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A Study of Culture and Modernity in Chinua Achebe's Select Novels

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Abstract

Achebe, born thirty years after the creation of Nigeria and thirty years before it attained political independence, had direct experience of the British colonization of Nigeria and Igbo land. That is why he was able to take up the role of a novelist, painter and historian. He has also assumed the role of a biographer. However, he is objective and maintains intellectual integrity and emotional poise in his approach to his cultural heritage. As an African Writer he upholds his culture because he finds that his people's past has been distorted, his ancestors stereotyped and his people of their cultural heritage despised. He realizes that the white historians have divested him and his people of his cultural traditions and civilization. He therefore establishes the fact that his ancestors did not live in a dark cultural void. He is rather affirmative about this fact.

Keywords

Chinua Achebe; Culture; and Modernity.

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Africa – the Old and the New Phases

If the turning point in the life of Africa was its historic encounter with the imperialist West and the resultant agony of subjugation and slavery, the post – independence experience has also been none too edifying with poverty and corruption plaguing the body- politic under, ironically, the much cherished self-rule. The new phase of intense debate among the African intellectuals and writers concerns the question of how best a positive and progressive continent can be given freedom which largely meant merely the substitution of masters, black in place of white.

Umuofia's Encounter with the White Man

In *Things Fall Apart*, the encounter between two cultures can be traced in the fate of the typical village Umuofia, which is situated in the lower Nigeria. The novel is an elaborate portrait of customs, traditions, birth, marriage and death. The society is over – shadowed by fear of evil, capricious god, magic and

death. The rigidity of the culture that makes changes impossible, drives the less fortunate members of the society, like the Osus (treated as out-casts); the parents of the twins; and all those who were held in contempt by the society to take shelter in the new faith brought to the village by the missionaries. During the exile of Okonkwo, the Whiteman comes to the region, with a new religion, a new law and a new system of values. On his return home, he is unable to reconcile himself to the changes, and so disaster strikes.

Social Changes

The three stages in Okonkwo's life are symbolic of the social changes that take place in Africa due to its colonialization - Okonkwo's prosperity, his exile and his death. Nwoye accepts Christianity not out of zeal for the new faith but out of disgust for certain customs of his society. A similarity can be drawn between the changes in Okonkwo's life and the social change, undergone before and after its encounter with European culture. The pre-colonial Nigeria was like Okonkwo: strong, beautiful, dignified and custom-bound. The post-colonial, like Okonkwo in exile, suffered loss of dignity in the process of its adaptation to an alien culture. This novel remains a balanced, objective portrayal of the implications of the Yeatsian vision of history.

Ulu's Encounter with the White Man

Arrow of God is a more complex study of men and manners than *Things Fall Apart*. It contrasts a strong individual, Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, with a confused, pliant community. He blames the villagers for their lack of support. He refuses to announce the celebration of new yam festival and it brings famine to the village. Ezeulu does not believe that his duties are limited by announcing and carrying out the prescribed rituals and festivals. He considers himself the guardian of his lambs and the representative and agent of Ulu. Suspicion grows when Ezeulu sends one of his sons, Oduche, to join the mission school and the white man's religion. The action is wholly justified by his intention to do what is best for his clan. Ezeulu explains to Oduche: "The

world is changing... I do not like it. But... I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. If there is something bring home my share. The world is like a mask dancing”.

Destruction of Old Order and Introduction of the New

In the case of Okonkwo, there is general harmony in his relationship with his clan. It is only when the new religion puts a knife on the things that hold them together that the clan falls apart. Thus the novel is a clear example of the destruction of old order by the introduction of the new. Okonkwo's suicide and the clan's break-up are directly linked to the process of colonization. Ezeulu is more aware of the need to adapt than Okonkwo, but the society to which he belongs is also for different. The individual and the community respond in different ways to the demand for adaptation.

Coming to Terms with the Changes

Okonkwo and Ezeulu refuse to compromise on their ideals and in the process one loses his life and the other his sanity. The clan's final verdict is not a positive one. Okonkwo's suicide is an abomination and requires elaborate purification rites. Ezeulu's sorrow is seen as punishment. But each of them has preserved his integrity in the face of overwhelming odds. The community has remained apparently resilient and capable of absorbing the shock of the new impact.

The religious drama in *Arrow of God* is played out against the backdrop of the colonial drama in Nigeria. Achebe is actually telling two stories at once, interweaving them with such skill that they cannot be separated. Ezeulu, a guardian of the old order, must be destroyed before the new order can firmly establish itself in Ibo land. Missionaries and European administrative officials subvert the old priest's authority in the clan and thereby precipitate his fall. The forces of change, which Ezeulu had hoped to forestall, thus overwhelm him and transform his society. The battle of cultures is once again won by Europe.

Chinua Achebe's next novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), intended as a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, is set in the capital of Nigeria in the late 1950's and has as its hero Okonkwo's grand-son, Obi Okonkwo, a young Westernized bureaucrat who finds himself torn between two cultures - the old and new. Although he comes back from his university studies in England with high ideas and a determination to prove himself an honest, hard-working civil servant, he eventually slides into corruption because he is unable to reconcile the demands placed upon him by his westernized girlfriend and his tradition-bound parents.

But again, as in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe does not try to blame this fall entirely to Europe. He acknowledges the weaknesses within traditional society as well as the human frailty of his hero. His intention is simply to show us what his people have lost during the colonial encounter, and he feels that one of their greatest misfortunes is their forfeiture of a clear code of moral values. It is this spiritual loss that leaves Obi and his society no longer at ease in the modern world.

Evolving into Modernity

Nigerian society was evolving into modernity and this new climate confronted Obi Okonkwo. He is torn apart in his desire to follow the path of his forefathers and at the same time to blaze his own trail and finally he seeks his own path and risks his whole future and position. He seeks to overcome the enslavement of custom and the boredom of tradition. He is firmly set against any constraint against his personal moral decisions, even if it means stepping himself in evil practices. He is opposed to outmoded social institutions, ideologies, traditions, and even patterns of thought and behavior.

The Need for Mixing of Cultures

Obi could have used his education to take his country back into his own hands, even though it was given to him by the colonizer. The only way to survive in a world where two cultures meet is to allow a certain amount of mixing which should be used in a positive regard. The sad thing is that Obi

Okonkwo did not do the expected. The novel ends where it began. The people of Umoufia, the judge, the British council man, and everyone are asking themselves why a man of such promise committed such an act. Of course, the entire novel is answering this question by tracing Obi's life, but there are really no answers in the end. The most pessimistic aspect of the novel is that it is cyclical.. Achebe wanted the novel to be cyclical to indicate a continuous sense of description and even stagnation. In the end, Obi finds himself expelled from his old idealistic self and in a mode of satisfaction, and the circle emphasizes the danger of that satisfaction.

***A Man of the People* - a Historical Record up to Contemporary Times**

In his fourth novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe brought the historical record right up to contemporary times. Indeed, this novel, published only nine days after Nigeria experienced its first military coup, even ended with a military coup. It appeared that Achebe had predicted with strange accuracy at the end of his country's first republic.

Political Chaos and Moral Confusion

But the novel no doubt is intended as a political parable, not as a prophecy. It has as its central character a corrupt politician who had elbowed his way into prominence and power. But M.A Nanga, one of the finest rogues in African fiction, is only a symptom of sick postcolonial African society. Although *A Man of People* is a comedy and ends happily with Nanga's removal from government, it has remained, like Achebe's other novels, a disturbingly pessimistic work. While censuring Africa for allowing itself to be corrupted by forces from within and without, Achebe again indicts Europe for contributing to the moral confusion and political chaos that beset independent African states.

Achebe's Diagnosis

Achebe's diagnosis is that people who had recently passed through a period of colonial rule adopted a rather cynical attitude towards political corruption. They were willing to excuse the extravagances of their leaders

because they believed that these men who had led the struggle for political independence now had a right to eat “the national cake.” They also believed that a well-fed M.P. might let a few crumbs fall to his constitution. Such cynicism kept hungry men like Nanga in power and perpetuated a tradition of corruption in government. The sick society had to undergo a major political seizure before such cynicism was transmuted into hope. His characters are representative men and women of their time, yet emblematic of the ills and dissatisfaction that afflicts modern African society. Nothing seems completely right in so debauched a world.

Achebe has made a conscious attempt to respond to the chaotic scenario caused by colonialism as it resembled the horror and nightmare of history that was being written about by the modernist writers in Europe and America. His novels are meant at once to “write back” to the western canon, correcting erroneous representations of Africa and Africans, and to restore to his people an awareness of the dignity and humanity of pre-colonial Africa - reminding them ‘what they lost’ through colonization.

Published two years before Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain, *Things Fall Apart* aims to extract from the colonial control over the representation of African lives, staking a claim to the right to self-representation. And ‘Modernism’ was a boon to the African novelist. It provided him with an art that helped to express his view of history.

The Modern Man Caught between Two Cultures

The Igbo clan is a group of African people with a complex, vigorous, and self-sufficient way of life. Prior to the invasion of their land and the eclipse of their culture by foreign powers, they were undisturbed by the present, and they had no nostalgia for the past. In the novel, Achebe portrayed a people who are now caught between two conflicting cultures. On the one hand, there is the traditional way of life pulling on the Umuofia people and one man’s struggle to

maintain that cultural integrity against an overwhelming force of the colonial imperialism.

On the other hand, we have the European style which, as presented, seems to represent the future, a new community of the so-called “civilized world.” It now appears this African man, Okonkwo, and the entire society of Umuofia must make a choice between the old and the new if they have a power.

The desire to become a member of European-style society has its attraction. For one, it is conveyed to the Umuofia people, including Okonkwo, as a means of enjoying the spoils of twentieth-century civilization. But Okonkwo refused to endorse the appeal. He recognized that accepting the invitation is done at the expense of things that comprised his identity and defined his values. That is why when some members of the Umuofia Community accepted the invitation and took on the strange faith, things began to fall apart for the Igbo people in Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

The integrated, organic community was shattered and divided among themselves so we have what seems like a total imposition of one cultural, social, and political structure upon another. Ordinarily, higher education should prepare its recipient to maintain and promote moral and cultural sanity. Education should have taught Obi Okonkwo the simple virtues of truth, honesty, and the necessity for a high sense of morality in society. He should have learned that no amount of material, social, and economic panaceas can substitute for a good moral and ethical citizen. Even the judge of the high court of Logos raises a pertinent question, which seems to be the main issue of *No Longer at Ease*: “I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this”.

Change is not Easy though Inevitable

This socio-cultural conflicts that existed and the gradual emergence of the autonomous individual, independent of the determining hold of the tribal

community, gives rise to the growth of a whole new individualistically oriented structure - socio-political as well as cultural. With the coming of Christianity the emphasis is shifted from communal to personalized living; supporting individual growth and liberty it placed a superior value on inner morality and individual achievement. This symbolized a dynamic future oriented view - positive and negative. Examples: Progressive but corrupt, New found individualism and new found humanity, Sympathy for the down-trodden outcast victim, Cosmic oneness of the universe, Selfishness, Competition, Rapacious materialism. Within such a world, personal realities of an individual world view are indeed alien and unacceptable. It's evident that change will not be easy.

Achebe's Style of Writing

Many African novelists took advantage of the fact that modernism helped them to handle their own crisis of culture. However, very few of them could keep up in their novel writing the technical developments in the novel from in the respective language of their writing, since they were satisfied with the conventional norms of the European novel.

Representing an African worldview through narratives that speak for themselves meant that Achebe would draw upon Igbo oral traditions to narrate the stories of his communities, while bearing in mind Richard Bauman's exhortations that in utilizing oral traditions to engage the "canons of elite western literary traditions and texts," oral narrative must not be taken merely to be "the reflection of culture" or "the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes" in historical writing: instead, oral narratives must be utilized "contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning".

The tendency of modernist writers to break with all traditions has an attraction for the African novelist who is strategically placed to witness what may be described as the apocalyptic moment of transition into the new. By

1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was published, modernism may be said to have passed its point of intensity but for the African novelist, colonialism became that apocalyptic moment of transition into the new.

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