Narrative Security Matrix: A Barthesian Critical Analysis Of Things Fall Apart

Fazal Ghani[1] , Dr. Irfan Ullah Khan[2] , Asma Sharif[3] , Dr. Abdul Waheed Qureshi[4]

[1]MPhil English, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology Dera Ismail Khan (Pakistan).

[2]Center for Non-Traditional and Peaceful Development Studies, School of Public Affairs, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.

[3]MPhil English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (Pakistan).

[4]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (Pakistan). [Corresponding Author]

Abstract

The world of narration while mimicking, favors structuralism as one of its basics to inform the reader and satisfy the critic in a more comprehensive way, and provides an armistice and delectable insight into both of them. Analysis of a narrative in the wake of hidden symmetrical points which the writer keeps in mind while writing, has been at a premium since long. There are several schools of thoughts whose concepts are used to asses and weigh the importance and value of a literary text with respect to its construction. Narratology, being a creative medium, is one of them. The study aims at applying some of the narratological codes of Roland Barthes (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) to Chinua Achebe's (1994) novel Things Fall Apart. It helps in creating new meaning and a mode of analysis to argue how the novel is an artistic whole? How it follows the devices of a well-knit story? How is Achebe one of the greatest Nigerian novelists and Things Fall Apart (1994) as a realistic picture of Igbo society; under the impression of so-called security the Whites actually exploited it. Actually, it is written in opposition to Joseph Conrad's (2007) Heart of Darkness. Barthes' codes (also called lexias), according to his perspective, are imperative for any narration and applying these codes to the novel, it is found that there are different enigmas of peace and security, actions, Igbo's culture, and binaries in the novel; the colonizers exploited the Igbo land and society saying that they were educating, civilizing, and providing justice and security to them. It is found that the terrible security and reforms for the Igbos have the paradoxical implication of covert devastation through the imposition of the English culture over them by the Whites. Different phrases and sentences are analyzed semantically. Things Fall Apart (1994), Achebe's debut novel, is found to be a masterpiece of narratology.

Keywords: Barthes' Codes; Colonization; Igbo; Matrix; Narratology; Security; Whites

Introduction

Do you know that thousands of stories are written and read every day? But some of them, as widely believed, are worth reading because they follow some basics of narration. The story of the novel Things Fall Apart by Achebe (1994) is one of them. It follows Barthes' (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) poststructuralist approach. Poststructuralists believe that plurality of meanings of a single idea is possible because of language (Catherine Belsey, 2002). This research aims at applying Barthes's narratological codes to Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart (1994) to see how it can be his master piece and different from other stories with respect to its plot construction. Barthes is a famous critic of structural writing. He favors active reading, and believes that the overall structure brings understanding (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974). The author being dead (metaphorically speaking), it is the reader who gives (new) meanings to a text. Several codes (called lexias) must be kept in mind while reading, because these "codes will result in interwoven text" (Bita Sadeghi, 2009, p. 65). The relation between the reader and the writer is complicated, and hence, there must be a strong bondage between the two.

An optimal text is always latitudinarian with respect to its interpretation, and hence, tolerant to several, even different explanations. Therefore, it cannot be restricted to singleness of purpose. In this regard, Barthes' "codes themselves are set of rules under which elements are selected that are combined with other elements to make new ones" (Miremadi, 2005, p. 73). The application of Barthes codes to Things Fall Apart (1994) results in a new kind of analysis. These codes may overlap each other. The purpose of the research under this theoretical framework results in critical illustration of the characters, structure and performance in the target novel. The target text is divided into small connected bits which include word, phrase, sentence or a whole paragraph. Every lexia carries a single meaning however, Barthes' codes system "for a uniform/unique narrative was much too reductive" (Mireille Ribieri, 2008, p. 490).

Research Objectives
- To explore enigmas and actions in the novel through Barthes' codes.
- To analyze major characters and plot of the story.
- To explore the realistic representation of African culture through cultural code.

Research Questions

1. What are the main enigmas and actions of the novel in the light of Barthes' codes?
2. How do Barthes' codes contribute in apprehending the characters and plot of the story?
3. How is the culture of Igbo society portrayed in the novel?

Literature Review

The novel Things Fall Apart (1994) has extensively and variously been explored and analyzed by critics and researchers, ranging from cultural perspective to eco-critical and postcolonial to symbolical. However, it has rarely been analyzed on the basis of narratological codes. Barthes

(quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) provided a detailed account of these codes and called the code "a mirage of structures … sign of virtual digression … one of the voices out of which the text is woven" (p. 21).

Barthes' Five Codes

Barthes (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) believes that a narrative/text has all the five codes or at least one code functioning like "weaving of voice" (Lashari, 2013, p. 118) of the story. They include as proairetic, hermeneutic, semic, symbolic and cultural codes (Peter Barry, 2002, p. 151).

Proairetic Code:

Proairetic is an action code encompassing the main actions and happenings of the story, and thus forms its plot. It is also called a "narrative code" (Terry Eagleton, 1993, p. 120). The structure of the narrative is best described by this code via characterization. It therefore, constitutes the basics of dramatic line. The order of action and its reaction is displayed by this code. When the reader is left in inquisition, an enigma is put into the story.

Hermeneutic Code:

Hermeneutic code, also called puzzle code, addresses the discourse that contains questions, inexplicability and oxymoronic statements in the text (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005). Ribieri (2008) states that the code "not only structures the narrative" (p. 46); but also technically sustains the readers' interest. This code always occurs at the start of the story and creates a conflict. It also carries the resolution and equivocal situation.

Cultural Code:

This code lexicalizes the given information, behavior, rituals, dogmas and is therefore, called the referential code (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974, p. 19). Culture always provides the writer with basis on which they erect their story. This code helps us to understand the culture and civilization of the characters within the story.

Semantic Code:

Barry (2002) called this code as connotative code. It refers to the linguistic chunks and items which give additional and suggestive meanings within the given text. Every story, Barthes believes, has "characters, places and objects" which help in understanding the theme within discourse (Eagleton, 1993, p. 120). The proper names, events etc. are mostly full of connotations. Suggestive connotations are frequently full of the crux of a given discourse and thus satisfy the ordinary readers as well as intellectuals.

Symbolic Code:

This code is also called antithetical code (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974), which refers to different symbols used in a narrative producing meanings as antithesis, binary oppositions etc. It sometimes overlaps the semantic code and the delineation between them becomes somewhat confusing for the reader. However, the symbolic code is used in a wider context. Many good writers see symbolism as their favorite device (Selden et al., 2005).

Barthes's five codes' theory is applied to judge how these codes help the reader understand the narrative of Things Fall Apart (1994) in a more comprehensive way. Barthes (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) made a distinction between the readerly (traditional) and writerly (modern) text. The reader, thus, transforms the former into a writerly text, and is free to multiply the meanings of a text easily.

In addition, Things Fall Apart (1994) is a prosaic mosaic of African (Nigerian) and American culture. As it was written in response to Conrad's (2007) Heart of Darkness in which he depicted them as wild and primitive, Diana Rhoads (1993) argued:

> "Achebe novel then, depicts both African and Americans, the actual and potential sources of modern Nigerian dignity. Things Fall Apart suggests that the perpetual human types recur in all cultures and that all effective civilizations must learn how to deal with those types". (p. 70)

The novel is the manifestation of the Igbo metaphysics which they believe and observe in their lives. These principles "should not be denied as mythic, fantastic, or as mere figments of narrative imagination. These principles force us to confront the "Rashomon aspects of experience" (Jude Okpala, 2002, p. 565). Achebe (1994) detailed each and every aspect, positive as well as negative, of Igbos' life that is why the novel is called the true picture of their culture.

Symbolism is a device which is employed by most of the narrators in their narrations. This not only helps the readers understand the discourse of the novel in different contexts but also to interpret it through formalism. Things Fall Apart (1994) is a rich assemblage of symbolism. Several symbols are used to illustrate the writer's point of view in a comprehensive way. Miss Cherrat (2012), in this connection, found:

> "Since symbolism is the basic feature of the African literature that includes the oral tradition, Chinua Achebe gave great importance to the function of names, colors, rituals, animals, spirits, gods". (p. 35)

The religiosity of Achebe's people and the Igbo clan is indebted in their exercise of the several rituals. They strongly condemn the idea which the English people had about the God, and there was a hot discussion between them; the difference between their Chukwo and Christian god. Musa Owoyemi (2012) argues that the novel of Achebe is a fountain of religious matter and that they were rigid in its concept against the rest. They were happy in the manifestation of their own religion and could not bear a word against it. Mandana Paziraie (2012), on the other hand, in his study, analyzed the novel at micro and macro levels and maintained that there are some notable differences at micro level. The close study of the desperate images as presented in the two novels i.e., Things Fall Apart (1994) and Heart of Darkness (2007) show different aspects of the two but unification on one major theme that is colonization and its worse effects on the Igbo people, is found to the core (Abdi Lashari, 2013).

The Igbos like the natural world. They had a direct contact with mother earth and its surroundings; Gitanjali Gogoi (2014) describes this relation as the spiritual relation between the nature and them, a relation that goes "beyond the visible physical correspondence" (p. 5).

Theoretical Perspective

The present study intends to apply Barthes (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) five narratological codes to the novel and discusses the different aspects of structure writing in the light of these codes. The study focuses how these elements played vital role in understanding, interpreting and giving extra meanings to the novel as follow:

- First, following Barthes' codes as he devised (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974), the text of the novel is segmented into bits which he called lexias. These lexias focus on reading material.
- Second, a lexia can be termed as unit consisting of a paragraph, sentence, phrase or a word.
- Third, the stature of the lexia is not confined but arbitrary and the researchers cut short a text for analysis.
- Fourth, the lexias are serialized starting from the beginning till the end.
- Fifth, these lexias are given relevant codes and discussed under them respectively. If a lexia connotes more than one interpretation or meaning, then it is discussed under the concerned codes.
- Sixth, pragmatic interpretation and meaning are pursued rather than literal one.
- Finally, every code is stared, and if a single lexia carries more than one code, two or three stars are put before second and third respectively. These five narratological codes are abbreviated into HER, ACT, SEM, SYM and REF.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study which is based on the process of textual analysis. This method was first used by Barthes (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) by analyzing a French novella Sarrasine. He divided the novella into lexias and applied the codes to it. Thus, following Barthes' (quoted in Barthes et al., 1974) practice, the novel under analysis is thoroughly searched for specific words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs and changed them into the starred text. All the five narrative codes are abbreviated as HER, ACT, SEM, SYM and REF. In this way the main actions, enigmas, cultural aspects, connotations and semanticism are explained.

Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Things Fall Apart (Achebe, 1994) *HER **SYM ***SEM

Is it possible for the things to fall apart? This is the title of the novel which catches the attention of the readers. It keeps the reader guessing about the story, and hence, compels them to read it. This is termed as hermeneutic code. It produces an enigmatic situation at the very start of the novel. This enigma is actually a conflict which is resolved in the last chapters of the novel. It also leads to other enigmatic questions: which things fall apart? How and why do they fall apart? The word 'things' has also been used as a symbol for the once united Igbo clan who were torn apart by the coming of the White Englishmen. There is a clear distinction between the unification and separation of Igbo society. These words also produce semanticism, which is the third code, applied to it. They can be connoted as: the 'things' refers to Igbo culture while 'fall apart' to the acculturation of colonizers and Igbos. It also gives the extra meanings of colonization of African land by Englishmen in the name of civilization and education. The Whites claimed that by introducing different measures of reform like judiciary, they want the Africans to prosper and secure. But behind this security, there is some hidden agenda as they actually wanted to colonize them by imposing over them their own culture, religion, ideology, and language. It is argued that the novel is full of Barthes' codes. Referring to these three codes,

the readers actively understand the story in a more comprehensive way. They become aware of the different elements of story writing.

2. "As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat". (Achebe, 1994, p. 8) *ACT **SYM ***REF

The action of the story is introduced in the very first paragraph of the novel. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the play defeats his opponent Amalinze, who was a powerful wrestler, and who has been a champion for several years among the neighboring Nigerian clans and "his back would never touch the earth" (Achebe, 1994, p. 1). Thus the setting of the novel is exposed. Amalinze is called the 'Cat' which is the symbolic representation because "Achebe gave great importance to the function of names … animals" (Cherrat, 2012). Amalinze was a tricky and wise wrestler but his fall was all of a sudden at the hands of Okonkwo. The novel is divided into three parts. This code shows the first part of Okonkwo's rise, power and strength as opposed to his father who was weak, effeminate and lazy. This is also referential code which refers to the culture of Igbo people who are ready to act and react. The wrestling match can also be interpreted as to the power of competition found in the African societies. This spirit of competition and reaction is later maintained throughout the story against the colonizers. All the three codes work together to form the setting of the story. They overlap each other; the SEM and SYM in particular. For example the word 'Cat' carries connotative meaning of being agile, as well as African symbol to be wise and reasonable. Barthes' codes actively function even in the first paragraph of the novel; the understanding of which informs the readers in a better way.

3. Fame had grown like a bush-fire in the Harmattan (Achebe, 1994, p. 8) *SYM

Things Fall Apart (1994) is a highly symbolic novel so it is worth reading on symbolic terms. In this line the fiery temper of Okonkwo is symbolized. One of the prominent symbols used in the novel is 'fire'. Okonkwo did not show any affection towards his three wives and their children. His actions were irrational and imprudent.

4. Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed (Achebe, 1994, p. 35) *SYM

Another symbol used in the novel is 'Yam'. This is the second important symbol which refers to power and strength. Okonkwo, at first, was a poor man but with the passage of time when he grew yams, he became well-to-do.

5. "Locusts are descending" was joyfully chanted everywhere (Achebe, 1994, p. 55) *SYM

The third symbol used in the novel is 'locust'. In the symbol of locust, the coming of the White is referred. They destroyed the Igbo clan. They tore them apart which the protagonist of the novel Okonkwo did not like as he knew the Whites' tricks of subjugating them through the lollipop of security, peace, reforms, novelty, modernism, development, and education. He fought it till the end but when he realized that it was not possible, he committed suicide.

6. He had discerned a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier's voice (Achebe, 1994, p. 14) *HER

When Okonkwo hears the crier's voice, he becomes conscious and thinks that there is something going wrong. The situation for him seems to be tragic. This is an enigmatic situation which arouses the inquisition of the reader in the form of the protagonist's thinking of an unpleasant situation i.e. "war with a neighboring clan" (p. 42). Although, the war with another

tribe could be the winning of the powerful one, yet, it was to end with the defeat of the other (again an African clan) which would ironically mean the defeat of the powerful. This was not meant for the security of one clan over the other but a cannibalism and the actual motif behind this was the eradication of unity among Igbos. This is actually an enigma (Hermeneutic Code) used by the novelist to create suspense in the story, and suspends it till late. The readers try to imagine what kind of tragedy is going to happen, and hence sustain them till the end. This is an interesting code that can be applied to any narrative. The narrator, mostly, uses it unconsciously, but if it is a conscious one, it shows an artistic skill. That is what a good narrative seems to be. This enigma is surfaced, later on, in another code as:

7. Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia (Achebe, 1994, P. 15) *SEM **ACT

The tragedy sensed by Okonkwo is revealed in this lexia. That is the leading action of the story. The neighboring clan of Umuofia has killed one of its girls that cause contempt between the two clans. Okonkwo and his clansmen were ready to fight with them. This is one of the main actions of the story. The second code applied to the same text, is the semantic code. This code leads the reader to have a look at the judicial system of Igbo people. They were gathered and decided to send Okonkwo to the neighboring clan to seek compensation for the death of their girl, otherwise, asking them to be ready for fight. The decision was taken up by a group of people and not by a single person. It means that the judicial system of Igbo was based on democratic principles. Hence, two codes ACT and SEM are applied to this sentence.

In the wake of these analyses in which Barthes' codes are applied to the selected words, phrases and sentences taken from the target text, it is argued that the novel Things Fall Apart (1994) is full of phrases and sentences etc. like those to which Barthes' codes can be successfully applied. It means that the story of the novel is the one that can be read and interpreted in the light of these codes. Hence, it is an artistic whole. The story revolves around these codes.

The main actions of story include the wrestling matches in which Okonkwo proves to be victorious, the killing of the daughter of Umuofia, Okonkwo's exile, the coming of White men who came to Umuofia in the name of educating and civilizing the Igbos, opposition of Okonkwo to the dominance of English people, and the suicide of the protagonist at the end. Okonkwo was disappointed when he knew that most of the people of his own clan have given up their religion and accepted Christianity, and hence, turned against their own clansmen. Therefore, they have fallen apart. These are the main actions of the novel traced effectively with the help of the proairetic or (ACT) code which means that it is one of the important Barthes' codes that is applied successfully to the novel Things Fall Apart (1994).

There is a clear-cut contrast between the culture of the Igbos and the Whites. Their ways of living and judiciary system are different. Their religions and other tenets are at odd with one another. Igbos believe in Chukwo, a god who lives among them, while the Whites on the other hand are the followers of Christian GOD who resides in skies. That is the referential (REF) or cultural code that can be seen working throughout the novel. Resultantly, the contrast between the two religions and other cultural dimensions is traced through this code.

Semanticism is yet another element of Barthes' codes. The target novel is full of semantic presentations of ideas. For example, the very title of the novel is semantically interpreted i.e., Things Fall Apart (1994). At the end of the novel, we can understand that the word 'things'

refers to Igbo clan and their unity (at the start of the story), while, at the end the words 'fall apart' mean that the Igbo clan has fallen apart because of the White missionaries who came there in the name of security, education and civilization. They are torn and the unity is no more observed in them. Thus the SEM (semantic) code is applied to the words and phrases that have connotative meanings in the novel.

The novel is full of symbolic presentation. Different symbols are used in several situations. Animals' names are particularly used to convey writer's meanings. For example, at the start of the novel, the wrestler Amalinze is called the 'cat' because he was a famous and skillful wrestler who was unbeatable for several years.

Conclusion

In the wake of the references given to various words, phrases and sentences under discussion, it can be argued that the target novel abounds in Barthes' codes. These codes are successfully applied to the novel which results in better interpretation of the novel. Being a good story, the novel can be turned as an artistic whole which caters to the taste of the readers and the critics who find it a richer source of juxtaposition between two desperate African and English cultures and religions. The Igbos were happy presentation of Igbos as uncivilized, wild and primitive. The representation of the Igbos by Achebe is a realistic picture where he showed both the negative and positive aspects of the Igbo clan that was torn apart by the Whites. The main actions of the novel include the rise of Okonkwo to power, the murder of Ikemefuna, the exile of Okonkwo, the coming of the Whites and their reforms measures, the return and the eventual suicide of Okonkwo. There are many symbols used in the novel but the three main symbols include: fire, epitomizing fierce and destructive nature of the protagonist; Yams, symbolizing Okonkwo struggle for power and strength; and locusts, referring to the White colonists who descended upon Africa and tore apart the Igbo clan. The difference between the two cultures, religions, and judiciary in particular are mentioned in the novel. Igbos believe that religion is based on agriculture, while on the contrary, the Whites see religion as education. Both the gods in the respective religions are fearsome. Igbos' judiciary system was different from that of Whites. It was a unique system. Egwugwu was the head of Igbo judiciary much like the judge of the Whites. Specific groups wearing masks sat to argue against each other in a case. The murder of Ikemefuna and the exile of Okonkwo was part of the many decisions taken by the Igbos. The novel is full of semantic representations of words and proverbs. Achebe himself favors that "proverbs are like palm oils with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 1994, p.11). The very title of the novel connotes the falling apart of the African society by the Whites. Seemingly, they came there in the name of educating and civilizing them but tore the society apart whose inhabitants once were united and whole. Through the so-called security, peace, education, and cultural and social reforms, they actually, usurped the Igbos' (Africans') emancipation. They made the Africans insecure by making a rift among various African tribes through different techniques, the major among which were the measures of reforms.

Recommendations for Future Research

The paper is limited to the application of five Barthes' codes only and the application of these codes can also lead to several other interpretations and semanticism. Hence, the paper is

vulnerable to criticism and different research perspectives because these codes can be applied to the novel in a quite different ways under different literary and cultural theories.

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