

**CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL:
EXAMPLES FROM ADICHE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*,
OKPEWHO'S *THE VICTIMS* AND ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL
APART***

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Abstract

*While it is true that nothing in life is certain, it is also true that this uncertainty is in itself a form of certainty. If people cannot be sure that anything is certain, they can at least be sure that uncertainty is a certainty. This paper examines the portrayal of certainty and uncertainty in modern African prose, particularly in Nigeria. It will attempt to do this through a close reading and analysis of three novels; *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *The Victims* (1987) by Isidore Okpewho and *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe. This paper highlights the significant tension between certainty and uncertainty, between reality and fantasy, and between fact and fiction. It also attempts to excavate the roles that social norms, values, and dispositions play in creating and sustaining these tensions and how the writers of these texts navigate them. The article concludes by extrapolating these tensions to future creative literary adventures that might emanate from Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Certainty, Uncertainty, Novel, Nigeria, African Literature*

Résumé

S'il est vrai que rien n'est certain dans la vie, il est tout aussi vrai que cette incertitude est en soi une forme de certitude. Si les gens ne peuvent être sûrs de rien, ils peuvent au moins être sûrs que l'incertitude est une certitude. Cet article examine la représentation de la certitude et de l'incertitude dans la prose africaine moderne, en particulier au Nigeria. Il s'efforcera d'y parvenir à travers une lecture attentive et une analyse de trois romans : *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Victims* (1987) d'Isidore Okpewho et *Things Fall Apart* (1958) de Chinua Achebe. Cet article met en évidence la tension significative entre certitude et incertitude, entre réalité et fantaisie, et entre fait et fiction. Il tente également de mettre en lumière les rôles que jouent les normes sociales, les valeurs et les dispositions dans la création et le maintien de ces tensions, ainsi que la manière dont les auteurs de ces textes les gèrent. L'article conclut en extrapolant ces tensions vers de futures aventures littéraires créatives qui pourraient émaner du Nigeria.

Mots-clés : *Certitude, Incertitude, Roman, Littérature africaine nigérian.*

1.0 Introduction

Certainty and uncertainty are themes that have been common throughout all branches of study or knowledge. The uncertainty principle is certainly one of the most well-known and significant features in physics. It can be seen as the most characteristic feature of quantum mechanics as opposed to classical descriptions of the physical universe. Put simply, the uncertainty principle (of position and momentum), as put forward by German physicist Werner Heisenberg, means that it is not possible to know the exact values of both the momentum and the position of a physical system at the same time. It is the basis for the conceptual difference between classical and quantum physics (Uncertainty Principle).

There are questions about risks in other branches of study, such as economics. It is these questions that force consumers to consider saving rather than consumption. So there is a branch of microeconomic theory that is concerned with optimal decision making under uncertainty; this branch, which has connections to game theory, is applied by insurance companies. Gunderman (2005), in *Education and the Art of Uncertainty*, says "uncertainty is one of the defining features of medicine" (Gunderman, 2005, p.45). This is, at first glance, surprising because the goal of medical science is not to make hypotheses or guesses but to develop theories that can be empirically tested." He concludes by saying:

Medical textbooks typically present information couched in terms of knowledge rather than opinion. Lecturers in medical school, residency, and continuing medical education programs often present material as though it were a simple fact, thereby implicitly squelching any scepticism. Yet applying medical research, textbooks, journal articles, and lecture materials to patient care inevitably represents an uncertain Art (Gunderman, 2005, p. 801).

According to Fromm (1947) "The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. The uncertainty is the condition to impel man to unfold his powers" (p. 112). As such, literature is not an exception to the all-important search for answers to questions of certain and uncertain. So the search for answers in literature can be regarded as one of the factors why people write, and why sometimes they often write some great stories. Certainly, there is a saying that nothing in life is certain, but it is also true that uncertainty is a certainty. While there may be no certainty that

anything is certain, there is always certainty that there is uncertainty.

Man has been concerned from time immemorial with the answers to the nagging questions regarding the past, present and future. It is certain that our world is in flux. There is much debate about whether there is certainty in this flux. For literary works in particular, it provokes the question: Does a worldview, cosmogony or cosmology shape people's notion of certainty and uncertainty and as such, its literary representation? To this question, we would submit "Yes, it does". While two of the three selected writers are from the same Igbo ethnic background, the other is from the Urhobo tribe. The fact that each of these writers engage with conflicts that interest them most perennially, directly or indirectly, is very important for the diagnosis of the difference in their perceptions of the world.

Whereas Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* shows polyandrous marriage as a virtue, Okpewho in *The Victims* shows it as a vice. For the Igbo man, in *Things Fall Apart*, it was important to have a large number of wives and children to ensure food security and status in the community. In Okpewho's *The Victims*, the nuclearity of family formations seems to be preeminent while in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* the romanticisation of the love which transcends racial differences is important in explaining how uncertainty in uniting people finally produces a sense of certainty for them. These differences in approach highlight the differences in the times and periods in which they wrote. This aligns with Heisenberg's argument regarding the impossibility of knowing the exact values of both the momentum and the position of a physical system, in this case that between the community and the individual as evidenced in these texts. Consequently, as we see in the progression from the precolonial (*Things Fall Apart*) to the post colonial (*Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Victims*), what is uncertain one day may become certain the next day or another day and vice versa.

A close analysis of these novels in the light of their authors' lives will suggest that variations in the life-world of these authors have also affected the way they portray certainty and uncertainty. This may explain why, for Achebe, writing, *Things Fall Apart*, is to demonstrate that Africa was stable before the coming of the white man and was actually

progressing in its development at a significant rate consistent with its terrestrial assets. For Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, published nearly half a century later, the need to project the uncertainty which people experience and suffer, particularly in times of war, becomes a more urgent task, while for Okpewho, an attempt is made to project a state of fractured domesticity marked by conflict, instability and gendered power imbalance.

2.0 Uncertainty and Certainty in African Literature

There are forms of uncertainty in every work of literary art; there is textual uncertainty, which is occasioned by the actions and reactions of the individual characters in-text as the writer simulates them to perform certain actions in order to move the story within the text forward. The degree of uncertainty impacts the themes and plotting of the text as well as the character development. The second level of uncertainty is that derived from the language to be used in writing the text and the language norms adhered to during the process. That there is an ongoing interaction between the portrayal of certainty and uncertainty in these three novels and that this interface brings these novels closer to reality than other genres cannot be disputed, what is highly controversial is whether or not the novel form needs either to capture reality and whether or not there is a reality in the first place. For example, in *The Victims*, Nwabunor, who is unable to conceive more children, suspects everyone for her misfortune and the first suspect is Odogua, who she feels is trying to wreck her life. As such, she is sure that Odogua is an enemy but she was not sure of how to tackle her. This uncertainty of which way to go in order to re-establish her status in the family leads Nwabunor to perpetrate the most atrocious of acts by poisoning Odogua and her children, and inadvertently her only son, Bomboy. The home, which starts out with an excess of certainty, is lost to uncertainty at the end of the novel as a result of the inability of the head of the home to accept his fate as the father of an only son. But one would like to argue that the 'certainty' of narration in this novel that polygamy is always doomed to fail, in line with Oguzie and Nnaji's claim that polygamy leads to moral and psychological instability (Oguzie and Nnaji 45), is tempered by the uncertainty of trying to have a desired number of children, and of a particular sex, from a monogamous marriage.

One of the important characteristics of African literature (oral, written, or a hybrid) that sets it apart from other literatures, as evidenced in the three novels being discussed in this paper, is the dynamic interplay between certainty and uncertainty. Given that African storytelling is a result of collective community beliefs, memory and long-standing cultural philosophies, it often starts with certainty: a reliance on the supremacy of the past, the unity of the community, and the moral certitude and structure of indigenous worldviews. This certainty, which exemplifies the African experience, has been invariably and persistently destabilised by historical, political and existential challenges such as colonialism, urbanisation, modernity, migration, civil war and globalisation, which have in turn created new forms of uncertainty which destabilise original certainties and challenge assumed truths for individuals and communities.

As a result, African literature has become a site for authors to navigate shifting realities and multiple epistemologies. Given the fact that narratives often challenge the boundaries of knowledge, trust, and preservation, the characters are often caught between the certainties of tradition and the uncertainties of changing social realities. This uncertainty, which is reflected in the narrative structures themselves, employs disjointed chronologies, polyvalent points of view, unreliable narrators, and open endings. These are evident in the works of other writers such as Ngugi wa Thiongo and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Ayi Kwei Armah and Dambudzo Marechera, to name a few, who portray worlds where certainty is highly valued but rarely achieved and where uncertainty becomes part of personal and national life. Thus, in African literary works, certainty and uncertainty are narrative tensions that expose the intricacies of African life rather than merely fulfilling thematic tropes. By underscoring the highly perishable nature of memory, the fluidity of African identity and the dynamic nature of the sociopolitical, African writers turn narrative into a site of negotiation and literature into a medium for renegotiating what is certain and uncertain, which in turn reflects the continent's complex traversals of continuity and change.

As a literary genre, the African novel has been a site for writers to negotiate the porous boundaries between certainty and uncertainty that

have been set in motion by histories of colonialism, cultural hybridity, political upheavals and social change; African fiction often dramatises the tensions between what is certain and what is uncertain. Certainty as embodied in collective memory, institutional authorities, or tradition is often at odds with a condition of intense uncertainty occasioned by dislocation, modernity, conflict, and the tenuous nature of individual identity. As a result, through narrative techniques that reflect the continent's complex epistemological space, with fragmented narratives, shifting points of view, unreliable narrators, mythic structures, and open endings, African novelists enact the fluidity of knowledge and experience.

In African literature, the tension between certainty and uncertainty is a serious political and knowledge issue, rather than merely a literary trope. Consequently, African literature often presents the tension between what is certain and what is uncertain, unsaid or contested in various settings: war, colonialism, social disintegration, to name a few. This paper examines how three canonical texts, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims*, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, embody and engage this tension through memory, narration and cultural rhetoric.

3.0. African novel and certainty, uncertainty

3.0.1. Love, Certainty and Uncertainty in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is set during the 1960s in the middle of a wildly violent civil war, which cost the lives of over a million people, most through cold-blooded killings. The novel's three central characters are caught up in the violence of these times. The first is a young man from a poor village who works for a university lecturer. The second is a young middle-class woman, Olanna, who comes to terms with the deaths of her relatives. The third is a writer, a white man, who is living in Nigeria for some unfathomable reason, and who becomes infatuated with Olanna's sister, an aloof and mysterious woman. Even though their lives collide in such a way that they are forced to interrogate their responses to the political events of the day, this remarkable novel is not only about individuals but about Africa itself: about moral responsibility, the end of colonialism, ethnic loyalties, class

and race, and how love complicates these issues.

The central aspect of *Half of a Yellow Sun* that provides the thread to the tapestry of issues in this paper is that of love. Man is born with a capacity to love and be loved; it has always been uncertain whether he will love or be loved or accept and use his capacity to love. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie considers love, especially in the context of the Nigerian-Biafran War, as a human experience intertwined with life's challenges. Gökçen Kara's New Historicist analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun* shows how Adichie "complicates the notion of monolithic, linear history" by suggesting that love and relationships in the novel are intertwined with power and historiography and demonstrating that history is not a fixed backdrop but something constantly challenged and negotiated. (Kara 376). This paper argues that the love in the novel is never one-dimensional and certain, it is a combination of certainty (trust, intimacy, and emotional security) and uncertainty (jealousy, betrayal, displacement, war). So the uncertainties of love reflect the uncertainties of historical memory: just as personal memories and allegiances are in flux, so too is national memory contentious and contested.

Adichie explores the dynamics of certainty and uncertainty through various forms of love. There is Olanna and Odenigbo's love, which is at times intimate and other times uncertain. Certainty is evident in their intellectual and emotional compatibility, which creates intimacy and comfort. Even then, these certitudes are tempered by suspicion, adultery and the chaos of their political and social contexts. Adichie suggests this when she says Olanna is attracted to his certitude: "... this was love: a string of coincidences that gathered significance and became miracles" (Adichie 122). But as she warns, Olanna also feels insecure and defenceless, as she wishes: "... that she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power ... the choicelessness she often felt around him" (Adichie 148). This suggests a double, certainty and uncertainty: certainty of her love, uncertainty of her need. She acknowledges that her vulnerability to him is also the power that he wields. This power dynamics makes Odenigbo's cheating, in particular his "...cheating on her with Amala", even more destabilising. Her sense of betrayal undermines her confidence in their relationship. Also, Olanna opposes marriage because she fears that it will undermine the passionate,

provisional, but meaningful relationship they have. She says “Each time he suggested they get married, she said no. They were too happy, precariously so ... she feared that marriage would flatten it into a prosaic partnership” (Adichie p59) . The second kind is the love of Richard and Kainene. Richard and Kainene’s relationship is marked by both desire and distance, suggesting that love and commitment can endure despite uncertainty and continue to evolve. Their bond is sustained by a quiet yet profound longing for one another. Kainene muses “ Is love this misguided need to have you beside me most of the time? Is love this safety I feel in our silences? Is it this belonging, this completeness? (Adichie -173). This quote symbolises their love as not just being, but also being complete, almost in a religious sense. But this completeness is borne from doubt confirmed not only in words but in silence. Richard's connection with Kainene has something to do with identity and belonging and is disrupted by the war and partition. Her disappearance at the end of the novel conjures a curiosity in his mind, a gaping hole: "He would never see Kainene again ... his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadows, only in half glimpses." (Adichie-494) This metaphor is arresting for the way that it illustrates uncertainty in Richard’s relationship and the lack of resolution, constant desire and sense of loss.

The balance of certainty and uncertainty is also explored in the novel in family dynamics. Olanna and her twin sister Kainene's relationship demonstrates both certainty and uncertainty; they love each other, and their love is enduring, but it is also often challenged by misunderstanding and rivalries. This relationship shows how family love is also uncertain, as ambition, pain and moral decision-making test family relationships. Later, there is a moment of promise and reconciliation: Olanna states, “I will never forgive myself if I lose you, Kainene.” (Adichie, p.297) This instance showcases the commitment where a moment of emotional assurance in a relationship has been overtaken by betrayal.

War often complicates familial and communal relationships and highlights that love cannot be separated from historical and social developments. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie appears to conflate love with the collective. The characters' love of Biafra is thus likened to their romantic and familial relationships: it is a place of passion, allegiances,

and fears. In the context of the war, the future is uncertain, and so love is uncertain, vulnerable, and precarious. Charles Cliff Feghabo (2022) suggests that in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie draws on love (romantic and familial) to challenge conventional gender roles and instead celebrates womanhood through the role of educated women during the Biafran War. So Adichie's depiction of love is not only personal but political, thus allowing women such as Olanna and Kainene to negotiate love and their own agency in wartime. Adichie's female characters add to our knowledge of love as not only emotional but also active. This is evident in how these women fight, resist and make political decisions, demonstrating that love (particularly in times of war) is about ethics and activism. In all, the novel implies that love is significant because it is uncertain. While certitude provides moments for orientation, hope and comfort, it is uncertainty that opens the space for love to be profound, defiant and nuanced. Adichie suggests that love is dynamic, powerful, capable of withstanding betrayals and loss, but also the fragile yet enduring nature of human relationships in times of crisis. Kalu Wosu (2018) explains this when he suggests that Adichie's novel is not only historical fiction, but also a collective account (p. 123). Adichie's writing is a performance of lived experience, a way to bear witness, given her non-first-hand experience, to the uncertainty of what happened. This conflates experiential and imaginative memory, unsettling certainty. Apio (2017), highlights gendered memory in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as women's traumatic recollections, such as those of Olanna, indicate disintegration, dislocation, and emotional devastation, thus highlighting women's uncertainty in rebuilding identities in the aftermath of war.

3.0.2 Ambiguity in *The Victims*: Social Disorder and Morality

Isidore Okpewho's novel, *The Victims*, has somewhat been overlooked in literary analysis, always having being in the shadow of the more well-known Adichie and Achebe. Yet, in it, theme of certainty and uncertainty presents a rich context for an examination of family, morality and social conflict. Okpewho's plot revolves around a polygamous family in which economic uncertainty, treachery and moral complexity abound. While there is a deficit of in-depth scholarly articles devoted only to *The Victims*, contextual studies emphasise the way Okpewho employs orality or social realism to portray individual uncertainty during collective turmoil (African Literature Association; Ogunyemi p.347-351). The

novel is a microcosm of uncertainty: polygamy, the irresponsibility of the father, and the poisoning to death, challenge traditional and modern moral certitudes (Oguzie and Nnaji p. 56-63). The presence of two wives, asserting power, and secret killings creates a moral uncertainty where personal certainties of roles and outcomes are tested.

Okpewho's *The Victims* explores polygamy's problems; it is the story of a discontented woman who has the unfortunate fate of marrying an irresponsible husband. Polygamy is the cause of misfortune in the novel which takes place in a normal African town; it is the story of Nwabunor, whose husband, Obanua, takes a second wife after his first wife bears him only one son. (p.4-5). Their marriage has been happy and harmonious until Obanua's mother inspires him to take a second wife. Thus, Obanua decides to marry Ogogua, who already has a set of twins from a Portuguese merchant. As soon as Ogogua moves in, things get out of control. Nwabunor sees Ogogua as a threat (p.15) and resolves not to be pushed out of her place. The ensuing competition between the wives generates suspicion. Nwabunor suspects everyone, particularly Ogogua, for her inability to bear more children (p.16). Thus, peace is finally replaced with hatred in the house, with the women always fighting and the children hating each other (p.25; 60-61; 63). The issue in the house is finally resolved when Nwabunor decides to kill Ogogua and her children. To do this, she gets a potion from Ese Nwozomudo, a horrible herbalist in the town (88-90; 120-122; 150) and mixes it with Ogogua's food (177; 182.) At the end of the day, she managed to destroy Ogogua and her children, but also killed her son (185-191; 195-196). As a consequence, she goes mad (197), while Obanua keeps up with his wine bottles (200). At the end of this story, the attentive reader would note that when Obanua complies with his mother's request to take another wife, he does not know that he is losing a certain degree of peace he once enjoyed with one wife and son. As the story shows, he loses this certainty to the uncertainty that having two women in one house presages, eventually cutting short his life to lunacy.

Okpewho's (1992) status as a novelist and as a scholar of orature is apparent in this story because it offers him a foundation in orature, which helps him to position his characters in a space between orature and literature, thereby enhancing epistemic uncertainty (Okpewho, African

Oral Literature; African Literature Association). Okpewho's exploration of this space reveals how tradition collides with present-day social upheavals, and eliminates any sense of certainty, as is the case with the larger trend of post-colonial prose in Africa: the intersection of the past and the present, where certainty is no longer assured.

3.0.3 Certainty and Ambiguity in *Things Fall Apart*

The final text examined in this paper is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which takes place in the late 19th century and early 20th century eastern Nigeria on the verge of and during the British invasion of the village of Umuofia. The novel traces the changes that the Ibo society undergoes as a result of British colonialism from the perspective of the protagonist, Okonkwo, a respected leader and a celebrated wrestler who possesses wealth through hard work and a "fear of failure and weakness". Driven by his fear of being seen as weak like his father, Okonkwo kills a boy accidentally and is exiled from his village for seven years. On returning, he discovers that the village is governed by the rules of colonialists and Christian missionaries. Okonkwo attempts to arouse the Igbo villagers to fight against the cultural and political oppression of the colonialists and missionaries, but only a few follow him in his crusade. This book is about the downfall of Okonkwo and how change and the refusal of Okonkwo to accept it become his weakness in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo is sure to win his people over to his side, but his people are unsure of his character and personality and prefer to yield to change. This blend of certainty and uncertainty appears to be a legitimate question that Achebe might have had in mind. In fact, current research also engages with the themes of certainty and uncertainty in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as represented in language, the privileging of proverbs and Igbo cultural practices, and the trauma of colonialism. Achebe's intervention with colonial discourse is what Al-Shamiri (2023) considers when he interrogates how Achebe uses traditional Igbo proverbs and imagery to construct a moral and epistemic alternative to the ideological stranglehold of the Europeans (p.73). In doing so, he renders proverbs as having a two-fold function as cultural repository and resistance. It is a resistance that is solid because its repository function is not static but dynamic, because it allows for changes in meaning when under pressure from the ideologies of colonialism, in the process, opening up a space of uncertainty that unsettles old certainties.

Neji (2021) provides a linguistic analysis of *Things Fall Apart* and the role of its verbs and proverbs in creating a polyphonic narrative. Neji claims that the speech in the novel is "no longer historical or apolitical" - the characters speak with tradition and also in a world in transition, creating uncertainty in the language. Neji's claim implies that proverbs is a traditional speech, and it's adaptable in context (p.134). For instance, in chapter one of *Things Fall Apart*, it is said, "Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten." (p. 6) This highlights the centrality of tradition (proverbs) in Igbo speech. But the "art of conversation" also implies flexibility: speech is not only ritualistic; it's a social phenomenon that people can use to make meaning in new circumstances. Another instance is when Obierika complains about the impact of colonial change (the uncertain) after the arrival of the missionaries on tradition (the certain). He says:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. ... Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife in the things that held us. Together, we have fallen apart. (Achebe, p.141)

In the quote above, Obierika shows a respect for the "cleverness" of the white man (uncertainty, ambivalence) but also a keen sense that "the things that held us together" are being broken. Words such as "knife" and "fallen apart" suggest fracture and disunity; so, his speech is both elegiac and critical of the changing world. There are several other examples in *Things Fall Apart* that demonstrate how the characters in Achebe's novel speak with the authority of tradition (proverbs, ancestor worship, family dynamics) but also with the reality of change (missionaries, young people, fragmentation). For example, Obierika's visit to Okonkwo at Mbanta is a warning about the threat of the new faith. Achebe says:

The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, with a handful of converts, and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan, but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man's god would not last. None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people who were called "efulefu," worthless, empty men. The imagery of an efulefu in the language of the clan was a man who sold his machete and wore the

sheath to battle. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up. (Achebe, 2008, p.115)

This speech displays moral ambiguity: the status quo is being challenged, and young people (such as Nwoye) are not bound by the same constraints. The speaker's anxiety stresses that the old certainties (ancestral deities, family relationships) are changing. This fear could also be deduced from Mr Brown's (the missionary) conversational shift in speaking to Akunna:

You said one interesting thing,' said Mr Brown. 'You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion, Chukwu is a loving father and need not be shared by those who do His will.' (Achebe, 2008,144).

This is a polite, tentative and conversational speech by a colonial missionary. It is not a brute assertion: he pays attention, learns from, and recognises the complexities of Igbo traditions. This captures the ambiguity in intercultural speech - it is neither wholly colonial monologue nor wholly indigenous. Achebe's characters are not always conservative or nostalgic in their language: their speech may be full of uncertainty, fear and ambivalence toward what is lost and gained. It is in this context that the analysis of proverbs as "culture carriers" through the lens of their illocutionary force (that is, how proverbs in the novel not only speak about culture but also do something, reveal characters' intentions and establish social relationships) by Ojumah (2023) is relevant. While these proverbs are traditional, they also become sites for contestation as the interpretation changes, in times of turmoil, and so does the confidence that the proverbs appear to offer. A good example is the proverb that says "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 2008, p.6). Perhaps the most famous proverb in *Things Fall Apart*, it refers to the significance of proverbs to Igbo discourse, not as a mere embellishment but a way to lubricate conversation. This proverb illustrates how characters use shared cultural knowledge to speak and that using proverbs is a way of enacting tradition in speech, what Ojumah would call a "constituted action" - where lubricating and "action" - where by using proverbs, the speaker is "doing" something social/cultural, not just describing it (p. 112).

Another proverb, which says "If a child washes his hands, he could eat with kings" (Achebe, 2008, p.7), denotes aspiration and social mobility. It implies people can climb the social ladder with hard work and purification (wash hands). This proverb may either express a character's goal, for instance, Okonkwo's aspiration to be acknowledged, or express a cultural belief. Ojumah suggests this is a performative form of speech because not only is it a reflection of a belief, but speaking it is an enactment of that belief; it inspires, justifies and normalises behaviour. Another proverb is also attributed to Okika in one of his speeches during the meeting of Umuofia elders when he says, "Wherever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life." (Achebe, 2008, 161-162) is a warning and can be classified as a prognostic proverb. When Okika speaks it, he is not just imparting wisdom or knowledge; he is making a political point. He is alerting people to danger (the toad is vulnerable because something is after it). This proverb warns everyone of a threat and calls people to be on their guard, thus functioning socially. All of the examples in *Things Fall Apart* are in line with Bhatti's (2024) postcolonial theoretical interpretation, which suggests that *Things Fall Apart* does not depend on binary oppositions of a colonial discourse. Achebe's use of languages (English and Igbo) in *Things Fall Apart* challenges the notion that we must know the world from the point of view of a colonial knowledge system asserting its universality, and through this blending, the novel claims the multivalences that belong to Igbo identity and culture. Okonkwo's world falls apart (the "falling apart" of the certain) is thus not only social or individual but epistemic: the certainties of tradition, power and selfhood are called into question and destabilised by uncertainties of the colonial encounter and incursion.

.4.0 The Nexus: Reading the Idea of Certainty and Uncertainty

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, set during the Nigerian-Biafran War, offers in its multiple focalisations (Ugwu, Olanna and Richard) a powerful example of narrative uncertainty because it stages a multiplicity of consciousnesses that challenge elite historical accounts. This by Ouma (2011) explores in his paper titled "Composite consciousness and memories of war in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*" as he interrogates Ugwu's transformation from a houseboy to a self-reflexive historian whose memory challenges elite versions of history. In

Ugwu's writing and musings, Adichie historicises memory as a contested site where certainty about the past cannot be taken for granted but must be fought for. This struggle, as Dix (2022) suggests, is furthered by Adichie's use of autofiction in the book, a choice she makes because she was born after the Civil War and therefore did not see many of the events described, but reclaims collective memory in fiction. As a result, she bears witness, rather than recalls, history while recognising the shortcomings, the desolate silences and the limits of her knowledge. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is, from its title, incomplete, signalling the unrepresented Biafra and the unreconcilable memory. By contrast, Okpewho's *The Victims* considers uncertainty within the home. The novel's themes of polygamy, poverty and betrayal within families subvert authority, thereby complicating moral certainty and psychological health. The book is written in third-person limited perspective to give close attention to the characters' internal tumultuousness, especially in a household that is supposed to offer certainty, but that is violent and distrustful. As a scholar of orality, Okpewho writes with an awareness of the oral tradition - a dynamic medium where authority is not fixed and transparent. So we have a depiction of social upheaval in which moral certainty is under threat. Conversely, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is about cultural destabilisation. Achebe builds a traditional imaginary of Igbo society through proverbs, rituals and collective utterances. But this collective knowledge is not unchanging. As Neji (2021) shows, the novel's language is polyphonic: characters speak in ways that are both in harmony with tradition and in disjunction to change (p. 123). Al-Shamiri (2023) also asserts that Achebe's use of colonial discourse is not only to highlight European dominance, but also to demonstrate the complexity and power of Igbo knowledge.

These three texts together suggest that in African literature, certitude is not a given but something to be earned, challenged and negotiated. Be it through recovering memories in the wake of war, the moral dilemma in a broken family, or the colonised subject's attempt to preserve cultural identity, certainty is always conditional, and that conditionality is the narrative crux here. Likewise, one would notice in these three texts three positions on certainty and uncertainty in all three texts. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is seen on a global level as the story of the conflict is told from the point of view of a Nigerian and the effects of the conflict are

used to create a universal message about love. In *The Victims*, the conflict is more confined to a family, whereas in *Things Fall Apart*, the conflict is at two levels: individual and communal. These two streams cross over each other when Okonkwo commits suicide, and the uncertainty is created. Through these three texts, readers can understand that certainly and uncertainty are not interchangeable words, or conditions or states. Something certain at one time could, at another, become uncertain; something that is uncertain could become a bit certain in another situation. Ultimately, how the authors arranged the actions and reactions of their characters to suit the schema of their novels is very significant and indeed vital for the authors' analyses of the issues of certainty or uncertainty as depicted in the texts. Do people have a premonition of what may be, but which did not transpire? When does certainty turn to uncertainty and uncertainty turn to certainty in the course of the narrative? In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the capacity to love is shown as a central quality of man, a quality that is inherent in all men. Hence, the capacity to love is a certainty for all. For Adichie in *Half a Yellow Sun* (2007), what the individual does with that capacity is what is uncertain and more importantly, it is this part of man that is uncertain that has been the ground for the creation of conflicts and the stuff for the resolution of the same. In *Things Fall Apart*, unlike *Half a Yellow Sun*, where the three main characters can call to the reservoir of latent love in their hearts to overcome adversity, Okonkwo, Achebe's main character, even though he is also in possession of this token for love, chooses to deviate from it to affirm his certainty to be a warrior and hero instead of a weakling. Thus, in a continuing spiral, Achebe becomes a study in the conflicts between the certain and the uncertain. The question of "Who am I?" (uncertain) is continuously juxtaposed against "Who I know I am" (certain). In this sense, Okonkwo is certain he is Unoka's son by birth but not certain he is his son by deed, prowess or conduct.

5.0 Conclusion

Where there is no uncertainty, there is no discovery. This is because certainty stands in the way of discovery: people are only interested in doing more research into those things they are certain about. On the other hand, the moment of uncertainty is when discovery is the greatest. As Vaclav Havel (1990) puts it, "Isn't it the moment of most profound doubt that gives birth to new insights?" (p. 4). Humans cannot learn if they are

not uncertain. And this is where it is important for representation and presentation in contemporary African writing, particularly in the Nigerian novel. In depicting the uncertainties of life in the African continent, they can call on everyone to engage in activities that promote certainty, such as peace-building measures, for example, which increase social stability and levels of certainty.

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