

COMMENSALITY AND CULTURE: A SEMIOTIC READING OF IGBO TRIBAL LIFE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract: Food in literary production signifies the cultural and cross-cultural relations from which it is produced. The emergence of Literary Food Studies engages food as a signifier to magnify human relations and emotions. Food is a mosaic system of signs symbolising diasporic, class, caste, racial, and gender relations. The paper focuses on commensality, one of the mushrooming trends in literary food studies. Commensality is the act of eating together that helps to build relationships and create conviviality, the social pleasure among people. It helps to reinforce the identity and sense of belongingness among the community members. Drawing on the theoretical readings from Mary Douglas and Arjun Appadurai's semiotics of food, the paper explores the possibilities of commensality in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The paper tries to argue that, commensality and its food practices along with representing togetherness could also symbolise the complex cultural functioning of the Igbo tribal community. The ingredients of the commensality, the culinary tools, and the order of eating convey cultural meanings. It throws light into the hierarchy and various power relations existing in the community.

Keywords: Igbo tribal community, food, commensality, culture, power relations

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Introduction

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe's debut novel is renowned for its realistic portrayal of Igbo tribal life and the intrusion of colonial powers. Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, popularly known as Chinua Achebe is a distinguished novelist, poet, critic, and professor who has contributed immensely to African literature. Achebe's familiarity and connection with the Igbo tribe are reflected in his literary endeavours. Most of his writings are rich repositories of African history, culture, and identity. Though the novel has been widely discussed and interpreted since its inception on multiple grounds, very few studies have made attempts to decipher the role of food in critically analysing the functioning of Igbo tribal society. The paper draws theoretical insights from semiotics and critically analyses the role of food, especially commensality, the act of eating together, and its associated practices to comprehend the hierarchies and power relations in the Igbo tribal community.

The evolution of food from structural to cultural and hegemonic domains widely opened the scope of engaging food as a potent tool to unfurl the hidden layers of any society. Research on food and its affiliations has acquired popularity in recent years. "Scholars across disciplines have studied food for a long time, most notably anthropologists and folklorists, but it is only in the last ten to fifteen years or so that food as a focus for scholarly study has gained real acceptance" (Bentley, 2008, pp. 111-116). Historians, anthropologists, structuralists, economists, and health practitioners have been discussing the association of foodways and individual and cultural identity. One of the path-breaking studies in the area is Levi Strauss' (1966/2013) "The Culinary Triangle" in which he elaborated the connection between cooking and culture. His culinary triangle classifies food into raw, cooked, and rotten each representing distinct aspects of culture. He represents "raw" as natural, "cooked" as a product of cultural transformation, and "rotted" as a product of natural transformation. The triangle is suggestive of human characteristics and Strauss compares cooking to language: "Cooking is a language through which society unconsciously reveals its structure" (Strauss, 1979, p. 495). In addition to Strauss, Roland Barthes (1961/2013), and Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2010) have also discussed the cultural aspects of food.

The emergence of Literary Food Studies facilitates manifold opportunities to unleash the interconnectedness of food and literature. Gitanjali G Shahani's (2018) edited book *Food and Literature* widely discusses the relationship between literary studies and food studies. The book is one of the first collections that anthologises scholarly articles that delve into the intersections of literature and food through thematic and methodological approaches. Shahani remarks that scholarship in literary food studies is attuned to culinary moments in a text (2018, p. 4). Literary Food Studies uses food symbolisms to reflect on cultural identity which encompasses multiple issues of gender, diaspora, and ethnicity.

Gender is a complex notion transcending the fundamental binary understanding of males and females. It is a socially and culturally “constructed set of roles”, framed by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Society has set different roles for men and women, and men being the ‘norm’¹ enjoy all privileges². The images of gender disparity and stereotyping of women in the culinary domain are recurrent motifs in literary representations. They point to the power relations in society in which women become mere cooks and caretakers in a family devoid of individuality and identity. Food is an intersecting point of sense of identity, belongingness, and nostalgia in a diasporic³ and ethnic contexts. In academic discourses, diaspora refers to the dispersion or scattering of people away from their homeland due to voluntary and forced reasons. The reasons include economic, political, educational, natural calamities, war, etc. Food plays a pivotal role in the identity construction of the diasporic people in an alien land. The choices and consumption of food grant them a sense of inclusion in the host community, which is defined by Anita Mannur as ‘culinary citizenship’, “a form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (2007, pp. 11-31). Simultaneously, the preparation and consumption of familiar foods aid them to recreate and connect to their lost homeland and identity. It is symbolic of their cultural ties. In addition to these, memories related to the sensory aspects of food like smell and taste are also prominent themes in diasporic writings. Culinary nostalgia and gastro nostalgia are terms put forward by Anita Mannur (2007) and Tulsi Srinivas (2006) respectively to emphasize the significance of food-associated memories in diasporic contexts.

Though the role of food is widely discussed in gender and diasporic contexts in literary productions, scholarly engagements interconnecting food and tribal culture in literary productions are scant. Most of the tribal writings⁴ are scrutinized for apprehending culture and identity through customs, beliefs, folk elements, gender relations, colonial invasion, and assimilation. A close reading of food in such writings could offer a lens to magnify the hidden and unnoticed cultural aspects from which it is produced and consumed. A textual analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* encourages to accentuate the interconnection of food and Igbo tribal culture.

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1. Norm – Refers to attitudes and behaviours that are considered normal, typical, and standard.
 2. Privileges – Refer to any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others (Johnson, 2005, p.5)
 3. Diasporic – Diaspora, the word has its roots in Greek, ‘dia speiro’ meaning to “sow over”.
 4. Tribal Writings – Writings which deal with the life and experiences of tribal communities.

Things Fall Apart: A Bird's View

The novel set in the imaginary village Umofia evolves around the life of the protagonist Okonkwo. Through the life of Okonkwo, a wealthy, mighty warrior, the novel unfurls the rich traditions, practices, and customs of the Igbo tribal community. Okonkwo works tirelessly to wash off the stains of his unsuccessful and 'effeminate' father Unoka. Okonkwo earns respect and honour in his community through hard work and perseverance and he is known in the nine neighbouring villages. He is a staunch, strong patriarchal figure towards his three wives⁵ and kids. Contrary to expectations, he exiles to his mother's village Mbanta as he accidentally shoots a clansman. His mother's relatives are delighted to welcome him as he is known for his capabilities. The situation in Umofia changes drastically when he returns after seven years of exile. The intervention of colonial powers disrupts tribal life and religious conversion corrodes their rich tribal identity. The life of Okonkwo turns bitter when he beheads a messenger from the District Commissioner. Unable to cope with the tragic events and sluggish nature of clansmen, Okonkwo hangs himself. The greatest warrior of the clan does not get a reputed burial as suicide is a sin in the community. The District Commissioner takes the initiative for Okonkwo's burial. Achebe mentions that the District Commissioner might write a paragraph about Okonkwo in his book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Methodology

Semiotics

Semiotics, the study of signs, also called semiology had its initial traces in the writings of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure defined 'sign' as a system of signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*) (Chandler, 2007, p. 14). The signifier refers to the sound pattern and the signified is the concept which it refers to. Semioticians look at how meanings are made and how reality is represented through signs and sign systems. Charles Sanders Peirce is one of the prominent contributors to the domain of semiotics. Peirce distinguished three classes of signs namely: icon, index, and symbol. The classification is based on the relationship between a signifying item and that which it signifies. An icon is a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object by virtue of resemblance or similarity with it. An index is a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object through some actual or physical or imagined connection. In the case of symbol, the relation between the signifying item and what it signifies is not a natural one, but entirely a matter of social convention (Merrell, 2005, p. 31).

5. Polygamy is practiced in Igbo culture.

Charles William Morris (1938), another influential figure in semiotics elaborates on signs in a different light. According to Morris, semiosis is the process in which something functions as a sign. The process involves three or four factors: that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter. These three components in semiosis are called the sign vehicle, the designatum, and the interpretant respectively; the interpreter may be included as a fourth factor (Morris, 1938, p. 3). The findings of Peirce and Morris contributed significantly to the expansion of semiotics in the later years.

The Semiotics of Food in Literature

Human beings eat to survive and food is the elemental source of nourishment for life. At the same time, food carries the incredible potential to convey meanings that transcend beyond its elemental role. Umberto Eco (1976) asserts that semiotics deals with everything that can be considered as signs. In semiotics words, objects, images, and sounds can be a sign. Food acts as a potent cultural object to symbolise individual, communal, ethnic, and national identities. The preparation and consumption of food offer material means to expose social systems and cultural values. Warren Belasco's (2008) "you are what you eat" echoes the nexus of food with social and cultural identities. One of the prominent readers of the semiotics of food, Simona Stano remarks, "Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment but is also part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in a process of signification and interpretation" (2015, pp. 646-671).

As semiotics deals with the study of signification and communication systems, it offers valuable insights for comprehending the beliefs, rituals, and practices associated with food. A blend of semiotics and food facilitates the grasping of denotative and connotative⁶ meanings associated with food in wider cultural contexts. In the domain of Food Studies, discussions and social interactions surrounding it, serve as perceptible indicators of underlying power dynamics. Mary Douglas, a prominent theorist in her "Deciphering Meals" observes, "If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (1972, pp. 61-81). Arjun Appadurai in his "Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia" also looks at food as part of semiotics. Appadurai writes, "Food, in its varied guises, contexts, and functions, can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance" (1981, pp. 494-511). Foodways are powerful in connecting and separating people. The connections between man and God, lower class and upper class, and men and women are determined by food to a

6. Denotative meaning – Describe the definitional, literal, obvious, or elementary meaning of a sign. Connotative meaning – The range of secondary and associated significations and feelings of a sign. It depends on the way a word is used in a particular context.

considerable extent. Food transactions⁷ in a household may show dominance and submissiveness in terms of gender relations. The traditional gender roles reinforce that women are primarily accountable for cooking and homemaking. The male-dominated patriarchal society relegates and regulates women to subservient positions. Women are responsible for meal planning, cooking, and serving in the familial setup. Her worth and honour are intrinsically bound to her culinary skills. Ironically, they cook considering the tastes and likes of the men in the family. Women typically cook meals while men enjoy them. This division of labour creates a power imbalance in the family through which men exert control over women. The food transactions in larger discourse can signal the cultural frameworks of a community or a society. Every activity centred around food can convey multiple meanings about the functioning of a society. Meaning can refer to

its significance; the purpose behind preparing or consuming it; the identity or beliefs expressed through it; the associations or emotions attached to it; the thing or idea it refers to; the use of food to demonstrate create status; and its representation of larger, historical, social and cultural patterns (Long, 2017, pp. 204-217).

Though food preferences are highly individual, they say a lot about an individual's cultural background. The ingredients, cuisines, culinary tools, rules, and habits associated with foodways carry layered meanings and the makers' cultures and environments can be inferred from these factors.

The scrutiny of food in understanding a culture in fiction is an emerging trend. Brad Kessler opines the major purpose of food in literature is its cultural significance. Kessler explains food as "Freighted with meaning. Just as in life, food in fiction signifies. It means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens doors to double and triple meaning" (2005, pp. 148-165). The analysis of foodways in a literary work could lead the readers to the unseen doors of a culture. Defining foodways Kittler and Sucher state that "the term food habits (also called food culture or foodways) refers to the ways in which humans use food, including everything from how it is selected, obtained, and distributed to who prepares it, serves it, and eats it" (2008, p.2). The documentation of a community's culture through food is very vital as food is a highly loaded cultural signifier. Food's signification becomes even more relevant in marginalised communities' narratives. Food plays a major role in the narratives of diasporic communities, tribal communities, Dalits, and refugees. Their age-old suppression, oppression, starvation, nostalgia for lost and forgotten past, belongingness, identity crisis, unity, harmony, and togetherness are well crafted through food signifiers. It would not be an overstatement to contend that food encapsulates a plethora of human emotions.

7. Food transactions (here) – the acts of planning, cooking, and serving food.

Commensality

Derived from the Latin word, ‘commensalis’ meaning ‘with the table’, commensality means eating together. David B Goldstein describes commensality as “the range of relationships that emerge and are reified through the act of eating” (2018, pp. 39-58). He stresses the importance of commensality to strengthen relationships among the people in a community. He adds, “Eating is not simply a biological phenomenon. It is a social one, even if one is eating alone” (2018, pp. 39-58). The process reaffirms one’s individual and communal ties. David E Sutton observes “anthropological study of food can be traced back to the origins of the discipline, witness the perceptive writings of Robertson-Smith on commensality” (2001, p. 5). In the scholarly arena, the prime agreement concerning commensality centres around its role in building and nourishing social rapport through the communal act of eating. Concomitantly, it works as a defining boundary within any given social gathering. Generally, individuals who share meals tend to occupy equal social strata and positions. The notion of excluding others, relegating them as unfamiliar or inferior is also a slice of commensality, often referred to as segregative commensality as put forward by Claude Grignon (2001) in his “Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology”. The root word ‘commensalis’ refers to the dining table. Critics and scholars point out that the ingrained meanings of commensality could also be deciphered through the material aspects surrounding the process. In addition to the act of eating, the culinary utensils, type of food, quantity of food, and seating arrangements also hold substantial significance in conveying the power dynamics. Central to this is the observation that men traditionally occupy the central position at a dining table and women are reduced to the role of servants attending the dining needs of men. Commensality within a community may serve as an indicator of the prevailing hierarchies and power dynamics. The paper dissects the instances of commensality in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to understand the hierarchies and power dynamics in the Igbo community.

Discussion

Food and Its Significations in Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe’s debut novel *Things Fall Apart* embarks on a significant position in African literature. Achebe, a member of the same community weaves Okonkwo’s story with the insight of an insider. The stereotypical stigmas associated with the mainstream representation of tribal communities are brilliantly dismantled by Achebe. The unique customs, traditions, and rituals of the Igbo tribe find a major place in the novel. The presence of food can be found on all the special occasions in the tribal community, especially in rituals and celebrations. The rituals and celebrations reinforce the cultural ties and identities of the community members. Sudhir Kakar says, for anthropologists,

ritual is a “ceremonial form that deepens the individual’s connection- with nature, community, and the sacred- and from which the individual emerges purified and with a sense of awe and significance” (2010, pp. 201-209). They are largely gastronomic affairs that publicize the varied cultural operations of the community.

One of the most significant rituals of the community is the festival associated with the harvest of yams. The Feast of the New Yam is an occasion of ecstasy and togetherness in the Igbo tribal community. Achebe writes, “The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umofia was in a festival mood” (2001, p. 35). It is intrinsically connected to the identity and culture of the tribe. It is the main opportunity for a man to show his wealth and status. The festival is observed as thanksgiving to Ani, the goddess of earth, and to commemorate departed souls. As the name indicates, it is the festival of “new yams”. Chima J Korieh describes the cultivation of yam “as a highly ritualised process, yam production often involved elaborate ceremonial rituals at the planting and the harvest season. The New Yam Festival marked the harvest season, when sacrifices were offered to Ahiajoku – the yam spirit, to ensure good yield and continuity of life itself” (2007, pp. 221-232). There are many preparations before the festival day. Yams of the previous year were disposed of the night before the festival. The festival day, the beginning of the new year and prosperity should start with fresh and tasty yams. Yams hold a very significant role in Igbo culture. It is a symbol of man’s identity. Yam, the man’s crop is titled as the “king of crops” (Achebe, 2001, p. 22). The number of yams one possesses attests to a man’s status and rank in society. A man’s success and status are measured in terms of his cultivation and production of yam and the number of barns he possesses. A good yield requires constant vigil and toil in the land. Most importantly, only men are allowed to cultivate yams. “Other crops were regarded as inferior to yam, and their cultivation subjected to the rhythm of yam cultivation” (Korieh, 2007, pp. 221-232). Naturally, the men of the community find the festival as an opportunity to exhibit their masculinity and their capacity to feed their families. The festival becomes the celebration of manhood. Thus, for the Igbo community yam is not just a means to satiate hunger, but a symbol of patriarchal status and identity. Once Okonkwo approached Nwakibie for yams to sow. He politely said, “I know what it is to ask a man to trust with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work” (Achebe, 2001, p. 21). His words suggest that yam cultivation is not everyone’s business. The men with dedication and hard-working mentality could only initiate the cultivation. Only such men could be trusted and given yams. It is his responsibility to return the yams after the harvest and maintain his dignity in the community.

It is surprising to note that some crops other than yam are considered to be women’s crops. “His mothers and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans, and cassava” (ibid., p. 22). These crops

and their cultivators (women) are treated secondary in the community. The secondary treatment of women and crops is the reflection and outcome of a patriarchal society. Allen Johnson describes patriarchal society as:

a society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centred. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women (2005, p.5).

The women of the Igbo community engage in multiple roles; they work in agricultural fields, in the domestic arenas and are responsible for child upbringing. Yet their contribution to the sustenance and development of the community is devalued as it is a highly patriarchal society. Domestic labour is socially invisible and considered unproductive despite of its enormous energy and time consumption. On the other hand, men cultivate yams and earn respect and honour in the society. Men's works are idealised and acknowledged. In addition to the toil in the fields and household, women become victims of domestic violence as well. There is a compelling instance in the novel in which Okonkwo beats his wife Ojiugo for not providing him food on time. Achebe who was vehemently criticized for his staunch patriarchal representation in his novels justifies this incident as, "Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (2001, p. 27). Achebe normalises and justifies Okonkwo's act of battering Ojiugo as the primary duty of a wife is to feed her man according to the cultural norms. The passive stance adopted by the neighbours witnessing the violent act showcases the plight of women in the community. It is "normal" to punish the women who do not follow or breach the rules of the community. Okonkwo's other wives try to stop him reminding him it is 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. 28). It is significant to note that, the wives stop him only because it is the Week of Peace. Any act of violence during this week is strictly forbidden in the community. The customs and beliefs of the community weigh more than the physical and mental well-being of women. Referring to this incident, Strong Leek notes, "There is, moreover, no week or even day of peace for the women of Umofia. They cannot find sanctuary within the confines of their own homes, or in the arms of their own husbands" (2001, pp. 29-35). Ojiugo remains a representative of the women of the community who are at the receiving end of their husbands' uncontrollable anger. Ekwefi, Okonkwo's another wife is also a victim of his uncontrollable rage. She is beaten for cutting a banana leaf to wrap some food (Achebe, 2001, p. 37). The incidents are shreds of evidence of women's status in the Igbo community as well as their devaluation of women in the institution

of marriage. They are the victims of double marginalisation on the grounds of race as well as gender.

As a ritual, there are strict rules and practices associated with the celebration of the festival. It is compulsory and customary to prepare fresh yams on the festival day. The cleanliness followed by the community members is clearly explained by Achebe. It is not only confined to the culinary domain but the entire house and surroundings are also cleaned and decorated for the festival. The general misconception of tribals as unhygienic people is brilliantly reconstructed by Achebe. He writes, "All cooking pots, calabashes, and wooden bowls are thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortar in which yam was pounded" (Achebe, 2001, p. 35). The culinary tools are treated with special care. R S Khare stresses that kitchen utensils produce a highly complex system of symbolism. "Food utensils just like food area and cook logically reinforce the cultural principles of rank and ritual interrelations" (Khare, 1976, p. 54). Some of the utensils are taken out only during special occasions and are kept separate from the utensils of daily domestic use which are ritually impure.

Okonkwo's wives and kids decorate the house to welcome the festival.

Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had then drawn patterns on them in white, yellow and dark green. They then set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomach and on their backs. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns (Achebe, 2001, p.36).

It is essential to note the creative expressions of Igbo women. They are talented in decorating and beautifying themselves and their living surroundings. Painfully, the men or the history itself fail to appreciate and acknowledge their women's creativity and potential. The main part of the festival is the commensality associated with it. It helps to comprehend societal relations through a bigger lens. Scrutinizing not only consumption but also the other stages of foodways is effective in documenting various cultural aspects of a group. Okonkwo and every other man in the community display their status and success through the feast. Yam foo-foo and vegetable soup are the main dishes of the day. The quantity of the foo-foo is a determining factor of a man's degree in the community. It is said, "No matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relations they invited from neighbouring villages, there was always a huge quantity of food left over at the end of the day" (p.35). The leftover food stands for their previous year's achievement in yam cultivation. The famous story associated with commensality is the following:

The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guests a mound of foo-foo so high that those who sat on one side could not see what

was happening on the other, and it was not until late in the evening that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the meal had fallen to on the opposite side. It was only then that they exchanged greetings and shook hands over what was left of the food (p.36).

As yam stands for the representation of masculinity, the feast associated with the festival aids a man in gathering name and fame among the community members and his relatives. Other than the quantity of food, the involvement and seating in cooking and eating are pointers of power dynamics. Arjun Appadurai observes, "Food transactions express the superiority of men largely their priority in being served food, the positions which they physically occupy, and their disengagement from the cooking process" (1981, pp. 494-511). Okonkwo remains disengaged from the act of cooking as it is considered 'women's domain'. Okonkwo "was always uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast" (Achebe, 2001, p. 36). The male members' disengagement from cooking and domestic activities highlight the gender roles entrenched in the community. He prefers working on his farm. It is attached to the societal acceptance of masculinity and success. It is his deliberate attempt to wash off the stains associated with his effeminate father. He strictly keeps away from any kind of act or word that tamper his masculinity. He does not even prefer to show his love towards his children as showing emotions is a sign of femininity and hence weakness. The only emotion he expresses is his uncontrollable rage, especially towards his wives. He never misses an opportunity to exhibit his masculine powers and features. Thus, the feast of the festival becomes an opportunity to show a man's masculinity, power, status, and dominance.

Though not discussed in detail, the food arrangements associated with a wedding are narrated through the wedding of Obierika's daughter. Yam pottage, foo-foo, and soup were the main attractions of the day. The community members' unity and cooperation can be deciphered through the associated acts of food preparation. Cooking of yam and cassava, and pounding of foo-foo are done simultaneously by women and young men. The division of labour rests on the defined gender roles. The heavy tasks of splitting woods and pounding yam are men's affairs. These are done by young men entering manhood. It is a matter of pride for them as these tasks exhibit their masculinity. On the contrary, women's hard work and efforts to feed the whole gathering remain unnoticed and normal. The attunement of young boys and girls to the prescribed gender frameworks of the community is embedded in such tasks. Achebe mentions Nwoye, Okonkwo's son:

Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, pounding food. On receiving

such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles (p. 49).

Nwoye must have ingrained the ‘ways of a man’ from his patriarchal father, Okonkwo who is delighted to see his son’s manly development. Simultaneously, he scolds his favourite daughter Ezinma to sit and behave like a woman. On the other hand, he thinks, “If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit” (pp. 61-62). It is disheartening to note that, despite of Ezinma’s potentials and capabilities, Okonkwo contemplates she should have been a boy. The men of the community never acknowledge or value the real potentials, creative talents, and existence of women.

Obierika’s eldest brother breaks the kola nut in the ceremony. Kola nut is of paramount importance in Igbo culture. The breaking and offering of kola nut precedes any other acts of a gathering. Ikenna Ukpabi Unya writes,

The kola nut is to the Igbo people what the prayer book stands for in the Christian world. It has ritual powers for peace, long life, prosperity, and unity; also used for sacrifices and functions, as a facilitator of communication between men and the gods (2021, pp. 289-312).

Talking about the acceptability of kola nuts, Unya continues:

In Igbo cosmology and philosophy, the kola nut is seen and described as a king. This is because it always comes first in every social gathering. It is used to welcome guests during meetings or public gatherings, used for marriage ceremonies, title taking, oath taking, sacrifices and others (pp. 289-312).

Like yam, kola nut also connotes the supremacy of masculinity. Usually, only men are privileged to break the kola nut and initiate the customs of a ritual or celebration.

There is another instance of commensality in the novel. The feast is arranged by Okonkwo as part of thanksgiving to his mother’s clan members. Okonkwo’s authority over his wives is explicated through his culinary instructions. They are asked to provide cassava for the feast. Ekwefi provided cassava, Nwoye’s mother and Ojiugo provided smoked fish, palm oil, and pepper for the soup (Achebe, 2001, p. 154). Okonkwo decides the items for the feast and it is the responsibility of the wives to fulfil his orders which once again points to the decision-making power of men in the community. As a highly patriarchal society, men enjoy the privilege of taking decisions on every aspect of community and family life and women merely follow.

The ingredients he asks for are laden with the significations of femininity, especially the cassava. Okonkwo takes the responsibility of collecting yam and meat. Meat always stands for masculinity and patriarchal powers. The act of

consuming meat “represents the dominance of man over animal and has been historically linked to status and power” (Adams, 2010, p. 48). This is also another way of displaying Okonkwo’s supremacy over his wives as both ingredients, i.e. yams and meat, are highly symbolic of masculinity, dominance, and power.

Okonkwo’s stern patriarchal nature is echoed in his reply to Ekwefi’s comment on the number of goats to be slaughtered. Ekwefi suggested slaughtering two goats, but Okonkwo outrightly replied, “It was not her affair” (Achebe, 2001, p. 155). He strongly believes, the status of a man rests on his ability to control his family. Okonkwo thinks, “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially women) he was not really a man” (p. 50). His fierce retort further elevates his patriarchal attitude, asserting complete control over the women and the feast arrangements.

The feast turns to be a symbolic representation and reflection of the hierarchical order of the community. The breaking of the kola nut, the order in which the items are served, and the role distribution in the commensality enfold layers of power structures. The main dishes of the day include yam pottage, foo-foo, egusi soup, bitter leaf soup, and palm wine. The oldest of the extensive family breaks the kola nut and prays to the ancestors for the well-being of the family. Following the tradition, yam pottage is served first. Yam, the masculine crop, not only shows its power in the agricultural land, but also on the dining table. It is the king of crops and has prime position on the table as it is cultivated by men who hold prime position in the society. Then comes foo-foo, which is a little lower in status. Thus, the order of serving the dishes offers a microcosm of gender disparity among the Igbo community.

One could not trace the voice of a woman in the gathering. The gathering is a men’s affair to talk and renew relations. Chinua Achebe is vehemently questioned and criticized for his one-dimensional characterization of women. Discussing the role of women characters in male-authored works, Carolyn Kumah (2000) observes that the women characters are silent, submissive, and rarely granted primary status and they remain absent in the public sphere. The highly patriarchal world of Achebe never grants voice to female characters. Women’s absence in commensality is conspicuous. They become background characters facilitating the smooth functioning of gatherings. They prepare and serve food for the guests. They become silent spectators but active facilitators who smoothen the act of communal eating. Age old histories of gender disparity and bias poignantly narrate the challenges and inequalities faced by women in domestic and culinary realms. They remain voiceless blindly following the directives of men. Historical accounts from eighteenth-century rural Sweden document a practice wherein women in the household were not allotted chairs at the dining table. Instead, they were expected to stand throughout the meal,

ready to address man's needs in the table setting (Grignon, 2001, pp. 22-33). Even after centuries, the plight of women in some cultures remains the same.

Emphasizing the momentousness of eating together, one of the elders commented,

A man calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (p.157).

The act of eating together reasserts the cultural identity of the community members. Talking about the interlaces of rituals and food of the Oglala tribe⁸, William Powers and Marla Powers write, "Special kinds of ritual foods are prepared and eaten by the congregation in a way that serves as a symbolic statement about their sense of identity" (1984, pp. 40-96). Deborah Lupton opines, "Sharing and incorporating food in a ritual meal implies the incorporation of the partaker into the community simultaneously defining his or her particular "place" within it. The individual, in the act of eating, is both 'eating into his body or self and being eaten into the community'" (1996, p. 17). The process of eating cements the bond among the community members. They use such events to discuss the functioning and transformations happening in society.

The tribal community's respect and indebtedness towards their ancestors is of utmost significance. Ancestors are remembered and fed on every special occasion in the village. They believe in the spirit of their dead ones and appease them for harmonious living and good yield. Tom Standage in his *An Edible History of Humanity* notes, "Food offerings and sacrifices were used to maintain the stability of the universe and ensure the continuation of agricultural cycles" (2010, pp. 49-50). During the feast at Okonkwo's mother's place, Uchendu the oldest of the family offers the sacrifices. Okonkwo offers sacrifices to his forefathers during the New Yam Festival as well. "Early that morning as he offered a sacrifice of new yam and palm oil to his ancestors he asked them to protect him, his children, and their mothers in the new year" (Achebe, 2001, p. 38). It is no wonder the order of hierarchy reflects in the prayer as well. He mentions the women of the house at the end of the prayer as 'mothers' completely neglecting their essence of self-importance and worth. Their identity is intrinsically bound to the culturally conditioned gender roles of 'mothers, wives, and daughters.' They are never valued and acknowledged for their individuality, hard work, talents, and contribution to the family and community's development. It is not only the case of Okonkwo's wives. All women in the community are destined to

8. Oglala tribe – The Oglala are one of the seven subtribes of Lakota people, who live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

be known in relation to their husbands and kids. Throughout the novel women are seen as cultivators and cooks who look into domestic affairs and are also responsible for their children's upbringing.

If the ritual is conducted in the family, the head of the family is entitled to do the offering. In a communal or extensive family gathering, the oldest and the most respected male member provides the offerings. Gods and ancestors, are given supreme importance in Igbo culture and they are the first recipients of the prepared food or kola nuts. The order of eating also signifies the hierarchy existing in the society. The community members are allowed to eat only after the customary offerings.

Conclusion

The burgeoning of Literary Food Studies bestows an augmented apprehension of culture. Food and its associated habits and ways disclose the cultural and social functioning of a community. Commensality, a slice of Food Studies, is a way to build and cherish social relations through the act of eating. A reading that transcends the accepted definition of commensality offers a lens to understand the hierarchies and power dynamics in a society. The food as well as the way one eats carry cultural meanings.

Though food is not the centre of Achebe's debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the cultural operations in the Igbo community can be deciphered through their foodways. The semiotic reading of commensality and the accompanying tasks in the novel holds a mirror to the identity, wealth, rank, status, power, supremacy, and gender inequalities among the Igbo community members. The culinary utensils, ingredients, language, and order of serving in eating are highly symbolic of the hidden cultural transactions of the community.

Okonkwo, the main male character in the novel, displays his wealth and masculinity through yam cultivation and grand feasts. His staunch patriarchal ideology and authority over his wives, and the subservient position of women in a patriarchal family and community are reflected in commensality.

The patriarchal Igbo community never grants women any voice in the public and private sphere. Women remain mute spectators, but vibrant coordinators of men's communal eating, the mere act of which reinforces the assigned traditional gender roles of women as cooks and care takers. Unfortunately, women's significant contribution to the proper functioning of family and community is undervalued and unacknowledged. Commensality, one of the emerging areas in academic discussions can not only unite people, but also separate them. The instances of commensality in a literary writing offer a possibility to delve into the deep layers of culture from which it is produced.

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