that language in the best possible way, in order to “uphold the African experience” (Zobaer 1): how the linguistic and ideological hegemony of the colonizers – manifested in all aspects of the life of an African colonial subject for decades – had made for the emergence of hard-to escape hegemonic forces. As a matter of fact, unlike many other famous critics of his age, e.g. Wali and Ngug, Achebe is a more tolerant figure and his less radical views in the case of the urgency of throwing away the language of the colonizers, and relying on ethnic languages as the medium for the production of African literature, might be assumed to be his point of power and a means bringing about his success in the field of African postcolonial literature. It can be opined that Achebe acts as an unbiased anthropologist and he is able, to a great extent, in pathologically studying the sources of such radicalism in progress. In fact, he is quite aware that what those critics do or claim is a response to what for decades colonizers have tried to advertise in Africa: the legitimacy of the Hegelian reading of ‘historicity’, and ‘civilization’, which introduces the present day Capitalist- Imperialist Europe, with an old written history, to be the place of civilization (Korang 2) and what stands in a binary opposition, or as the ‘other’, to the inhumane and barbaric Africa which cannot be defined based on those universally- accepted criteria evaluating culture and humanity. In other words, Achebe knows well that African pre-colonial literature which is oral in nature and a far cry from what the Europeans had in mind of literature might be re-read and relied on in developing a powerful postcolonial one. In fact, Achebe comes to understand that a powerful Africa in post-colonial age cannot be built by fully dismissing what characterizes its present state, as a colonial zone, and by radically sticking to its pre-colonial, inheritances and values, among which stand language, culture and religion.

Taking into account the above-mentioned facts, it is not hard to infer why Achebe chooses to write in English in his attempt to develop a powerful anti-colonial discourse. In reality, he is able to exploit the language of the colonizers in line with his de-colonizing strategies, in his attempts to construct an alternative discourse to convey “those possible meanings of African [identity]”, (Vuletić 3). As the epigram shows, even though Achebe is conscious about the subversive quality of the dominancy of the colonial language, he knows

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that it can turn to be a blessing in disguise when its universal and communicative potentials are exploited ambivalently with purpose of exposing universally, or expanding beyond national level, what is local or ethnic to a great extent through an international means. To elaborate more on the matter, it can be referred to what Achebe asserts in “The African Writer and the English Language”, in which he draws on the fact that although the presence of British colonizers had many negative effects on the life of the various Nigerian tribes, it gave them “a language with which to talk [to] one another” and the possibility of “mutual communication” (58), through a universally well-known language. However, it shall not be ignored that the version of ‘English’ he proposes to be adopted is that one which is “able to carry the weight of” his “African experience”; a new version which is “still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (q.t.d. in Goonetilleke 353-354). Taking into account the approach Achebe adopts in making use of the language of the colonizer, the present study intends to interpret the language as well as the discursive tools Achebe adopts in his *Things Fall Apart* in light of Homi Bhabha’s theory of “Ambivalence”.

It can be asserted that what makes Homi Bhabha a significant figure in the field of ‘postcolonial criticism’ is the way he approaches the colonial and postcolonial phenomena from a new perspective. In truth, compared to Franz Fanon, Edward Said and other pioneers of the field, one is to witness quite a different kind of criticism in Bhabha because of his double emphasis on the necessity of paying more attention to cultural factors and taking them as leading forces in the development of postcolonial studies. This tendency in him, to highlight the cultural factors and taking them as important elements, affecting the formation of the socio- cultural relations’ as well as socio-linguistic discursive ones, is indeed what makes for the development of the idea of “in-between” (Bhabha 50) or a location in which a complex series of varied cultural contacts and interactions rather than a bundle of straightforward dialectics between the colonizer and colonized is to occur: “a liminal space or the ‘in-between’ location of cultural action, in which meaning [or identity] is produced” (Chakraborty 1).

On the account of the idea of the ‘liminal space’, and the ‘non-linearity’ of the relation between the colonizer and the colonized, other terms introduced by Bhabha can be clarified with more facility. As a matter of fact, Bhabha considers such a space and set of relations to be the very cause of the formation of “hybrid identities”, since they can condition the process of cultural synthesis or “translation” (Rutherford 210) – in which a series of signs or symbols are replaced with new sets all standing in a relational position with the discursive controlling force practiced by the colonizers. In other words, Bhabha believes that it is through such a complex cultural process that, whether consciously or unconsciously, cultural changes take place and in consequence ‘identity’ is formed. From a different perspective, it can be inferred that, in Bhabha’s point of view, to study a postcolonial subject, a critic is faced with a hybrid

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identity and must draw attention to the existing identity “multi- positionality” within the space of discourse and how through difference or differentiation from the colonial ‘other’, a subject is to be identified (156) from the colonizer, in a non-stop process. Thus in view of Bhabha’s assessment, a critic must be able to overcome the given grounds of opposition by opening, in his or her language of criticism, a space for “translation” or a “place of hybridity” (Bhabha 37) to make him or her able to reflect on such a system at work. By analogy, it might be deduced that what Bhabha considers to be the most salient feature of a postcolonial work of literature is its ability to draw on these facts at different, linguistic, discursive and thematic, levels. As discussed above, by relying on such an approach, the present study intends to put into analysis Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in order to prove the validity of the claim that this novelist is conscious about the nature of the relation between the colonizer and the colonized and is able to depict it through adopting a specific version of ‘English’ as well as specific discursive and thematic tools owing much both to the native oral literature of the pre-colonial time and English literature.

Discussion:

The most dominant feature of the language Achebe adopts in the way of constructing a powerful anticolonial discourse is ‘hybridity’. As a critic asserts, the language Achebe uses is marked by the use of the English language with a heavy Igbo language influence; a language which draws on the writer’s “ideological idiosyncrasy”, and acts as a source of power, (Olusola 82). Relatedly, it might be claimed that by relying on ‘hybridity’ and through the projection of the psychological impacts of ‘otherness’ on the colonial subjects and the existing ‘ambivalence’ within a colonial relation, consisting of non-linear bundles of dialectics, through his specific language, Achebe is to depict a colonial experience; what is significant when read in line with the matter of the ‘third space’ in Bhabha’s terms. To study such a features in Achebe’s discourse, in this study, his language and discourse in his first Novel *Things Fall Apart* are going to be studied in terms of two prominent discursive features in this novel: First, the insertion of local Words and expression so as draw on the colonial and postcolonial realities, and second, the use of local proper names.

Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe intends to criticize the dehumanizing “narratives of colonialist writers” who were trying to show Africa had no history and was primitive (Osei-Nyame 149). As a matter of fact, to question the validity of such an account, Achebe decides to provide a thorough record of the pre-colonial Nigerian (Igbo) people from the standpoint of an insider who is to rely much on the potential of the oral tradition of his people, which does not bear the characteristics of the radical ethnographical techniques usually adopted by the colonial writings, (Booker, 40). However, the narrator is to keep at an objective distance from the native people at the same time that he tries to discredit the colonial subjectivism; what is to help him in keeping the structural balance and achieving a space in which the

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voices of the native subjects are also to be heard. Such a technique can, in consequence, pave the ground for giving shape to a valid alternative reading capable of depicting an authentic picture of the first colonial contacts, the ‘hybridization’ process and its aftermaths.

Relatedly, to highlight that alternative reading in process, Achebe makes use of some innovative discursive techniques which rely much on the native language and culture for their own development. For example, in his first novel, Achebe inserts Igbo words and concepts to the body of the novel in italic form; and explains them literally within the context of the novel through the voice of that insider narrator standing at an ambivalent position. Such a strategy, in fact, make the western readers notice the “Other” through an act of literary ‘estrangement’, while simultaneously directs them to rely on the descriptive techniques, the novelist adopts in order to familiarize what has been ‘defamiliarized’. Such an act then can be claimed to be able to suspend the probable anthropological presumptions western readers of this novel might have had in mind before starting to read. A glossary of those native words and a brief explanation for each provided at the end of the novel by Achebe can be asserted to be enhancing the affectivity of such a discursive strategy.

Furthermore, with the purpose of providing such an alternative narrative, Achebe tries to foreground the innate features of the native language and culture by quoting the original Igbo songs or words plus their translation while drawing on a native custom or ceremony. For instance, projecting on the less investigated aspects of native Judiciary system and the way native councils could resolve matters through the assistance of ancestral spirits, through the ritual of masks, what Achebe does is providing the original song through transliteration and leaves it to the reader to find the meaning in the context as they go on reading:

‘Umuofia Kwenu!’

‘Yaa!’

‘Umuofia Kwenu!’

‘Yaa!’ (*Trilogy* 63)

As a matter of fact, the effect such a narrative device can have on non-native readers is to be clearly understood when, for instance, in dealing with the matter of a local wrestling match, Achebe just tends to provide his readers with a translation of the songs enchanted by spectators in the praise of their hero wrestler since more or less a western reader is more or less not ignorant of the wrestling traditions common all around the world:

Who will wrestle for our village?

Okafo will wrestle for our village

Has he thrown a hundred men?

Has he thrown a hundred Cats?

He has thrown four hundred Cats.

Then send him word to fight for us. (*Trilogy* 38)

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One of the other important discursive techniques used by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, is the native Igbo names and their significance. One might claim that such a technique to be of no importance to a great extent because the foreign English readers would not get the meaning. But, first of all, it shall not be ignored that if seen from the perspective of a hybrid postcolonial reader, or the liminal space at which Ache himself stands as an Igbo writer framing an English discursive structure, this matter is very meaningful. Furthermore, the insertion of bizarre and hard to pronounce names, titles, and expressions into the body of an English text is in itself a kind of double de-familiarization as the non-native English readers' understanding of their own mother tongues is challenged greatly. This fact, might be taken as a proof to the fact how, in opposition to the claims of classic postcolonial theorists and in line with Bhabha's theories, the colonized might find a way to stand in an ambivalent relation with the colonizer. Precisely, here the de-familiarized version of English, containing a large number of local names, is a third space or the liminal zone at which realities of a postcolonial discourse and discursive dialectics as well as the deep layers of the native cosmology and philosophy are put into exposure outstandingly. To draw on this matter, in what follows, specifically, Igbo proper names in *Things Fall Apart* are put in study.

The most dominant feature of Igbo personal names is to be revealed if several Igbo dictionaries or proper-name glossaries are checked: the fact that most personal names in this language have in the first instance some fixed senses – in Freghe's terms – and are not to be classified as ostensive proper names. This is in reality, to be clearly understood when one is to find that, "Igbo language is the vehicle through which the worldview of Igbo people is not only preserved and carried forward, but also the instrument for developing this worldview" (Ebuziem 29): that which is rather complex and seems even inconsistent, (Foley 48) if literally studied. Taking into account this idea, it can then be found why words to embody such a language in general – and personal names in specific – present themselves to be economic linguistic tools by their clausal structures; clauses that can be cut as short as possible, in order to guarantee the conveyance of some important meanings (Obiamalu 113) historically framed on the basis of a specific worldview or cosmology.

It is good to start this part by focusing on Okonkwo, and his name, To do so, in the first instance, it seems necessary to focus on his father Unoka and his character because referring to *Things Fall Apart*, a reader is to find that the novel's initial pages are allocated to his character and Achebe has tried to highlight the difference between him and his son. As the novel reveals, Okonkwo is always feeling ashamed of his father for his irresolution and his inability to pay his debts as well as taking the titles an honorable Igbo man had always attempted to win. That is why, he always had tried to escape what he hated much: to be called an *Agbala* like his father, which is equal to a man with no titles or a woman in Igbo. However, approaching the character of Unoka through the lenses of the matter of 'Igbo names' and their significance, a new reading can be provided.

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Literally, Unoka is composed of *uno+ika*, *uno* standing for ‘house’ in Igbo (Swift, Altaghotu and Ugorji 131) and *ika* which means ‘to be greater’ (476). Therefore, it can be assumed that his name means: Household or family is of greater importance. However the readers soon find that it is in contrast with Unoka’s real personality going on reading. As the novel reveals Unoka was not a firm man to rely on “the strength of his arm” (Achebe, *Trilogy* 15) to support his family and owed much money to many people postponing to pay them back through adopting a kind of cynicism in behavior plus a witty language; a language very common in “trickster” Igbo tales – like that of the turtle in the story of birds’ feast in *Things Fall Apart* (Nwosu 16). Hence, with regard to such an irony revolving around the distance between the significance of Unoka’s name and his real character Achebe must have intended to portray something important which is a mismatch in appearance since a character like Obierika within the same space is represented as a respected titled man with much wealth and a prosperous *obi* – one whose name might also be taken to mean as similar to that of Unoka, *obi* standing for “the large living quarters of the head of the family” (Achebe, *Trilogy* 147), and ‘*ika*’ to be ‘greater’ or ‘surpass’ as mentioned above. Actually, by giving shape to such a discursive strategy or correspondence between the two characters, through their names, Achebe is trying to justify why Okonkwo hates his father and his character. In reality, by referring to Ebuziem and his assertions in this novel, it is likely to infer that Unoka’s failure comes from his inability to keep in line with the same system of ideologies or the cosmology once engendering Igbo naming philosophy: the rules to be obeyed by the newborn’s parents in naming as well as the necessity of showing respect to the spirit of the ancestors or the metaphysical forces converged to persuade or develop an ideal character for him fulfilling the demands of his *Chi* or personal god. In other word, Unoka’s ignorance or irresolution holds him from tracking this ancestral route as he takes a wrong approach in life and becomes a victim of *chi* or fate: His way of conduct according to Igbo philosophy is to lead to saying no when one’s *chi* or personal god says yes. Indeed, this manner shall be taken as the source of Okonkwo’s hatred and his attitude toward those figures like his father. It is therefore clear, why keeping on the right path or moving in line with what his name implies is Okonkwo’s ideal. In other words, it has been his life-long attempt to say yes as “when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also”. (21)

As mentioned above, Okonkwo is reflected to be permanently self-conscious about himself as well as his social status in order to distance himself from what would identify him with his father. Actually, he is always trying to look in others’ eyes as the ideal, the hero or the most perfect man and this is even reflected by the name he chooses for his most-loved daughter Ezinma; or Ezigbo the good girl (32); a name which in a critics’ mind is to function like a metaphor to designate something more than the mere act of indicating a person. Additionally, Okonkwo’s anxieties in that case are also manifest in his attitude toward his son Nwoye. He is always worried about him and is terribly horrified by the thought of his

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probable failure in future by moving in the same direction as his grandfather Unoka. Presumably, it can be asserted that his concerns about his son are not only to be understood from his behavior, but also from the name of his son as well as that of his own. These two names – ‘Okonkwo’ and ‘Nwoye’ – have one thing in common and that is belonging to the same category of Igbo names: Names that refer to the ‘Time of Birth’ or an occasion since ‘Nkwo’ and ‘Orie’ signify two Igbo Market days (Achebe, *Trilogy* 293). In fact, the name ‘Nwoye’ – which is composed of Nwa+Orie – stands for: the boy or the child born on ‘Orie’ (Ubahakwe 9), as Igbo equivalent for ‘male’, ‘boy’ or ‘child’ is ‘Nwa’ (11). Similarly, the name ‘Okonkwo’ means: “the male child of Nkwo” (Basden 174). This category of names have much to say about Igbo cosmology and can in sequence aid the development of this study. According to Abanuka, “The market days were originally established by the supernatural beings bearing different names sent by God as messengers to earth” (89); what were in fact given as a reward to Nri, the historical god-like king and the founder of Nri (Igbo land), who was successful in revealing the names of the four market-day spirits without disclosing their names; (Ebuziem 31) as such an act could make it possible for mankind to possess them. This shows why these four market days were somehow sacred for Igbo people and justifies in advance the reason for children born on each of these days to be named after them.

Actually, the sacredness of market days in Igbo culture and the myth-like story of Nri are good clues to aid a critic in the way of grasping a better understanding of the historical importance of marketplace within an agrarian culture flourished on a land with few fertile soil and long dry seasons. Indeed, going through ages Igbo people had found that yam cropping and a dynamic economy revolving around this product was the only way to survive – an agricultural product which was to be gained only by hardworking men and not by irresolute men like Unoka who would stay home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil instead of going out with axe to cut down virgin forests in search of a more fertile soil to plant new year yams (Achebe, *Trilogy* 15). Thus, Okonkwo’s efforts early at the novel for making a share-cropping contract with Nwakibie and his permanent endeavors to make Nwoye a good yam farmer, unlike his grandfather, can be taken as a kind of existential identity search or self-realization matching the demands of what their culturally-defined names imply. Relatedly, it is the loss of the very self-confidence or potential for existential self-fulfillment found in Nwoye that Okonkwo laments for and hopes his son to acquire a day by getting along with Ikemefuna; one who already seems to possess enough talent and ambition to move in that way with resolution. However, the sacrifice of Ikemefuna by the oracle’s decree and Okonkwo’s act of taking part in it is in truth equal to the metaphoric sacrifice of Nwoye since it acts as the final stroke for all traditional Igbo values and the validity of ethics Okonkwo was trying to dictate to his son. It is quite ironic that by accepting such a fate or *chi* determined by the oracle for Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is doing something against the personal

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chi of him and its demand projected through the phrases of Ikemefuna's name: signifying 'May not my power be in vain', *Ike* denoting 'power' in Igbo, *m* 'I' (Emenanjo 379), and *funa* or *n'efu*, 'may not be in vain' (Williamson 68) – as the negative primary auxiliary in Igbo is 'na' (Onumajuru 135), connoting 'May not!' when used in prayer form.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe, the contemporary Nigerian novelist is one of the pioneers of the African postcolonial Literature. What credits him as such, might be claimed to be his ability to use literature as a discursive tool in the way of de-colonization; an alternative discourse to give birth into a kind of 'ambivalence' and thus capable of drawing on the postcolonial condition his people face as inheritors of 'hybridity' and 'otherness'. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, can be taken to be the best example of such an attempt since it possess some important and unique discursive features framed around two important linguistic tools: First, the insertion of local Words and expression so as draw on the colonial and postcolonial realities, and second, the use of local proper names. Actually, by relying on these two devices that foreground a kind of emerging otherness, Chinua Achebe highlights the liminal space in which the linguistic hybridity is born. Furthermore, by making use of the two devices, he is able to depict the ambivalent and recursive series of dialectical relation that is created between the colonizers and colonized symbolically through a hybrid language or discourse capable deconstructive or decentralizing powers. This is in fact a proof to why Achebe believes that 'things fall apart' because of the fact that 'the center cannot hold'

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