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**POSTCOLONIAL IRONY IN CHINUA**  
**ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART***

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication

Bachelor's Thesis

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Antti Kuusimaa: Postcolonial irony in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*  
Kandidaatintutkielma  
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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tarkastelee nigerialaisen kirjailijan Chinua Acheben ensimmäisessä romaanissa *Things Fall Apart* ilmeneviä jälkikoloniaalisen ironian muotoja. Romaania on tutkittu sen laajan suosion ja rikkaan ironian vuoksi laajasti, mutta varsinaista koko romaanin kattavaa jälkikolonialistista ironian luentaa painottavaa tutkimusta ei ole aiemmin tehty.

Romaani on ensimmäinen afrikkalaisen kirjailijan kirjoittama jälkikolonialistinen romaani, joka saavutti suurten suosion niin Afrikassa kuin länsimaissakin. Romaanin tapahtumat keskittyvät nykyisen Nigerian alueelle, ja kuvaavat Okonkwo nimisen igbo-heimon jäsenen elämää 1800-luvun lopun kolonialismin paineessa. Romaani seuraa muutosta, jonka brittien tulo aiheuttaa perinteisessä afrikkalaisessa kyläyhteisössä.

Romaanissa kuvataan igbojen perinteistä elämää, joka rinnastetaan länsimaalaisten käsitykseen mustasta Afrikasta sekä kolonialismin vaikutuksista afrikkalaiseen yhteiskuntaan. Achebe kuvailee kolonialismin aikaan saamia jännitteitä sekä muutoksia perinteisessä kyläyhteisössä. Romaani haastaa käsityksen sivistymättömästä Afrikasta ironian keinoin.

Aineistoanalyysissä keskitytään tunnistamaan jälkikolonialistinen ironia. Tutkimuksessa tällaisen ironian ilmentymiksi valikoitui Acheben käyttämä kieli, jolla romaani kirjoitettiin sekä kolme eri kohtausta romaanista: päähenkilön tarina, kulkusirkkojen saapuminen ja kirkon rakentaminen pahaan metsään. Analyysi osoittaa, että jälkikolonialistinen ironia toimii ironian eri muotojen kautta ja vaikuttaa niin länsimaalaiseen kuin afrikkalaiseenkin tulkintaan.

Avainsanat: Postcolonial novel, irony, postcolonial irony, western, african

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# ABSTRACT

Antti Kuusimaa: Postcolonial Irony in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*  
Bachelor's Thesis  
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This Bachelor's thesis examines the different varieties in which postcolonial irony appears in the Nigerian author's Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The novel has been studied extensively due to its popularity and rich use of irony, but no studies have been conducted, which would have encompassed the novel in its entirety from the perspective of postcolonial irony.

*Things Fall Apart* is the first postcolonial novel by an African author which garnered widespread popularity in Africa as well as in western countries. The novel takes place in modern day Nigeria and describe Okonkwo the life of Okonkwo, who is a member of the Igbo tribe, in the late nineteenth century when colonialism started affecting their lives. The novel depicts the change presaged by the coming of the British.

The novel portrays the traditional way of life of the Igbo, which is contrasted with the western notion of life in black Africa and the effects of colonialism on African society. Achebe describes the tensions and changes caused by colonialism in the traditional village society. The novel challenges the depiction of primitive Africa by way of irony.

The analysis of the novel focuses on identifying postcolonial irony. The study selected the language Achebe used to write the novel as well as three scenes as representatives of postcolonial irony: the protagonist's tale, the coming of the locusts and the building of a church in the Evil Forest. The analysis showed that postcolonial irony functions through different varieties of irony and affects the interpretation of both western and African readers.

Keywords: Postcolonial novel, irony, postcolonial irony, western, african

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe, whose novels have been read all over the world, is probably the best-known Sub-Saharan African writer. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, thrust him in the literary consciousness of the western audience and presaged a literary career spanning five decades, marking him as the foremost post-colonial African author. His novels revolve heavily around colonialism and criticism of it through – among other devices – irony, the adoption of which has remained stable in African novels since the colonial period. (Onyeoziri 2011, 31). This Bachelor's thesis delves into Achebe's first-born novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in an attempt to locate and identify the writer's use of irony throughout the novel. These ironical instances are then ascribed postcolonial significance from the point of view both the colonial and the colonised.

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel written for two different audiences, Western and African. Achebe sets out to educate his Western readers of their blind spots regarding European colonialism in Africa, and of their almost child-like belief in European colonialism "as a civilising mission", as argued by Okonkwo, who is the namesake of Achebe's protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* (Okonkwo 1995, 82). Okonkwo further claims that *Things Fall Apart* was drafted to challenge the myth of Africa's "inability to create order out of chaos" (Okonkwo 1995, 83). Achebe himself has come out to say that his primary purpose for writing the novel was to provide his African readers a realistic depiction of their past, with all its imperfections, but free of the stereotypes and distortions imposed upon them by Europeans (Câmpu 2014, 1). Okonkwo's assertion, that the novel sets out to challenge the myth of Africa as being devoid of the entities

associated with order – such as courts of law or bodies of governance – is aimed at western audiences, whose opinions of Africa have upheld the myth, while Achebe directs his intention closer at home, towards Africans. These conflicting viewpoints, both present in the novel and vying for supremacy, offer fertile ground for students of irony in a postcolonial setting.

Literary critics, both Western and African, have studied Achebe's texts extensively in the field of irony and colonial criticism. Hutcheon, Fenwick, Onyeoziri, and a slew of others have attempted to plumb the depths of irony in postcolonial novels both from Western and African perspective alike, and while *Things Fall Apart* has received its share of the limelight, Achebe's later novels have proven to be more popular in that regard. Fenwick is one of the few critical works in which Achebe's first novel is taken under closer scrutiny. The low number of critical works focused on irony and its postcolonial usage in *Things Fall Apart* leaves space for this thesis.

The purpose of my study is to locate scenes and vehicles of postcolonial irony in Achebe's novel and closely analyse them. The object of this analysis is the postcolonial aspect element that can be teased out from these ironical instances. I will also devote a section to define both irony and postcolonial irony in my theoretical framework, arguing for a reader-response theory, where irony is inferred by the intended audience. Another section focuses on irony's importance in the postcolonial novel genre of African literature.

It was eminently clear that in order to write an honest paper about irony in postcolonial African author's novel, this essay would have to give voice to African critics, scholars, and writers. Otherwise, this thesis would be partaking in the practise of

explaining the nature of Africa and its colonialism for African people, continuing the tradition of intellectual colonialism by the West. While selecting one's sources based on geography may present its own challenges, and opens the thesis to accusations of bias, in a discussion of historical colonialism, credence and voice must be given to those more deeply affected by the practise.

## **2 THEORY OF IRONY IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE**

This chapter establishes the theoretical background used in the thesis. In the first section, a general overview of irony is given from the point-of-view of understanding postcolonial literature. In the second section, the thesis discusses different varieties of ironies. The second section also expands on several ironies, which are useful when reading postcolonial literature. The third section gives a detailed view of irony in postcolonial setting and discusses the viability of postcolonial irony.

### **2.1 Irony**

Much has been written and argued about the form and use of irony, and even more resources have been expended in the defence and deconstruction of theories attempting to cement the true nature of irony. It is apparent that irony has fascinated the Western world from its inception, and there is “little disagreement as to its basic” form and function (Hutcheon 1994, 9). Fenwick’s succinct characterization claims, that it “enacts a relation between truth and falsehood”. According to Fenwick, the literal meaning of an utterance may be false, yet the speaker cannot be named a liar if the true meaning of the “utterance is understood”. The success of the ironical utterance thus rests on the communicator’s “inability to mark the irony clearly enough” and the listener’s failure to understand the utterance ironically. He goes on to state that “the true sense of the utterance transcends its false and limited meaning”. (2006, 9). Colebrook likewise categorises irony, at its broadest sense, likewise, as a “doubleness of



meaning". She asserts that irony may include those ironies that are not only rhetorical, but the kind which go beyond speech or language (Colebrook 2004, 13).

At its most basic level, irony is a social act which is said to have two participants, the intending ironists, and their intended audience, or "the one that "gets" and the one that doesn't 'get' irony" (Hutcheon 1994, 10). The irony may be able to hide itself from one audience, who are not intended to understand that the utterance was supposed to be understood ironically. The ironist attempts "to set up an ironic relation between the said and the unsaid" (Hutcheon 1994, 11). In other words, the ironist and the interpreter form a relationship, where the interpreter "decodes" the intended message, which is in opposition to what is said by the ironist, arriving at the same conclusion regarding the said message. The problems with this rather simplistic approach become apparent the minute they are voiced: some ironies can be wholly unintentional, while other intended ironies might go unnoticed by their audience. As Hutcheon points out, "irony, then, will mean different things to the different players" (Ibid.). In other words, the truth is different depending on the reader or listener. Colebrook agrees, stating that one may still read the past texts, understand their contexts and purported truths, but not ascribing to those truths, or believing them (2004, 3). The readers ground themselves to different contexts, which offer unique viewpoints.

To help with this grounding, Hutcheon, says "we don't make meaning outside of particular situations", but rather instinctively ground our "meaning-making" activity into "specific context" as Ducrot and Todorov stated (qtd. In Hutcheon 1994, 55). Understanding postcolonial irony requires rapid shifts in these contexts.

The context can also be understood to cover cultural perspectives. This perspective would then become vital when trying to analyse irony in postcolonial literature. The perspective, or rather the dominant discourse in the said community's perspective, affects the irony. This is what makes irony an interesting feature of postcolonial literature, albeit one that is hard to define. An example of a cultural perspective, Raskin (2015) states that "colonial apologists", referring to people who to this day view colonialism beneficially, claim that "colonialism, however inhumane, was nonetheless preferable to the non-colonial alternatives of despotism, slavery, and savage warfare". This notion of African perceived "savagery" by colonials is prevalent in *Things Fall Apart* and serves as a reminder, that cultural discourse affects one's ability to recognise irony.

## 2.2 Types of Ironies

Not all ironies are as well-suited for post-colonial novels or oft used by African authors. To better understand how Chinua Achebe deftly uses irony in *Things Fall Apart*, it is appropriate to first define how irony is often used within literature, and to highlight the more prolific ironies within the genre of post-colonial literature.

There are different ways to categorize ironies into different groups, according to Elleström (2002, 54). One classification distinguishes irony into two different categories, *verbal irony*, also called rhetorical irony, and *situational irony*. In verbal irony, the intention matters. Elleström gives an example of a man remarking how wonderful weather it is, while "sad[ly] looking at the rain outside the window" (Elleström 2002,

55). Situational irony, often called irony of events, is according to Thirlwall “independent of all forms of speech, and needs not the aid of words” (qtd. in Elleström 2002, 55). According to Elleström, in literary texts situational irony is often called *structural irony* (2002, 55). He goes on to state that structural irony, specifically, can be defined as irony involving “a naïve hero or an unreliable narrator”, whose world view is different from that of the reader (Ibid.).

The divide into verbal and situational ironies can be thought of as the classical ordering of ironies, which are then further divided into subcategories. In the next sections, situational irony, tragic irony, and historical irony are more clearly defined. Especially in the context of postcolonial literature, where history, historical events, and historical revisionism play their parts, *historical irony* is a worthy addition to the list of ironies.

### **2.2.1 Situational Irony**

For Elleström, situational irony is irony that is not defined by its intention (Elleström 2002, 55). It is the irony of a situation expressed not through verbal use, but through actions. According to Elleström, it is “more generally understood as a situation that includes contradictions and sharp contrasts” (Ibid.). As previously mentioned, situational irony is often called structural irony in literary texts (Elleström 2002, 55). For the purpose of this thesis, situational irony is used when referring to instances of irony in the texts, which fulfil the criteria for situational irony, as described by Elleström.

### **2.2.2 Tragic Irony**

Tragic irony is irony that goes beyond speech or language (Colebrook 2004, 14). Tragic irony concerns itself with the actual circumstances that arise in literature, not what is said. It is reminiscent of the audience in theatre knowing beforehand the outcome of the tale before the characters in the story have any indication of the outcome. Colebrook is of the opinion that tragic irony is closely related to cosmic irony, which is otherwise known as irony of fate (2004, 13). According to her, cosmic irony works by obfuscating the outcome of the action, clouding the effects to the agent of the action, and the activities of the forces that “exceed our choices” (Ibid.).

As such, tragic irony is then closely related to historical irony, in the sense that the audience knows “its destined outcome” (Ibid.).

### **2.2.3 Historical Irony**

Historical irony is not a recognised type of irony. However, in the context of postcolonial literature studies, it bears mention that a type of irony called ‘historical irony’ has gained prominence in recent times, even if literary and communication studies have yet to embrace the term.

A more modern type of irony, historical irony is the sort of irony that can be useful when attempting to analyse historical events. Historical irony works by retrospectively scrutinizing events that have happened, and which “ironically had different outcomes than at the time expected.

Historical irony can be seen as working in tandem with other kinds of ironies, but it is connected to the events in chronological manner. As such, it is not irony taking place *in situ* within a novel, but rather can manifest itself as external knowledge that

prospective and well-informed readers possess and which they can use, while witnessing an event taking place in a novel, to identify it as historical irony.

An example of historical irony would be H. G. Wells' famous proclamation, where he forecasted that the First World War would be the war to end all wars (Stepp 2014). As it would be, history proved him wrong, ironically, given how conflict rich the twentieth century was.

## 2.3 Postcolonial Irony

The term – postcolonial irony – is often used to describe the use of irony in a postcolonial setting, instead of as a separate, self-sufficient type of irony in the manner of dramatic, historical, or situational irony. Given the breadth of works in postcolonial literature, and their popularity, it could be worthwhile to ponder briefly whether a specific kind of irony could be coined *postcolonial irony* and how such an irony could be constructed.

Post-colonial irony could be thought of as having juxtaposition of narratives as one of its core requirements. One narrative, hailing from the West, and featuring the stereotypical and distorting view, as described by Achebe, of bringing culture to savage tribes of Africa. This narrative is the discourse of colonialists. In opposition to this, an African narrative intended to educate both audiences of the real and historic depiction of Africa as it was, in effect demythologising the authentic past. This is the line that postcolonial irony could straddle: addressing both Western and African audiences, seemingly respecting the western beliefs on Africa as an uncivilised and barbaric continent, while undermining this very same discourse in its address to Africans.

Hutcheon has called the usage of irony in postcolonial context a “strategic” response “which has the potential to subvert from within”. She further extrapolates on this by saying that

as a double-talking, forked-tongued mode of address, irony becomes a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time. Its inherent semantic and structural doubleness also makes it a most convenient trope for ... postcolonial doubled identity and history. And indeed irony ... has become a powerful subversive tool in the re-thinking and re-addressing of history by ... post-colonial artists. (1995, 133)

Postcolonial irony’s potential to “subvert from within” has undoubtedly made it an attractive tool to be employed in postcolonial literature, but it yet lacks gravitas as a free-standing type of irony. To reinforce this point, Fenwick states that “there is no specific kind or manner of post/colonial irony” (2006, 10).

In this thesis, postcolonial irony is understood as an ironic event, which touches upon the different discourses and contexts in western world and Africa. For the purpose of defining postcolonial irony, all the different ironies are accepted. The ironical instance is further defined as postcolonial irony if it speaks to both African and western readers, whether it ironizes either or both of these discourses, demythologises the past, or educates the ignorant.

### **3 THINGS FALL APART IN BRIEF**

*Things Fall Apart* is a story of Okonkwo, from the village of Umuofia, which is located on the east bank of the Niger River, set in of the late nineteenth century, in the area what later became Nigeria. The novel is told from the point of view of the Igbo people. The reason for the novel, according to Achebe, was to combat the misconceptions of African culture (or cultures) being primitive and savage (Câmpu 2014, 1.)

The book is divided into three parts, and follows the life and tribulations of a proud Umuofia leader and wrestling champion, Okonkwo, and his family. The first part is focused on familiarizing the reader with Okonkwo's family history, and the Igbo society's many customs and beliefs, which may seem alien to Western readers.

Contrary to the usual Western narrative used to justify the actions of the colonial powers by 'civilizing the black people', the Igbo are shown to have a system of self-government, as well as systems of justice, religion, and commerce. This contrasts Western and colonial presuppositions regarding Africa, creating fertile ground for Achebe to sow his irony. The first part ends on a dour note as Okonkwo and his family are exiled from his village for an accidental killing; his exploding gun sent a sliver of shrapnel through a young boy's heart. This scene offers the reader a chance to witness Igbo justice in action. Because the killing (deemed a killing of the female kind) is accidental, Okonkwo and his family are banished for seven years, after which they are welcome to return to Umuofia. The second part introduces the Igbo to the white men and their religion, Christianity. The overly proud and independent Okonkwo sets himself in opposition to the alien religion, and, by proxy, the white government. By the third

part, where Okonkwo and his family return safely to Umuofia, both the Christian church and the Britain colonial government have taken a hold of Umuofia to the immense irritation of Okonkwo. Things come to head with Okonkwo killing a messenger of the white government, but in dismay realizes that his village will not follow him to a war against the white men. He takes his own life, which is seen as the dishonourable course of action by the Igbo, but strange and rather quaint by the British District Commissioner. The District Commissioner is also the most forthright example used by Achebe to portray the colonials in an ironic light.



## 4 IRONY IN *THINGS FALL APART*

This chapter focuses on analysing several scenes from the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1994) by Chinua Achebe. In the first section, Achebe's reasons for adopting the English language for use in his novel is discussed. Furthermore, the first section discusses the potentiality of English language as a venue to express postcolonial irony. The second section focuses on the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, and his measure as a vehicle of both tragic and postcolonial irony. The third section studies in detail an instance of postcolonial irony, by co-opting Fenwick's (2006) analysis of the coming of the locusts. The fourth section analyses the cursed forest's viability as an instance of postcolonial irony.

Several instances in the novel can be recognized as ironic and in many of the scenes, several different types of ironies can be observed. This thesis attempts to recognise and analyse those scenes thought to be portrayals of postcolonial irony.

### 4.1 Irony in African Discourse

Irony's importance in African literary discourse has been studied extensively, given its prominence. Onyeoziri has voiced her opinion that African novels tend to ironize, saying that:

African novels have demonstrated, since the colonial period, a remarkable tendency to ironize. Authors, in speaking for those who are constantly represented as not having understood or who do not possess the discursive subtlety of colonizing Europe, put forth their subtlest and most complex discursive forms, exemplified in irony, as a principle, an answer, and a heritage. (2011, 31)

Let us set aside the question of “why” and first take a closer look at her implicit claim of irony being the discourse form of the elite. I believe it can be said without a doubt that Europeans viewed themselves as being, in contrast to the Africans, somehow better, perhaps even more intelligent, which would have in their minds resulted in levels of discourse that Africans could not match. In support of her claim of irony being “a complex discursive form”, Western critics have a history of treating irony as the plaything of the intellectuals, with Kierkegaard famously claiming that irony is not understood by all, since it “travels in an exclusive incognito, as it were, and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech” (qtd. In Hutcheon 1994, 51). Indeed, Hutcheon goes on to paint a familiar image of the ironist as an “omnipotent god-figure smiling down—with irony—upon the rest of us” (Ibid.).

It may very well be that the condescending attitudes of the colonial powers toward the colonized, and of the western discourse attitude in general, have influenced the adoption of irony as an important postcolonial form through which to criticise colonialism, but does it alone explain the tendencies of African novelists to ironize? In support of Onyeoziri’s claim, Berrendonner points out that irony, by its nature a discourse reliant on interpretation and conclusions drawn from assumptions, also leaves the ironic speaker “an escape route in the event of censure” (qtd. In Onyeoziri 2011, 15). Irony, then, allows the writer to criticize from within, a valuable luxury in the post-independence period, with oppressive post-independence regimes, and “the evolution of patriarchy under colonial rule and beyond” (Onyeoziri 2011, 17). The adoption of irony allows the author to backpedal, to escape the censure. Colebrook states that the

definition of irony becomes indefinable in a postmodern world (2004, 1). This attribute of indefinableness safeguards the intending ironist.

Hutcheon has drawn attention to how postcolonial literatures have tried to reconstruct and negotiate their relationships to “what came before” by stating that:

[a]fter that imposition of an imperial culture and that truncated indigenous history which colonialism has meant to many nations, post-colonial literatures are also negotiating (often parodically) the once tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with the revalued local past. (1989, 131)

As a way of explaining African writers’ tendencies to resort to ‘parodical’ methods of connecting their short-lived colonial history with that of their ancestors’. In this way, Hutcheon connects ironic discourse with post-colonial politics. Hutcheon herself has said “that irony has become an important strategy of oppositional rhetoric” (Hutcheon 1994, 11).

## 4.2 English Language

Achebe’s choice to write *Things Fall Apart* in English may seem odd. Using the coloniser’s language to tell the tale of how your people fell under the dominion of the British Empire may have disappointed those proponents of ethnical Nigerian languages, who could have seen in the language an echo of cultural hegemony. However, that criticism, if there ever were any, has by now dissipated, and Achebe’s choice of language can be viewed as the most over-arching instance of postcolonial irony in *Things Fall Apart*.

The novel's ending suggests that Achebe's choice of the English language is a deliberate ironical choice. On the very last page, the District Commissioner has settled on the title for his book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, and decided that he could write "...not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph of..." the man who killed one of his messengers and then hanged himself (Achebe 1994, 209). Diverting one's attention to the title shows a typical register of language, which was used to describe both Africa and Africans. Striving to appear impartial and objective, drily academic, the District Commissioner is not interested in the context of Okonkwo's suicide, but rather wishes to portray it as an oddity of one African to western readers. He is content with surface detail, and the academic language of the book's title gives the appearance of rigorous scientific method. Furthermore, readers who are familiar with the effects of colonialism in Africa may take notice of the ironies in the two words *pacification* and *primitive*. Viewed in historical context, the colonialism efforts in Africa did not ensure the pacification of the affected nations after colonial powers withdrew.

The colonials othered Africans, and had no desire to become familiar with their customs, as the District Commissioner's actions show. Had the District Commissioner been interested in familiarizing himself with Igbo customs, he could have written a more thorough book, with perhaps a more accurate and truthful title.

However, the prevailing custom of the colonial powers was to keep the colonised at an arm's length while describing them in a great surface detail to readers back in the home country. Hence in an ironic twist, Achebe has co-opted the English language and used it to describe, in great detail, the Igbo community, and the contexts which lead to Okonkwo's suicide.

Forgoing complicated syntax, Achebe opts to use a simple and conversational prose throughout *Things Fall Apart* while emphasising the importance of folklore and oral language to the Igbo. In numerous instances in the novel, the narrator underlines how important the Igbo considered oral rhetorical skills, saying how “the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, 1994, 7).

Achebe’s simple yet beautiful prose ironizes the District Commissioner’s book, and, in general, the western discourse in books written of the colonial Africa. According to Hutcheon (*Circling the Downspout of Empire* 1989, 177), irony in postcolonial texts resists the “dominant” while at the same time acknowledging its power. Hence, similarly to the District Commissioner, Achebe has written a book on the Igbo, and has elected to use the same language. Yet where the District Commissioner’s prose is academic and seemingly impartial judging by the title, it paints the Igbo as primitive savages, whereas Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is simple, easy to read, and treats the Igbo with respect regarding their culture. He also manages to incorporate Igbo words without any translation into the text, forcing the western reader to consult a dictionary.

Achebe’s prose makes mockery of the western discourse on the Igbo by using the same language, in a similar setting, yet offering the reader a more truthful depiction. Colebrook states that to understand when a writer is being ironic, it must be possible to identify and explain a writer’s specific culture and the context (2006, 3). Here, Achebe has demonstrated an understanding of the colonials’ culture and the context through which they viewed Africans.

In summary, it can be argued that *Things Fall Apart* is a continuation of the Igbo oral story-telling tradition, an important part of their culture. The decision to use the coloniser's own literary tool and language mocks the discourse inherent in western literature regarding the colonised Africa. As previously mentioned by Hutcheon, irony, in post-colonial setting, becomes "rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time" (2005, 133). Achebe's subversion of the coloniser's language mocks the colonial ruler's attempts at studying the Igbo and their customs by using the same language to continue the Igbo tradition of oral storytelling, displaying his familiarity of his own culture and that of the coloniser. The English language thus becomes an extended figure of postcolonial irony, which pervades the whole novel.

### **4.3 Stubborn protagonist**

The portrayal of Okonkwo throughout the novel defies attempts to compartmentalise the irony into a single, concise literary device. Without a doubt, he falls under the shadow of situational irony and is thusly afflicted by a host of different ironies. His life is rife with irony, which he does not recognise, even at the end.

From the beginning of the novel, readers are shown that Okonkwo is a self-made man who despises his father, Unoka, who was lazy, cowardly and had died an ignoble death (Achebe 1994, 4, 5, 18). Okonkwo is everything his father wasn't. Yet, in a twist of tragic irony, he too dies an ignoble death, by hanging himself, which, among the Igbo "was an abomination" (Achebe 1994, 207). Okonkwo had worked all his life hating

“everything that his father Unoko had loved” (Achebe 1994, 13). However, they both had died shameful deaths by the standards of the Igbo.

The postcolonial irony affixed to Okonkwo’s fate ties itself to cultural traditions. Among, the Igbo, both Unoka and Okonkwo had died bad deaths. Yet the change in the District Commissioner’s attitude towards the Igbo changes because of the hanging, he becomes “a student of primitive customs” (Achebe 1994, 207). The postcolonial irony inherent in Unoka’s and Okonkwo’s deaths is, that according to western tradition, their deaths are not dishonourable. Unoka might have been healed of his affliction through western medicine, and western history is rife with men who sooner took their own lives than face other fate.

The District Commissioner labels Igbo cultural beliefs primitive, ironically, when they are merely obeying their own customs and traditions. This is where the grounding into different contexts matters in understanding the irony. Furthermore, the miscommunication affirms the western discourse of the “primitive tribes of Lower Niger” and their primitive customs. In conclusion, the postcolonial irony is achieved through structural irony. This irony is achieved by the reader who possesses knowledge outside of the world views of the District Commissioner.

#### **4.4 The Locusts Are Coming**

Perhaps the most powerful single instance of irony in *Things Fall Apart*, as explored and explained by Fenwick (2006), relates to the coming of the locusts. Locusts, in western discourse, are a portent of calamity, as noted by Fenwick. In the Bible, to force the

Pharaoh to release the Hebrews from their servitude, God sent locusts as the eighth plague to “eat every tree which groweth for you out of the field” in the kingdom of Egypt (Ex. 10:1–20). Furthermore, western agriculture practises are susceptible to locusts. In the minds of the western reader, the coming of the locusts must be met with dread by the Igbo.

Achebe describes the locusts “as a shadow falling on the world, as the swarm, thick enough to pass for a cloud, hid the sun itself” (55). Fenwick (2006, 13) correctly points out that a Westernised reader’s expectations are turned upside down. The foreboding language offered by the prose has the reader expecting an apocalyptic event, yet further reading has the Umuofians cheerfully rejoicing at the locusts’ coming. Apparently, they are good to eat, according to the narrator’s instinct (Fenwick 2006, 13). This is in direct opposition to western readers’ instincts, which are at first reinforced by the prose, and then dashed when the Igbo rejoice. According to Fenwick (13), Achebe illustrates how incompletely the western reader understands the Igbo culture, similarly to the District Commissioner, who feels “authorised” to explain “all that is necessary about the “primitives” under his control”.

Fenwick points out how the Westernised reader’s expectations are at first confirmed, and later dashed by Umuofians. However, Fenwick further goes on to prove that the Western readers’ instincts are, in the end, justifiable, by adopting an ironic stance from which to analyse the extended metaphor. The situational irony in Western expectation mirrored towards African reality can be turned into a dramatic irony if we take the coming of the locusts as heralds for the arrival of the British. It becomes apparent that Westernised readers do not understand the Igbo culture based on their



reaction to the locusts, yet at the same time Western readers are put into a position of knowing more than the Igbo regarding the arrival of British, and their direct comparison to the locusts (Fenwick 14). The dread felt within western readers of *Things Fall Apart* is justified, even though the reason differs, as Fenwick demonstrates.

Fenwick expertly ties the dramatic irony, which he uses instead of tragic irony, and which is recognisable by readers who have knowledge of colonial history, with the ending of the book, where the District Commissioner knows better than the natives. “The Westernised reader is thus immediately constituted as a part of the same imperial 'us' that encompasses the District Commissioner”, as Fenwick eloquently argues. The District Commissioner acts as a foil against which Fenwick mirrors the western reader’s perspective regarding the Igbo. The District Commissioner is again used as the backdrop for Achebe to display western discourse’s lack of knowledge regarding Africa, as he has done throughout the book through the language. This cannot be a coincidence, since the District Commissioner acts as the dominant force in the area, acting as the direct representative for colonial powers. His ignorance is the ignorance of the West.

#### **4.5 The Cursed Turns into a Church**

The village of Umuofia, and other Igbo villages, had Evil Forests. The Igbo used these forests to bury people who had died of “evil disease”, and abandon the potent fetishes of deceased medicine men. The Igbo believed that the Evil Forests were “alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness”. (Achebe 1994, 149)

In the novel, the Christian missionaries ask and receive permission to build a church near Mbanta, near which Okonkwo and his family are spending their exile from Umuofia. The Igbo allow them to build the church in their Evil Forest, a permission which they did not think the missionaries to accept, due to the Igbo's beliefs regarding the forest. To the amazement of the Igbo, the missionaries are able to build their church and even survive the Evil Forest. This proves their faith's potency to many Igbo, who decide to convert to the new religion.

By giving the missionaries land for their church, the Igbo consider themselves cunning. They expect the missionaries to die within four days. Not wanting the foreign religion to settle in their midst, they connive for the missionaries to build their "shrine" amidst the horrors of Evil Forest, and to ultimately die. Instead, the missionaries win many converts because they survive the Evil Forest, demonstrating their powers.

The event is ironical in several senses. In one sense, the irony works through the situation. The Igbo's intention is to expunge the missionaries of a new religion from their village, yet the opposite of that happens: the new religion thrives. In another sense, the event can be categorised as dramatic irony since the reader knows beforehand that the Evil Forest would not harm the missionaries. It can be suggested that the thriving new religion hastens the collapse of Igbo self-rule by creating division among them. As it is, the missionaries gain converts and influence among the Igbo in a dramatic, ironical fashion.

In the postcolonial reading, the event is ironical similarly to the coming of the locusts. Whereas in the case of the locusts, the western reader was overcome by a sense of dread and foreboding by the style of prose Achebe wrote the passage in, in this

instance the Igbo themselves regarded the Evil Forest to be the place where the powers of darkness lingered. To their amazement, the missionaries overcome this imagined obstacle without even registering that they were supposed to fear the forest. While it is not made clear in the novel whether the missionaries were aware of the significance of their act, their natural instinct was not one of fear, which the Igbos expected, but of joy, upon hearing that they could build their church, which confused the Igbos (Achebe 1994, 149).

## 5 CONCLUSION

The English language is an extended postcolonial irony in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe manages to appropriate the colonialist's language and make it his own by cultivating Igbo oral tradition and seeding the novel with Igbo words, the translations of which are only found in the glossary, not in the text proper. Okonkwo's fall from glory is in itself a tragic irony, but the manner of his death offers the reader a window into a scene of structural irony. The District Commissioner treats Okonkwo's death as something quaintly primitive.

Fenwick's expert analysis of the locust scene allows the reader to see how postcolonial irony works both ways. Firstly, the western readers prepare for the worst, given the significance of locusts in western agricultural discourse, but those fears are needless in African context. Secondly, the coming of the British is comparable to the coming of locusts, but this time the Igbo do not understand the inherent danger. The reader possess knowledge gained from history.

The Evil Forest acts as the blind spot of the Igbo and works as a dramatic irony. The readers have the knowledge that the forest would not harm the missionaries, whereas the Igbos' expectations were contrary. This proves the potency of the missionaries' religion and wins them converts. It can be argued that the success of the missionaries is instrumental in the collapse of the Igbo society's self-rule.

As Onyeoziri states, irony is one of the more important aspects of postcolonial novels (2011, 31). It stands to reason that Achebe's first novel would be rife with irony, but that it also would present opportunities for an ironic postcolonial reading. This

ironic postcolonial reading has shown the narrowness of thought with which colonial powers treated the “primitive” African tribes.

Achebe has managed to show both western readers and his African audience a glimpse into how things were during the colonial period. The area of Lower Niger was not an unknowable entity, without tradition or culture, but was instead full of vibrant and energetic communities, with their own customs, even problems. Achebe unveils this blind spot for both western and African audiences.

For a postcolonial people, the fiction that the Igbo were devoid of culture is shown as false in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe has shown that the Igbos were rich in culture, and have been deft enough to co-opt the coloniser’s tools of discourse for their own use, and turn it against the former colonialists. It is done to educate, so that the mistakes of the past cannot be repeated. Perhaps it is a hope of the postcolonial authors that future generations are able to flexibly shift from one context to another, without being grounded indefinitely in any one perspective.

Further research in the topic is still needed. This thesis has been written from the point of view of a western reader and analysed correspondingly. It would be interesting to examine in what ways the same ironical instances this thesis has highlighted are viewed by readers from African point of view, and whether there are changes in meaning or the manner in which irony manifests itself.

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