Cultural Symbols, Identity and Meaning Formation: Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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'*We shaped our buildings and afterwards our buildings shaped us.'*
Winston Churchill (October 1943)

Abstract

The present paper makes an attempt to examine how George Herbert Meade's theory explains people's use of symbols as a sense-making tool to elucidate the socialization process, role performance, identity, and meaning formation within the Igbo society for explaining various aspects of human life in the novel Things Fall Apart. This study is significant as it deals with character analysis of Okonkwo, to see how different roles of son, warrior, husband, father and a clansman are defined in Igbo culture during various phases of family and social life to clarify how Symbolic Interactionism has given a new impetus to see society, culture, psychology and relationships. It argues that the physical setting is significant to human behavior and human actions can be interpreted with the critical analysis of cultural symbols and the way they are deployed. It concludes that human behavior is based upon assigning meanings and their symbolic interpretations of the objects that surround them. The Symbolic Interactionist analysis of the novel clearly indicates that Okonkwo's self and meaning formation is built on perceptions of the reactions of his clansman and his self-concept functions to direct his behavior. The development of different roles changes role and behavior patterns. The internal and external happenings influence role performance, conflict, struggle, and affect the nature, attitude, and self-image of Okonkwo. Moreover, it also affirms that the cultural symbols for honor, respect, and manliness etc. are not fixed naturally rather these are the constructions of the mind and are given meaning through interaction of the people.

Key words: Symbolic Interactionism, Language, Culture, Symbols, Self, Identity

1. Introduction

1.1 Language and Culture

Human language plays an important role in human life and it also supports the emergence of the culture. It is a part of human behavior to express thoughts and communicate information to shape culture and personality (Krech, 1962). Language is an accepted system of arbitrary vocal symbols which plays a paramount role in storing meaning, experience and to develop, elaborate and transmit learned and shared beliefs, values, customs and behaviors as a culture. (Linell, 2001) This is not the only important function of language but it is also a tool to make integration, social adaptation, and self-expression (Sitindoan, 1984). As a means of communication, language enables a person to form and express his feelings and thoughts and meet needs by a system which is arbitrary and has public symbols (Keraf, 1980). Based on these notions one can say that language has symbols which contain meaning or concepts but has no direct relationship with the symbolized as it is based on the conventions in particular culture provides meaning to all human business and actions.

Nababan (1984, p. 53) defines culture as a "system of rules of communication and interaction that allows a society to occur and preserve". Culture can not only be interpreted as "the activity and creativity of the mind" (Poerwadarminta, 1983, p. 143) but also as "the sum of the conduct and human behavior that must be acquired by learning and are arranged in life" (Koentjaraninggrat Ed., 1985, p. 69). Based on it, one can say that only humans have sense and reason to generate culture as a learned behavior to adapt to their environment and improve the standards of living. Various studies have been carried out on the important function of language in communication and culture, well known among them is Sapir - Whorf hypothesis which expounds the connection between language, thought and culture. According to Sapir (1921), "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desire by means of voluntarily produced symbols." They believe that the world we are live and breathe in is a linguistic construct; language describes this world and molds the perception of reality. Another important study in the field is by George Herbert Meade (2005) who in his symbolic interactionism theory explains people's use of symbols as a meaning-making tool to describe the role of communication in different areas of human experience and explains society, culture, psychology and human relationships. He believes Symbols are social objects which are derived culturally from creating, conveying and maintaining shared meanings in social interaction. People use language to anchor meanings to the symbols and perform in accordance with symbolic meanings they get within any particular situation. People thus communicate through symbols and interact to form relationships around them. Self, mind, society, culture all meanings to symbols derived from and is reliant for its existence on symbolic interactions. The authors of this paper assert that symbolic interactionism contributes to the study of human self and behavior and explains human actions that why people do what they do by examining symbols, objects and their assigned meanings in the relation between culture and human conduct. The researchers analyze the work Things Fall Apart with its focus on cultural symbols and its role on identity and meaning formation to explain how Okonkwo develops his sense of self and connects to the social actions to acquire and use symbols

and shape and reshape implications for objects and himself in communal context including his own experiences.

1.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Mead's concepts are gathered by his disciple Blumer (1969) in his three principles of symbolic interactionism which are as follows:

1) 'Human beings assign meanings to things and act towards them on the basis of the implications they have for them.'

 2) 'The meaning of objects emerges out of one's social interactions with one's fellows'.

3) 'These meanings are controlled in and adjusted through, an interpretive process that a person takes help from in dealing and managing things he or she come across.'

The principal point of Symbolic Interactionism is that human's language is symbolic form and life is lived in a symbolic domain: through symbols, humans create shared meanings and maintain it through social interactions as symbols are culturally derived and form relationships. The goal of our interactions is to construct reality through language by providing cultural meanings to symbols as Reality is primarily a social product. In Language and Culture Claire Kramsch says that language expresses cultural reality because it is bound up with culture in complex and multiple ways as "words communicate facts, events and ideas" and it also reflects authors' beliefs, attitudes as well as their point of view about any affair (2001, p.8).

Interactionists believe that individuals being social actors act and reacts in the shared symbolic world of created meanings. Meanings are developed through the internally interpretive process and then checked externally to understand how feelings, realities, values, behaviors and perceptions are influenced by a social and cultural process within the moment of contact between people (Blumer, 1969).

1.3 The Concept of Self in SI

The self which is dialectically related to the mind is a crucial concept of Mead. Mind and self cannot exist without each other thus, "without a self one cannot have a mind to converse with oneself, and without a mind, one cannot take oneself as an object" (Ritzer, 2004, p.56). Mead's notion of the self is important to comprehend human performance. The self is a basic concept along with symbols, meaning, and interaction in symbolic interactionism, as the social object self is lodged in social group membership and activities; it remains stable as these membership and activities are stable. The content of self reveals the organization and content of society. The self as a social product is a link between a personal and social organization that is manifested with reference to the internalized role (role identities e.g. chieftain, husband, son) that "emerges from social expectations related to a character position within a system of relationship" (Turner, 2004, p. 345).

Stryker and Statham (1985) propose that the structure and organization of self-conception depend upon a differential commitment to various role-identities. Individuals are motivated to maintain, protect act and remain committed to their particular conception of role identity because it implicates their self-esteem. The vital aspect of the self is that it is a reflexive phenomenon. Reflexivity enables people to argue, reflect, evaluate and act toward themselves as objects. This human attribute based on the ability to role-take, to look at themselves from the viewpoint of others and enables the individual to develop a self-concept.

2. SI Analysis of *Things Fall Apart*

Symbolic Interactionism thus helps explain the self and can work as stimuli that initiate behavior. In this dimension symbols and their meanings can aid self-attributions, performing roles, and the formation of self-images in various situations. The symbolic qualities of objects and actions have implications that are common within a cultural context. People go through a self-interactive, reflexive assessment of the meanings given by others to symbols, and fit in this understood evaluation by others into the self-concept. In this qualitative research, the symbolic interactionism theory has been used in the textual analysis of Things Fall Apart to understand how individuals find, and create meanings of cultural symbols through social exchanges in their lives and society and how these interpretations resultantly influence their identity and meaning formation.

It is imperative to know, on the background of the novel that, Things Fall Apart is about a clan which shared common awareness, once thought like one, spoke like one and acted like one. Then the coming of Whiteman broke this unity and changed the meaning of cultural realities of Igbo society.

The Igbo society which was communal, tribal and religious plays a vital role in the lives of the people and was a source of inspiration for the natives. The members of the society, without questioning or reconsideration, observe the instructions of Igbo gods and goddesses. While Achebe incorporates numerous stories[i] to prove nature as a living entity for the Igbos, he also indicates that the colonial rulers discarded its spiritual value as they did not find it beautiful and welcoming.

Things Fall Apart as a novel about a culture on the edge of conversion portrays how the prospect and reality of change affect different characters and the meaning and worth of objects. The novel can also be an interpretation of the first European penetration of Igbo land in the eastern part of Nigeria centering mainly on the manner which affects Okonkwo, a reactionary tribal leader, who failed in his offer to win the support of his clansmen to fight the Whiteman who invaded the religion and culture of Igbo society. Becker and McCall in book entitled, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies are of the view that "if we treat religious movements as cultural movements, we will begin to give more attention to symbols and rituals within each religion in order to explain what they are and what they stand for" (3). Okonkwo, for example, battles the new religious and political systems because he senses that he himself will not be manly if he approves to join or even tolerate them as they are not manly. Okonkwo perceives Nwoye as dead, he ceases to be Okonkwo's son as soon as Nwoye converts to Christianity, Nwoye becomes a source of continuous

disgrace and humiliation for him and the entire family. But on the other hand, the self-evaluative system motivates a lot of the clan's lepers to embrace Christianity; especially, long despised those outcasts who were placed below everyone else in Igbo cultural values catch in the Christian belief system a haven to enjoy a more elevated status in the new community.

Achebe elaborates that the most awful thing that anyone can experience is the loss of respect and self-worth. Okonkwo builds his sense of self-esteem upon the cultural ideals by which society and religion judges him; his resistance of change in culture and religion is also due to his fear of losing religious and social values 'We look at objects and assign meaning to them, but in many cases, certain objects take on special meanings due to when, why and how they were placed in someone's life' (Christopher, 2004, p. 8) which then directs into the interpretation of role performances and social actions within society. Okonkwo, the son of the effeminate idle, poor, profligate, cowardly, gentle and lazy Unoka, achieves great social and financial success by rejecting everything that he thinks to be "soft," such as emotion and common chat and for which he believes his father had love. He deliberately embraces his opposite standards and becomes violent, prolific, affluent, thrifty, brave and obstinately opposed to music and anything else.

Socialization is an active process of conforming to other's expectation and learning roles. The self-being active and selective interprets, constructs and expresses its roles and influences its environment and itself. The self actively engages in the unpredictable process of its own development. It may dissociate itself from a role when they perceive incongruities between some valued aspect of self-conception and the role imposed on them (Cooley,1902) therefore, one can argue that Okonkwo's relationship with his late father could be the reason that forms much of his fierce and aspiring behavior. He does not want to be like his father and wishes to go beyond his father's legacy of extravagant, lazy behavior, which he considers as frail and therefore womanly. Okonkwo does not want to be like his father as he fears failure.

> His whole life was dominant by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another came for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. (P.15)

Igbo's veracity of a man lies in his daring and brave acts. It is no coincidence to refer to a title less man with a word which also means "woman." This is an inherent association in the clan's language and the relator mentions that the word for a man who fails to win any of the lavish, prestige –indicating, honorable titles is agbala, which also stand for "woman."

An account of men in Things Fall Apart is that of inhuman, brutal and wicked every man was supposed to be like that, even though at about the time of the setting of the novel, for instance, any man who could bear the look of blood, or a man of achievements or a man of hostilities is a man.

In Achebe's words, Okonkwo was the first who brought home a human head in Umuofia's latest war. It was his fifth head in a very young age. 'He drank his palm-wine from his first human head on great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity'. The narrative represents the way the society built up the image of men, someone who can drink from a skull of a fellow human being. Bravery is appreciated of a man when he could, all in the name of tradition, put to death a fellow human being as was seen in the traditional sacrifice of the poor boy Ikemefuna who was beheaded by someone whom he called a father.

In Self and Society, Hewitt claims that "meaning lies within the way we behave. Meanings are not fixed or unchangeable, but are determined by how a person acts toward an object"; Okonkwo's notion of manliness is not the similar with the clan's rather, he links aggression with masculinity and believes that he should display the only emotion of anger to display his masculinity. For this reason, he frequently threatens his wives to kill and beats them time to time. Mead makes it clear that "People anticipate responses from their own individual acts and through the process of minding can have control over their own actions" (2005, p.15). The process of minding is dependent upon a basis of consciousness, and our consciousness enables us to better understand people and respond towards their actions in social settings but in case of Okonkwo we have seen that he does act rashly and impulsively and does not reflect about things. Yet others do not behave in these ways that are in no way having the fear of being called effeminate. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo, "was a man who thinks about things and matter before act." Whereas Obierika excuses joining the group on the trip to murder Ikemefuna, Okonkwo simply afraid of appearing weak, not only voluntarily joins the men that will kill his surrogate son but also with his blade brutally kills him.

Although traditional Igbo culture is egalitarian in nature, it is also strongly male dominant where masculinity is linked with strength while femininity is the symbol of weakness. Okonkwo's seven-year banishment from his community only fortifies his opinion that men are resilient than women. Okonkwo entirely resents the period of exile in his motherland while he lives among the maternal kinsmen. The exile gives him an opportunity to get in touch with his feminine side; he keeps reminding himself that the villagers of Umuofia are warlike and fierce but his maternal kinsmen are not as they should be. He considers them flawed because they prefer compromise, compliance, and avoidance over bloodshed and anger.

In Igbo society, aggressiveness is considered an important symbol of masculinity which increases relative social dominance. Aggression is a hostile, forceful or attacking behavior. In many cultures 'Military virtues such as violent behavior, power, bravery, and stamina have constantly been defined as the usual and essential potentials of manliness (Graham Dawson, 1994). Okonkwo as an aggressive man asserts his manhood in a variety of forms i.e physical, verbal, nonverbal: "And he did pounce on people quite often… he was angry and could not get his word out quickly enough, he would use his fists" (P.4). He perceives affection a mark of weakness and remains unemotional and unmoved. "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness" (P.30). He exercises his aggression not only publically to

express his dominance but also in domestic sphere on his wives and children. He beats his wives without any legitimate reason and his son Nwoye as well for being lazy like a female. He "ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children" (P.14) Okonkwo cannot deal with weakness; he seems to think his son resembles his grandfather and that is something which fills him with fire. Unoka is considered weak even by him because of his idleness, talking and love for music which are believed the feminine domain of activities. He fears losing community respect by being effeminate. Social repute has an important meaning in Igbo culture. Personal reputation is based on the number of publicly earned titles which is significantly indicated by the ankle bracelets men wear. Generally, Men gain reputation through the production of their yam crop, talent at wrestling, bravery in battle, and hard work as these were the symbols of power and status. Status depends on merit and earns men influential position and authority in the clan as well as number of wives. Wealth and prosperity are the symbols of worth and value of a man in Umoufia- a patriarchal society. A man with the number of titles and number of barns who is wealthy enough to take care of his many wives and children is a source of attraction and attention in Igbo society "There was a wealthy man, in Okonkwo's village, who had three barns, nine wives, and thirty children…but one title which a man could take in the clan" (P.20) A man should be domestically, socially ,and economically prosperous in order to be admired as respectable and honorable in that society, Achebe shows this behavior and reality of Igbo society by portraying male characters in terms of prosperity, wealth and success as they believe a 'man' is worthy to be called a man when he has good status and enough wealth and who has never experienced failure in any way in society. "Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. Each of his three wives had her own hut. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it" (P.16), but on the other hand people laughed at poor and treat them like a woman who is unable to support his family e.g Unoka-father of Okonkwo, who was a failure, a debtor, a poor man who 'owed every neighbor some money 'and whose 'wife and children had barely enough to eat' (P.6).

In the Igbo culture, the wrestling contests are occasions which confirm the masculine attribute to continue leadership and virility for the men, even women of that culture love wrestling. They clap their hands and sing the praise of victorious warrior and honor him in a heroic way. The people of Umoufia and neighboring tribes are strong combatants and they love to be violent and battle against their opponents. Okonkwo is really concerned with reputation and works hard to gain respect for his village and himself by a physical contest of wrestling because he grew up with a father who was lazy and shameful. It is due to the courage and warrior ship of Okonkwo that the people of Umoufia not only pay him respect in his own community, but he was also respected in neighborhood.

Traditionally speaking, wrestling and fighting are the passions of Igbo culture for which man's manliness appreciated in Igbo society. Strong physique and robust body are considered important traits to build a great image of a man. The igbonian construct of the male is that of emotionally

strong man, who is not the subject of his emotions rather he has good control over his emotions and feelings. Igbo culture presents emotions as feminine trait. Achebe represents his 'tall and huge' protagonist Okonkwo through his power and bodily strength and power whose 'bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look' (p.4) 'He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue… (p.16). Okonkwo who 'was as slippery as a fish in water', his manly figure makes him the center of attraction and Achebe compares with 'Amalinze a wily craftsman' (P.15.) He loves to be and called a brave man who has the daring heart to face the world and has a potential to be on top. It is him who defeated seven years unbeaten wrestler Amalinz the cat and won in an intertribal fight to bring first human head. 'He was a man of Action, a man of war. Unlike his father, he could stand the look of blood.' (P.11) Bravery for him is a quality, he dislikes Abame folk for not being valiant enough and when his clansman fails to join him in battle against invaders he is not scared to take on the white man individually and says: 'We must fight these men and drive them from the land' (P.182.)

3. In Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Okonkwo's image of the self is more an image of the socially dictated image of a man. He reminds himself to act like an honorable brave man because for him the meaning of man parallels social status as a man. He prefers to remain unmoved, stern and unemotional to express his feelings at times, as his "manly" values conflict with his "unmanly" ones. He proves himself a tragic hero who finds himself unable to adapt to changing times, incapable to perform within his changing society as the white man comes to live, inspire and alter the lives, meaning and culture of Umuofians.

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[i] Okonkwo was banished to Mbata when he rejects the oracles of the hills and caves of the priestess of Agbala to claim his daughter.

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