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The Prophetic Statement in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Textual Comparison

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Abstract

Oedipus the King and *Things Fall Apart* show fundamental similarities. This essay explores these similarities in an attempt to give more of a formalist interpretation and a somewhat fresh insight into Achebe's path-breaking novel, anchored on his use of the prophetic statement. In drawing a comparison between the two texts, the paper is not seeking to engage in a "colonialist" or "neo-colonialist" critique. Rather, it employs the formalist approach to read Achebe's timeless masterpiece beyond its use as an anthropological text in certain quarters of the Western academy in order to situate the novel in the tradition of the best literary writing.

Key words: Formal critique; prophetic statement; fate; agency; proverbs; character; colonialism; cosmopolitanism

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Résumé

Cet article explore les similitudes que présentent Œdipe roi et Tout s'effondre dans une tentative d'offrir une interprétation formaliste et un éclairage nouveau sur le roman novateur d'Achebe fondées sur son utilisation de la déclaration prophétique. En dressant une comparaison entre les deux textes, l'article ne cherche pas à se livrer à une critique «colonialiste» ou «néo-colonialiste». Au contraire, il emploie une approche formaliste pour

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lire l'intemporel chef-d'œuvre d'Achebe au-delà de son utilisation en tant que texte anthropologique dans certains milieux académiques occidentaux afin de situer le roman dans la tradition des meilleurs œuvres littéraires.

Oedipus the King and *Things Fall Apart* show fundamental similarities. In this essay, I intend to explore these similarities in an attempt to give more of a formalist interpretation and a somewhat fresh insight into Achebe's path-breaking novel, anchored on his use of the proverb as a prophetic statement. In attempting to draw a comparison between the two texts, I am not, in the words of Charles Nnolim, trying to engage in "colonialist [or neocolonialist] criticism that thrives on finding 'masters' for African writers in Europe and America" (Nnolim, p. xiii). Rather, my intention is to demonstrate the "dialogue between African and European literature" without "ignoring the specific Africanness" (Booker, p. 7) of *Things Fall Apart*. As literary critics know, no literature is built from the scratch; rather, every literary work owes something to the ones, oral or written, that came before it. And this is particularly true of the African novel which, as Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike contend, is a "hybrid of the African oral tradition and the imported forms of Europe" (Chinweizu et al, p. 8). Furthermore, in using a strictly formalist approach to Achebe's timeless masterpiece in close juxtaposition to *Oedipus the King*, I hope to read the novel beyond its use as an anthropological text in certain quarters of the Western academy to open up new ways of discussing the novel, for example, Achebe's structural use of the proverb as an equivalent of the prophetic statement in classical Greek literature, in particular, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Though the two texts are set in different societies, one in ancient Greece, in Europe, and the other in the late nineteenth century in Igboland, in West Africa, they take up the same subject matter of the individual who, against the background of communal upheaval in which he is a principal actor, goes up against powerful forces that ultimately lead to his downfall. However, both writers amply demonstrate that the downfall of the protagonist is not

inevitable. Neither is the path leading to his downfall inviolable fate. As the late Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi aptly notes in the title of his adaptation of *Oedipus the King*, the gods are not to blame. Neither is fate to blame, as both protagonists are implicated in their misfortunes through flaws that set the stage for their tragic downfall as a result of their inability to successfully manage the flaws. The result is soul-stirring pathos suitable to the gravity of the subject matter. It is true that the two texts are set in different societies and that one is based on myth while the other is based on historical circumstances surrounding the Igbo encounter with British colonialism in the late nineteenth century but the character flaws that lead to the tragic downfall of the two protagonists are strikingly similar and connect the two texts in very powerful ways that greatly reward reading them together, a hermeneutic move that serves as a bridge between the two cultures from which the texts emerge and that throws into broad relief our commonality as human beings across geographies and cultures.

Both texts are tragedies that make a prophetic statement on the life of the protagonist at the outset of the stories of their protagonists, which then forms the basis for a very tightly controlled plot that unfolds through a structure of dramatic irony, as the protagonist takes actions to put a distance between him and the prophetic statement only to get increasingly entangled in it until he experiences a dramatic fulfillment of the prophecy in his life. In *Oedipus the King*, Apollo, through an oracle, declares to Laius, King of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta that the child that she is pregnant with will kill his father and marry his mother. To avert this fate, Laius and Jocasta give the child, Oedipus, to one of their shepherds with the instruction that it should be exposed to the elements to die. The shepherd takes pity on the child and gives the child to a fellow shepherd from Corinth, who in turn gives the child to Polybus and Merope, the childless king and queen of Corinth. They bring up the child as their own but taunted later in life at a party by a reveler that Polybus and Merope were not his actual parents Oedipus goes to find out the facts of his parentage from the oracle. Instead of answering his question, the oracle tells

him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Alarmed, Oedipus flees Corinth in order to thwart the fulfillment of the prophecy. In his flight, he meets a royal personage, Laius, his actual father, and his train at Phocis. For failing to get out of the way of the carriage in time, he gets a blow on the head from the staff of Laius. In anger, Oedipus kills the entire train except one man, the same shepherd who had spared his life when he was an infant. He has now fulfilled half of the prophecy. He proceeds from the site of the killing to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and frees Thebes from its evil grasp. In appreciation, the Thebans give him the widow of their dead king as wife. The entire prophecy is now fulfilled. Years later, another plague begins to lay the whole of Thebes to waste, which is actually where the plot begins. In a very tight unfolding of the plot, Oedipus is revealed as the culprit. In other words, the prophetic statement holds true for Oedipus in spite of all the measures that he had taken to flee from it.

From here forward, that is, from the beginning of the play, the plot is unfolded through a structure of dramatic irony through the brilliant dramaturgy of Sophocles, who turns Oedipus the killer into Oedipus the detective. As E. F. Watling notes, since the audience already know the story, its attention "was not primarily to be held by the factor of suspense," but for the playwright to use "that powerful and subtle weapon of 'dramatic irony'" (p. 12). What we thus have, as Franco Tonelli, writes is "a continuous process of loss: the dissolution of meaning into non-meaning, of identity into non-identity of transparency into non-transparency – in short to use Blanchot's expression, the decay of the absolute into non-presence" (p. 15). Tonelli's description of the shifting status of Oedipus in Sophocles' representation of him as the decay of the absolute into non-presence is an apt description of Achebe's representation of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, however, makes a significant alteration to the Sophoclean model: he does not make Okonkwo a detective. There is no need to do so because Okonkwo is not on the trail of any crime, but his use of the prophetic statement still bears a very close similarity to the use of the

Sophoclean prophetic statement and invests his story with as much dramatic power.

With Achebe, the oracular-cum-prophetic statement comes in the form of a proverb, that is, a wise saying that according to the online thesaurus "expresses effectively commonplace truth or useful thought." On Achebe's use of the proverb, Bernth Lindfors writes: "…Achebe's proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local color but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying" (p. 56). He goes on to add, "By studying Achebe's proverbs we are better able to interpret his novels" (p. 56). In fact, Kalu Ogbaa writes that proverbs "express the life and civilization of the [Igbo] people" (p. 112). The proverb as prophetic statement is uttered by the protagonist's own father, Unoka, not the oracle of a deity as in *Oedipus the King*. The narrator says: "He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime" (*Things Fall Apart*, pp. 3-4). Here, not eating what one had in one's lifetime means the inability of a person, when he is alive, to enjoy his material wealth or achievements. Unoka's statement can, of course, be also read as the attempt by him to justify his spendthrift habit. Achebe uses this pithy proverb as a commentary and prophetic statement on Okonkwo's life. Okonkwo will be incapable of enjoying his hard-won achievements because in the attempt to flee from the Unoka image he will be constantly overreaching himself, using his singular talents of strength, bravery, and derring-do to drive himself toward his own destruction, in his continual need to prove that he is not like his father. Therefore, what Achebe has done here is to foretell Okonkwo's fate in the same manner as the oracle foretold the fate of Oedipus before his birth. Achebe enhances the prophetic statement with a telling end of Okonkwo's life through a brief presentation of the end of the father. The narrator tells the reader that Unoka "died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess … He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die" (p. 13). In the fate of the father, Achebe spells out the fate of

the son. Okonkwo, one of the lords of Umuofia, will in the end suffer the fate of his father — die an ignoble death — and be carried off like his father to the Evil Forest in spite of all the attempts he makes in his lifetime to avoid the father's fate as one who ends up as a social outcast completely rejected by his community.

The adult Unoka's life was in a state of perpetual angst as a result of his debilitating laziness in a society that placed much store by hard work and this sets up his son's success as well as his son's tragic overreach and demise. Unoka was forever in debt and in the years before his death could not feed his family. Okonkwo's tragic turn begins in boyhood when he takes a flight from the image of the man that his father had become, a flight that would end badly because it is more visceral than something reasoned out. In this regard, it is similar to the Sophoclean pattern because even though Oedipus would be celebrated for his ability to use his reason to solve the riddle of the sphinx, his actions are repeatedly driven by his visceral responses to situations, which would eventually prove his undoing. Ernest Emenyonu writes that it is the "obsessive urge to obliterate his father's image and make a fine name for his family that compels Okonkwo in to a ruthless immersion in all of Umuofia's values of manliness" (*The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, p. 113). The Unoka image is thus a Corinth from which Okonkwo flees and like Oedipus, Okonkwo's natural endowments, during his flight, will lead him both to greatness and a catastrophic fall from greatness into the maws of the very fate from which he has been fleeing.

Oedipus flees from Corinth to Thebes so as not to kill his "father," King Polybus, and marry his "mother," Merope. On getting to Thebes, he uses his natural wit to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, namely that man is the only animal that walks on all fours in the 'morning' of life, on two feet in the afternoon and on three in the evening of life. In solving the riddle, he frees Thebes from the evil grasp of the Sphinx. To show their appreciation, the Thebans make him their king and give him the widow of the dead king as wife. Okonkwo's rise to greatness follows a similar, though non-incestuous,

conclusion. Like Oedipus, he achieves instant fame and success by providing a solution to a problem confronting his people. Whereas in Thebes, it was the Sphinx, in Umuofia the problem is Amalinze the cat. The situation was not life threatening as in Thebes, but communal pride, which had been in tatters for seven years, was at stake. The narrator says:

> Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. Amalinze was the first wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Mbaino (p. 3).

For solving the riddle of the cat, just as Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, Okonkwo gains instant fame that paves the way for his rise to the status of one of the lords of the clan through the mentoring of men such as Ogbuefi Nwakibie, the wealthiest man in Umuofia, who gave him yam seedlings to start his own farm, relentless hard work, and notoriety as a fearless warrior. A quasi-republican and agrarian community, Umuofia rewards with honor and status those who through hard work become wealthy yam farmers as demonstrated through the size and number of their barns of the crop as well as those who distinguish themselves through acts of bravery in inter-communal wars. Thus, Okonkwo's solving of the "riddle" posed by Amalinze the cat to Umuofia paves the way for him to acquire the goodwill of his kinsmen and women, which he adroitly uses to catapult him to prominence.

As in *Oedipus the King*, all the above incidents take place in the past before the beginning of the plot and the unfolding of the downward spiral of the two protagonists. Oedipus goes from power and influence as King of Thebes to a disgraced, blind outcast from Thebes. In his own downward spiral, Okonkwo goes from being one of the lords of the clan, at the beginning of the plot, to a suicide, a reject, and eternal banishment from the clan in death. Both protagonists do not deal with inalterable fate; it is their character flaws that lead them to their seemingly irrevocable ends. In *Oedipus the King*, at the commencement of the play, Thebes is suffering a very deadly plague. Oedipus sends Creon, who unknown to him is his younger birth brother, to go and find

out the cause of the plague and what should be done to end it. Creon returns from the oracle with its message: the cause of the plague is the unpunished murder of the late king — Laius. The murderer must be found and punished. The oracle does not say who the murderer is, thus setting the stage for Oedipus the detective to search for Oedipus the killer. Oedipus turns to Teresias the prophet for clues on how to find the murderer but the old prophet is reluctant to speak, for he like the audience, knows that the killer is Oedipus himself. Oedipus interprets Teresias's reluctance to speak as evidence of a conspiracy between the prophet and Creon to dethrone him. Irked, his famous temper comes into display. In rage, he calls Teresias a "shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot" (Sophocles, tr. Watling, p. 36). Oedipus's fiery temper thus propels him into a catastrophic search for the killer or as Tonelli calls it, "a continuous process of loss."

Okonkwo shares Oedipus's highly volatile temper as well as his tendency for overcompensation when provoked. For instance, when Okonkwo's wife "cuts a few leaves off" the banana tree in the compound "to wrap some food," he beats her senseless and comes very close to committing his first murder when he shoots at her for teasing him about the inefficacy of his gun (pp. 27-28). We see the tendency for overcompensation on a similar dramatic scale in Oedipus when he kills Laius and his entire train, save one man, because of a knock he received on the head from the staff of Laius. Okonkwo's tendency for overcompensation leads him to a series of violations of the community's code of behavior. For example, on another occasion he violates the Sacred Week of Peace by beating another wife of his during the Week. The narrator says:

> In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the Sacred Week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess (p. 21).

His clansmen come to the conclusion that he has no respect for the gods (p. 22). Thus, Okonkwo, like Oedipus, suffers a continuous process of loss, which

in Blanchot's expression, eventually leads to the "decay of the absolute into non-presence."

Another quality that both protagonists share is their overbearing pride. In his quarrel with Teresias, Oedipus expresses disdain for both the prophet and the gods. He says to Teresias:

> What was your vaunted seercraft ever worth?
> And where were you, when the Dog-faced Witch was here?
> Had you any word of deliverance then for our people?
> There was a riddle too deep for common wits;
> A seer should have answered it; but answer came there none
> From you; bird-lore and god-craft all were silent.
> Until I came – I, ignorant Oedipus, came –
> And stopped the riddler's mouth, guessing the truth
> By mother-wit, not bird-lore (pp. 36-37).

Emenyonu points out that, "The Greeks believed that when a man became powerful, the gods … feared and envied him, and wishing to destroy him, would incite him to commit an act of hubris and contempt for them" (*The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, p. 122). Emenyonu draws a parallel between this belief and that of the Igbo, Achebe's people. Amongst the Igbo, hubris is called "aru." According to Harold Scheub, Okonkwo is guilty of *aru* "throughout the novel" (Scheub, p. 74). This is what pushes Okonkwo inexorably to the tragic fate of his father from which he is in flight throughout the novel. Okonkwo's *aru* is often on full display when he is dealing with less successful men. The narrator says:

> Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: 'This meeting is for men.' The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why Okonkwo had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit (Achebe, p. 19).

Both protagonists' cultures valorize manliness but it is manliness exercised within the framework of respect for others, an attribute both men sorely lack.

Their lack of respect for others also manifests itself in contempt for the advice of others. Indeed, Oedipus's fall can be linked to his inability to take advice. In Corinth, for instance, after he is told that Polybus and Merope are not his

parents, he confronts them to find out the truth; they reassure him that he is their son. But, Oedipus, forever, wary of the counsel of others, goes to the oracle instead. Polybus and Merope's lie could be rightly faulted on the grounds that they are not his biological parents and Oedipus' question to them appears clearly to be aiming at seeking the answer as to whether they were his biological parents but on the other hand, as his adoptive parents and as those who have played the role of father and mother to him since he was a few days old, one could say that they were well within their right to insist that they were his father and mother. Since Oedipus himself had known only them throughout his life as parents, his action shows a too easy dismissal of trust in them and he pays dearly for it as his flight from Corinth to avert the fulfillment of the prophecy inexorably leads him to its fulfillment. In the same vein, he rejects the counsel of Creon to receive the words of the oracle in private. He also rejects the advice of Teresias not to provoke him to speak. And to Jocasta's plea that he leave off the investigation of Laius's killer he cries out arrogantly: "Nonsense: I must pursue this trail to the end. Till I have unraveled the mystery of my birth" (Sophocles, tr. Watling, p. 55). It could be argued that Oedipus is engaged in a commendable single-minded pursuit of the truth but Sophocles also demonstrates that he is utterly besotted by his own wisdom and counsel in his chest-thumping to Teresias that he did what no man or god could do in answering the riddle of the sphinx. Similarly, Okonkwo rejects the counsel of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in his village, not to kill Ikemefuna, the boy he held in custody for the clan. The oracle decides that the boy should be killed but it was not incumbent on Okonkwo to be the one to carry out the killing because the boy calls him "father." Ogbuefi Ezeudu tells Okonkwo: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (p. 40). Ogbuefi Ezeudu is a Teresias of sorts, since in many African traditions, including that of the Igbo, the ancient are often credited with prophetic and seer ability. He like, Teresias confronting Oedipus, is thus doing so as a representative of the gods. And that is why, Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, tells him: "If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not

please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (p. 46). On this point, Emenyonu notes that "Ikemefuna's entry into Okonkwo's household marked the beginning of the tragic decline of Okonkwo and his death in the hands of Okonkwo is a crux in the action of the story" (Emenyonu, p. 120). Like Oedipus, therefore, Okonkwo is incapable of listening to the counsel of others. And both men suffer disastrous consequences as a result of this character flaw.

Going beyond Emenyonu, I will put the beginning of Okonkwo's descent into catastrophe in Okonkwo's inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son. Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son is the event that unravels everything that he has achieved in the clan and it is what sends him on the exile that would take him away from Umuofia at a crucial moment in the clan's history: the visit of the missionaries. As a result of his absence during the initial encounter of the clan with the missionaries, who during their early incursion into the clan were led by the amiable Reverend Brown instead of the volatile Reverend Smith, an Okonkwo double of sorts, he loses touch with the pulse of his people's feelings. Like Oedipus, Okonkwo's exile is a key element in the plot. Both Sophocles and Achebe use the exile-and-return technique to dramatic effects, for the return of the exile would force the plot to a dramatic climax and denouement.

For both protagonists, exile is a period during which the community-wide event that would force the protagonist into playing his people's hero would be set up and their confrontation with the event would destroy both of them. In *Oedipus the King*, the event is the plague, which is triggered into the womb of time, as it were, to stay there until the gods decide to unleash it after Oedipus murders Laius and makes his way to Thebes, where he fulfills the other part of the prophecy, marriage to Jocasta, widow of the late king and, unknown to him, his mother. The gods withhold the plague, punishment for the non-punishment of the murderer of King Laius, from the Thebans until the time they judge appropriate to act, which is at the height of Oedipus's influence and power. In *Things Fall Apart*, the event is the coming of the missionaries. They

bring a new vision of life that is a dramatic departure from the existing culture. The missionaries come before the colonial officers and the encounter between the missionaries and the people of Umuofia under Reverend Brown is cast as a cosmopolitan encounter where the stranger is given hospitality as well as a space to share his views freely without the threat of physical harm or death. But the cosmopolitanism of the encounter notwithstanding, because the two cultures are remarkably different, the site of non-coercive conversation also has the potential to quickly degenerate into a non-cosmopolitan violent clash. Achebe makes the transition from the first to the second by switching Reverend Brown for Reverend Smith, a man as volatile as Okonkwo. Okonkwo sees in the unfortunate situation that Reverend Smith had helped to create through the unchecked zealotry of some of the new converts as the perfect opportunity he had been waiting for to reprise his before-exile role and influence in the clan. As with Oedipus, there would be no half-measures; it would be a full frontal and public confrontation.

This is what sets the stage for what I call *the exile of darkness* for both protagonists. The exile of darkness constitutes the second exile for both protagonists and it is permanent. In *Oedipus the King*, taking Thebes as home and site of first departure, the first exile occurs when Oedipus is taken into exile in Corinth as a child. The second exile occurs in adulthood after the prophecy is fulfilled. During the first exile, events that would lead to his tragic end develop. Thus Oedipus leaves Thebes as a child and by the time he returns to Thebes, he had already killed his father at Phocis and at Thebes after solving the riddle of the Sphinx, he marries his mother. The stage is set for his tragic end. The second exile is the exile of darkness; he is permanently driven from Thebes, a broken and blind man. Achebe makes use of his two exiles in a similar manner. The first exile, as mentioned earlier, occurs when Okonkwo inadvertently kills Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son and is forced to flee Mbanta. In his absence, like in *Oedipus the King*, the stage is prepared for his tragic demise when the missionaries come to Umuofia and under the volatile Reverend Smith some of the new converts begin precipitously to overturn the

mores of the clan. The second exile, the exile of darkness, is also Okonkwo's permanent banishment from Umuofia to the Evil Forest, after he takes his own life.

The tragic ends of both protagonists and the permanence of their exile from their homelands evoke similar responses. Of Oedipus, the chorus says:

> Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus
> Greatest of men…
> Behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head…
> (Sophocles, tr. Watling, p. 68).

As for Okonkwo, there is no doubt that Obierika, his best friend, is speaking for the community, when he says: 'That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia … and now he will be buried like a dog…' (Achebe, p. 147).

From the foregoing, it is evident that both men are men of heroic stature, made of the stuff of tragic heroes. It is also evident that with regard to their characters, they are cut from the same cloth; but the similarity of the two works goes far beyond the character makeup of both protagonists. Both works operate on a structure of dramatic irony, which is set up by a prophetic statement at the beginning of the work. Both men take flight from the prophetic statement. In the process of doing so, they inexorably work toward its fulfillment. However, both Sophocles and Achebe amply demonstrate that the fates of their protagonists were not inalterable ones. Oedipus takes flight from Corinth in the hope that he would not fulfill the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. His actions only lead him to the fulfillment of the prophecy. In a similar vein, Okonkwo takes flight from his own Corinth—the father's pathetic end—but his actions only lead him to that end.

An important difference between the two works is the form. In *Oedipus the King,* the dramatic form compels Sophocles to make the plot so compact that there is no room for detail. The work assumes clockwork efficiency with little room for elaboration. For the theatre, where the attention span of the audience is very short, this undoubtedly works highly in favour of the play. But taken outside of the theatre, it would be a handicap. The play raises more questions

than it answers in the mind of the reader. Some of these questions are very obvious. How is it possible for Oedipus to marry his mother and have four children by her? Why was there no remedy for the Sphinx, even from the gods, until Oedipus comes along? Why did the gods wait until Oedipus is at the height of his powers before sending the plague? The questions go on and on, but it is obvious that they may not be properly answered even if the play were to assume the length of a Brechtian epic play. For one, the play is more of myth and legend than realistic and, therefore, not to be given a strictly realistic interpretation. Perhaps far more important is the fact that a play meant for the stage has a very brief life and an excellent writer like Sophocles takes that fact not as a handicap but excellent opportunity for his work. The prose writer has more time with which to work. He can hold the attention of his audience for a much longer time. He thus has the opportunity of filling out details that may constitute excess baggage for the playwright. He therefore has the privilege of coming up with a richer, fuller, and more informationally satisfying work. This is what Achebe does with a structural model that is very similar to the one that Sophocles employs in *Oedipus the King.* Elements of anthropology have been thrown into the novel, but they arise out of a commitment to verisimilitude on the part of the author and these elements make the novel more successful as a work of art and as a work of reflection on the Igbo colonial encounter with the British Empire, using the language of the colonial power in a manner that, as Mala Pandurang observes, serves "as a counter-weapon to perform a psychologically affirmative function and to inscribe new meanings" (p.17).

To sum up: at the beginning of the essay, I noted that this is not an attempt to engage in what Nnolim calls colonialist, or even neocolonialist, criticism but one to do a largely formalist reading to offer fresh insight into Achebe's use of the folkways of the Igbo in the more recent tradition of the novel and tragic drama dating to ancient times to create a masterpiece in the best tradition of the tragic form that compels a reading of it alongside one of the most important tragic plays in all of literature, *Oedipus the King*, to show the close similarities between them as well as where they differ and why, like *Oedipus the King*,

Things Fall Apart is a work of the highest literary achievement. In an interview with Achebe, Charles Rowell tells Achebe that critics have said that they see in Okonkwo an Aristotelian tragic hero, to which Achebe responds that he did not think that he "was responding to that particular format" (p. 97). He goes on to say though that it is not to say that there is no relationship between the two, while at the same pointing out the indebtedness of Greek culture to African culture (p. 97). The village of Umuofia that Achebe creates is certainly an original Igbo village that shares great similarities with the classical Greek village but it is apparent that Achebe was able to use his formal training in literature to outstanding effect by putting the story of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, and the Igbo colonial encounter with the British Empire, in the mode of the classical tragic drama of three acts, the first act dealing with the rise of the hero, the second act the hero's encounter with an obstacle that threatens his fortune, if not his life, and the third the determination of the hero's fate as he tries to overcome the obstacle and restore his fortunes, usually through acts of overreach that arise from tragic flaw(s) in his character. Using this structure, the exile-and-return technique, irony, and more importantly a proverb or wise saying from the mouth of the hero's father, Unoka, and his unfortunate end as a kind of prophetic statement on the life and tragic end of his son, Okonkwo, Achebe is able to use the novel form first as a site of pure literary art that is extraordinarily compelling and second as a site to bear the weight of the history of the falling apart of Igbo communities in their encounter with British colonialism. These are great achievements, but perhaps more significant is Achebe's contribution to the humanist and cosmopolitan project in his critique of colonialism. In Biodun Jeyifo's words, Achebe presents both colonizer and colonized on a human scale without "the superhuman and subhuman distortion and stereotypes that had become endemic as the harvest of the literary exploration of colonialism" (pp. 9-10). That Achebe is able to use mostly formal means to achieve that goal is a singular achievement that critiques the colonial encounter in favour of a cosmopolitan encounter.

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