

communication. In fact, communication had been fine tuned to be an art and there were contests held to choose outstanding communicators. The art of conversation itself is described with the help of the following proverb:

Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.

Achebe builds this into his own narrative by weaving these folk elements into the tapestry of his narrative. Among the *Ibo*, proverbs are used to describe a person's interaction and relations with others, focusing especially on his/her status or place in the society. Among them, for instance, they had a saying "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" meaning thereby that one could raise one's social status by one's behaviour. Okonkwo is shown to be such a person. Another proverb that fits Okonkwo is *-A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.* Okonkwo's potential is recognised by his fellow villagers because you can *tell a ripe corn by its look.* While his father could not raise a loan because lending him was *full like pouring grains of corn into a bag of holes*, Okonkwo had no such difficulty when he went to borrow yams for planting.



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brother uses the following expression:

As the dog says, 'If it fall down for you and you fall down for me, it's play.

The implication is that there should be a happy compromise in all such matters.

Given below are more such proverbs and sayings that Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart.*

A child cannot pay for its mother's milk.

Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.

An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.

A toad does not run in the day time for nothing.

Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching.

I have learnt that a man who makes troubles for other is also making trouble for himself, said the Tortoise.

The clan is like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.

Achebe makes clear that these proverbs and sayings are a part of the inherited wisdom of the *Ibos*, by preceding the proverbs of sayings by words such as “As our elders say”, “as the saying goes among our people”, etc.

To drive home the full import of the sayings, Achebe translates them directly in a very simple language. This way he is able to convey the linguistic prowess of his people. This is also one of the most powerful aspects of the narrative strategies employed in *Things Fall Apart*. We shall look at the use of language and comment of Achebe’s style next.

4.6 LANGUAGE AND STYLE

One of the strongest virtues of *Things Fall Apart* is its style and the use that Achebe makes of the English language to weave this apparently simple but highly sophisticated story of the passing away of a way of life.

The language is very simple and direct and so is the syntax. This is very much in keeping with firstly, the art of oral narration which was a significant feature of the society Achebe describes in the novel and secondly, with the ‘educational’ role that Achebe assigns to his novel.

However, as in the case of the story and the characterisation this simplicity at the level of style is also very deceptive. Look at the case with which Achebe builds a large number of *Ibo* words into his English language structures. While it is true that Achebe provides a glossary of such terms at the end of the novel, it is also true that in most cases a reader is able to ‘guess’ the meaning from the context. Let me take a couple of examples. In chapter one, the following sentence occurs:

He could hear in his minds ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the ekwe and the udu and the ogene and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them decorating them with colourfuland plaintive tune.

It is not difficult to guess as to what the *Ibo* words *ekwe*, *ude* and *ogene* stand for. They must be musical instruments. The ease with which we are able to make the guess is not only because of their being juxtaposed with words like ‘rhythm’ and ‘tune’ but also because of the naming of one of the instruments - flute - in English. Let us take another example, this time from chapter twelve:

On the following morning the entire neighbourhood wore a festive air because Okonkwo’s friend, Obierika, was celebrating his daughter’s uri. It was the day on which her suitor (having already paid the great part of her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only for her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive kinsmen called umunna.

We can immediately ‘guess’ that *uri* must refer to some kind of an engagement ceremony. However, as stated above in 4.5, the most important feature of Achebe’s style in *Things Fall Apart* is the use of *Ibo* proverbs. Even a cursory reading of the novel draws one’s attention to a very extensive use of proverbs by Achebe as an important stylistic device. First, their use lends authenticity to Achebe’s

portrayal of the *Ibo* society in which not only is the use of proverbs in day-to-day life quite popular but it is highly prized as well. Those who can use these proverbs frequently during a conversation are considered to be better speakers. This is also true of the *Yoruba* people in Nigeria itself and the *Ashante* people in Ghana. Secondly, the use of proverbs fits in well with Achebe's didactic function that he assigns to every novelist. Every proverb, as we know, has some kind of amoral or lesson to draw from. Finally, proverbs lend an element of precision to Achebe's style of writing. What may need paragraphs of elaboration may be put more easily and effectively through the use of a proverb. Here is an example: instead of saying that to coexist is a virtue and it is advisable to do so without coming into conflict with another person, an *Ibo* would simply say –'let the kite perch and let the eagle perch', or, signifying the importance of appropriate behaviour, the *Ibos* say. 'If a child washed his hands, he could eat with the kings.' Again, *Ibos* believe that circumstances are favourable to only those who try to do things themselves and this they say in the following manner: when a man says yes, his *chi* says yes. *Chi* incidentally is the personal god or spirit assigned to every *Ibo* individual at the time of his/her birth and is supposed to stay at his/her shoulder all the time.

Thus, Achebe's use of *Ibo* words, *Ibo* proverbs translated into English and the use of simple structures that are a characteristic of the oral style of narration make up the style of *Things Fall Apart*. Add to this his frequent use of irony and you have quite a formidable style of writing.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *Things Fall Apart* is both specific and universal in character. How?

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- 2) Is it correct to call the style of *Things fall Apart* simple? If not, why?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been a favourite book with readers, critics and translators all over the world. It is sometimes suggested that the book is a very simplistic account of the life of a character that lacks depth of complexity. The impression of *Things Fall Apart* is enormous. The novel, in fact, is quite a

complex portrayal of a society that is in itself, quite complex. In fact, this society- the *Ibos* towards the end of nineteenth century - is the 'real subject' of the book.

Achebe also builds into his analysis of the society a universal element that sets the book free from fetters of time and place. The novel is about human predicament itself. This makes *Things Fall Apart* specific and universal at the same time.

It is also suggested that the style and the language of the book, like its structure and characterisation, is very simple. Once again, this is not true. Achebe has borrowed a large part of his technique from the oral art of narration which is quite common among the *Ibos* and which gives the impression of being simple but is not really so. Achebe makes use of *Ibo* words quite frequently, weaving them skillfully into his structures of English. Again, extensive use of proverbs which he translates from *Ibo*- sometimes literally, sometimes after modifying them significantly – also lends complexity to his style and the use of language.

It is because of these specific features that *Things Fall Apart* is considered a modern classic.

4.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- i) *Things Fall Apart* is both specific and universal because while dealing with specific characters in a specific society at a specific point of time, Achebe invokes the very predicament of man. The novel thus transcends barriers of time and place.
- ii) The style of *Things Fall Apart* is simple in appearance only. It is so because Achebe adopts the style of oral narration. However, on closer scrutiny we find many features of style and uses of language, which make it quite sophisticated. The use of *Ibo* words and proverbs is the most prominent of these features.

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