

WEALTH AND POWER IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD AND CHINUA ACHEBE

VEENA.K.G

Lecturer
Department of English,
Cauvery College,
Virajpet, S.Kodagu
Karnataka. India.

ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature portrays the fashion in which the inhabitants came to understand and interpret their surroundings for themselves and for the marginalized. The new canon of writing by the oppressed colonies gradually began to take shape. Their ideas and ideologies opposed the European view point. They expressed their desire to frame their identity and their grit to survive amongst the wilderness in their new literature. Their love for their land, its tradition and culture began to infuse in their writings.

Wealth and Power played a great role in blending the desire to explore their Identity and the courage to Survive. Resistance literature has halted the destructive processes of that imposition of the colonizers giving a start to ‘decolonization’ patterns. The literature of Canada, the West Indies, Africa, India, Australia, and the Pacific Islands has not only focused on its originality but also has influenced the longing of its inhabitants to rule their own life.

This paper will attempt to explore the aspirations of the people towards wealth and power, pain and disturbances in relationships through Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Survival and the world of Oppression mark the core of the Canadian and African Literatures. Through a comparative approach, an attempt will be made to examine the role of wealth and power in Canada and Africa. The paper also attempts to exhibit how colonized people have the same wavelength in opposing Oppression of any form.

**“Turning and turning, in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
More anarchy is loosed upon the world,**

- W.B. Yeats: “The Second Coming”

The dawn of new millennium has bestowed the novelists a new dimension to express themselves in the world of literature. Commonwealth literature portrays the way in which the inhabitants come to understand and interpret their surroundings for themselves and for outside people. Commonwealth literature just like the original settlers and conquerors initially looked almost exclusively backward towards the homeland in a desperate attempt to cling to what was safe, known and culturally superior. By the end of the 18th century large migration in the name of trade and commerce and adventure had led to the establishment of colonies around the world also contributing to a new land with slaves and indented labour from Africa and India. This mingling of different cultures and wiping out of the inhabitants contributed to mixed cultures and cross races with no identity of their own. The triumph of the trade made people greedy and as a result what was once independent lands became colonies of Europe now after a lot of sufferings and sacrifices the colonies have established themselves as new nations.

Commonwealth Literature is a new canon of writing by the oppressed colonies. The oppressed minds of the colonies began to counter the European view points with a new set of ideas and ideologies surrounding their trials and triumphs. Tales of the victories and hardships, the exploitation both human and nature, began to gain ground leading to the growth of a new kind of literature called the Commonwealth Literature. Money and Power have always played a pivotal role in the society. From time immemorial money and power has created and destroyed many individuals. In literature, it is Marxist Critical theory which focuses on power and money and examines the upper class attempting to maintain their power and influence over the lower class with pride, which Money has provided them. This paper tries to identify the power play with the backing of money in the select Novels of Margaret Atwood and Chinua Achebe.

A recipient of the Booker Prize and the winner of Arthur C Clarke award and Prince of Asturias award for literature, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's novels have attained high critical acclaim for her skill of story-telling. To know more about conflict, it is necessary to have knowledge of Atwood's ground breaking study of archetypal patterns in her novels. Chinua Achebe, poet and novelist, was one of the most important African writers. He was also considered one of the most original literary artists writing in English. He received Nigeria's highest honor for intellectual achievement, the Nigerian National Merit Award, in 1987. His novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was shortlisted for the Booker McConnell Prize that same year. Chinua Achebe's novels are a stark reflection of the African reality. He very vividly captured the changing face of Africa. The present study takes into consideration Margaret Atwood's "The Blind Assassin" and Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" from a Marxist perspective to emphasize on wealth and power causing a lot of pain and disturbances in the relationships of Man in the society.

Atwood's 'The Blind Assassin' is narrated by two unnamed lovers who meet in dingy backstreet rooms. Interestingly, the novel exhibits elements of Science Fiction too. Iris, the protagonist, wonders over the mystery surrounding her sister's death. Atwood introduces a novel-within-novel. As she ponders over her sister's death, she is in for another shock of her life-her husband's dead body found in a sailboat. Atwood brilliantly weaves together two stories and blends them creating a world of astonishing vision and unforgettable impact.

In this novel Atwood delineates the Canadian culture and conjures up specially the lives of the people of high social standing, introducing the rich, eccentric Chase family and tracing the reverberating effects of the First World War on the Chase family members. It is a mesmerizing novel with triple narratives interwoven into it.

At the periphery, it is the fabrication which constructs the tragic life of Laura and her lover Alex Thomas, an idealistic young man and a radical, viewed from the perspective of Laura's sister Iris. Embedded in it is a fiction of adultery re-counting the surreptitious love affair of a wealthy maiden and a fugitive Marxist. The innermost layer at the centre contextualizes the incredible and astounding adventures of the blind assassin and the mute sacrificial maiden, synthesizing the use of the devices of science fiction and the fabulous tales of Arabian adventure. The narrative of the blind assassin and the mute sacrificial maiden posits a parallel to the tale of the aristocratic woman and her illicit partner, who in turn are allegorical figures for the enticing and incomprehensible Laura and her lover, Alex. The recurring theme of predator and prey, delineated in the triple narrative, postulates the possibility that Atwood deliberately triplicates the identity of the protagonists in the multiple folds of the complex novel.

The Novel has an edge over the fact that the Chase industry was to be shut down due to depression. War had taken its toll and every sector was affected. Captain Norval Chase, President of Chase Industries Ltd., expressed:

All portions of the country have suffered their setbacks and Chase Industries currently faces a scale down of its operations due to reduced demand. He would make every attempt to keep the factories running but may soon be under the necessity, of either layoffs or part hour wages (133)

The labourers suffered and many factories had the scene of Union riots, brutal violence and considerable destruction of property. Captain Chase was worried of the situation and called upon his elder daughter Iris and told her to look after her little sister in case anything happened to him. He insisted that she maintained the honour of the family.

What can you buy for a nickel? he said . I was caught off-guard by this question, tongue tied. I didn't know. Laura and I were not given any money of our own to spend, because Reenie said we needed to learn the value of a dollar.”(125)

The Chase Industry underwent a huge loss and Mr. Richard Griffen, Toronto financier and outspoken President of Royal Classic Knitwear wanted to overthrow Chase Industry. He compelled Captain Chase for the merger of Chase industry with his own Industry. To gain power over his competitor, Richard created worse situations to compel Captain Chase to hand over his industry to him. Captain Chase to save face in the society, got his eighteen year old daughter Iris Chase married to Thirty five year Richard Griffen.

Richard will be asking you something, said father to me. His tone was apologetic..... I think he may be asking you to marry him, he said.....I have already given my consent ,,, so it's up to you. Then he added, A certain amount depends on it..... What he was saying was that unless I married Richard, we wouldn't have any money.(276)

The relationship between father and a daughter becomes a business. To safeguard their family dignity, father humiliates the father-daughter relationship as in a way he would be selling his daughter to a business tycoon.

Both the sisters Iris and Laura are in love with Alex Thomas, who is a fugitive, an extremist. Richard uses his power to track Alex. Laura had to submit herself to Richard in order to save her lover. Richard uses Laura in bargain to let Alex go out of the country. Here the aspect of power infuriates relationships. A fatherly figure brother-in-law uses his Power to force Laura to have physical relationship with him to safeguard her lover and when she becomes pregnant he sends her to asylum branding her as insane. Thus, even as the novel is about the quest for true love, it raises questions regarding private and social morality, the veracity of

sexual liberation and ethical integrity. Aristotle viewed money as a kind of “nonsense” since it is a human invention designed to facilitate trade and not something based in nature (Aristotle, Politics, 1.3.10,39

“Brebis” also criticizes money for destabilizing traditional social hierarchies. Money can transform a hermit into a thief “(qtd. in Cowell: 155, 1.202-204).

In accordance with Atwood’s novel, Chinua Achebe’s ‘Things Fall Apart’ depicts an intense quest for Money and Power among the people of Umufia clan. Okonkwo is a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan, a lower Nigerian tribe that is part of a consortium of nine connected villages. He is haunted by the actions of Unoka, his cowardly and spendthrift father, who died in disrepute, leaving many village debts unsettled.

Unoka, the grown –up was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. (5)

In response, Okonkwo became a clansman, warrior, farmer, and family provider extraordinaire. He hated his father. He always wanted to be a powerful man in his clan. He hated his father as he was a failure and had no respect in the society. A father – son relationship with a strong bondage also meets its drastic end if the person is a failure. Money and Power matter a lot to commemorate a relationship.

In a settlement with a neighboring tribe, Umuofia wins a virgin and a fifteen-year-old boy. Okonkwo takes charge of the boy, Ikemefuna, and finds an ideal son in him. Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, forms a strong attachment to the newcomer. Despite his fondness for Ikemefuna and despite the fact that the boy begins to call him “father,” Okonkwo does not let himself show any affection for him.

Ikemefuna stays with Okonkwo’s family for three years. Nwoye looks up to him as an older brother and, much to Okonkwo’s pleasure, develops a more masculine attitude. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected village elder, informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has said that Ikemefuna must be killed. After several hours of walking, some of Okonkwo’s clansmen attack the boy with machetes. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help. But Okonkwo, who doesn’t wish to look weak in front of his fellow tribesmen, cuts the boy down despite the Oracle’s admonishment. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye deduces that his friend is dead.

The desire to be powerful and to be known as a strong person Okonkwo was ready to kill Ikemefuna even though he had great liking towards this boy. Therefore, in any society, be in a tribal clan or a modern civilized society, everybody craves for Power and that insatiable thirst for power can blind a person to commit heinous crime against his near and dear ones.

Okonkwo is ordered to go into exile for seven years from his land as he unknowingly fires and kills a clansman. He is distressed as he had great pride of being a hero in his clan. Okonkwo’s kinsmen, especially his uncle, Uchendu, receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Although he is bitterly disappointed at his misfortune, Okonkwo reconciles himself to life in his motherland.

His life turned sour with the advent of the British as he knew they would destroy his clan. Crave for power and the tussle to become the supreme instigated Okonkwo to end his life. Marxist theory demonstrates a society of two classes, the Bourgeois and the Proletariat. The Bourgeois being a class which has an upper hand over the Proletariat, a subordinate class, engaged in hostile interaction to achieve class consciousness. Marx believed that all past history is a struggle between hostile and competing economic classes in state of change.

Wealth and Power play a great role in blending the desire to explore their identity and the courage to Survive. This paper would like to depict life in the world of oppression with a bird's eye view of the situations which alter the attitudes of the people which exasperates relationships. Karl Marx opines that the evolving history of humanity, its institutions and its ways of thinking are determined by the changing mode of its “material production” that is, of its basic economic organization. In support of the above discussion Terry Eagleton in his book ‘Marxism and Literary Criticism’ opines:

The understanding of importance of Wealth in any relationship is expressed in Marx and Engle’s “The German Ideology” (1845-6) as the production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life, conceiving, thinking, the spiritual intercourse of men, appear here as the direct efflux of man’s material behavior. (2)

Thus, according to Marx, Art is the “superstructure” of society. It is this social perception which enlivens the ideology of which one social class has power over the others and how the relationships change. In Accordance to the theory, the authors have showcased that money and power in society determines the behavior of the protagonists and the characters in the novel.

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