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Dialogic Failure and Decolonial Resistance: A Bakhtinian Reading of Things Fall Apart

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Abstract:

This article offers a literary-sociocultural approach in reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to frame failure in the novel as dialogic and a site of decolonial resistance. Through dialogism, heteroglossia, and cyclical temporality, this study shows how Igbo society mediates justice, knowledge, and communal life through negotiation and collective accountability. Okonkwo's monologic rigidity mirrors the monologic frameworks of coloniality, contrasting with the dialogic ethos of Igbo society and revealing how colonial disruption threatens communal negotiation, indigenous knowledge and temporalities. Failure emerges as a method of preserving indigenous temporalities, moral reasoning, and oral traditions, asserting the validity of alternative ways of knowing, and challenging Western linear, monologic frameworks.

Keywords: *Things Fall Apart*, Bakhtin, dialogism, heteroglossia, chronotope, epistemic disobedience, decoloniality.

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1. Introduction:

For centuries, western modernity has claimed universality, silencing other ways of knowing and imagining the world, against this logic, decoloniality emerges as a pluriversal project of delinking, theprocess of recovering the marginalized epistemologies and supressed possibilities of being. A prominent figure in decolonial theory, Walter D. Mignolo, argues that coloniality is not a derivative or byproduct of modernity but rather its constitutive logic. It embodies the oppression, exploitation, and dispossession masked by the promise of progress and civilization and enacted through the imposition of Western hierarchies of knowledge and values. As Mignolo puts it, "Coloniality names the (un)intended consequences of the narratives of modernity—Anthony Giddens's missing chapters… It is the darker and hidden side of modernity" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 140). Hence, the decolonial project is a liberation of knowledge, enabled through "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 114), a deliberate refusal to conform to the dominant, monologic Western system of knowledge and values, and a call to reclaim indigenous and non-Western epistemologies.

Postcolonial literature offers a particularly productive site for exploring decolonial themes, especially in contexts where the legacy of colonialism continues to shape cultural identity. In Nigeria, fiction has long grappled with these tensions, rendering cultural dialogue and hybrid subjectivities in crisis; works such as *Things Fall Apart* are personification of such tensions. Scholarship on Achebe often reads *Things Fall Apart* as Okonkwo's personal tragedy rooted in

psychological rigidity and hypermasculinity. Gikandi (1991) argues that Okonkwo's obsession with masculinity and fear of weakness precipate his tragic suicide, mirroring Igbo society's collapse. Similarly, Innes (1990) emphasizes his inflexible patriarchal values, framing his alienation as a tragic endpoint. Recent studies, like Nyeenenwa(2022), continues this focus analyzing Okonkwo 's tragic downfall as a result "of his escessive desire to uphold masculine ideals and material success which blinds him to the changing dynamics of his society." These readings prioritize individual flaws, overlooking narrative structure of Igbo society as a way of resistance. Hence, in this article, I adopt a literary-sociocultural approach using Bakhtin's dialogism to reframe failure in *Things Fall Apart* as a decolonial method of resisting colonial modernity.

Through a Bakhtinian reading of Things Fall Apart, the analysis examines how the novel stages a breakdown in dialogue between indigenous and colonial worldviews, resulting in narrative and cultural failure challenging colonial modernist narratives of progress by foregrounding fractured voices, temporalities, and identities. Despite its Western roots, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, grounded in heteroglossia, chronotope, and the persistent refusal of singular, authoritative voices, resonates powerfully with Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience within the decolonial project. Both frameworks challenge monologic epistemic structures that marginalize alternative voices and systems of knowing. Building on these frameworks, my argument is that in Things Fall Apart, this alignment becomes analytically revealing: failure, manifested in the breakdown

of dialogue between indigenous and colonial worldviews, is not a narrative flaw, but a deliberate rupture that resists monologic control.

2. The Bakhtinian Imagination: Dialogism, Heteroglossia, and Chronotope.

Dialogism is the term used to define the set of thoughts and ideas foregrounded by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's thoughts contributed to diverse fields of knowledge, spanning from linguistics, literature, cultural theory, to philosophy and others. Regardless of the field or stage of his career, the dominant principle that governs all his thought is "dialogue." For Bakhtin, dialogue is not merely the interaction between two entities or utterances, nor is it a simple argument; it is a fundamental mode of thought and being. dialogism for Bakhtin is a fundamental condition of existence and meaning.

Dialogism is characterized by outsideness and relationality: the self and meaning can only be understood in relation to another, since the other can perceive what I cannot see from my own position. As Bakhtin explains, discourse is "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents," weaving through other voices as it "merges with some, recoils from others, [and] intersects with yet a third group" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). This interplay makes meaning eternally open and unfinalizable, another fundamental characteristic of dialogism. Dialogic relationality does not aim toward synthesis, as Bakhtin adamantly criticizes Hegelian dialectics for, nor is it rhetorical debate aiming at persuasion; it resists

closure, for "each consciousness retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).This openness finds its concrete literary articulation in heteroglossia and the chronotope, which enact dialogism by staging the interplay of diverse voices within specific cultural space-times.

In his theorization of language, Bakhtin criticizes traditional linguistics, Saussurean structuralism in particular, and its insistence on treating language as a self-contained system of signs divorced from cultural and historical contexts, which he finds particularly reductive. Instead, Bakhtin foregrounds language as a socially charged dialogic practice. Language is inherently heteroglossic, a term Bakhtin uses to describe the presence of multiple socially and historically situated voices within language and texts, each carrying distinct worldviews, value systems, and ideologies. As Bakhtin notes, "language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291), which reflects the stratification of society. These contradicted voices interact dialogically, not in pursuit of synthesis, but in acknowledgement of their coexistence and irreducible differences, hence, for Bakhtin, language is never neutral, every utterance comes from a specific social position. While heteroglossia highlights the coexistence of multiple socially and ideologically stratified voices within language, Bakhtin further explains that this multiplicity is shaped by a dialogical dynamic of centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces seek unity and standardized language which is the monologic aspect of this dynamic, while centrifugal forces pull toward diversity and difference

which represent the dialogical dimension, together they work to produce generative tension that makes heteroglossia possible.

While all of Bakhtin's concepts unpacked earlier have literary applications, the chronotope stands out as the most distinctly literary, for it is theorized primarily in relation to literary narrative, whereas heteroglossia and dialogism extend more broadly into linguistics, philosophy, and social theory. The chronotope is the intrinsic correspondence of time and space and how this relationship shapes the literary narrative and determines the work's genre. While the chronotope is Bakhtin's coinage, its concern with the relationship between time and space draws on a longstanding and ongoing inquiry across philosophy, the social sciences, and physics. Bakhtin was admittedly influenced by Einstein's theorization of time and space in the theory of relativity, as he wrote his essay *Forms of Time and the Chronotope*, where he first introduced the concept, at a time when Einstein's physics were groundbreaking. Bakhtin reoriented the idea of relativity, which reconceptualizes time and space not as separate dimensions but as a unified continuum, toward formulating the chronotope in literature. Each literary work, Bakhtin suggests, is grounded in a distinctive configuration of time and space; as he writes, in the chronotope, "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84).

A narrative is not shaped solely by style or theme but by the chronotopic patterns through which it organizes human experience. For instance, some works embody cyclical time tied to natural and

ritual rhythms within familiar spaces, reflecting a worldview grounded in continuity, tradition, and communal life. Others, by contrast, are structured around linear time and transitional or liminal spaces, suggesting a narrative logic oriented toward change, rupture, and historical transformation. In this sense, every work of literature crystallizes around a particular chronotope, and it is this chronotope that shapes the narrative's logic and the representation of human life within it. By situating narrative time and space as lived, relational and dynamic, the chronotope, alongside dialogism and heteroglossia, underscores a conception of meaning that resists closure and determinacy.

In contrast to the fixed and rigid systems of Marxist and Hegelian dialectics, Bakhtin's dialogism posits a dynamic of meaning that is alive, open, and continually oriented outward. When applied to literature, it becomes an artistic principle, making the novel a site of open-ended ideological exchange. Bakhtin favors the novel because it enacts the dialogic principle through independent voices, each with its own worldview, rather than a single authoritative perspective. The dialogic novel does not merely contain many voices; it allows them to coexist, confront, and illuminate each other without one subsuming the others. In this sense, dialogism, as Morson and Emerson (1990) contend, is an all-encompassing principle, an approach to thinking and perceiving the world that "presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the prosaic" (p. 15). Its grounding in the prosaic makes it especially suitable for the literary-sociocultural approach I adopt here, which reads Achebe's representation of Igbo life itself as a dialogic order, containing heteroglossic voices, interacting social perspectives

and communal chronotopes. Although heteroglossia and dialogism can be defined separately; heteroglossia capturing the diversity of social voices, and dialogism the ongoing interaction and negotiation between them, in the analysis that follows, I treat them together as they often overlap in practice. In Igbo society, as represented in the novel, voices are rarely isolated; they constantly respond to, challenge, and shape one another, making the distinction more analytical than practical.

3. Bakhtinian Reading of *Things Fall Apart*

3.1. Egwugwu as a Dialogic Structure of Governance and Justice

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* stands as an exemplary text for a Bakhtinian reading, as its narrative foregrounds multiple voices, temporalities, and social practices that embody dialogism.The egwugwu court exemplifies the dialogic nature of Igbo governance, where justice is not imposed monologically but emerges through negotiation among multiple social voices. In a court scene where a man pleads his case for the Egwugwu , the novel stages the egwugwu's house as "a pandemonium of quavering voices: 'Aru oyim de de de dei!' filled the air as the spirits of the ancestors, just emerged from the earth, greeted themselves in their esoteric language" (Achebe, 2001, p. 65).This scene highlights how authority in Igbo society is performative and communal. The egwugwu, ancestral spirits represented by masked men, mediate disputes, but the process is inherently dialogic: the parties in dispute are given the opportunity to speak and defend themselves, while the voices of litigants, elders, and

the masked spirits interact dynamically, reflecting the community's shared moral and cosmological framework. Justice here is not abstract or codified; it is enacted in speech, ritual, and collective evaluation."

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism illuminates this process. He notes that prose "intensifies difference between historical and ideological days" and "dialogically opposes them to one another in unresolvable dialogues" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291). The egwugwu court functions in precisely this way: each perspective—the plaintiff, the defendant, the ancestral voice, and the audience—exists in tension with the others, and meaning is generated through their interaction rather than imposed by a single authority. When a domestic dispute is brought before the egwugwu, the court does not deliver a mechanical or predetermined verdict; instead, it orchestrates a negotiation among voices. Achebe's narrative preserves this openness by emphasizing the ritualized multiplicity of sound and speech rather than a single authoritative voice. Law, in this context, is a social performance reliant on collective interpretation: every utterance is heard, acknowledged, and countered, producing a justice that is relational and negotiated rather than dictated. This mirrors Bakhtin's idea that meaning is never finalized but exists in the interplay of voices—an embodiment of unfinalizability. Just as Bakhtin writes that dialogue carries on "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6), the egwugwu court demonstrates how Igbo justice is dialogic, fluid, and deeply rooted in communal interaction.

Yet, this dialogism is bounded. While multiple voices are acknowledged, the system enforces limits: social norms, taboos, and cosmological laws guide the discourse. This tension reflects a dynamic interplay of centrifugal forces, which allow diverse voices and perspectives to emerge, and centripetal forces, which unify the community and maintain social cohesion. For instance, certain groups, such as the osu (outcasts), are excluded from full participation, and some verdicts reflect prevailing hierarchies. This highlights that dialogism in Igbo society is structured rather than anarchic, producing a coherent epistemic system that enables the community to negotiate morality, responsibility, and social order.In this sense, the egwugwu court represents more than a legal institution; it exemplifies an indigenous epistemic order that worked for the community, organizing social life through dialogic engagement. As a site of interaction, negotiation, and collective accountability, it is a living manifestation of Bakhtin's theory: meaning, authority, and justice emerge in the interplay of voices, rather than through monologic decree.

3.2. Heteroglossia and the Voices of the Clan

The Igbo clan in *Things Fall Apart* functions as a heteroglossic society, structured through assemblies, storytelling, proverbs, and songs, where voices vary according to age, gender, and social role. These social languages coexist within a shared cultural framework, producing both dialogue and tension, and shaping everyday interactions. Differences in perspective, ranging from judgments about bride-price rituals to inheritance practices and interpretations of European behaviors, are openly articulated, questioned, and

negotiated, reflecting Bakhtin's observation that "each consciousness retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).

This dynamic appears in both formal and informal interactions. In negotiating Obierika's daughter's bride price, fathers, sons, uncles, and elders engage in layered dialogue, balancing personal interests, social norms, and customary rules. Each contributes a distinct perspective, and negotiations unfold through conversation and ritualized exchange. Obierika critiques certain customs as "upside-down," while his eldest brother observes that what is "good in one place is bad in another" (Achebe, 2001, p. 53), highlighting the contextuality of social norms. Even when opinions clash, the interaction remains dialogic, balancing centrifugal forces of difference with centripetal forces of cohesion. Social stratification shapes this heteroglossic structure: speakers' positions, age, and experience influence how they speak and interpret customs, yet no single voice dominates. The conversation remains coherent, relational, and mutually enriching, demonstrating that Igbo heteroglossia functions as an epistemic system for managing difference, preserving cultural wisdom, and sustaining communal accountability.

Storytelling further exemplifies heteroglossia, where multiple voices, perspectives, and moral frameworks coexist within a shared cultural space. In the scene where Okonkwo recounts "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" to the boys, Nwoye simultaneously recalls his mother's tales of the tortoise, the bird Eneke-nti-oba, and Vulture pleading with Sky. These contrasting narratives, fatherly tales

emphasizing strength, motherly tales emphasizing cunning, empathy, and moral reflection, illustrate how different social roles, generational experiences, and gendered perspectives produce distinct expressive forms. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is visible here; each voice retains its integrity, yet the narratives intersect in Nwoye's consciousness, producing a dialogic space where values, morals, and social norms are negotiated. Storytelling positions Nwoye between his father's and mother's voices, allowing him to form his own understanding of social and moral order. In this way, storytelling is not mere entertainment, it is a social practice in which heteroglossia organizes knowledge, mediates socialization, and preserves cultural wisdom across generations.

3.3. Chronotope of Communal Rhythm:

In Bakhtinian terms, the chronotope, the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in narrative, shapes how stories unfold, and in Things Fall Apart, it illuminates the rhythms, rituals, and relational structures of Igbo society, revealing how time and space are socially lived, collectively experienced, and morally ordered . In a scene that occurs at dusk, the entire village gathers in the *ilo* for the wrestling contest, forming a vast circle around the central space where the wrestlers will compete. The crowd, drummers, elders, and wrestlers together constitute a living social arena. Here the arena which is viewed as a center of unity where communal life converges in shared attention and collective excitement, merges in the moment where "the crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose frantic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but

the very heartbeat of the people" (Achebe, 2001, p .37). Within the village arena, the drums, animated by performers and spectators alike, embody the temporal rhythm of communal life, transforming the wrestling contest from a mere spectacle into a performative enactment of chronotopic social cohesion and collective values.This rhythm embodies the cyclical nature of Igbo temporality. The wrestling arena enacts this cyclicality: contests conclude, victors emerge, the crowd dissipates, yet the arena will again host communal life, rituals, and performances, perpetuating social knowledge and relational accountability across generations.

This chronotope of communal celebration exemplifies the dialogic and heteroglossic dynamics of Igbo society. Multiple voices and agencies, wrestlers, drummers, elders, and the observing crowd, interact in structured engagement, negotiating authority, skill, and collective excitement. The frenzy of the drums channels centrifugal forces of individual expression while simultaneously maintaining centripetal cohesion through shared attention, ritualized behavior, and normative expectations. Time and space converge: the wrestlers' contest unfolds in a clearly demarcated arena, structured by cultural conventions, while the rhythmic soundscape binds the community into a coherent temporal experience.

Through this scene, Achebe dramatizes how precolonial Igbo society organizes knowledge, social roles, and moral evaluation through embodied, performative practices. The wrestling arena becomes a living manifestation of dialogic engagement, where meaning, authority, and social identity emerge from interaction rather

than imposed decree, reflecting the relational, participatory, and morally intelligible order that underpins indigenous epistemology.

3.4. Colonial Interrupted Temporality

3.4.1. Chronotope of Rupture

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe constructs Igbo social life as a spatiotemporal system, where time and space are inseparable and imbued with communal meaning. The unmasking of the egwugwu occurs during the annual ceremony honoring the Earth goddess, situating it within the cyclical, sacred temporality of Igbo ritual life. Although Achebe does not specify the precise location, the event unfolds in village space imbued with communal and symbolic significance. This rhythm reflects the African conception of time: as Animalu (2011) notes, African time "depicts the world as an immortal regenerative cycle of birth, death, and re-birth of all things in nature in which time—the African time—is cyclic and irreversible" (p. 27). The intrusion violently collapses this ritual time-space, producing a chronotope of rupture: ancestral voices, communal authority, and cyclical rhythm are disrupted, marking the incursion of linear, colonial temporality into Igbo epistemic order.

Lewicka (2005) argues that place attachment forms, maintains, and preserves identity, fostering individual, group, and cultural self-esteem, worth, and pride. The desecration of the egwugwu house during this sacred ceremony symbolizes a profound disruption of this attachment. The village arena, central to Igbo cultural identity, serves as a space where intangible cultural heritage is enacted. Its desecration

signifies not only a physical violation but also an assault on the community's sense of self and continuity.

Achebe captures the gravity of this rupture through a striking image: “That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son...It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death.” (Achebe, 2001, p .136). The chronotope here crystallizes the collapse of ritual time into historical finality, foreshadowing the community’s disintegration under colonial rule. The cyclical temporality of ritual is violently replaced by a linear temporality of conquest and “death,” underscoring how colonial intrusion unmoors the community from its dialogic relationship with place, identity, and sacred continuity. The chronotope of rupture thus, reflects the totality of colonial disruption, where dialogism, heteroglossia, and ritual temporality are simultaneously undone, marking the death of an entire world.

3.4.2. Chronotope of silencing:

Following the imprisonment of Okonkwo and other titled men, the village fell into an unusual and oppressive quiet.

> It was the time of the full moon. But that night the voice of children was not heard. The village ilo where they always gathered for a moon-play was empty. The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance… Young men who were always abroad in the moonlight kept to their huts…Umuofia was

like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run (Achebe, 2001, p. 143).

In this moment, Achebe stages a temporal and spatial rupture: the normal rhythms of communal life, assemblies, storytelling, play, and ritual, are suspended, and the usual dialogic interplay among voices is silenced. The chronotope of the village, which normally mediates social cohesion through collective action and cyclical time, is fractured; centrifugal and centripetal forces no longer operate in balance, and the epistemic system of Igbo society is momentarily destabilized. This silence, prompted by the intrusion of colonial authority, embodies the monologic imposition of linear, coercive temporality over a previously cyclical and relational social order. By rendering the village mute, Achebe dramatizes how colonial presence interrupts the dialogic structures of governance, the heteroglossic practices of daily life, and the ritualized temporality that sustains communal knowledge. The result is a powerful visual and temporal metaphor: the community's life-force, normally enacted through voices, rhythms, and interaction, is frozen, emphasizing both the disruptive reach of colonial power and the resilience of indigenous epistemologies that will later reassert themselves.

4. Dialogic Failure as Decolonial Resistance:

While previous scholarship has emphasized Okonkwo's personal flaws, his hypermasculinity, fear of weakness, and rigid adherence to patriarchal ideals, his tragedy can also be read as a failure to engage dialogically with his own society. As Unoka observes during a year of

famine, "A proud heart can survive a general failure…It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone" (Achebe, 2001, p .19). This distinction between collective and individual failure illuminates the stakes of Okonkwo's choices: in a society structured around negotiation, relational accountability, and the interplay of multiple voices, his insistence on a singular, authoritative self isolates him from the communal fabric. Elders, priests, age-grades, and the wider community together mediate justice, moral norms, and social cohesion; Okonkwo's refusal to accommodate alternative perspectives or temper his decisions through dialogue renders him unable to participate meaningfully in this dialogic system. In Bakhtinian terms, he embodies a form of monologism within a society that thrives on dialogism and heteroglossia, mirroring in microcosm the colonial imposition of monologic order. His inability to respond adaptively to both the social and temporal complexities of his world transforms what might be read as individual psychological rigidity into a symbolic enactment of the collapse of monologic identities.

Taken together, the dialogic structure of governance, the heteroglossic dimensions of daily life, and the cyclical, ritualized temporality of communal life illustrate an internally coherent epistemic system within Igbo society. Authority, justice, and social norms emerge through interaction, negotiation, and collective accountability rather than through monologic decree, reflecting a culturally grounded logic of relational knowledge. By foregrounding these features, Achebe preserves an indigenous way of knowing and being that is both socially functional and epistemically rich. In doing so, the novel enacts a form of decolonial resistance: it asserts the

validity of Igbo temporalities, moral reasoning, and oral traditions against the homogenizing, linear, and monologic frameworks introduced by colonial authority. As John S. Mbiti notes, "the linear concept of time in European thought…is practically foreign to African thinking" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 21), and Achebe's emphasis on cyclical, communal rituals participates in this epistemic disobedience, reclaiming African conceptions of time and space. The narrative does not simply romanticize precolonial life; it documents a dialogic, heteroglossic, and relational system that continues to speak, even in the face of disruption, affirming the endurance of indigenous

5. Conclusion:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts Igbo society as dialogic, heteroglossic, and temporally cyclical, where authority, moral norms, and knowledge emerge through interaction and ritualized practice rather than imposed decree. Okonkwo's monologic rigidity highlights the consequences of failing to engage with this relational epistemic system. By foregrounding indigenous temporalities, moral reasoning, and oral traditions, Achebe enacts epistemic disobedience, resisting the homogenizing pressures of colonial authority. This study underscores the value of analyzing dialogic failure as a decolonial strategy and suggests applying this lens to other African or postcolonial texts to explore how epistemic disobedience preserves alternative knowledge systems and cultural resilience.

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