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Folktales in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart:

An Analysis of Folklore/Tribal-lore Function in Igbo Folktales

'Folklore' and 'Folk life' (or Tribal lore and Tribal life) are not separate communal dimensions, but are rather a singular composite entity where the folklore emerges from folk life and in turn folk life is regulated by the folklore as land, people and environment form an important context for the creation, propagation, relevance and sustenance of folk practices and cultural expressions. Folklore stores and transmits cultural knowledge, representing the aesthetic and expressive aspect of an indigenous culture, which can be translated into both generalised and highly specific registers through various artistic oral productions, such as folktales, folk songs, myths and legends, and utterances (Puzzles, Jokes and Riddles). Thus, folklore, in a way, is the language of culture which, like any language system, is established and practiced in oral communities through the collective acceptance of certain norms and practices.

According to William R. Bascom, the functions of folklore are embedded in the socio-cultural and psycho-social context of the oral communities. The folklore addresses the psychological context of culture through instruction that mirrors the actual lived reality of contemporary society, such as in proverbs, invectives and warning tales; and entertainment by presenting plots that goes beyond the plausible reality to create wish fulfillment through escape in fantasy, such as in magic tales and tall tales. It adds on to the socio-cultural context through validation of socio-cultural norms and pedagogical exercises, such as in didactic tales and cosmogonic myths. Thus, according to Bascom, folklore serves to fulfil four major functions, namely, amusement/entertainment, validation of culture and cultural norms, passing down of the pedagogical and educational values, and maintaining a check on social behaviour of the community members (Bascom 333-349). Furthermore, Axel Olrik believes that the *sage*¹ is usually governed by similar epic laws of narrative and formalistic features with similar design and compositional functions (Olrik 130). He enumerates basic laws of the form of *sage*, wherein laws of presence of calm in opening and closing, repetition of elements of the plot, contrast of functions, and sequential positioning of characters, are seen as common structural reference points.

If we follow Axel Olrik's formal approach, as theorised in *Epic Laws of Folk Narratives*, that *sage* has similar narrative laws, the functions of folklore can be traced in any genre of the *sage*. With regards to this viewpoint, folktales in Chinua Achebe's novel are picked to highlight

¹ Alan Dundes explains Axel Olrik's concept of sage saying, "Sage, as defined by Olrik, is virtually an all-inclusive term and is meant to incorporate such forms as folktale, myth, legend, and folksong. This definition is important inasmuch as Olrik feels that the "laws" are not limited to just one genre, such as legend, but rather that they are equally applicable to many genres. To Olrik the wSagenwelt rules are such that they take precedence over the everyday rules of objective reality. The world of Sage is an independent domain, a realm of reality separate from the real world, subject to its own rules and regulations." (Dundes 128)

the folkloric functions in the larger plot of the novel, which uses ‘Orality’ as not just a decorative exterior style; but as a means of attaining a life-like portrayal of the Igbo culture and experience. The larger narrative of the story lets us explore the socio-cultural aspects of the folktales as we get a sense of not only the teller, performer and listener of the story but also the occasion and place of such storytelling sessions which helps in establishing various socio-cultural folkloric functions of the chosen tales. This paper analyses the folktales of ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of Birds’ and ‘Mother Kite and Daughter Kite’, related by Igbo characters, Ekwefi and Uchendu respectively, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* with the objective of establishing folktales as metaphorical and authentic expressions of folklore and folklife of the indigenous Igbo Community. However, it is to be noted that while reading and analysing the Igbo folktales and folk narratives, the political implications of Postcolonial reading of Igbo Culture in *Things Fall Apart* has been deliberately avoided and attempts have been made to read these elements as a reflection of the folklife and folklore of the Igbo Community in the chronotope as is recreated in the novel. The selected folktales are analysed at semantic (dealing with the context and meaning of the tale), syntactic (dealing with the compositional formal framework of the tales) and pragmatic (dealing with the performance of the tale) levels so as to check its socio-cultural relevance and folkloric functionality without any regard to aetiology of these tales.

The folktale of ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of Birds’ appears in the eleventh chapter of the novel, when the narrator of the novel tells us,

“Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okwonko from his wives’ huts as each woman and her children told folk stories. Ekwefi and her daughter Enzima, sat on a mat on the floor. It was Ekwefi’s turn to tell the story.” (Achebe 87)

The information provided in these lines spoken just before the tale begins is crucial as it establishes the socio-cultural aspects of folklore which would not have been possible if these tales were read in isolation without the external narrative of the novel. Herein we can see that it is a usual pedagogical and amusement activity in which the children and mothers are involved as both the storytellers and listeners. The occasion is not an extraordinary situation but a usual domestic and cultural activity as is indicated from the fact that the story is told in turns by the participants. Furthermore, Enzima keeps on interpolating comments, questions and suggestions as the tale unfolds indicating that the folktale narration like any other folkloric activity is an inclusive and collective process wherein the speaker is constantly reminded by the audience if any acceptable formalistic features, like the presence of a song as pointed out by Enzima to Ekwefi, has been left out. The constant question-answers also adds a feel of catechism to the whole narrative and educates the children in the values indicated in the tale and simultaneously warns them against the consequences of evil and vile behaviour, maintaining a social check on the social behaviors of the community members. Moreover, the proverb, “a man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself” is reported verbatim in the tale indicating the didactic moral behind the tale which again serves the purpose of maintaining a check on the behaviour of the audience along with providing a fulfillment of such deviant behavior through the character and deeds of the trickster animal in whom such behaviour does not look out of place.

The folktale of ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of the Birds’ as narrated by Ekwefi in the novel can be summarised as follows:

Once the birds were invited for a feast in the sky and they start preparing for it by painting beautiful patterns on their bodies with *uli*. Tortoise, the trickster, notices this and begs

them to allow him to join them for the feast on the account being a changed person. After deliberation, the birds allow him to join them for the feast and give him a feather each to sew two wings for himself. The birds choose tortoise as their spokesman as he was a great orator and he misuses this opportunity by tricking the birds into believing that there is an age old custom where whenever someone is invited to grand feasts they should change their names and adopt a new one. He declares that his new name would be "All-of-you" and other birds should also take up a new name each. Everyone takes his advice and end up at the feast with new names. As the food is served and set before the guests, the tortoise becomes greedy and when the birds are invited to eat, he asks who is the food for and the host replies saying "it is for all of you," which is the tortoise's new name. He tells the birds that it is the custom of people of sky to serve the spokesman first and others later. Hearing this, other birds let him eat the food and the host also starts thinking that it might be a custom in the bird's tribe to allow the spokesman to eat first. The birds get angry at seeing the tortoise gobble down most of the food and choose to fly back without eating anything. Before they leave, each bird takes his feathers back from the tortoise. With no wings to fly back home, tortoise tries to trick the birds once again by asking them to carry a message for his wife to bring out all the soft things in the house and cover the compound so that he can later jump on it. The parrot who was more angry than other bird decides to take the message for tortoise but instead of asking his wife to cover the compound with soft things, he asks her to cover it with all the hard things in the house. As tortoise falls from the sky and hits the compound, his shell is broken into many pieces. A great medicine-man comes to his rescue and puts back all the pieces into a shell which starts looking chequered. Ekwefi then explains that this is the reason why the tortoise's shell is not smooth.

This is a trickster tale in which the trickster is caught in his own web of intrigue. According to Dr. Janet U. Ogbalu, “The Activities of a tortoise are indispensable to Igbo Folktales. There is a wise saying that when a narrator fails to include the name of the tortoise in his tale, his tale lacks ‘salt’” (Ogbalu 17). Thus, Tortoise tales are most common and important Igbo folktales. It is the fullest text of a traditional folktale in *Things Fall Apart*. Ekwefi narrates the tale of ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of the Birds’ by starting with the initiation formula of oral traditions like “once upon a time” and embarks on a three page folktale narrative before ending in the formal etiological explanation at the end explaining why the tortoise’s shell is not smooth as well as indicating the long life span of the tortoise. According to Orlik’s Law of Opening and Closing of a *sage*, he states that the narrator begins the story from a calm point and slowly moves towards excitement which peaks in the middle and again the calm is regained as the story comes to an end. This law can be seen as applicable to the tale of ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of Birds’ as the story starts with a calm situation of birds getting ready for a feast and ends in the medicine man treating the tortoise’s broken shell rather than letting him die in the end. Orlik’s second epic Law of Repetition can be observed in the way tortoise keeps on trying to convince the birds to take him along with them and how the refrain “all-of-you” is repeated in the tale. Orlik’s Epic Law of Contrast can be observed in the contrasting personalities of extremely kind and gullible birds and cunning and cruel tortoise. Other contrast can be seen in the famine hit land and grandeur and abundance of the sky. The law of initial and final positioning of character is also maintained in this tale as the tortoise being the primary character is placed in the initial position and parrot with whom our sympathy lies is placed at the final position of the narrative. Lastly, the law of linear narrative movement is also maintained as the plot moves in a linear action and consequence progression. In terms of the pragmatic analysis of the tale, we can see that certain

paralinguistic aspects of performance are left out and only those features are retained as could be accommodated in written form. For example, the one-person audience, Enzima, is active and participant; she makes comments, asks questions, and demands that a story with a song be told.

The second tale of 'The Mother Kite and Daughter Kite' appears in the fifteenth chapter of the novel in a completely contrasting situation, place and participants. The story takes place in the *Obi* (hut) of Uchendu in Mbanta under a formal setting and tense atmosphere as this story is narrated by the eldest member of Okwonko's mother's family, Unchendu (Okwonko's Uncle) right after the incident of the genocide of tribe of Abame is narrated by Obierka. The audience and storyteller of this tale does not comprise of women and children but titled and older men of Mbanta and neighbouring clans. This indicates that the folktales are not related only for the amusement and entertainment purposes but also to reiterate cultural knowledge and information and serve the function of warning and providing practical education to not just children but male adults too. Furthermore, this tale is not related like the usual domestic cultural activity but is invoked with a specific function in mind and is limited to the context of the ongoing conversation between the characters of the novel. The fact that the eldest man of the house related the tale also hints at the sociological structuring of the participants of this folkloric activity wherein the seriousness of the situation is maintained through the mere worth of Uchendu's age, experience and title. The psychological context of the tale is also indicated by the creation of allegory of the contemporary crisis in the animal fable format as is indicated by Uchendu right at the end of the tale when he says, "Those men of Abame were fools" (Achebe 127). The embedding of this story hints that stories are the medium through which one comes to

grips with events that are disrupting the stable foundations of the old world and making people anxious with strange forebodings. The tale as narrated in the novel by Uchendu is as follows:

“Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. “You have done very well,” said Mother Kite to her daughter, “but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?” “It said nothing,” replied the young kite. “It just walked away.” “You must return the duckling,” said Mother Kite. “There is something ominous behind the silence.” And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. “What did the mother of this chick do?” asked the old kite. “It cried and raved and cursed me,” said the young kite. “Then we can eat the chick,” said her mother. “There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.” Those men of Abame were fools.” (Achebe 127)

The tale starts with the folkloric formula of “Once” and serves the etiological purpose in the end by explaining why kites eat chickens but not ducklings. Coming at the end of the highly dramatic telling of the Abame genocide story, the tale is told in a simple manner with straight forward and less witty dialogues as compared to ‘The Tortoise and the Feast of Birds’ tale, with a tersely controlled narrative rhythm which makes it easier to absorb the full impact of the Abame crisis being given expression in story. The tale however follows the epic law of calm before opening and closing as the mother kite and daughter kite are safe and have avoided the dangerous situation. The law of repetition can be perceived in a limited way (as the tale narrated is a shortened version of the actual tale) in the fact how mother kite asks the daughter kite the same questions with regard to the response of the prey’s mother and how she makes her daughter to repeat the same act until a successful attempt is made. Orlik’s law of contrast can be seen in the contrasting experience and wisdom of mother and that of her young one. The positioning of

duckling as the principal character and the daughter kite with whom our sympathies lie in the end also resonates with Orlik's law of initial and final positioning. Finally the story also follows the law of linear narrative as the story moves linearly in action and time. In terms of the pragmatic analysis of the tale, major paralinguistic and performative features of the tale are missing as the occasion and participants do not engage in correction or banter but rather respond by repeating the moral of Uchendu's story as soon as Uchendu stops speaking, Okwonko says, "They were fools" (Achebe 127) and Obierka also adds to it saying, "They have paid for their foolishness" (127). In the end of this conversation, Uchendu articulates the function of the folktale he endeavoured to evoke by saying, "There is no story that is not true".

In conclusion, it can be fairly established that igbo folktales follow Orlik's Epic Laws of Folk Narrative and share similar formal and compositional features. This reiterates Orlik's claim that. "the common rules for the composition of all these *Sage* forms we can then call the epic laws of folk narrative. These laws apply to all European folklore and to some extent even beyond that...Even the traditional categories of folk narrative are all governed by these general principles of Sage construction" (Orlik 131). This analysis shows that not only the formal features of *sage* but also the functional features of folklore when applied to most of the folklore in the world are more or less universal. This conclusion, interestingly, makes us realise and wonder at the shared sense of life and culture of a primitive man that defines his intellectual character. Furthermore, it can be established that the Folktales recreated in *Things Fall Apart* make the audience/reader experience and embody African Tribal realities as it penetrates and transforms its structure and extends its scope and makes it an active vehicle for exploration of socio-cultural and psychosocial aspects of not just the igbo community but the whole of humanity taken together as it articulates human problems and dilemmas and raises and integrates consciousness about it.

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