

## Review Essay

# On Wale Ogunyemi's Translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* into Yoruba, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*: A 'within-to-within' Approach of its Challenges

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### Abstract

This essay examines the proverbs, and other wise-sayings as used in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* vis-à-vis the Ogunyemi's Yoruba translations of the novel, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*. The within-to-within approach is the lens through which the text and its Yoruba translation are explored. The approach establishes some level of similarities in the cultures and nuances of both languages (Igbo and Yoruba) due to their mutual intelligibility. The work encourages more translation of African novels written originally in English, French, or Portuguese into African languages. Doing so preserves the languages and cultures, the sustainability which Akinwumi Isola (2010) refers to as Literary Ecosystem. That is a way of giving back to the society from which the author got inspired. Further, there exists the idea of language retrieval, a process of translation which Isola viewed goes into translation when the novels involved are lexico-semantic and culturally close to each other.

### Introduction

Some literary critics have argued that translators are traitors. Others have taken a stance against such polemic assumptions. The reason behind the argument is nothing but the inability of one language to accurately translate another language with the same lexico-semantic nuances. It must be exerted

that certain languages are mutually intelligible while others are not. Some languages can accommodate other languages that when they are translated one to another, share almost sameness of perfection. The kind of approach used while translating such languages, and the lexico-semantic closeness of the languages determine whether a translator can be named a traitor or not.

### **'Languagibility' and Translatability of Two Closed Cultures**

Language is arbitrary and translating one language to another can pose certain difficulties. These considerable difficulties, though, may make one language not commensurable when translated to another, but Umberto Eco reassures that such incommensurability does not mean incomparability (2001:12). Therefore, reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in Yoruba as translated by Wale Ogunyemi in 1997, one cannot but see a near-sameness precision of language, culture, and cultural expression in the Yoruba translated text. A careful examination of *Things Fall Apart*, though written in English, yet full of the flora and fauna of Igbo rich cultural tradition and rendition, makes this essay assumes the text as an "Igbo literary text." Achebe himself corroborates this assertion. "I'm an Igbo writer because this is my culture; Nigerian, African and a writer...no, black first, then a writer..." (Gikandi 1991:19). Several African literary texts, whether written in African languages or English have been translated into many European languages, but very few have been translated into African languages.

*Things Fall Apart* has been translated into about fifty-seven languages<sup>1</sup> across the globe, which makes the texts to be read and/or translated from a 'within-to-without' approach. That is, the source text (within), and the Euro-centric translation of it (without). The approach comes with its peculiar translation challenges. However, translating the *Things Fall Apart*, the source text to Yoruba based on a within-to-within approach compares the texts at the level of proverbs, idioms, aphorisms, and anecdotes. Though translating one from one text into another comes with some challenges but looking through the lens of one African language to another African language, however, might offer a different dimension to the challenges of translation.

Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* categorically asserts that all culture is originally colonial, the term colonial is loosely used not as a pejorative term that designates a servant to master the relationship of master to slave hegemony. Rather, it is a term that suggests culture and language that is accommodating and hospitable. Ricoeur (2005) underscores, "...Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the world of Other paralleled by the act of

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1 <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/565351/things-fall-apart-by-chinua-achebe/9780385474542/>

receiving the word of the Other into one's home, one's own dwelling" (25). The obvious from the assertion of Ricoeur in relating to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is that the Igbo language is one of those languages that is very accommodating and hospitable to the Other. Hence, the reason Ogunyemi achieves a near-sameness Yoruba literary translation of *Things Fall Apart*, which he titled *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*. A within-to-within approach looks through the lens of a language and culture that is close enough in terms of cultural practices and linguistic intelligibility. Although *Things Fall Apart* is written in English, most scholars would argue that it is embedded in Igbo tradition and cultural nuances. For this reason, the within-to-within approach sees the text as Igbo literary text (within), and the Yoruba translation (within) to compare their closeness and the level of likely difficulties encountered in this kind of approach of translation.

Rendering an African literary text into another African language or languages, Isola (2002:135) advocates for a literary text that would not only be written in an African language, but also an English literary text is written by Africans to be translated into African languages. To Isola, African literary texts and their writers should see their work and society as an "Ecosystem" According to him, "Historical conditions largely determine a writer's choice of language, but don't writers have a moral obligation to give something back to the literary ecosystem from which they initially drew their inspiration?" Isola argues further that, "Africans deserve to know what writers have taken from their societies." However, what does Isola mean with the "Writers Moral Obligation"?

In an ecosystem, there exist different relationships among the organisms. There is a parasitic that only receives from another organism without giving anything in return. In other words, the parasitic organism milks dry the host organism, while a symbiotic relationship gives and takes from the host organism. I consider the literary relationship Isola refers to as a symbiotic relationship in a literary ecosystem. He asserts the need for a literary writer to give back to society their oral tales, folktales and oral tradition deduced into writing. No doubts, it is in the spirit of moral obligation that Ogunyemi translated *Things Fall Apart* into Yoruba. Based on the literary ecosystem of Isola, this essay advocates for more translation of the indigenous novels into other indigenous literary texts. Going forward, *Things Fall Apart*, the source text (ST) will be referred to as *Things*, and, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*, the target text (TT) as *ìgbésí*.

### **African Literary Text**

Discourse in Africa is always cocooned in the use of copious proverbs, aphorisms, anecdotes, wise sayings, and other figurative. Proverbs, as Achebe says, are the “palm-oil with which words are eaten.” (*Things*, 5) This shows that for any language to achieve the feat of near-sameness translation, it might be very important for such a language to have equivalent textual materials to do so. Yoruba, for one, is a language that makes use of proverbs, idioms, anecdotes, aphorisms and so on. For instance, there is a proverb that authenticates the importance of proverbs in a discourse. Proverbs easily conveyed the crux of discourse to the interlocutors: *Òwe leṣin orọ, orọ leṣin òwe, bí orọ bá sọnu, òwe la fi i wá a.* (lit. Proverbs are the horses for the discourse, and vice versa, a lost discourse is found by the use of proverbs). Here, the sense of good communication is determined by how well versed the interlocutors are in the use of the proverbs.

### **What is a Proverb?**

Proverbs are a peculiar device of communication by which views are given in either short sentences or phrases loaded with meaning that cannot be understood at face value. Proverbs are used in making an effective point clear to the listener than an elaborated explanation. A speech full of proverbs is believed to have salt. (Pachocinski, 1996:4) Proverbs are like visual aids, gestures, or symbols used to accompany the language that makes the instruction vivid to young people. Comparison and contrasts are important elements in proverbs; they make the language more effective. They provide searching thought instead of ordinary words. Factually, a proverb is a great weapon to quiet a foolish man (Pachocinski 1996:5). The effectual use of proverbs demonstrates how knowledgeable a speaker or listener is. The interlocutors both understand each other using proverbs as they can codify the meaning of their conversation with an ‘elderly ears’ and not with naivety. There are benefits associated with the use of proverbs. It is used for correction, discipline, disputes settlements, praise or encourage, and so on. A conversation that must take many sentences to express can be summarized in one sentence using proverbs. In other words, a proverb economizes words.

Proverbs are careful observations, experiences of the people within their ecosystem. The elders that invented proverbs, thoroughly pay attention to their environment, plants, animals, trees, rivers, birds, rain, sun, air, seasons, and human behavior, then synthesize their noted characteristics and create proverbs. People often attach great importance to an idea when expressed in proverbs than in a plain language.

Let us take a cursory look at the use of proverbs in the *Things*, their Yorùbá equivalent in Ogunyemi's translation, and the possible ideal English rendition of the proverbs.

<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	<i>Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo</i>	Ideal English Equivalent (IEE)
...proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten (5)	<i>Òwe sì lẹ̀sin ọ̀ọ̀ (5)</i>	Proverbs are a critical building block for communication, as critical as words themselves.
...the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them (6)	<i>Òjò kò mẹnì ọ̀wọ̀, ẹ̀ni eji bá rí ní eji í pa (5)</i>	Rain does not discriminate, it falls on anyone who lies beneath it.
...if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings (6)	<i>...bọ̀mọ̀dé bá mọ̀wọ̀ wẹ̀,yòò bá àgbà jẹun (6)</i>	If children know how to properly respect their elders and follow protocol, they will reap many fruits. (If a child washes his hands, he can eat with his elders).
When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk (7)	<i>Tí òṣùpá bá n ràn, ebi eré sí sá a sì máa pa ẹ̀lẹ̀sẹ̀ kan (7)</i>	The crippled person walks in public at night under the cover of darkness. Someone with undesirable traits will make efforts to conceal them.
A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing (15)	<i>ọ̀pọ̀lọ̀ kì í dédẹ̀ ẹ̀ jántó jántó kírì ọ̀sán gangan (13)</i>	There is a valid and important reason that something is happening.

**Aphorisms and Anecdote**

...since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching (16)	... <i>tí èniyàn bá jé ata-mátàṣé èmi náà sì di afòmabà</i> (14)	If one is to be predatory, one must also be prepared to defend themselves against predators.
...you can tell a ripe corn by its look (16)	... <i>tí eja bá sọ lódò a máa ní mọ oye tó tó</i> (14)	It is easy to measure something's value at first glance.
A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness (14)	Èni tó á fẹ́ ẹ oríire gbọ́dọ júbà fágba (12-3)	Someone who wants to be successful must respect his elders.
..when a man says yes his <i>chi</i> says yes also (19)	<i>Ohun tí èyàn bá fẹ́ ní eḷé dàá bá ní fẹ́</i> (17)	Trust your instinct.
Looking at a king's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast (19)	<i>Táa bá rẹnu ọba, bí eni pé kò muyàn rí ni</i> (17)	One in a position of greatness may appear to have never suffered or depended on support in the past, however, there is more than meets the eye.

**Table: Comparison of Selected Proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* and *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo***

As Isola (2010) notes, the literary ecosystem from which the writers initially drew inspiration is by moral obligation and deserves to be given back to the society where it was taken from. This idea of literary ecosystem informs the translation of Soyinka's *Aké* by Isola of which he, Isola, claims to have not done a translation per se, but rather, a "language retrieval" (Isola 2010). For Isola, though, Soyinka writes in English, yet anyone who has the mastery of Yoruba language and its socio-cultural worldview would feel the deep echoes and nuances of Yoruba.

The within-to-within approach of looking at *Things* and *Ìgbésí*, hinges on the Isola's language retrieval spectrum. One would agree that for a translator, translating proverbs, idioms and so on is very tasking and sometimes, the rendition of proverbs to English, especially from an African language, becomes challenging as they can lose meaning in the target language. Some semantic or lexical elements are lost in translation.

No wonder Khrais, (2017) states that "A good literary prose translation shows that language has not only a communicative purpose but also societal and cultural flavors that distinguish the Source Text. The translator cannot

escape the complexities of differences between cultures (80). Khrais, citing (Walter Benjamin, 1968) sees "cultural difference," a problematic issue in translation, as "the irresolution, or liminality, of 'translation,' the element of resistance in the process of transformation, that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation" (75).

However, the good news is that the irresolution of cultural differences is minimal, especially when the two cultures in question are closely related as in the case of Igbo and Yoruba. This does not mean that Igbo culture is the same as Yoruba culture, but rather that they are close in terms of cosmology, worldview, and belief in the ancestors with some cultural practices. As highlighted in *Things*, there is a case of a taboo among the Igbo where "children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits," (*Things*, 7). Also, "A snake was never called by its name at night because it would hear. It is called a string." The bottom line here is that this same taboo exists verbatim in Yoruba cultural milieu.

Therefore, the society where Achebe drew inspiration from is not far from the same practice within the Yoruba society, where Ogunyemi drew his translation prowess. Except for a few linguistic lexicons peculiar to the Igbo language, to someone very groomed and well versed in Yoruba language and cultural practices, the translation of *Things* in Yoruba would pass for a Yoruba text exactly, because the rendition flows smoothly like Yoruba text in its absolute.

### **The Challenge in translating Proverbs and Idioms**

From the samples above, a translator faces a challenge on how to better render the imports of those proverbs when translating using a within-to-without approach. However, a retrieval might not confront such a challenge because the approach is a within-to-within. In other words, it is very possible to admit a translator as a traitor since the approach used is a within-to-without this is because rendering African proverbs in translation has the tendency to be explained especially when such proverbs do not have equivalent in English or other European languages. An African language is not mutually intelligible with a European language. This attests to the assertion that a within-to-within approach if employed in translating an African language to another African language as opposed to a within-to-without approach that translates an African language into a European language. In other words, Isola's argument sees a within-to-within approach as language retrieval, rather than as a translation *per se*. However, retrieval as in the case of *Things* and *Ìgbésí* does not face this challenge of having to explain a proverb or an anecdote in the TT

because both languages and cultures share some peculiarities and as a result, the proverbs and idioms have the same semantic imports in both cultures.

The inevitable challenges faced in translating proverbs is a double “transposition” process. (Bandia, 1993:54). Looking through the lens of within-to-within, it might be less herculean compared to within-to-without approach. However, either of the approaches has some level of challenges, Pamela Smith emphasizes, when supporting the view that a within-to-without approach has some challenges, that African writers navigate a multifaceted, multilayered linguistic chats of their mother tongue and straddle the fences of their own familiar indigenous tongue and tradition and the alien, learned tongue of the master (Smith, 2001:750).

### Conclusion

Translators might have been perceived as traitors; it is important to note that it is not on all occasions. Rather it depends on the approach employed. Either a within-to-within or a within-to-without approach. A within-to-within approach favors retrieval as Isola argues and can result in minimal challenges during a translation process. Hence, it is important to advocate for the retrieval of more African literary text written in African languages. For instance, an Akan literary text can be retrieved in Ewe, a Kinyarwanda text be retrieved in Swahili, and so on.

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