

PROVERBS, AND NARRATIVE AGENCY: A CHILDCENTRIC READING OF THINGS FALL APART IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study examines how proverbs function as sites of making new meanings and how children exercise narrative agency in interpreting them in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, while also considering their transformation and availability to children's use and interpretations in the digital age.

PROBLEM STATEMENT: Existing scholarship often views proverbs as fixed forms of adult-controlled wisdom, overlooking children's interpretive agency and the influence of digital culture on proverb reinterpretation. This study therefore proposes a child centric framework that reconceptualizes proverbs as dynamic spaces where children actively reconstruct meaning within both literary and digital contexts.

METHODOLOGY: The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytic approach grounded in a theoretical framework that combines child centric criticism and narratology. It employs close textual analysis of selected proverbs in the novel, alongside a comparative analysis of digital cultural practices such as memes, social media discourse, and digital storytelling.

FINDINGS: Findings reveal that although proverbs in the novel are primarily voiced by adults, their meanings are not fixed but open to reinterpretation. Children, as characters and implied readers, actively engage with and reshape these meanings to negotiate identity and authority. In digital spaces, this interpretive flexibility is amplified as youth remix and circulate proverbs, decentralizing traditional authority.

CONCLUSION: This study concludes that proverbs are dynamic, evolving forms of knowledge shaped through interaction and reinterpretation. It recommends that literary criticism and educational practices adopt child centric approaches that recognize children as active interpreters of culture.

RECOMMENDATION: The study recommends that literary scholarship and educational practice adopt child centric approaches that recognize children and youth as active interpreters of proverbial discourse, particularly in digital spaces where meanings are continually reshaped and renegotiated.

Keywords: *Narrative Agency, Proverbs, Childcentric Criticism, Digital Culture, Things Fall Apart.*

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs occupy a central place in African expressive cultures, functioning not merely as aesthetic devices but as repositories of communal memory, values, and social knowledge. According to Ruth Finnegan (2012), proverbs are “a particularly rich and flexible form of oral expression” (p. 393) whose meanings emerge through context, performance, and social interaction. In African literary studies, however, proverbs have largely been treated as stable expressions of communal wisdom articulated through adult and patriarchal authority. Such approaches emphasize their didactic and cultural functions while overlooking the interpretive role of audiences, particularly children. This oversight is significant because proverbial meaning is neither fixed nor universally controlled by adults. Proverbs acquire meaning through use, interpretation, and social interaction. Yet children are frequently positioned in literary criticism as passive recipients of inherited knowledge rather than active interpreters capable of negotiating, reshaping, or contesting cultural meanings. Although scholarship on *Things Fall Apart* has extensively examined Achebe’s use of proverbs as markers of Igbo worldview and cultural authenticity, limited attention has been paid to how children, both within the narrative and as implied readers, engage with and reinterpret proverbial discourse. This study addresses that gap by offering a childcentric reading of proverbs in the novel, foregrounding children’s narrative and interpretive agency.

The study is grounded in Childhood Studies, particularly the argument by James and Prout (1997) that children are active participants in the construction of social meaning rather than passive subjects of adult culture. This perspective is complemented by dialogic narratology derived from Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), whose conception of language as dialogic emphasizes that meaning is produced through interaction and reinterpretation. Within this framework, proverbs are understood not as static cultural artefacts but as dialogic utterances open to re-accentuation by different audiences, including children. The study further situates these interpretive processes within contemporary digital culture through Walter J. Ong’s (1982) concept of secondary orality, which explains how oral forms persist and evolve within technologically mediated environments.

The digital age has transformed the circulation and interpretation of cultural forms. Social media, memes, and digital storytelling encourage remixing, participation, and reinterpretation, enabling younger users to appropriate traditional expressions for contemporary purposes (boyd, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Proverbs are therefore no longer confined to oral performance or literary representation. They increasingly function within interactive digital spaces where

authority becomes decentralized and meanings remain fluid. These developments make it necessary to reconsider proverbial discourse not as fixed cultural inheritance but as an evolving site of participatory meaning-making.

It is within this context that this study re-examines *Things Fall Apart* to deconstruct the previous scholarship that has emphasized the novel's proverbs as carriers of adultcentric communal wisdom and cultural continuity. This article argues that the meanings of proverbs remain open, contested, and context-dependent. Through a child centric approach, the study demonstrates how children, as characters and implied readers, engage with, reinterpret, and potentially transform proverbial meanings. By connecting literary analysis with contemporary digital practices, the study contributes to African literary and Childhood Studies by reconceptualizing proverbs as dynamic and participatory forms of cultural knowledge rather than fixed expressions of adult authority.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Scholarship on proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* has largely emphasized their role as repositories of communal wisdom, cultural continuity, and social authority within Igbo society. Studies by Finnegan (2012) and Norrick (1985), for instance, predominantly approach proverbs as stable and culturally sanctioned expressions articulated through adult, particularly patriarchal voices. While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding the cultural and aesthetic functions of proverbs, they often privilege adult authority and treat proverbial meaning as relatively fixed and uncontested. This dominant scholarly orientation has resulted in limited attention being paid to children's interpretive roles within proverbial discourse. Children are hardly viewed as active participants capable of interpreting, negotiating, questioning, or reshaping meaning. Consequently, insufficient scholarship exists on how children, both as characters within the narrative and as implied readers, engage with proverbs as dynamic forms open to multiple interpretations. This creates a significant childcentric gap in the study of proverbial discourse in the novel. In addition, existing studies have not adequately examined how the digital age reconfigures the circulation and interpretation of proverbs among contemporary youth. Social media platforms, memes, and digital storytelling have transformed cultural communication into increasingly participatory and decentralized practices in which meanings are constantly remixed and redistributed. Within these digital environments, young people actively appropriate and reinterpret traditional expressions to reflect contemporary realities. However, scholarship on *Things Fall Apart* has rarely connected proverbial discourse in the novel to these evolving digital practices. This study addresses these gaps by developing

a childcentric framework that reconceptualizes proverbs not as fixed expressions of adult authority but as dynamic and dialogic sites of making new meanings. By foregrounding children's narrative and interpretive agency and linking literary analysis to contemporary digital practices, the study provides a more inclusive understanding of how proverbial knowledge is produced, negotiated, and transformed across generations and media.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

The general objective of this study is to examine how proverbs function as dynamic sites of interpretation and how children exercise narrative and interpretive agency in engaging with them in the digital age in *Things Fall Apart*.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine how proverbs function as sites of narrative reconstruction in *Things Fall Apart* beyond their conventional role as fixed expressions of communal wisdom.
2. To analyse how children, as characters and implied readers, exercise interpretive and narrative agency in engaging with and reinterpreting proverbs in the text.
3. To explore how the digital age reconfigures the use and interpretation of proverbs among contemporary youth through platforms such as social media, memes, and digital storytelling.

Research Questions

1. How do proverbs function as sites of narrative reconstruction in *Things Fall Apart* beyond their conventional role as fixed expressions of communal wisdom?
2. In what ways do children, as characters and implied readers, exercise interpretive and narrative agency in engaging with and reinterpreting proverbs in the text?
3. How does the digital age reconfigure the use and interpretation of proverbs among contemporary youth through social media, memes, and digital storytelling?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Childhood Studies (James and Prout, 1997), Dialogic Narratology (Bakhtin, 1981), and Orality and Digital Media Theory (Ong, 1982). The integration of these frameworks is necessary because the study examines proverbs not only as literary and cultural forms but also as dynamic sites of interpretation through which children exercise narrative agency within both textual and digital environments. The combined frameworks therefore enable the study to interrogate the relationship among proverbs, meaning-making, childhood agency, and digital reinterpretation in *Things Fall Apart*.

Childhood Studies challenge traditional developmental approaches that position children as incomplete adults or passive recipients of culture. James and Prout (1997) argue that children are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives” (James & Prout, 1997, p. 8). This argument fundamentally alters the epistemological status of the child by recognizing children as social actors capable of producing meaning, negotiating identity, and influencing cultural practices. This framework is particularly relevant to the present study because scholarship on proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* has traditionally emphasized adult authority and communal wisdom while paying little attention to children’s interpretive agency. Through a childcentric lens, proverbs cease to function merely as fixed moral statements transmitted from adults to children. Instead, they become dialogic cultural forms whose meanings may be negotiated, resisted, or reinterpreted by younger subjects within and beyond the text. Spyrou (2018) further complicates romanticized assumptions about childhood innocence by arguing that children’s voices are always mediated by social, cultural, and political processes of the time.

The Childhood Studies perspective allowed this study to analyze how children in literary and digital spaces negotiate proverbial meanings within structures of authority while still exercising agency. It further demonstrates how children engage with proverbs not merely as inherited truths, but as flexible forms open to reinterpretation and narrative reconstruction.

Also, the concept of Dialogic Narratology (Bakhtin, 1981) argues that language is inherently dialogic, meaning that utterances derive significance through interaction among speakers, audiences, contexts, and prior discourses. His assertion that “the word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293) highlights the relational and contested nature of meaning. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of proverbs, which are often regarded as fixed and culturally authoritative expressions. From a dialogic standpoint, however, proverbs are not stable containers of universal truth but dynamic utterances whose meanings shift according to context, interpretation, and ideological positioning. In *Things Fall Apart*, proverbs function as important communicative tools that mediate authority, identity, and social relations within Igbo society. Yet the dialogic approach demonstrates that such proverbs remain open to re-accentuation by different interpreters, including children. This framework therefore enables the study to examine how younger subjects may generate alternative meanings that challenge assumptions of unified or fixed cultural interpretation. Herman (2013) further reconceptualises narrative as a cognitive and interpretive process rather than merely a structural form. Herman argues that narratives are “tools for thinking” (2013, p. 3), emphasizing the active role of

readers and audiences in meaning production. This perspective broadens the concept of narrative agency beyond storytelling itself to include interpretive engagement.

Applied to this study, these framework supports the argument that children exercise narrative agency through interpretation. Children are not only consumers of proverbs within narrative structures but also active participants in reconstructing meaning. Their interpretive engagement transforms proverbs into sites of negotiation rather than fixed repositories of communal wisdom. Dialogic Narratology therefore provides the conceptual basis for understanding proverbs as flexible and contested forms whose meanings are continually reshaped through interaction, interpretation, and narrative participation.

The third theoretical component of the study derives from Orality and Digital Media Theory, (Ong, 1982). Ong's concept of "secondary orality" explains how technologically mediated communication reproduces certain characteristics of oral culture, including participation, immediacy, communal interaction, and fluidity of meaning. According to Ong (1982), this "new orality has striking resemblances to the old" (p. 136), despite emerging within electronic and digital environments. Proverbs therefore, originate within oral traditions yet continue to evolve within digital culture. Social media platforms, memes, online storytelling, and digital conversations have created new spaces where traditional expressions are remixed, circulated, and reinterpreted. Proverbs in digital environments no longer function solely as inherited communal truths; they become participatory cultural resources continually reshaped by users. boyd (2014) further argues that networked publics are characterised by persistence, scalability, replicability, and searchability, features that transform how meaning circulates in digital spaces. Similarly, Shifman (2014) demonstrates that memes thrive through remixing, imitation, and reinterpretation, enabling users to actively participate in cultural production. These insights are particularly relevant because younger users dominate many digital spaces and frequently adapt traditional expressions to reflect contemporary realities. Proverbs are therefore no longer confined to oral performance or literary representation; they increasingly operate within participatory digital cultures where meanings are unstable, collaborative, and constantly evolving. Therefore, the young users can reinterpret and redistribute proverbs in ways that challenge traditional adult-centered authority.

In conclusion, the integration of Childhood Studies, Dialogic Narratology, and Orality and Digital Media Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing proverbs as dynamic sites of meaning-making in *Things Fall Apart*. Childhood Studies foregrounds children as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of cultural knowledge. Dialogic Narratology explains how proverbial meanings remain fluid, relational, and open to reinterpretation. Orality

and Digital Media Theory situates these interpretive processes within contemporary participatory environments where meanings circulate across literary and digital spaces. Collectively, these frameworks allowed the study to reconceptualise proverbs not as fixed expressions of communal authority but as evolving and contested forms shaped through interaction, reinterpretation, and narrative participation. The triangulated framework therefore supports the study's central argument that children exercise interpretive and narrative agency by engaging with, transforming, and redistributing proverbial meanings across generations, contexts, and media.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in literary analysis, narrative inquiry, and digital culture studies. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining meaning-making, interpretation, and cultural representation because it enables researchers to explore how meanings are socially and contextually constructed (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). The study employed a descriptive-analytic and interpretive research design informed by Dialogic Narratology, and Digital Media Theory. Narrative inquiry was especially relevant because it facilitates the exploration of how stories, utterances, and cultural expressions shape identity, interpretation, and social relations across contexts (McKibben & Breheny, 2023; Finlay & dela Cruz, 2023). The primary text, *Things Fall Apart*, was purposively selected due to its extensive use of proverbs and its significance in African literary studies as a representation of Igbo cultural philosophy, authority, and communal relations.

Data were collected through close textual reading and purposive sampling of proverbs, dialogic exchanges, and scenes involving children or child-oriented interpretive possibilities. The study also incorporated selected digital materials, including online discussions, memes, and social media reinterpretations, as supplementary interpretive contexts illustrating how proverbs continue to circulate within participatory digital culture. The analysis employed thematic narrative analysis and dialogic textual analysis to examine how meanings emerge through interaction, context, and competing interpretive voices. Recent qualitative scholarship emphasizes that narrative inquiry and reflexive interpretation are essential in understanding how meaning is continuously negotiated within cultural and narrative practices (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Smith & Luke, 2023). To ensure analytical rigour, the study employed theoretical triangulation, reflexive interpretation, and thick textual description. These approaches strengthened interpretive depth while ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in textual evidence and contextual sensitivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews key scholarly engagements with proverbs, narrative agency, childhood, and digital discourse in order to situate the present study within existing debates. While considerable work has been done on African proverbs and Achebe's use of them in *Things Fall Apart*, less attention has been given to how these proverbial forms may be reinterpreted through a childcentric lens, particularly within the digital age.

Scholarly work on African proverbs has traditionally considered their role as repositories of communal knowledge and moral instruction. Finnegan (2012) argues that proverbs function as "condensed expressions of collective experience" (p. 393), emphasising their performative and contextual nature within oral traditions. Similarly, Norrick (1985) examines the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of proverbs, demonstrating how meaning emerges through usage and shared cultural understanding. Within African literary criticism, such perspectives have been applied to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where proverbs are often read as stabilising forces that reinforce communal values and social hierarchy. However, this line of scholarship only privileges adult speakers and communal authority, thereby overlooking the interpretive role of marginalised audiences, including children. Proverbs are thus treated as relatively stable carriers of tradition rather than contested or reinterpreted forms of discourse. The present study builds on Finnegan's emphasis on contextual flexibility but shifts the analytical focus toward children as active interpreters, thereby reconceptualising proverbs as dialogic and participatory rather than purely authoritative.

Critical engagements with *Things Fall Apart* have consistently highlighted the centrality of proverbs as beautification of communication. Achebe (1958) famously describes proverbs as "the palm oil with which words are eaten" (p. 5), underscoring their role in mediating and embellishing traditional communication and cultural meaning. Building on this, scholars such as Killam (1969) and Irele (2001) interpret Achebe's use of proverbs as a strategy for authenticating Igbo culture and resisting colonial misrepresentation. Proverbs, in this sense, function as markers of indigenous epistemology and narrative authority. These readings largely focus on the adult male voices that articulate proverbs within the text, particularly figures like Obierika. As a result, they marginalise alternative interpretive positions, including those of children and younger audiences. This study extends Achebe's scholarship by interrogating not only who speaks proverbs but also who interprets them, thereby shifting attention from authorial and character-based authority to readerly and audience-based agency.

The emergence of Childhood Studies has significantly transformed understandings of children's roles in cultural and social processes. James & Prout (1997) argue that childhood is a socially constructed category and that children are active participants in shaping their own experiences. Building on this, Spyrou (2018) critiques simplistic notions of children's voice, emphasising that such voices are always mediated by broader socio-cultural forces. Complementing these perspectives, Watson (2010) underscores the importance of recognising children as meaning-makers whose interpretations are situated and relational. However, much of this scholarship has focused on sociological and ethnographic contexts, with limited application to literary analysis, particularly within African texts. The present study applies Childhood Studies frameworks to the interpretation of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*, thereby demonstrating how children's agency can be theorised within literary discourse.

Narratological approaches provide further insight into how meaning is constructed and negotiated within texts. Bakhtin (1981) conceptualises language as dialogic, arguing that all utterances are shaped by prior discourse and open to reinterpretation. Herman (2013) extends this idea by framing narratives as cognitive tools that enable readers to actively construct meaning. While these theories have been widely applied in literary studies, their potential for childcentric analysis remains underexplored. Most narratological readings of *Things Fall Apart* focus on narrative structure, voice, and thematic development without explicitly considering how different audiences particularly children engage with the text. This study, conversely, integrates dialogic narratology with Childhood Studies, thereby foregrounding children as active participants in reconstruction of meaning in narratives.

The relationship between orality and literacy has been central to understanding African literary forms. Ong (1982) introduces the concept of "secondary orality" to describe how oral modes of communication persist within literate and technological contexts. Finnegan (2012) similarly highlights the adaptability of oral forms, including proverbs, across different media. However, earlier scholarship on orality tends to focus on the transition from oral to written forms, with less attention to contemporary digital environments. In this study Ong's framework is extended by examining how proverbs are recontextualised within digital platforms, thereby demonstrating the continuity and transformation of oral traditions in the digital age.

Recent scholarship on digital media emphasises the participatory nature of contemporary communication. Couldry (2012) argues that digital media reconfigures the relationship between producers and consumers of content, while Page (2018) highlights the co-constructed nature of digital narratives. Similarly, boyd (2014) identifies key features of networked publics, including persistence and replicability, which shape how cultural forms circulate. Shifman

(2014) further explores the role of memes as units of cultural transmission that rely on remixing and reinterpretation. While these studies provide valuable insights into digital culture, they rarely engage with traditional forms such as proverbs or consider how children interact with them. This study addresses how proverbs are adapted and circulated in digital spaces, particularly by younger users, thereby linking traditional oral forms with contemporary participatory practices.

Scholars such as Isidore Okpewho (1992) have emphasised the aesthetic and functional dimensions of African oral traditions, including proverbs. Okpewho argues that oral forms are inherently flexible and derive meaning from performance and context. This perspective aligns with Finnegan's (2012) emphasis on variability and adaptability. However, like earlier scholarship, Okpewho's work primarily focuses on performance contexts dominated by adult participants, with limited attention to younger audiences. The present study builds on Okpewho's insights by extending the concept of interpretive flexibility to include children's engagements, both within the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* and in contemporary digital contexts.

Reader-response theory offers another useful lens for understanding interpretive agency. Iser (1978) introduces the concept of the "implied reader," suggesting that texts are structured to invite particular forms of engagement. Fish (1980) further argues that meaning is produced within interpretive communities rather than residing solely in the text. While these theories highlight the active role of readers, they do not explicitly address age as a factor in interpretation. Consequently, the specific ways in which children engage with texts remain underexplored. This study extends reader-response theory by foregrounding the child as an implied reader, thereby demonstrating how age and developmental positioning can shape narrative interpretation.

Across these scholarly traditions, a common pattern that emerges is that proverbs are widely recognised as dynamic and context-dependent, and narrative meaning is understood as dialogic and participatory. However, there remains a significant gap in the integration of these insights with childcentric perspectives, particularly within African literary studies. Existing scholarship tends to privilege adult voices, overlook children's interpretive agency, and neglect the impact of digital media on the transmission and transformation of proverbs. This study addresses these gaps by synthesising Childhood Studies, narratology, and digital media theory to produce a childcentric reading of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*. It advances the argument that children are not passive recipients of cultural knowledge but active participants in its interpretation and transformation. By situating this analysis within the digital age, the study further demonstrates

how contemporary communicative environments amplify children's narrative agency, thereby contributing to ongoing debates in African literary studies, Childhood Studies, and digital humanities.

RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the three research objectives. The analysis examines how proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* function beyond their conventional understanding as fixed expressions of communal wisdom and instead emerge as dialogic, contested, and reconstructive forms of discourse. Guided by Childhood Studies, Dialogic Narratology, and Digital Media Theory, the discussion explores how proverbial meanings are negotiated within structures of authority and how children exercise interpretive agency through silence, emotional response, resistance, and reinterpretation. The section corresponds to the objectives of the study. The first part analyses proverbs as sites of narrative reconstruction and semantic openness. The second examines how children, particularly Nwoye and implied child readers, engage critically with proverbial discourse and challenge dominant cultural meanings. The final part explores how contemporary digital culture reconfigures the use and interpretation of proverbs among youth through social media, memes, and digital storytelling practices. Together, the findings demonstrate that proverbs are not static cultural artefacts but dynamic communicative forms whose meanings continue to evolve across literary and digital environments.

Proverbs as Sites of Narrative Reconstruction

The study found that proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* function not as fixed repositories of communal wisdom but as dialogic and semantically flexible utterances open to reinterpretation. Although proverbial discourse in the novel is primarily controlled by adult male figures such as Okonkwo and other elders, the findings demonstrate that the meanings of proverbs remain unstable and dependent on context, experience, and interpretation. Achebe's assertion that "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 1958, p. 7) initially presents proverbs as authoritative communicative tools within Igbo society. However, the metaphor of "palm-oil" simultaneously suggests mediation rather than closure, implying that proverbs facilitate discourse without permanently fixing meaning.

This observation aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) argument that language remains dialogic and gains meaning through interaction and reinterpretation. Similarly, proverbs such as "Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them" (Achebe, 1958, p. 8) and "A man who pays respect to the great paves the

way for his own greatness” (p. 19) appear to reinforce communal hierarchies, obedience, and seniority as conditions for success. Yet their meanings remain ideologically unstable because they simultaneously expose the unequal structures within which recognition and advancement are negotiated. As Ruth Finnegan (2012) observes, proverbs are not static truths but socially situated utterances whose meanings shift according to context and audience.

The analysis further revealed that specific proverbs generate interpretive tensions that allow alternative readings to emerge. For instance, the proverb “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (Achebe, 1958, p. 8) appears to affirm meritocratic mobility and social advancement. However, from a child centric perspective, the proverb also constructs inclusion as conditional upon conformity to adult expectations and established authority. Likewise, the proverb “When a man says yes his chi says yes also” (Achebe, 1958, p. 27) outwardly celebrates self-determination and personal agency, particularly through Okonkwo’s rise from poverty to prominence.

Nevertheless, the study found that the proverb becomes ethically unstable when interpreted within contexts of violence, emotional repression, and hypermasculinity. Okonkwo’s rigid adherence to such proverbial logic contributes to actions such as the killing of Ikemefuna, thereby exposing how cultural wisdom may legitimize harmful forms of masculinity. Similarly, the aphoristic statement, “Looking at a king’s mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast” (Achebe, 1958, p. 26), appears to naturalize male authority while concealing the vulnerability and dependency underlying patriarchal power. From a child centric and dialogic perspective, these proverbs reveal that proverbial discourse in the novel simultaneously empowers, regulates, and silences younger subjects. However, the study established that such authority is never absolute because narrative tension, emotional response, and silence create spaces for reinterpretation and resistance. Proverbs consequently emerge as contested discursive sites where authority, morality, masculinity, and identity are continuously negotiated rather than universally accepted (Bakhtin, 1981; Finnegan, 2012).

Children’s Interpretive and Narrative Agency

The study found that children in the novel exercise interpretive agency even though they rarely participate directly in proverbial speech. While proverbial authority is monopolised by adults within the patriarchal and gerontocratic structures of *Things Fall Apart*, children engage with these utterances critically through emotional response, ethical evaluation, silence, and resistance. The findings demonstrate that child agency in the text is therefore located less in

speech production and more in interpretation and moral negotiation. Nwoye particularly emerges as a central figure through whom the instability of proverbial authority is exposed. Achebe repeatedly demonstrates that proverbs function not merely as repositories of communal wisdom but also as ideological instruments through which authority, masculinity, age, and social conformity are enforced. For example, the proverb, “The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did” (Achebe, 1958, p. 21), initially celebrates self-validation and masculine accomplishment. Within Umuofia’s patriarchal order, such proverbial logic legitimizes self-assertion, competitiveness, and heroic individualism, qualities embodied in Okonkwo. However, from a child centric perspective, the proverb simultaneously exposes the burden placed upon younger generations to internalize adult standards of success without questioning their ethical implications. Nwoye’s gradual alienation from his father suggests resistance to this culture of self-glorifying masculinity. The proverb therefore becomes dialogic rather than fixed, generating meanings that exceed adult intentions.

Similarly, the proverb, “Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching” (Achebe, 1958, p. 22), reflects adaptation as a survival strategy within oppressive conditions. Although uttered within communal discourse, its implications illuminate Nwoye’s psychological and interpretive transformation. Faced with a violent social environment in which sensitivity is feminized and punished, Nwoye develops inward forms of resistance through silence, emotional withdrawal, and eventual religious conversion. His interpretive agency resembles Eneke’s adaptive flight. He learns to survive by distancing himself from the rigid ideological structures represented by his father and clan. The proverb thus acquires subversive significance when read through the consciousness of the child.

The proverb, “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break” (Achebe, 1958, p. 20), outwardly advocates coexistence and communal tolerance. Yet the study found a profound contradiction between such proverbial ideals and the actual treatment of vulnerable subjects within the clan, particularly children. The killing of Ikemefuna demonstrates the collapse of this ethic of coexistence, since the community refuses symbolic space for emotional difference, compassion, or youthful vulnerability. Nwoye’s trauma after Ikemefuna’s death exposes the inconsistency between communal wisdom and communal practice. Consequently, the proverb becomes ironic: while Umuofia verbally promotes mutual coexistence, the same Umuofia violently suppresses alternative emotional and ethical positions. Similarly, “An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a

proverb” (Achebe, 1958, p. 21), illustrates the anxiety produced by implied guilt and historical memory. Although directed at adults, the proverb also illuminates the atmosphere of fear and psychological surveillance surrounding children in the text. Young characters learn that proverbial speech often contains hidden accusations and moral expectations that regulate behavior indirectly. Nwoye’s interpretive unease therefore emerges not only from physical violence but also from the symbolic power of language itself. Proverbs become disciplinary tools that produce conformity while silencing dissenting emotional responses.

The maternal proverbs in the novel further complicate patriarchal authority and open interpretive space for children. Uchendu’s declaration that “A child cannot pay for its mother’s milk” and “Mother is supreme” (Achebe, 1958, p. 117) introduces an alternative moral framework grounded in nurture, interdependence, and emotional care rather than aggression and masculine achievement. These proverbs destabilise Okonkwo’s hypermasculine worldview by foregrounding maternal ethics as the foundation of human survival. Significantly, Nwoye gravitates toward precisely these neglected values of tenderness and emotional belonging. The findings therefore suggest that children selectively interpret communal wisdom rather than absorbing it uniformly. Through this selective interpretation, Nwoye constructs an ethical position that contests dominant patriarchal ideology from within the cultural system itself. “Living fire begets cold, impotent ash” (Achebe, 1958, p. 153), further reveals the intergenerational tensions surrounding masculine inheritance. Okonkwo uses this proverbial logic to condemn Nwoye’s perceived weakness and failure to reproduce patriarchal ideals. Yet the proverb ironically exposes the instability of inherited authority because Nwoye’s refusal to replicate his father’s violence signifies not impotence but ethical divergence. From a child centric perspective, Nwoye’s transformation challenges the assumption that children exist merely as extensions of parental identity. Instead, Achebe presents the child as an autonomous interpretive subject capable of rejecting inherited ideological “fire” in favor of alternative moral futures.

The analysis therefore revealed that moments such as the killing of Ikemefuna produce an epistemological rupture in Nwoye’s understanding of cultural wisdom. Proverbs and communal logic that equate masculinity with strength and emotional detachment become ethically questionable when confronted with violence and suffering. Achebe’s statement that “something seemed to give way inside him” (Achebe, 1958, p. 61) illustrates the collapse of unquestioned belief in inherited proverbial logic. This study therefore found that Nwoye’s silence operates as a form of dissent and interpretive resistance rather than passivity. Furthermore, the absence of children’s direct proverbial speech may itself be understood as a

form of disnarration that creates interpretive space for readers, particularly child readers, to imagine alternative meanings and suppressed perspectives. The findings consequently demonstrate that children in the text are not passive recipients of communal wisdom but active interpreters capable of questioning, resisting, and re-signifying authoritative discourse.

Digital Reconfiguration of Proverbs among Contemporary Youth

The study further found that the dialogic and flexible nature of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* anticipates their contemporary transformation within digital culture. Proverbs no longer operate exclusively within oral and literary traditions but circulate dynamically through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, memes, status updates, short-form videos, and digital storytelling practices. In these spaces, young users actively reinterpret, remix, parody, and redistribute proverbial discourse according to contemporary social realities. The findings demonstrate that digital culture intensifies the participatory and dialogic qualities already embedded within proverbs by allowing meanings to be collaboratively negotiated across multiple users, audiences, and contexts.

Achebe's proverb, "A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride" (Achebe, 1958, p. 26), for instance, acquires renewed significance within contemporary digital youth culture. On social media platforms, young people frequently deploy analogous expressions to construct resilient online identities despite economic hardship, academic failure, or social instability. Motivational captions, TikTok voiceovers, and WhatsApp status updates often transform such proverbial logic into performances of emotional survival and self-fashioning. Yet digital contexts also ironize the proverb by exposing the fragility hidden beneath performative confidence. What appears as pride may conceal anxiety, unemployment, or social precarity. Consequently, the proverb's meaning shifts from communal wisdom about endurance to a critique of curated digital selfhood and aspirational identity formation.

Similarly, the proverb, "Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life" (Achebe, 1958, p. 10), resonates strongly within contemporary digital environments characterized by surveillance, social pressure, and political anxiety. Youth frequently invoke comparable proverbial logic online to comment indirectly on corruption, police brutality, economic hardship, or political instability. Memes and coded humorous posts on TikTok and Facebook often function like traditional proverbs by communicating danger indirectly through symbolism and irony. Just as proverbial speech in Umuofia encoded communal anxieties without explicit confrontation, digital youth discourse

frequently employs metaphor, satire, and ambiguity to evade censorship while expressing dissent. The proverb therefore demonstrates continuity between oral indirectness and digital modes of coded communication.

Proverb further illuminates the collective nature of identity and consequence within both communal and digital spaces. “If one finger brought oil it soiled the others” (Achebe, 1958, p. 112), for example, emphasizes how individual actions affect the wider clan. Within digital culture, however, the proverb may be recontextualized to critique cancel culture, online shaming, or the viral spread of scandal. A single controversial post, leaked video, or political statement by one individual frequently implicates broader communities, families, institutions, or ethnic groups through digital association. Contemporary youth therefore reinterpret the proverb not merely as a moral warning but also as commentary on the interconnectedness and volatility of online social networks. The findings consequently suggest that digital environments extend rather than erase the communal logic embedded within traditional proverbial discourse.

The study also found that the proverb, “A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches” (Achebe, 1958, p. 66), acquires complex meanings when circulated within youth-oriented digital platforms. Traditionally, the proverb validates early recognition of future greatness, leadership, or masculinity. In digital culture, however, young people often appropriate similar expressions to celebrate emerging talent in music, activism, sports, fashion, or online influencing. Viral TikTok videos, for example, frequently frame talented children or adolescents as future stars whose promise is already visible. At the same time, the proverb may also be used critically to interrogate social expectations imposed upon children at an early age. The digital reinterpretation therefore exposes tensions between celebration and pressure, individuality and performance, aspiration and commodification. Achebe’s metaphorical assertion that “The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another” (Achebe, 1958, p. 125) similarly anticipates the adaptive resilience of digital communities. In the novel, the proverb reflects the regenerative capacity of Umuofia despite moments of crisis and loss. Within digital culture, youth communities likewise demonstrate remarkable adaptability. Online trends, hashtags, meme cultures, and virtual solidarities constantly evolve even after censorship, platform restrictions, or social disruption. When one online community collapses, another rapidly emerges through new hashtags, accounts, or applications. The proverb therefore acquires contemporary relevance as a metaphor for digital resilience and the regenerative character of participatory online cultures.

Most significantly, the proverb-like lament, “He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe, 1958, p. 176), provides a powerful framework for understanding both colonial disruption in the novel and fragmentation within contemporary digital societies. In Achebe’s narrative, the statement captures the disintegration of communal bonds under colonial intervention and ideological division. In digital contexts, contemporary youth often invoke analogous sentiments to critique the erosion of social cohesion through misinformation, political polarization, cyberbullying, generational conflict, and algorithm-driven isolation. WhatsApp misinformation chains, divisive TikTok political content, and polarized Facebook debates frequently intensify fragmentation rather than solidarity. Yet digital culture simultaneously creates new forms of belonging and collective identity among youth across geographical and cultural boundaries. Thus, the proverb speaks not only to loss but also to the continual reconstruction of community under changing historical conditions.

The proverb, “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings,” also acquires new meanings when recontextualized in digital spaces. Contemporary youth may deploy it ironically to critique inequality, educational exclusion, nepotism, or generational privilege rather than simply affirm meritocratic success. Viral online discussions frequently expose how structural inequalities complicate traditional narratives of individual hard work and upward mobility. The study therefore established that digital platforms transform proverbs from stable moral statements into dynamic communicative resources used for humor, critique, resistance, activism, and self-expression. Unlike the children in Achebe’s narrative who remain largely excluded from authoritative speech, digital environments allow contemporary youth to become active producers, performers, and disseminators of proverbial reinterpretation.

The findings thus support the argument that proverbs remain living cultural forms whose meanings continue to evolve through participatory digital practices. Achebe’s proverbs endure precisely because they are dialogic, adaptable, and open to reinterpretation across historical moments and communicative technologies. In both literary and digital contexts, younger audiences emerge as central agents in reconstructing, contesting, and sustaining proverbial discourse.

CONCLUSION, SIGNIFICANCE, AND REFLECTION

This study examined proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* beyond their conventional understanding as fixed expressions of communal wisdom. In relation to the first objective, the findings established that proverbs in the novel function as dialogic and contested sites of narrative reconstruction through which meanings are continually negotiated rather than permanently

stabilised. Achebe's proverbial discourse therefore operates not simply as cultural preservation but also as a space where authority, morality, gender, and communal identity are questioned and reinterpreted. Secondly, the study demonstrated that children exercise interpretive and narrative agency even when excluded from direct proverbial speech. Through emotional response, silence, ethical evaluation, resistance, and selective interpretation, child figures such as Nwoye expose the instability of adult-controlled proverbial authority. The study consequently challenged adult-centric assumptions that position children as passive recipients of communal wisdom by showing that they actively negotiate and re-signify inherited cultural meanings. Also, the study established that the dialogic flexibility of proverbs extends into contemporary digital culture. Platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook enable contemporary youth to remix, parody, reinterpret, and circulate proverbs in ways that connect oral tradition with digital participation. Proverbs in digital spaces therefore remain living cultural forms whose meanings are continuously reshaped through humor, critique, activism, and self-expression.

The significance of the study lies in its contribution to African literary criticism, childhood studies, and digital cultural scholarship. By foregrounding children as interpreters of proverbial discourse, the research introduces a child-centric perspective that expands existing approaches to African oral aesthetics and narrative analysis. The study also contributes methodologically by demonstrating the usefulness of integrating narratology, orality studies, and digital media analysis in the interpretation of literary texts.

Ultimately, this research makes three major contributions to scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes proverbs as flexible and negotiable narrative forms rather than static repositories of communal truth. Also, it centers children and young audiences as active interpreters capable of questioning and reconstructing cultural authority. Third, it bridges traditional oral forms with contemporary digital practices, demonstrating the continued relevance of proverbs within evolving communicative environments. Nevertheless, the study remains limited by its reliance on qualitative textual analysis and a single primary text, which restricts broader empirical generalization and suggests the need for further comparative and interdisciplinary research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings suggest several directions for future research.

1. Empirical investigations could explore how child readers interpret proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* and other African texts, using ethnographic, classroom-based, or digital discourse methods.

2. Comparative analyses across different African literary works could examine how proverbs function in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, determining whether the patterns identified in Achebe's text are unique or representative.
3. Research could also focus on digital adaptations of proverbs, analyzing how memes, hashtags, and viral storytelling reflect contemporary youth culture. Interdisciplinary studies examining the intersection of language, translation, and digital media would further illuminate how proverbs are reinterpreted across linguistic and cultural boundaries.
4. Finally, expanding the theoretical framework to incorporate perspectives from postcolonial theory, performance studies, or cognitive linguistics would deepen the analysis of proverbs as complex cultural and communicative forms.

Finally, this study demonstrates that proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* are not relics of a static past but living, evolving forms of expression that continue to generate meaning across contexts. Through a child centric lens, the research foregrounds the interpretive agency of young characters like Nwoye, whose moral reflection and critical distance reveal that understanding is not confined to adult voices. Narrative agency, therefore, is reimagined as a participatory and relational process, in which meaning emerges from the interplay between speaker, listener, and context.

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