

# THINGS FALL APART AFTER 50 YEARS: TRAGEDY AND EXISTENTIALISM IN AFRICAN WRITING

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*Could the condition of social alienation experienced throughout Africa (usually attributed to transitions from the colonial to the post-colonial, and from the rural to the urban) be understood as constituting a widespread existential crisis? Ato Quayson explores Chinua Achebe's novels for historical ambiguity, contemporary ambivalence, the impossibility of authentic action, and transitive measures.*

## PART I: TRANSITION AND AMBIGUITY

Readers of *Things Fall Apart* will recall the moment in the penultimate chapter of the novel when the gathering of the people of Umuofia in the marketplace is rudely interrupted by messengers from the district commissioner. The messengers are confronted by Okonkwo, who happens to have taken a position at the very edge of the gathering. Okonkwo has been shown throughout the novel as a man of few words and a volatile disposition:

‘What do you want here?’

‘The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop.’

In a flash Okonkwo drew his matchet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo’s matchet descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in the tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’

He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away.

The salience of this momentous event is not so much in the evidence it provides of Okonkwo’s final severance from his society, as in the peculiar contrast suggested in his “knowing” that the tribe will not go to war that is set against their bewildered question: ‘Why did he do it?’ The question itself marks the distance that the tribe has travelled from the unshakable certainties of its own belief system to a sense of confusion about what constitutes a heroic action. The descent of Okonkwo’s matchet represents the uncanny moment when the affirmation of the warrior ethic for which he has clearly been rewarded throughout his life is counterpoised to the disclosure that his clan’s morés have undergone a subtle yet significant change from what he had assumed them to have been before. He had been in exile for seven years, and in the interim many things had changed. The contrast between his knowledge and their be-

wilderment amounts in the final instance to the difference between what may be described in a Aristotelian terms as the tragic protagonist’s moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*) and the unbearable collective impasse of understanding for a society that has suddenly been called upon to bear reluctant witness to their hero’s error of judgment. If the hero’s recognition is deeply personal it is equally and precisely balanced against the epistemological impasse and communal burden that his act announces for the people. The pregnant moment also serves to focalize in miniaturized form the entire process by which the community of Umuofia expresses ambiguity with regard to its own past. In the past conveyed in the novel the messenger’s decapitation could have meant only one thing, namely, a call to arms against the disrespectful invading culture of the colonizer. Now, however, the military heroic ethic is subject to doubt at the very least if not disavowal. It is to Achebe’s credit that he bifurcates the response to the decapitation, thus making it impossible even for us readers to settle on an easy conclusion.

The ambiguation of response to the past, whether collective or personal, is a key marker of modernity and is represented thematically in European literature particularly prominently from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. When Eliot Prufrock laments that he has “measured out his life in coffee spoons” the coffee spoons also serve as a symbol of the transitive measures by which the banal ritual accoutrements of bourgeois life are connected to his growing sense of inauthenticity. To describe the coffee spoons as transitive measures is to borrow something from the study of the grammatical features of language. Whereas the verbs to “lie”, or “sleep”, or “laugh” require no object, the verbs to “kick” or “eat”, or “hold”

do require an object for the completion of the trajectory of action which they describe. Prufrock's coffee spoons are no ordinary metonyms for the long-established teatime rituals well-known to commentators on English social life. Rather, in the poem they represent instruments both of measurement and of the relation between the transitory and the profound. They link uneasy recognition with wry sentiment. For despite his desire to 'push the moment to its crisis' Prufrock also recognizes the inescapable compromise wrought by his thorough assimilation to the rituals of the social group he ponders unsettling. In this existential conundrum he joins a long tradition in Western literature, marked pre-eminently by Shakespeare's Hamlet and followed by memorable characters in Ibsen, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Conrad Beckett, and several others for whom the possibility of authentic action is usurped by the surrounding banality of the social lifeworld.

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Dread, boredom, alienation, absurdity, nothingness, and dissolution are conventionally taken as central to existentialist writing. Prufrock's enervating malaise and Hedda Gabler's anguished boredom find their counterparts within African literature in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Nagib Mahfouz's *Midaq Al-*

*ley*, Cheik Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, Tsitsi Dagarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*, Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*, and in almost every novel written by J M Coetzee. And yet it is the implications of the ambiguation of attitudes towards the past that give us the best entry into the problematic of existentialism for African literary writing. In this literature the problematic response to the past and to history is to be discerned at three interrelated levels.

First is what is represented as pertaining to the transition between one historical phase and another. The transition is often taken to proliferate gaps in understanding and to generate problems of interpretation regarding the status of the past and its significance for the present.

Second is the ambivalence that comes to bear upon the status of moral judgment and how this relates to action, whether of an epic or quotidian kind. Whereas moral judgment may in the past have appeared apposite and the epic code secure, the process of transition progressively puts these in serious doubt in the minds of individuals and of entire communities. The effect of the collective or individual ambivalence is that it renders the underlying cultural codes no longer entirely relevant to ideas of self-fashioning. They are also criticized as ultimately subserving the interests of a self-serving elite or ruling class. Other sites and cultural modalities seem equally pertinent to moral judgment and heroic action, and the apparent attractiveness of contrasting models of praxis engenders confusion in the minds of those contemplating any form of pursuit, from war, to marriage, to even falling in love.

The third aspect of the response to the past lies exclusively within the consciousness of the individual,

where the uncertainty with respect to the past must be felt first and foremost as a problem for the constitution of an authentic self. Often the problem of authentic self-constitution lies at an interface with the broader question of narrative, that is, with the terms and instruments available for the narration of a coherent account within which the self and its relationship to its social interlocutors may be understood. The impossibility of separating truth from falsehood and action from moral judgment is then seen as interposing insurmountable questions *in the mind* of the individual.

It is only when all three aspects come together – epistemological impasse or gaps in understanding, the historical ambiguity that engenders ambivalence, and the crisis in individual consciousness – that a text can truly be said to be representing a thematic of existentialism. Much has been said in studies of Africa about the crises that the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial and from the rural to the urban have provoked for its populations, yet the precise ways in which such transitions divulge elements of existentialism (as opposed to say crises of social adjustment) has not been much attended to.

It would be a mistake, however, to settle upon *Things Fall Apart* as the exemplar of literary existentialism in African literature. There are certain details in the text that do not allow for this. The fact of Umoufian society's inherent unanimism disqualifies the novel at a fundamental level from such a definition. Even when, as in the case of Obierika and his meditation on the sad exile of his friend Okonkwo from the clan for the inadvertent killing of the son of a clansman, the interrogation of the blind codes of justice that the tribe enforces is short-circuited in

his mind when he turns in his reflections penultimately to a proverb: ‘As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others’. This then allows Obierika to retreat from a conclusion that would condemn the contradictory moral norms of his society once and for all. But perhaps the most pertinent disqualification is provided in the character of Okonkwo himself. Throughout the novel he is represented as someone for whom the changes in his society do not register in his consciousness either explicitly or subliminally as transitions that need to be negotiated, but only as signs of the reprehensible departure from masculine and heroic norms that must be upheld at all costs. In other words he has no ambivalence towards either his own past or that of the clan’s. Rather, he is defeated by the certainty of his own interpretations.

Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* raises a more complex question, which is whether given the largely urban, bourgeois, or sub-aristocratic settings in which existentialism has hitherto been explored in both Western and in much of African literature, a rural setting such as we see in the novel allows for the proper representation of the existentialist thematic as such. Can a rural dweller, brought up on assured ritual practices and a predictable diurnal round also feel existential alienation? One can handily point to Thomas Hardy’s *Return of the Native* or *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as giving the lie to this question. And yet it is in fact Achebe himself who provides the best answer from an African perspective in *Arrow of God*, the third offering to his trilogy (the second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, is set in the city) and the true sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. *Arrow of God* also has a largely rural setting, and the story is placed in a period of earlier colonial encounters among the Igbo

of southeastern Nigeria than that of Achebe’s first novel. And yet nothing could be more different than the earlier offering. To Umuofia’s unanimism is set Umuaro’s lack of communal consensus. In place of Okonkwo, “a man who was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” is Ezeulu, chief priest of Ulu who, though also well-known throughout the six tribes that make up Umuaro, is from the start met with a mixture of reluctant respect and uncomprehending revulsion by his own people. The compliment is mutual. It is the way in which *Arrow of God* thematizes transition and assimilates its vagaries to the consciousness of Ezeulu that registers the novel as a supreme example of existentialist literature in the terms we have described above.

### Can a rural dweller, brought up on assured ritual practices and a predictable diurnal round also feel existential alienation?

A deceptively innocent level at which the novel displays the theme of historical ambiguation is that of the intersection between rumors, gossip, and foundational narratives. The novel literally swirls with rumors and gossip and these give us insights into the surreptitious perceptions that people have of Ezeulu, that his wives have of each other, and that the folk in the tribe have of the white man and vice versa. The novel suggests that rumors and gossip are first and foremost disciplinary instruments, in the sense that the characters use these to devise a moral cartography of others’ behavior, and, more consequentially, that such rumors and gossip are prefaces to various courses of action. Intersecting with rumors and gossip are a number of foundational narratives. Though these narratives are also ultimately disciplinary,



A cover of “Things Fall Apart”, Ballantine Books, 1984.  
Photo: Flickr/lungstruck

they are analytically distinct from rumors and gossip in that they appear to require specific forms of assent with regard to their truth value. The latter, as we see from the novel, is tied to notions of heroic action. And yet, whereas the elusive veracity of rumors and gossip do not seem to generate any difficulty in procuring assent towards the opinions they express or the actions deriving from them, the foundational narratives we are presented with are responded to

with a debilitating skepticism.

The most crucial of these narratives is without a doubt the one that is the subject of the elders' meeting early in the novel. The male elders of Umuaro meet to debate whether to go to war with the people of Okperi, who have mischievously in their eyes come to lay claim to a piece of land bordering the two communities that had hitherto not been the object of any disagreement. At this meeting Ezeulu recounts the story that his father had told him as a child about how the six tribes had come together to collectively create the god Ulu, with the weakest tribe among them nominated by the others to be the custodian of this new synthetic deity. As the descendant of the priests of Ulu and its spokesperson, Ezeulu cautions that his god is not one to fight an unjust war. His father had told him that the disputed land had always belonged to Okperi.

To this piece of historical interpretation and measured rhetoric is counterpoised that of Nwaka, a lord of the land who has taken the highest title Eru 'which was called after the lord of wealth himself'. Nwaka opens his speech with a proverb, that, unlike what the proverbial discourse that Achebe made famous with *Things Fall Apart*, is designed not to affirm unanimity but to inscribe difference: 'Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers'.

This extraordinary opening is only the preamble for a story that is in every detail opposed to the one that Ezeulu has just recounted. In Nwaka's account the people of Okperi could not possibly have owned

the land in question since historically they were driven away first from Umuofia, then from Abame, and subsequently from Aninta. It is only after many upheavals that they came to settle near Umuaro. By insisting that Okperi had been driven from not one but several locations Nwaka raises a dramatic distinction between nomadic and sedentary peoples. In his account as nomadic peoples the Okperi are nothing but wandering "strangers" and thus cannot have any claim to a land settled by a sedentary people such as their own clan. The only reason they now make bold to claim the disputed land, Nwaka adds, is because the white man has established his administrative headquarters at Okperi. This last point is also a salient historical interpolation introducing the presence of colonialism that Ezeulu's foundational story does not reflect. Since each account is a "goatskin bag" and therefore incapable of objective verification, the only means of ascertaining their truth content is through the horizon of ideology.

### Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own.

The binary distinctions that undergird the differences between the two men – priest versus self-made man; tradition versus individual talent – should not conceal the fact that the two of them are actually proffering *mutually exclusive* stories about their collective past. This radical ambiguity regarding the past, here located in two contrasting narratives about the foundations of the tribe, gains further ramification at different levels of the novel. That gossip and rumour gain readier assent as actionable value as opposed to the foundational narratives of the tribe hints at the fact that the transition produced by the

colonial encounter has succeeded also in reconfiguring epistemological categories. In the terms first set out by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* we see how Achebe is giving free play to both dominant and residual cultural categories. He does this in such a way as simultaneously to suggest a discursive inversion (the dominant foundational tales appear dubious while rumors and gossip retain believability) and an affirmation of the order of things (it is the foundational tales that are the subject of deliberative exchange for the lords of the clan, while gossip and rumor retain their salience largely at the level of the domestic sphere). The simultaneity of inversion and affirmation then encapsulates the ambiguity of transition located at the intersection of both content and form.

When Ezeulu's people ignore his advice and send out an irascible emissary who provokes a war with Okperi the white man steps in, collects all their guns and destroys them, thus earning for himself the redoubtable epithet of "Breaker of Guns". When Captain Wintabota (Winterbottom) calls a big meeting and tries to ascertain the cause of the war between the two people it is only Ezeulu who emerges as a truthsayer, telling Captain Wintabota the facts of the matter according to his perspective. Ezeulu's testimony is responsible for Wintabota deciding the case in favor of Okperi. Rumors after that are that Ezeulu has become the white man's "friend", and his people progressively distance themselves from him to the point where towards the end of the novel when he is invited by Wintabota to Okperi for a consultation his elders can barely conceal their disgust: "Now it is not clear to me whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him. When we have a feast do we not send for our friends in other clans to come and

share it with us, and do they not also ask us to their own celebrations?... Or does Ezeulu think that their friendship should stop short of entering each other's houses?" These are the questions that Nwaka asks on this second occasion.

However, it is in the mind of Ezeulu himself that the historical transition and the existential nexus generated by it find their most profound articulation. For his resentment of the clan is balanced by his absolute dedication to the service of their collective god, Ulu. And his admiration of the white man's mission school, to which he sends his youngest son Uduche as his "eyes and ears", is a purely pragmatic measure of counter-surveillance so as to be able to know and anticipate what the white man is bringing into his world. When at Okperi he is offered the opportunity to be crowned chief of his traditionally acephalous people as part of the well-known and highly controversial British colonial policy of Indirect Rule in Africa, Ezeulu's response is quick and unequivocal: he does not serve anyone but Ulu. He is promptly thrown in jail to teach him a lesson. While shunning the profane incredulity of the white man, Ezeulu preoccupies himself in jail with planning a terrible punishment for his people in reaction to their derisive and skeptical response when he had called them to ask for advice on the white man's invitation to Okperi. In this he makes the serious mistake of extrapolating from the malevolent indifference of the elders of Umuaro to generalize the fate of all his people, something for which he is made to suffer at the end of the novel.

However, from the beginning Ezeulu has been shown to be an anchorite, alone with the burden of comprehending the highly complex nature of his sacred mission. As the novel unfolds the recognition

registers in his own consciousness that his solitude is not a mere necessity enjoined by his priestly vocation but that limitations have been set on the actions and judgments of the priesthood of Ulu due to historical changes in his society. Ezeulu recognizes that the power of instituting social reform that had been the purview of his grandfather and father before him had contracted to the point where the chief priest was now merely the one that tendered to the rituals of Ulu, an intolerable abbreviation of the priestly vocation in his view. The historical diminution in the social role of the priesthood for Ezeulu is registered in his consciousness as a psychosomatic re-ordering of his very being. Thus when he reflects upon the unsettled position he now seems to occupy he is frequently stung by anger, as though by a 'black ant'. His reaction is simultaneously mental *and* physical. Thus the ambit of moral judgment (is it right to go to war, to inform on his people to the white man, or to respond to the white man's invitation to become a chief) is intricately tied to questions of action, but in such a way as to ensure that any action that he might undertake will, while seeming authentic in his own eyes, remain decidedly inauthentic in the eyes of his own people. His existential condition is that of being the victim of an alienating world at the same time as being a central and indispensable part of it.

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So far we have been operating on the assumption that the past is ultimately retrievable even if our attitude to such retrieval is inherently ambivalent. But

what if, under the force and impact of historic events such as slavery, colonialism, or trauma, the past is obliterated to the degree that the only way of retrieving it is through a form of laboured assemblage? More pressingly, what happens to consciousness when the retrieval of the past takes on the force of a historical imperative precisely because of its obliteration? Does consciousness itself survive intact with the acknowledgement of an obliterated history?

The metaphor of transitive measures, which we raised with regard to Prufrock, becomes additionally pertinent to the next phase of this enquiry. As we noted earlier, the coffee spoons that measure out his life are transitive measures first in the sense of allowing him to link a banal object to an entire life-world, and also in relation to the fact of their being invested with an emotional charge that transcends their banality and converts them into metonyms of larger processes of social alienation. Entangled in the transitive measures provided by banal objects is then the intensification the perception of alienation. This intensification is not pathological; far from it. On the contrary it marks the heightened state of awareness that is required for the epic task of historical retrieval in the face of its obliteration.

African existentialist texts such as Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* provide us with useful cues towards understanding this conundrum. But in truth the absolute starting point for such an enquiry has to be sought in the work of Frantz Fanon, especially his *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon is a poet of the psychoexistential complex, one whose every sentence is a charged indictment of the historical obliterations of colonialism and the necessity of struggle enjoined

for its retrieval. It is to Fanon that we will turn next (in *The Johannesburg Salon*, Volume 2) in reflecting upon existentialism in African writing.