***GNOSI:* An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis**
Volume 3, Issue 3, December, 2020

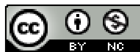
ISSN (Online): 2714-2485

Feasts and Fasts: Satiety and Starvation in *Things Fall Apart*

Harry Olufunwa[1], Bífátifé Olúfémi Adésèye[2]
[1]Department of English and Literary Studies
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti
holufunwa@fuoye.edu.ng

[2]Department of Theatre and Media Arts
Federal University, Oye Ekiti, Nigeria.
bifatife.adeseye@fuoye.edu.ng

(**Received**: June-2020; **Accepted**: October-2020; Available **Online**: December-2020)


This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License CC-BY-NC-4.0 ©2020 by author (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's best-known novel has been rarely considered in food-related terms in spite of comprehensive investigations into almost all other aspects of the complex and engaging culture it portrays. This paper seeks to help redress that omission by looking at the way in which literal and metaphorical notions of satiety and starvation offer new insights into *Things Fall Apart*. By looking at the ways in which the various meanings of satiety and starvation are implicated within each other, it is argued that they accurately replicate the concerns of a novel set in an era momentously poised between continuity and change, in addition to further illuminating the motivations for the behaviour of its characters.

Keywords: food; fiction; satiety; starvation; sacrifice.

INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart (1995) is as much a story of literal and symbolic feasts and fasts as it is a tale of culture and conflict. Like other postcolonial writers, Achebe utilizes "an expansive alimentary epistemology – one that encompasses food, consumption, refusal, and deprivation" (Parma 2020, p. 161). This essay focuses on the manifestations of food as satiety and starvation as they existed in an indigenous society before the advent of colonialism in order to evaluate an indigenous African

society's relationship with food and related issues on its own terms rather than as, say, a consequence of the colonial encounter.

The importance of examining food-related issues in a precolonial African context cannot be overemphasized. As Ato Quayson (1994) has said in another context, what is often conveyed is the "implicit assumption that post-colonial literatures are in a perpetual umbilical dance with the metropolitan center, counter-productive though it is" (p. 119). Far too often, the impression given is that precolonial African foodways as depicted in literature are a mere prequel, a backstory, an era whose relevance is heavily dependent on the periods that succeeded it. Food was cooked in Africa before the advent of colonialism; attitudes, beliefs and entire worldviews were structured around what people ate, how they ate it, why they ate it, and who they ate it with. Such portrayals in literature merit study in their own right, not as corollaries or addenda, or only in contrast to the changes wrought by slavery, forced migration, colonial rule, or modernity.

Just as no one would reasonably accept that African history started with the emergence of European colonialism, so should it be unacceptable to assume that literary examinations of food in African literature are better undertaken when confined to the colonial and postcolonial eras. Detailed examinations of food in precolonial African literature will enable a better understanding of those foodways in their original contexts, the etiquette which shaped them, the taboos which defined them, the rules of hospitality which characterized them, the rituals which enabled them, and the people whom they defined, and who defined them.

This paper examines food "as a supplementary mode of communication within a story" (p. 17). Food, in other words, offers meanings and interpretations which further illuminate issues portrayed in the text via description, dialogue and the creation of situations. Its ubiquity, necessity, and cultural rootedness make it a particularly useful tool in this regard:

Food is used in every society on earth to communicate messages. Preeminent among these are messages of group solidarity; food sharing is literally sacred in almost all religions and takes on a near-sacred quality in many ... families around the world. It also carries messages about status, gender, role, ethnicity, religion, identity, and other socially constructed regimes. It is also, very often, used in even more fine-tuned ways, to mark or indicate particular occasions, particular personal qualities, particular hangups and concerns. It is subject to snobbism, manipulation, and debate (Anderson 2005, p. 6).

In *Things Fall Apart*, food, as demonstrated in satiety and starvation, sharpens conventional portraits of traditional Igbo society by identifying the importance of agricultural activity and feasts in social life, highlights submerged narratives, analyzes the links between satiety, starvation and personality, facilitates the delineation of the personality of Okonkwo and other characters, and proffers new insights on the implications of what happens to them. Food is analyzed from the perspective of extremes; superabundance and deficiency, both of which are representative of the poles of possibility within which Okonkwo and other characters move in traditional Igbo society. Literature's special ability to do this is unique:

... it is only through imaginative engagement that our relationship with food – what it is, where it comes from, how it identifies societies and cultures – can be interrogated and redefined at the most profound level – and possible futures opened up. (Archer, et. al. 2014, p. 165).

Just as food offers a viable framework for the understanding of a given society, so does its presentation as satiety or starvation provide insights into situation,

circumstance, personality, attitude and character. It is not merely the symbolism of food itself, but the more specifically complex symbolism of its overconsumption and undernourishment in both literal and metaphorical terms. For *Things Fall Apart*, a novel famously positioned between continuity and change, between old and new, between free will and fate, and between coherence and fragmentation, it is a particularly appropriate approach to use.

Satiety is the end result of the plenitude of food, an ostensibly unambiguously happy even paradisiacal situation. It implies good harvests, communal peace and harmony, and general prosperity. Starvation is the ultimate consequence of food scarcity, and it implies failed harvests, widespread strife, and general poverty. But satiety is also closely associated with gluttony, just as starvation can be venerated as fasting. Just as there are "nutritive and non-nutritive uses of food" (Edwin, 2008, p. 41), so are there non-dietary manifestations of satiety and starvation. As shall be demonstrated, characters, situations and narratives in the novel are characterized by forms of satedness and hunger that are often a complex amalgam of the literal and the symbolic. Ordinary notions of satiety and starvation often conceive of them as polar opposites, but they may in fact better understood as actually being mutually constitutive, dependent upon each other for their full meaning. This essay looks at the nature of such interconnectedness the multiple meanings engendered by satiety and starvation in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and their implications for the overall themes of the novel.

Satiety can be regarded as a state in which a condition or need or desire (usually hunger) has been fully satisfied to the extent that continued intake is no longer necessary, at least for the time being. A state of starvation may be said to have been reached when a need or desire (again, usually hunger) has not been satisfied to the extent that it is in real danger of having severely deleterious consequences. Satiety may lead to starvation, and vice versa, as is often the case with food. David Goldstein succinctly states the way in which satiety and starvation are linked to each other:

... when we are hungry, we have a need for food, which we experience as an emptiness that needs filling. When we eat, we experience the pleasure of replenishing that lack and are then satisfied, full "of a natural plenitude" (p. 35). Food in the novel transcends mere "gastronomic interjection," (Shahani 2018, p. 4); it contributes crucially to Achebe's project of cultural reclamation and affirmation, charting the inevitability of culture change, and documenting the far-reaching effects of colonial incursion, in addition to its use as an element of realism and local authenticity. Food manifests as agricultural produce, as means of sustenance, as evidence of divine approval, and as means of worship. As Boyce and Fitzpatrick claim,

... food and its consumption operate as potent and multi-faceted symbols. Food is sometimes present simply as what gets eaten but more often ... it functions as a conduit for something else, signalling wealth or poverty, cultural difference or a sense of belonging, status and identity in terms of rank, gender and moral standing, and sometimes (but never simply) fashion (p. 3).

Agricultural activity is the main food-production process in *Things Fall Apart*, and is central to the novel. Its distinct, predictable cycles set the pace for the reassuring rhythm of human activity; the produce it yields provides sustenance as well as the wealth that defines manhood and achievement. Umuofia's preeminent deity, Ani, symbolizes the complex interconnection of food with consumption, status and worship. She is the guarantor of fruitful harvests, the ultimate arbiter of moral behavior, and the receptacle within which the ancestors are buried. A feast is thus the simultaneous worship of the deity and acknowledgment of her bounty, the reward for

keeping religious injunctions, and communion with the ancestors, in addition to being the celebration of communal life. By extension, a fast is the putative consequence of religious, relational or other discernible failures. Farming, in essence, constitutes the basic framework within which satiety and starvation are realized.

Attitudes to food in *Things Fall Apart* are deceptively sophisticated, characterized as they are by ritual, taboo, courtesy, ceremony, and an ever-present consciousness of the importance of deities and ancestors. Food transcends mere sustenance; its socializing functions are vital in the context of traditional Igbo life and the way in which it is intimately interwoven with the act of worship. It is also synonymous with work, since it is the unremittingly hard farm labour which produces the crops that are used as food: "Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king" (p. 10). As the quintessential "man's crop," it is similarly synonymous with masculinity, wealth and social prestige, as successful farmers like Nwakibie and Okonkwo enjoy the social esteem of an agrarian society. Kola is as essential a precursor to the act of conversation as it is to feasts. The fact that its significance as symbolic nutriment is out of all proportion to its nutritional value demonstrates the ritual context within which all food consumption takes place. Hosts taste their food first, simultaneously signifying the absence of ill-will and testifying to the quality of what has been prepared.

Just as this complex understanding of food is an ever-present constant in traditional Igbo life as depicted in the novel, so is its opposite, the absence of food, an inescapable reality. The hunger which underscores Unoka's poverty is stated very early in the novel: "He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat" (p. 2). His lack of success is implicated in his family's lack of food. Okonkwo's worries about Nwoye are essentially alimentary anxieties: "He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices" (p. 17). And he perceives the consequences of Nwoye's betrayal in similar terms: "He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god" (p. 50).

FEASTING AND FASTING

The relationship between the satiety of feasting and the starvation of fasting is demonstrative of the way in which Achebe depicts the organic connectedness of traditional Igbo society, the complicated nature of the individuals who constitute it, and the difficult choices they are compelled to make. At the simplest level, periods of feasting are interspersed with periods of fasting; feasting is all the more enjoyable after fasting; the New Yam festival, for instance, takes place after a phase of enforced dietary restrictions forbidding the consumption of newly-harvested yams. Feasts are symbolic of the clan as a living community of people; they underline the ties of kinship, neighbourliness and friendship which bind them to one another. Their significance cannot be restricted to just the culinary aspect, though that is important. They are also indicative of the full participation in the cultural feast that is traditional Igbo life: the meetings, ceremonies, festivals and other activities that comprise its social, political and economic existence.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of feasts in *Things Fall Apart* is their overt commensality, defined as "how acts of sharing food help construct self-other relationships, group interactions, and ... whole societies" (Shahani 2018, p. 22). More than the fare on offer, the occasion they seek to commemorate, or even the fun itself, feasts in the novel are essentially celebrations of the community, whatever else they

may be. There is the deliberate coalescing of extended family which is a major aspect of the New Yam festival. There is the "difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village" (p. 37) which characterizes the *uri* ceremony of Obierika's daughter. Even the patently unsociable Okonkwo describes the magnificent valedictory feast he gives in Mbanta in consciously communal terms: "I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet" (p. 55). As the main feast of the novel, the New Yam festival is the clan's most important celebratory event, a true celebration of "food as fellowship" (Fieldhouse 2017, p. 125). It a complex combination of ecofest (a festival celebrating "astronomical or seasonal events" and designed to ensure "continuity of the food supply," theofest (a festival celebrating religious events), and cultural festival (Fieldhouse 2017, pp. 207-211). It is the culmination of hard work, climatic cooperation, and divine sanction. It is feast and it is festivity. It celebrates yam as produce, as food, as sacrifice, and as social glue, incorporating gods, ancestors and humans as celebrants. It is the precise point at which the ever-present threat of starvation formally gives way to the seductive promise of spiritually-sanctioned satiety. A festival in which the presence of in-laws is obligatory, it overtly brings the extended family together, cementing ties between families and kin. Food is perceived in the proper context, with its multiple meanings combined to present a feast which is both satisfying and edifying. This is conspicuous consumption in the best sense of the term.

Fasting in the novel is rarely the self-denial often associated with the term in its ordinary sense. It is present as inadequate nourishment due to physical indolence (Unoka), the inability to eat because of sadness (Ikemefuna), or emotional distress (Okonkwo). There are the fasts resulting from abruptly-halted feasts, as would very likely have been the case in Ezeudu's defiled funeral, as well as that resulting from the ill-treatment of prominent Umofia elders by the colonial administration. These instances help to establish the reality of hunger as a fact of life in traditional Igbo society. If there are rich and successful citizens like Nwakibie, who are capable of feasting, there are also their indigent counterparts like Unoka, who are often compelled to fast. If celebrations like the New Yam festival are occasions for joyous feasting, there are also situations in which individuals are unwilling or unable to eat.

Like feasting, the meanings of fasting also extend beyond the ordinary sense of the deprivation of nourishment. It also includes the inability to fully take part in or enjoy one's membership of Umuofia society, because one is statutorily unable to do so (like the *osu)*; because one is unable to reconcile oneself with certain practices (Nwoye); because one is emotionally unable to participate in communal life on his own terms (Okonkwo); or because one transgresses the laws of the community (Okonkwo). The *osu* are perhaps the community for whom metaphorical fasting is most apparent. The comprehensive finality of their exclusion from the life of the clan is chilling in its completeness:

He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart - a taboo for ever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste - long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An osu could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest (p. 51). For societies as communal as this one, the ritual exclusion of ostensible clan members from full participation in traditional society is existential fasting of the worst kind. Ironically undermining the professed egalitarianism of the culture, it

denies social recognition regardless of ability, looks, behaviour or commitment to the social good. It paradoxically replicates religious fasting its spiritual basis and devotion to deities, while inverting the voluntary nature of such devotion. Unsurprisingly, the *osu* hunger for acceptability, and seek it in the only institution open to them, the newly-arrived church.

As a group who are *in* society, but not *of* it, the *osu* occupy an existential no-man's-land between the certainties of satiety and the unknowns of starvation. They can never attain the former, but are not necessarily condemned to the latter. Oddly enough, their ritual predicament simultaneously contrasts with and replicates that of Okonkwo. The *osu* hope to emerge from the social starvation imposed by custom, just as Okonkwo escaped from the physical starvation imposed by parentage. But while their actions are consciously geared towards societal inclusion, Okonkwo's actions are unconsciously geared towards societal exclusion.

SATIETY AS SUBTEXT

Satiety manifests obliquely in *Things Fall Apart*. It is not examined explicitly and does not constitute a major theme. There are hints of it in depictions of the wealth of Nwakibie and in the gloriously-unrestrained eating of various feasts portrayed in the novel, but the emphasis seems to be on satiety as a temporary attainment rather than a permanent state. This is probably unsurprising for a culture in which absolutism of any kind is famously abhorred. In this regard, it is significant that no one is ever seen to acquire the clan's fourth and highest title; the attainment of social satiety of this kind is only a tantalizing possibility, something to be aimed at, but rarely achieved. Satiety is, in fact, a subtext of the novel, carefully concealed beneath more obvious matters and used to further illuminate them. Rather than treat it in the main narrative thread, Achebe examines satiety indirectly in the proverbs, sayings and folktales recounted by characters. This serves to highlight the complexity of the issues surrounding satiety in the context of traditional Igbo society. It is implicit, for example, in Okonkwo's ambitions for himself: he achieves his wish to become one of the lords of the clan, but the attainment of this goal cannot satisfy him. He seeks *satiety*, not mere *satisfaction*, a contradiction which is at the heart of his tragedy.

Food-related proverbs and folktales put issues of satiety in perspective. The tale "How Tortoise Got a Cracked Shell" examines the social consequences of over-indulgence in such a way as to interrogate Okonkwo's own unbridled ambition. The parallels between Tortoise and Okonkwo are pointedly similar. Both are characterized by a rampant individualism which places them at odds with others and ultimately alienates them from society. Both utilize their innate abilities to quell their hunger, but trespass the bounds of propriety set by their respective societies. Both realize their helplessness in the face of communal disapprobation, and both utilize solutions of dubious utility.

Some food-related sayings in the novel seem to pose a tension between what "was" and what now "is." The adage, "Looking at a king's mouth ... one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast" (p.8) implicitly shows the distance between the king now and the baby then; "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (p. 8) indirectly poses the difference between those who allegedly have received supernatural help and those who have not been so lucky. This opposition between past and present, and between divine assistance and personal effort emphasizes the multiplicity of possibilities and interpretations which can be brought to bear on any understanding of satiety. It can be criticized as blatant over-indulgence, or it can be praised as the attainment of

legitimate ambition. And Okonkwo is symbolic of this essential ambiguity. His critics call him "the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi" (p. 9). While arrogance and hubris can easily be identified with Okonkwo, it is arguable that this is an unfair assessment. But it is also arguable that his conceit, his ambition, and his raging self-obsession do combine to pose a great burden for his *chi*. As he himself laments, "Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation" (p. 43).

STARVATION AS SELFHOOD

Unlike satiety, starvation is portrayed less indirectly in *Things Fall Apart*; that does not imply that it is not treated with great complexity, however. Starvation manifests in the novel as situation, as attitude, and as fate. It is demonstrated as situation in the case of Unoka's laziness and poverty. It manifests as situation and fate in Ekwefi's maternal misfortunes. For Okonkwo, starvation appears as situation, as fate, and as attitude: the situation is the emergence of British colonialism and its massive disruption of traditional ways of life; the attitude is Okonkwo's ambition to succeed in life and his refusal to countenance otherwise-positive qualities he considers weak; it is fate in his inability to overcome his personal demons.

At first, it seems that Okonkwo is hungry in the most positive sense of the term; his desire to make something of himself is a worthy goal, one that is fully recognized by a fundamentally egalitarian society where "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (p. 2). Starved of a decent inheritance, Okonkwo's most admirable characteristics come to the fore as he struggles to overcome his circumstances: he acknowledges and taps into the overt communality of his society when he appeals to Nwakibie for seed yams; he does not let the climatic chaos of the ensuing horrific planting season discourage him; as champion wrestler, formidable warrior and successful farmer, he achieves social preeminence within the context of traditional norms, and is justly hailed for it. Okonkwo "had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders" (p. 2). In the sense that he has demonstrated the hard work and determination required to succeed, he certainly has washed his hands. His tragedy is that his ambitions grow to the extent that they become an "insatiable omnivorousness" (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 2017, p. 251).

It is at precisely the point of communal acclaim that the less-attractive aspects of his personality become most prominent: he disparages a less-successful kinsman as an "*agbala;*" he "could never become as enthusiastic over feasts as most people (p. 11); he sees open-handedness and generosity more in terms of prestige than as goodwill. An important part of the feast-fast dynamic is recognizing when one has had enough, that is, when the point of satiety has been reached, and responding accordingly on the basis of that fact. Okonkwo's hunger is apparently limitless, and encompasses murder, impiety and even self-hatred. It causes him to reject any traits or qualities that seemingly do not favour his goals, no matter how positive they may be in themselves. In an emotionally-expressive society, he becomes an automaton, programmed to display only one feeling: rage. And his fury, ironically, is never satiated; it is a monster that must be perpetually fed. It is thus no surprise that Okonkwo's anger is always seeking to vent itself. Perhaps the most egregious example is the way he relieves his "suppressed anger" (p. 11) by beating Ekwefi just before the New Yam festival. Not only is this anger unquenchable, it is self-consuming, as Okonkwo is regularly as angry with himself as he is with others. He is furious with himself for becoming a "shivering old woman" (p. 21) after participating in the killing

of Ikemefuna. He repeatedly questions the fidelity of his *chi* in angry frustration with life's setbacks.

Indeed, such outbursts constitute a steady counterpoint to the fear that also comes to dominate his personality. Like his anger, Okonkwo's fear has positive roots, but fails to strike the necessary balance between satiety and starvation. It is a major driving force in his bid for personal validation and social success: "he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death" (p. 5). But his inability to recognize that such fear cannot be allowed to degenerate into the crippling terror which paralyzes normal relationships causes it to dominate him. And, like his anger, his fear is simultaneously ravenous, insatiable and self-consuming. It continually demands ludicrous acts of masculinity which must be outstripped by even more incomprehensible demonstrations of supposed courage that ultimately achieve little, since in actuality, it is at heart "the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (p. 4). Feasting and fasting, satiety and starvation, anger and fear are the mutually-constitutive polarities which define Okonkwo and ultimately become synonymous with his personality.

SATIETY AS STARVATION

Things Fall Apart (1995) melds satiety and starvation in ways that illuminate the complex nature of the relationship between them, as well as their ambivalence in the context of Igbo traditional society. The locust visit is especially evocative of how the two phenomena are implicated within each other. In their ordinary sense, locusts are notorious pests, creatures whose voraciousness can cause starvation for the humans whose crops they devour. But they appear at precisely the time when, instead of being a starvation-inducing menace, they are a desirable delicacy, so rare that their deliciousness can only be apprehended by "instinct" (p. 18). Instead of causing fasts, the instinctively hungry people of Umuofia feast on them. Several characters also demonstrate the ambivalence of satiety-starvation. The long-suffering Ekwefi embodies both the potential and the danger of satiety and starvation, being a woman who has given birth ten times but has just the one child. Instead of enjoying satiated motherhood, she has had to suffer continual maternal deprivation, underlined by the repeated despair of dashed hopes. It is thus no surprise that she provides the atypical Ezinma with a virtual feast of motherly love, symbolized by "such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom" (p. 25).

The trio of Ezinma, Nwoye and Ikemefuna, in their different ways, also delineate the paradoxes which shape satiety and starvation in Umuofia. In deciding to "stay," Ezinma is apparently satiated with the cycle of birth and death characteristic of *ogbanje* children, and decides instead to thrive on the unquestioning love of Ekwefi, for whom she is "the center of her mother's world" (p. 25). Nwoye cannot bring himself to fully engage with traditional culture and thus develops a hunger for a way of life that can answer the questions his "callow mind" (p. 48) poses. With its notions of universal brotherhood, unconditional forgiveness and altruistic love, Christianity is ostensibly well-positioned to bring nourishment to "his parched soul" (p. 48). Ikemefuna is the gift of Mbaino aimed at sating Umuofia's desire for revenge, reparations and respect. In Okonkwo's household, his very presence satisfies both Nwoye's wish for a boon companion and Okonkwo's craving for unambiguously masculine sons. Consequently, his sacrifice is an indication of both the inherently-temporary nature of human satiety and the unquenching hunger of the gods for veneration.

Okonkwo is a study in the paradox of satiety and starvation. His monomaniacal focus on hating "everything that his father Unoka had loved" (p. 4) means that he sates himself with aggressive masculinity and starves himself of compassion. His agrarian achievements undoubtedly testify to his ability to produce food on a large scale; "long stacks of yam stood out prosperously" (p. 4) in his barn, but his personality is such that he continually hungers for ever-greater success and prominence on his own terms rather than those prescribed by the clan. He is a "good eater" (p. 11), but is uncomfortable with the social context of feasts that is so essential to their full meaning. Such discomfort reveals deeper issues: "Okonkwo's lack of enthusiasm for the celebration of food as food, rather than as a marker of social status, points to his essential isolation from a culture he ironically fights to preserve (Olufunwa 2000, p. 70). He feasts on his achievements, but they cannot satisfy him because he hungers for ever-greater goals. It is significant that, immediately after ostensibly sating his masculinity by accompanying Ikemefuna's executioners and killing him, Okonkwo suffers physical starvation in consequence.

Indeed, for Okonkwo, the parallels between satiety and starvation on the one hand, and free will and fate on the other are uncannily similar. The closer he approaches satiety, the stronger the influence of free will seems to be. The nearer he draws to starvation, the greater the impact of fate appears to be. Yet, given the complexity of Okonkwo's tortured soul, it could just as easily be argued that the closer he gets to satiety, the more acute his starvation becomes. Wealth, success and fame do not mellow him; feasts like the New Yam festival do not entertain him; he is unhappy with his son because he is not exactly like him; he finds it difficult to operate within the restrictions imposed by his culture, even though, as one of the nine *egwugwu* of the clan, he is in fact supposed to be one of the stoutest defenders of clan law.

Taciturn, inarticulate and stuttering, he is patently unable to partake in the verbal feast (you qu?!) that is conversation in traditional Igbo society. He is therefore contemptuous of the dialogue and consensus-building that are essential in a culture where speech is the precursor to action, not a substitute for it. His determination to suppress all emotions except anger cuts him off from the rich resources of empathy that are characteristic of life in his community, turning him into an isolationist anomaly in a profoundly communal society.

Okonkwo violates the Week of Peace, essentially a festival of concord in which "in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour" (p. 9), because his second wife, Ojiugo forgot to cook for him. Physical hunger combines with a penchant for violence and a disdain for verbal interaction to produce a major infringement of communal norms. Starvation leads to sin. It is truly ironic that Okonkwo, the farmer *par excellence*, violates a religious injunction designed to ensure bountiful harvests because he is hungry! When the narrative moves to Mbanta, satiety and starvation are manifested in a new context. Not only are Okonkwo's fear and anger further aggravated by his new circumstances, but the new tensions and pressures caused by Christianity come into play. As a radically new way of thinking, behaving and believing, Christianity brings very different perspectives to the issues of satiety and starvation, especially regarding their meanings and purpose within the context of colonialism and change. As portrayed in the text, Christianity seeks to clear a space for itself by defining itself in opposition to Igbo traditional culture. Thus, it proposes a new deity, new ways of worship, and new kinds of relationships between individuals and with the supernatural as a consequence. Unlike the agrarian, earth-centred religion structured around Ani, Christianity is essentially

heaven-focused and more individualistic in its emphasis on a personal relationship with God. Significantly, the traditional ethos which shapes the contours of the New Yam festival is replaced by a much more spiritual repast, as a new convert discovers: "Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the Feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the village variety. He had therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion (p. 56).

The notion of sacrifice is central to understanding the paradox of satiety and starvation: if the gods and ancestors don't feast, humans will fast. Sacrifice as indicative of the paradox that exists between satiety and starvation. It is the main ritual by which the hope of satiety becomes possible and the threat of starvation warded off. Unoka's failure as a farmer stems from his desire to "stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil" (p. 56). Okonkwo pays homage to his ancestors in the way he "worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children" (p. 4).

It is Okonkwo, not Ikemefuna, who is the novel's preeminent sacrificial offering: his suicide is an act of inverted self-sacrifice, a final act of the fierce individualism which characterized a life in which personal goals regularly took preeminence over communal norms. As such, it is rejected by Ani, and cleansing sacrifices are required to redeem the polluted land. But it can also be read as a sacrifice of propitiation designed to appease the wrathful colonial god, and thus ward off the consequences of communal punishment, such as that wrought upon Abame. In its own way, colonialism is as hungry for veneration as any traditional deity, and its sanctions for violation can be just as severe. As an exploitative system, with its "[a]symmetries, geographical and social, between production and consumption" (Roy 2020, p. 167), colonialism replicates and reifies the paradoxes inherent in the satiety-starvation matrix. Colonialism operates within what Alan Bewell calls "the context of imperial geophagy: in both the capacity to rule the world is signified by one's ability to consume it" (p. 143). At the broadest level, its ultimate aim is that of ensuring the satiety of the metropolitan ruling class, a goal it inevitably achieves at the expense of the starvation of the colonized peoples whose labour and resources are being exploited. In addition, however, colonialism further complicates the ambiguities of satiety and starvation in two main ways: by offering new forms of satiety and starvation (such as western education and trade), and by replacing indigenous forms of satiety and starvation with foreign ones (such as Christianity in place of indigenous religion). Colonialism, in essence, proposes forms of satiety that do not quite satiate and new approaches to hunger that plumb new depths of starvation. Christianity does enable many of traditional society's outcasts to live lives of potential freedom and dignity, but it also imposes new kinds of exclusion as well, ostracisms which are aggravated by individuals like Reverend Smith and Enoch. Then there is the emergence of the rent-seeking, bribery and extortion that allow interpreters and court messengers to satiate themselves with ill-acquired wealth. Time-tested ethics and behaviour are replaced by a crass materialism which no longer places honesty and communal values at the centre.

SUICIDAL SATIETY

The contradictions which characterize Okonkwo's suicide are well-known: he who won renown for killing the enemies of Umuofia has brought shame and disgrace upon the clan by killing himself; the man whose rags-to-riches story epitomized the community's highest ideals has become the man whose suicide violates its greatest

taboos; the one who wanted to be held in perpetual renown has gained eternal notoriety; a man who prided himself on shows of manliness ends life with a display of cowardice. There are also anomalies which are specific to satiety and starvation: in its individualistic isolation, his "self-slaughter" (Bloom 2010) is an act of autophagy, a self-consumption which reveals his alienation from a society where people eat together; the proficient farmer ostensibly favoured by agricultural goddess Ani has become the suicide utterly rejected by her; his hunger for glory and respect became so great that it consumed him.

The interlocking paradoxes which characterize Okonkwo's suicide crystallize his struggle between the extremes of satiety and starvation, and his failure to strike a balance between them. This is not a society in which one eats alone, as Tortoise should have known. Individualism in such a communal context can easily become synonymous with selfishness and greed. It is Okonkwo's tragedy that his capacity to stage feasts is undermined by an outlook on life that is pathologically uncomfortable with such emphatically culinary celebrations of life and living. In this regard, it is significant that his father Unoka, as poor, as cowardly, and as unsuccessful as he was, was far more aware of the communal ethos which underlies all feasting: "If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry" (p. 1). This difference in outlook is also seen in the way father and son meet their respective ends. Unoka, the weakling who cannot bear the sight of blood, takes his flute along with him to the Evil Forest. Okonkwo, the fearless warrior, cannot find anything to give him solace in his final moments. The impecunious father has his music; the prosperous son has nothing.

In hindsight, it is not surprising that a man so starved of affection, so emotionally undernourished, so psychologically famished, should continuously have difficulties with Ani, a deity who was "the source of all fertility" (p. 11). The beating he administers during the Week of Peace, for instance, continues in defiance of divine taboo simply because he "was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (p. 9). His need to sate his personal notions of masculinity trumps supernatural prohibition, communal disapprobation, and even personal self-esteem. Okonkwo's productivity, achievement and wealth actually conceal an emotional poverty that ultimately exposes itself.

Ogbuefi Okonkwo clearly demonstrates a capacity for both satiety and starvation. But such is his personality, the nature of his society, and the temper of his times, that satiety subverts starvation and starvation subverts satiety. Things, indeed, have fallen apart.

REFERENCES

Achebe, C. (1995). *Things Fall Apart* (Everyman's Library). [PDF]. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Anderson, E.N. (2005). *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Archer, E. J., Richard, M. T., & Howard T. (2014). *Food and the Literary Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bewell, A. (1999). *Romanticism and Colonial Discourse*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bloom, H. (2010). Introduction. In *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations)*, edited by Harold Bloom, 1-3. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.

Boyce, C., & Joan, F. (2017). *A History of Food in Literature: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present*. Oxford: Routledge.

Edwin, S. (2008). “Subverting Social Customs: The Representation of Food in Three West African Francophone Novels.” *Research in African Literatures*. 39 (3): 39-50.

Goldstein, D. (2010). “Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating.” *Gastronomica*. 10 (3): 34-44.

Fieldhouse, P. (2017). *Food, Feasts, and Faith: An Encyclopedia of Food Culture in World Religions*. Volume I: A-K. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC.

Highfield, J. B. (2017). *Food and Foodways in African Narratives: Community, Culture, and Heritage*. New York: Routledge.

Olufunwa, H. (2000). “Eating with Kings: Food and Ambition in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*. 17 (1): 69-71.

Quayson, A. (1994). “Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Ache be’s *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It.” *Researchin African Literatures*. 25 (4): 117-136.

Shahani, G. G. (2018). “Introduction: Writing on Food and Literature.” In *Food and Literature*, edited by Gitanjali G. Shahani, 1-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roy, P. (2020). “Postcolonial Tastes.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, edited by J. Michelle Coghlan, 161-181. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.