

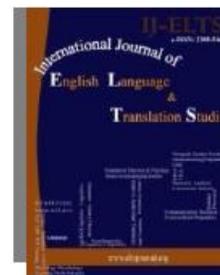


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The Post-Colonial Reality in Chinua Achebe's Novels

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern of Chinua Achebe, the recipient of the *Man Booker International Prize, 2007*, was his society, more precisely, the destiny of his people. As the fundamental feature of his novels was social realism, they served as an authentic record of the changing African world. Achebe, perhaps the most authentic literary voice from Africa, wrote not only to record the African, especially Nigerian, life but to analyse the reality experienced by the native people in different times and situations. In his view, the writer must be accountable to his society. To him it was absurd to think of art as a pure and autonomous entity coming into existence by itself in an aesthetic void. Accordingly, his aim was to make his fiction an instrument of awareness seeking to elevate the social reality to a higher level. In this regard, the paper is an attempt to show Achebe's endeavour to expose the rampant corruption and evil in Nigeria to exert a decisive and positive influence on his people. His faith in female power as an agent of traditional morality is also highlighted in the paper.

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1. Introduction

...[A] single canvas, *Guernica*, by Picasso himself could so frighten the state machinery of Spanish fascism. For how could a mere painting on canvas exercise such awe unless in some way it accorded with, or had a disquieting relationship to, recognizable reality?

Achebe, C. (1988b:95)

The novels of Chinua Achebe undoubtedly bear a firm assertion of his conviction about art's "disquieting relationship" with a "recognizable reality". Although conceding the fact that art cannot be a carbon copy of life, he exhibits a positive awareness to its immense power of persuading and motivating people by displaying disagreement with the existing authority or administration. According to Achebe, in Chametzky, J. (1987:74), as long as the artist is not in conflict with the authority on account of his social responsibility, the artist, despite his talent and excellence, is bound to be a failure: "And where you have the poet not bothering about, when you have the emperor not bothering about the poet, you can be sure that something is wrong". He further states: "Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure" (Achebe, 1988b, p.30). He agrees with Frank Kermode (1975) who offers a "practical" definition of fiction as "something we know does not exist, but which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world" (p.37). Achebe too finds man perpetually inventing fiction to overcome problems in actual life. To him, "it (fiction) begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and human conscience" (1988b:105).

2. Discussion

The "recognizable reality" in Achebe's novels is that of Africa, especially of Nigeria, in its different phases of socio-political and cultural evolution. The four

distinct stages of history, starting from Africa's ancestral past to contemporary present, are fictionalized in his novels with a rare critical sensibility and a profound sense of responsibility. The portrayal of the traditional society and its confrontation with an alien civilization in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), the chaotic plight of Nigeria during the colonial regime in *No Longer at Ease* (1960), the post-independent corrupt political situation in *A Man of the People* (1966) and the vivid rendering of the contemporary post-colonial Nigerian reality in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) clearly points at his social commitment.

A strong sense of social awareness marks the writings of not only Achebe but also other prolific African writers like Wole Soyinka, Mongo Beti, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and Buchi Emecheta as well. According to Ngugi (1971:04) the novelist must swim, struggle and define himself in the mainstream of his people's historical drama. The first generation African writers were mainly engaged with the culture-conflict theme, the confrontation between the native and the western cultures and its consequences. But the turbulent Africa of the present day no longer allows her writers to be nostalgic about the pre-colonial past. In this context, Soyinka (1988) states:

The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. Of course, the past exists... it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence... (p.19)

In the traditional African sense, art is in the service of man (Achebe, 1975: 19) and the artist is a spokesman of his community, acting as the conscience of his society. So the literary artist should confront the truth



and force his countrymen to see themselves as others see them.

The immediate concern of Achebe's novels is the condition of Nigeria. After recording brilliantly the colonial traumas and conflicts experienced by his people in his first three novels, Achebe sets on to portray the post-colonial reality in *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). As reality is not static and always in a process of change, Achebe adapts himself with the changing reality by capturing different points of time in his novels. In *A Man of the People*, he turns his back on the European presence to expose the evils nurtured by the Nigerians themselves. The novel is, in fact, a serious indictment on post-independent Nigeria, a scathing exposure of the corrupt political practices, cynicism of the mass and the ineffective role played by the self-deceiving, self-indulgent, and alienated intellectual elites. The moribund political experiences of independent Nigeria is explored mainly through the political career and dubious activities of Chief Nanga, the Minister of Culture who came to power by distinguishing himself as a heckler in the Parliament. The novel is a commentary on Nanga's ministerial career with long ceremonial tours round the country and abroad, accumulation of wealth and property and numerous sex scandals. His grand official residence and his three blocks of seven-storied luxury flats, which he owns in his wife's name, stand in sharp contrast with the shacks where majority of the people live and who can afford only pails for excrement. Yet the common people exhibits a cynical and apathetic attitude as they find no wrong in corruption; " 'Let them eat,' was the people's opinion, 'After all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?'" (Achebe, 1988a, p.144). As

nepotism becomes an admirable trait, Nanga considers the nation to be a cake from which each tribe should try to get as large a share as possible. Achebe's point is quite clear: the turgid problems faced by Nigeria cannot be solved by depending on the general will.

Even the role of the African intellectual elites is quite disappointing. Odili Samalu, an enlightened educated youth, proves himself to be a self-deceiving and self-indulgent anti-hero. He analyzes the evil practices and corruptions yet he himself indulges in them unscrupulously. Being an alienated figure, he considers himself above his people, a hybrid who advocates western philosophy by rejecting all local allegiances which he turns down as "primitive loyalty". In his involvement with Nanga, the corrupt Minister, Odili exposes more of his character than the Minister. Despite his determination to behave indifferently with his former teacher (Nanga happened to teach him in school), he is elated as Nanga recognizes and embraces him in a school function. Afterwards, he accepts the Minister's invitation to the capital to try for a civil-service post. The material comforts in the Minister's official residence fascinate Odili and his idealistic philosophy slowly disappears. He starts justifying the temptations of men of power. He even becomes doubtful about bringing "into politics niceties and delicate refinements that belonged elsewhere" (Achebe, 1988a, p.11). Odili's later opposition to Chief Nanga is entirely on a personal grudge. Nanga has molested Elsie, his girlfriend. Yet instead of saving her, he leaves the house with a sense of defeat and later on seeks revenge by inciting Edna, Chief Nanga's prospective "parlour wife" to break her engagement with Nanga and also by contesting Nanga in the Election. Here, Achebe gives a detailed description of the



horrifying Nigerian election campaign, violence, election fraud, bribery, victimization of opponents and exploitation of mass media by the ruling government. As Chief Nanga's attempt to bribe Odili fails, he brings him to public disgrace with merciless beating. Recovering on the election day, Odili finds that his nomination paper, intercepted by Nanga's followers, has never reached the Electoral Officer.

The failure of the intellectual elites is further explored in the figure of Zailo, the country's renowned novelist whose pretention, superior air and indifferent attitude reveal that the intellectuals in Nigeria have failed to share the hopes and aspirations of the common people. Even Max, the most admirable of all characters comes under scrutiny for maintaining a double standard in conduct. He seeks to end corruption and foreign capitalism by utilizing money from Chief Koko with a false assurance of stepping down for him: "... we needed the money.... you tell me how you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little" (Achebe, 1988a,p.126). Max's murder on the Election night while investigating the large scale rigging by Koko's men shows the high price he has to pay for his "little" deed. However, "the fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime" (Achebe, 1988a,p. 149), brought to power by the rigged election, is ousted by an army coup which actually occurred in Nigeria two days before the publication of this novel.

Achebe's last novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), in a way a sequence to *A Man of the People* (1966), is a powerful exposure of another corrupt national game played by a group of self-interested opportunistic army and civilian officers. The post-colonial situation in *Anthills of the*

Savannah is marked by gross abuse of power, social injustice, repression, violence, brutality and a general torpor exhibited by the common people. Achebe(1987) presents the unpredictability of the contemporary situation:

...in that absurd raffle-draw that apportioned the destinies of post-colonial African societies two people starting off even as identical twins in the morning might quite easily find themselves in the evening one as President shitting on the heads of the people and the other a nightman carrying the people's shit in buckets on his head.(p.183)

Achebe has clear vision of the nexus of power operating in post-colonial Nigeria. The imaginary country of Kangan in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is evidently Achebe's own Nigeria that experienced military rule for a long time. The opening of the novel bears hints of impending trouble as Sam, the military dictator, is engaged in eye combat with Chris, his former school-mate and presently his close associate in the government along with his two other friends Ikem and Beatrice. The non-linear narrative pattern makes scope for multiple narrative voices, that of Chris, Ikem and Beatrice, to view post-colonial Nigerian reality from different perspectives. Eventually Achebe takes up the narrative task to express his bitter experience in post-colonial Nigeria.

The novel begins with the first person narrative of Chris who, although, already disillusioned with Sam's power intoxication, is reluctant to quit from the scene, perhaps for his inertia or perhaps for his curiosity to see the end of the game: "...I am still at this silly observation post making farcical entries in the crazy log-book of this our ship of state," (Achebe, 1987,p. 2). In the observation of Ikem, the second narrative voice, Achebe's ideology seems to be perfectly integrated. Yet a sense of



alienation and apathy marks this character too: "...a stubborn sense of community which can enable Elewa to establish so spontaneously with the driver a teasing affectionateness beyond the powers of Ikem" (Achebe, 1987, p. 142).

In his aggressive bid for life-time Presidency, Sam gradually alienates himself from his friends who feel their welcome at the palace "distinctly cooler" (Achebe, 1987, p. 53) than before. The failure to achieve his goal makes Sam more brutal and revengeful which gets reflected in his refusal to help the disastrous drought-affected people of the distant, dry savannah province of Abazon who foiled his plan to seize absolute power by boycotting the election poll. Later on, their delegation is arrested as drug pushers and criminals intending to invade the Presidential Palace. Sam involves his friend Ikem, the rebellious editor of the country's most independent newspaper, *National Gazette* with the Abazonian delegation as Ikem has already become a threat to his despotic power by writing "crusading editorials" (Achebe, 1987, p. 38). Despite the refusal of Chris, the Commissioner for Information, to suspend Ikem, the President's order is executed. Ikem's incautious statement regarding a rumour that H.E. will put his own head on the coinage, may incite the people to take off his head, reverberates throughout the country on being published as the headline in the *National Gazette* as "EX-EDITOR ADVOCATES REGICIDE" (Achebe, 1987, p. 162). Within hours, Ikem is murdered by the security police. His murder reminds us of the execution of Nigeria's prolific writer Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 for raising voice against the military dictatorial regime.

The socio-political dilemma of modern Nigeria is reflected in Ikem's most eloquent

statement on the reversal of roles: the erstwhile colonized has become the colonizer by imitating the steps of the former colonial master. It is exemplified in Ikem's account of the execution scene where the comfortable padded seats reserved for the VIPs relaxing in the coolness of home, are empty, poor people have roasted themselves in the oppressive heat. But what strikes Ikem is their indifference and patience to endure hardship without protest: "They have the animal capacity to endure the pain of, shall we say, domestication" (Achebe, 1987, p. 40). The enthusiastic participation of the crowd in the public execution makes Ikem observe the "blot of villainy" (Achebe, 1987, p. 100) in the common people whom he finds upholding a corrupt leadership by imitating the standard of their leaders. A taxi driver blames Ikem, an elite, for not travelling in a chauffeur-driven new car. Ikem's speech on "imperative struggle" (Achebe, 1987, p. 153) implores the audience to go for self-examination as "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Achebe, 1987, p. 158). He analyzes the flaws of different sections of the community: the workers are blamed for resorting to strike when "outdated and outrageous colonial privileges like motor vehicle advances and allowances are threatened" (Achebe, 1987, p. 157). The leaders are no better; instead of having concern for low national productivity, they are interested in consuming worker-funds. A national leader refuses to use an official Peugeot 504 which is ultimately replaced with a Mercedes. The leaders of the Civil Service Union whom Ikem calls "plain parasites" (Achebe, 1987, p. 157) also fall in the same category. The civil servants and urban employees of public corporation are shown as a party of the oppressor. Ikem further flays the superficial notion of the



"modish radicals"(Achebe, 1987,p. 159) who have failed to consider things in right perspective. The student community too comes under Ikem's close scrutiny for not raising itself above self-interest:

...students are in my humble opinion the cream of parasites... Do you not buy or sell votes, intimidate and kidnap your opponents just as the politicians used to do?... Do you not form tribal pressure groups to secure lower admission requirements instead of striving to equal or excel any student from anywhere?

Achebe. (1987:160)

The novel bears testimony to gradual self-realization of both Ikem and Chris. It is Ikem, the sensitive poet, who first undertakes the spiritual journey of self-discovery after realizing his alienation from the mass. The failure to merge himself with the earth and earth's people is expiated by Ikem through his death. Ikem's brutal murder shakes Chris off his inertia, who estranging himself immediately from the present government, undertakes a bus journey through the rebellious province of Abazon, where only anthills are visible in the barren landscape. The bus journey that symbolizes Chris' growing spiritual enlightenment eventually brings his death as he attempts to save a young girl from molestation by a police sergeant. Through death, Chris and Ikem overcome the cynicism and inertia that made them inactive in the first part of the novel.

Sam's furtive measures to hold power yield no lasting success as another military coup leaders capture the political power after murdering Sam. The death of three leading characters brings Beatrice to prominence and through this development, the notion of feminism is embedded in the narrative. Achebe gives his heroine two names – Beatrice Nwanyibuife, the latter an Igbo name meaning "a female is also

something"(Achebe, 1987,p.87). He projects her as an embodiment of feminism and traditional values. Her skirmish with Sam asserts her strong individuality, an impression that further gets deepened by Ikem's mystic discourse addressed to her. After the untimely death of Chris and Ikem, she becomes the last resort for their friends and followers, "the stragglers from a massacred army"(Achebe, 1987,p.217) who finally unite themselves around her. With an awareness to the qualities of modesty, love and gentleness that a woman brings to the world, Achebe associates Beatrice with Goddess *Idemili* who came to earth to wrap the rude waist of Power who was rampaging naked through the world, with a "loincloth of peace and modesty" (Achebe, 1987,p.102), a legend upholding woman as the bearer of traditional morality. This mythic discourse about the outrageous activities of the untamed Power has a close parallel in Nigeria where both political and administrative powers have been abused to the detriment of the entire community.

The untimely death of Chris, her boyfriend is, in fact, a turning point in the life of Beatrice as it initiates the process of her identification with the native African self. Despite her early alienation from the native African self and culture on account of her Christian upbringing and education in England, she is intuitively aware of her mystical identity feeling herself "like Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves" (Achebe, 1987,p.114). Her reconciliation with the African self, which started with the death of Chris, culminates in the naming ceremony of the newborn child of Ikem and Elewa where she plays the role of a ritual priestess performing the traditional rites.

3. Conclusion



The reconstruction of the two distinct phases of the post-colonial Nigerian condition in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, shows the reality as a product historical forces and the characters appear to be caught helplessly in the web of conflict and social evolution. Although concerned with the contemporary reality, the colonial legacy looms large in both the novels. The historical events related to colonization seem to have shattered the spiritual fabric of the Nigerians causing their loss of traditional values and making them participate in the historical development for which they have not been prepared. The immediate consequences are chaos, corruption, and instability in all spheres of life. With a keen awareness to the socio-political forces operating in post-colonial Nigeria, Achebe presents this crisis in fictional term. His conviction about art's "disquieting relationship" with a "recognizable reality" and his understanding of the artist's responsibility in the African context have enabled him to give a poignant expression to the prevailing corruption and instability—the two disrupting forces affecting the health of the entire nation.

About the Author

Nirupa Saikia holds an MA (Gauhati University) and a Ph D degree in *Chinua Achebe's novels from North Eastern Hill University* (NEHU), Shillong. She is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English, Government Aizawl College, Mizoram, India and has got thirty two years of teaching experience. Her major area of research interest is African Literature, especially in the novels of Chinua Achebe. She has also participated in a number of National, Regional and State Level Seminars and workshops and has published research papers in various International Journals.

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