

**AFRICAN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS IN THE NOVELS OF CHINUA
ACHEBE: RESPONSE TO COLONIALISM**

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ABSTRACT

Achebe's reputation as an outstanding African novelist rests securely on his four novels – Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer At Ease (1960), Arrow of God (1964) and A Man of the People (1966) the first three of them having been published together as The African Trilogy (1988). The village novels Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God depict conflicts in Ibo society partly generated by the impact of European colonialism and partly by tensions within the society itself. These two novels form a class by themselves in the sense that they unfold the complexities of tribal life beneath its surface simplicity and calm and the tribal societies symbolize the conflict of cultures. The other two novels No Longer At Ease and A Man of the People are satirical in intent and hold up a mirror against the New Rulers of the of the postcolonial era in Africa. Taken together, all the four novels deal with the theme of colonial encounter and human condition, and yield wonderful response to colonialism. At the root of the theme of colonial encounter runs a parallel and basic theme of these novels, that is, the theme of sustenance of African culture and traditions. Rightly so, because traditions and the culture of a country provide an identity and self-reference to the people of that country. A society of certain identity could then get established and re-established even after great losses.

Keywords: Tradition, culture, self-references identity, colonial encounter, human condition, sustenance, African identity, response to colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, popularly known as Chinua Achebe, believes that our ancestors created their myths and told their stories for a human purpose, and therefore, “any good story, any good novel should have a message”. Unlike some African writers struggling for acceptance among contemporary English language novelists, Achebe has been able to avoid imitating the trends in English literature. Instead, he has embraced the idea at the heart of the African oral tradition, that is that, art is, and always was, at the service of man. Achebe, very artistically and skillfully, exploited these oral traditions to transform colonial realities into fiction in order to create intellectual and substantial response to colonialism. Dr. K.K. Bhatt’s compilation in this connection is quite relevant:

“Achebe’s feel for the African context has influenced his aesthetic of the novel as well as the technical aspects of his work. As Bruce King comments in Introduction to Nigerian Literature: Achebe was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transmute the conventions of the novel, a European Art form, into African Literature. In an Achebe novel, King notes, “European character study is subordinated to the portrayal of communal life. European economy of form is replaced by an esthetic appropriate to the rhythms of traditional tribal life.”¹

Dr. Bhatt finds more:

“Clive wake of the University of Kent, a perceptive critic, rates Chinua Achebe’s works among the classics of African literature along with those of Senghor of Senegal and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria. While Achebe is primarily a novelist, Senghor is a poet and Soyinka a dramatist. They all deal with universal themes of the human condition in a way that transcends the contemporary setting of their works.”²

Apart from Achebe’s village novels, that is, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), wherein the portrays tribal life clinging fondly to its traditional values and confronting directly with the brute colonial forces, Achebe in his other two postcolonial novels, *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) depicts home-grown colonial situation after independence with a new identity, that is colonialism. John Thieme remarks:

“Achebe’s other novels are ‘ *A Man of the People* (1966), a fierce indictment of corruption in post-independence Nigeria, and the latter *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), set in a fictionalized surrogate for Nigeria, in which democracy has been sacrificed to the interests of a self-serving elite. More complex in mood and structure than *A Man of the People*, *Anthills* shifts its focus between four protagonists, each of whom embodies a different response to the NEO-COLONIAL situation and state corruption, and for the first time Achebe includes a fully developed female character. The novel returns to a central concern of all Achebe’s work, the African artist’s role in helping to create a more just society, particularly

emphasizing the importance of storytelling as a shaping force in people's lives."³

Chinua Achebe is the trend-setter among the African novelists who are writing in English and have challenged European approach towards the African. Dr. Janardan Prasad finds:

Among African novelists, Achebe is sui generis. It is not as if he stands aloof from the main stream of 'Protest' and cuts out a path for himself. He is very much in it; he protests against the imposition of an alien religion on the traditional way of life against colonial rule, and after the independence of his country, against corruption in Government and society."⁴

Colonialism has always been a painful process, and Africa like India in general and Achebe's Nigeria in particular has had its experience of the colonial rule. It must not be forgotten that the colonial encounter, here, has a background history of humiliating colonialism and slavery. Like other colonies, Africa experienced this violent trauma of colonialism and the chief characteristic of which is a sense of deep injury, a hurt that agonizes with a threat and moves to an extreme, where the colonized finds himself distorted, imposed and owned. RabindraNath Tagore, in one of his later poems, castigated the European assault on Africa. TO quote him:

With mantraps they stole upon you, those hunters,
Whose fierceness was keener than lightless forests,
Whose pride was blinder than you lightless forests,
The savage greed of the civilized stripped naked,
Its unabashed inhumanity
Your forest trail became muddy, with tears and blood."⁵

Such human conditions, after a reasonable extent of time, ferment and prepare a soil for encounter and response Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*' is a story of the people in an Ibo village during 1890s, a period when British colonialism was first introduced into the tribal organization of Africa by the missionaries and the civil and military administrations. At first these legendary creatures are discussed with incredulity and Achebe structures it in such a way as to make the white appear on the very fringes of recognition. Only gradually, they intrude themselves more closely into the life of the village. Fearsome stories come from the nearby village of Abame recording the power of white men. Dr. Bhatt studies deeper:

A white missionary arrives and the elders of the village consult the oracle for guidance. The oracle told them that the strange men would break the clan and spread destruction among them. To escape this fate they murder the missionary and tie his bicycle to a tree. When the search is made, the tethered bicycle becomes the very evidence that condemns them, and a permissive expedition destroys the village and kills the inhabitants."⁶

Achebe gives a pathetic pen-picture of this mass-massacre at Abame, like the Jallianwallamass-massacre of Amritsar, India:

The three white men and a very large number of other men surround the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed except the old and the sick that were at home and handful of men and women whose ‘chi’ were wide awake and brought out of that market.”⁷

Thus from the very beginning, the white men apply the policy of force on the weak and the miserable tribal people. About the role of conscious novelists like Chinua Achebe, Dr. S.S. Prasad is of the view that :

Such brutalities have been used by novelists not only to indict colonialism but also to show how these incidents were the result of racial prejudices and went deep into the collective consciousness of the people and shaped their response to British Rule.”⁸

The clash between the African tradition and the white man’s modernity is presented by the author with a mildly comic irony. The novelist has very clearly delineated how the white people came with their religion and established a government, developed trade and spread education. He investigates that they had been diplomatic enough to tread softly on the faith of the clan, like Peter Abrahams, Achebe is also deeply concerned about the black being dominated by the whites. Actually, through this exploration, Achebe explores the Black consciousness.

Things Fall Apart (1958) is a tragic story of the decline and fall of the tribal hero Okonkwo of Umuofia. He states that the white man has put a knife on the things that held them together and they had fallen apart. As is clear that the title is taken from ‘The Second Coming’ of W.B. Yeats. The relevant lines are: “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”⁹

What Achebe means to say is that the binding forces of the African gods, beliefs, customs and festivities were all gone. And it was his duty to re-educate, regenerate and rejuvenate the Nigerian society.

The white man who had, first, come peacefully as missionary, had brought not only an alien religion but a government also to protect the converts. Gradually, Church and government join in a doomed effort to pacify Umuofia clan. The new religion grows in strength, the new government also is working and trade has increased in the area. Achebe feels:

The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel become things of great price and much money flowed into Umuofia when Mr. Brown realizes that he cannot win by a frontal attack, goes to work by building a school and hospital in Umuofia and by convincing them that, if Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them.”¹⁰

The resentment of Okonkwo and the helplessness of the clan against the growing power of the white man are aptly summarized in the version of Obeirika who clearly proclaims:

The white man is very clever who came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan no longer acts like one. He has put a knife on things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”¹¹.

When the human conditions deteriorate like this, Okonkwo, one of the greatest men in Umuofia, commits suicide for the sake of the honour of himself or perhaps due to his helplessness. The people of Umuofia fall broken and confused, and the British Deputy Commissioner exploits this situation to rule better. David Carrol describes this situation: “Arrogance, contempt and levity –these were some of the attitudes which surfaced among the local people.”¹²

Achebe’s second novel, *No Longer At Ease*, shows the nature and extent of the changes wrought by colonial intervention in Nigeria. It gets reflected in the career of Obi. The novel is set in the modern Nigeria in the days just before independence. It has its hero Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo of ‘*Things Fall Apart*, and son of Nwoye, now called Isaque. Achebe moves to another setting of Nigeria in the fifties but his themes remain similar—themes of colonial encounter, human condition and sustenance of African culture and tradition: response to colonialism. Locals cherish hopes in Obi (Obiajulu Okonkwo) to understand the situation and rise against the strangers in a better way. As Obi is the only palm fruit of Umuofia who is in the European services, the people have high hopes from him. Their hopes are not restricted to financial help alone but much more. Bruce King observes:

Just as the mission school in *Things Fall Apart* was seen as useful because it brought information about the white man, the village has taxed itself to gain from its most intelligent youth a return of both prestige and cash.”¹³

Bruce King continues:

They (the village people) seek to combat the intruding European ideas to protect themselves against the administration. The policy of segregation and social exclusiveness although diminished in the practice, is not totally extinct. The club which was a place of recreation for the whites only previously was restricted to the whites only. In this novel, we find that ‘although the club was now open to them technically, few Africans went to it.”¹⁴

Racial superiority and colonial consciousness, which were part and parcel of the colonial rule, find evidence in the manners, behavior and dealing of Obi’s immediate boss, Mr. Green. He muttered something to the effect that Obi would enjoy his work, provided one, if he wasn’t bone lazy and two, if he was prepared to use himself: “I’m assuming you have one to use, he

concluded.”¹⁵ Immediately after that Obi is rebuked on telephone by Mr. Green: “You say ‘sir’ to your superior officers, Mr. Okonkwo.”¹⁶

In ‘Arrow of God, a mutual understanding between the locals and the whites, though slowly and situationally, develops as both have their motives. The Europeans seek refuge behind their myths and rituals as they strive to administer this corner of the empire. They are, in reality, looking for a power structure they can understand and promote. This sort of mutual understanding results in the separation of the two worlds. This is why PremaNand Kumar remarks: “In Arrow of God, we witness the spectacle of an increasingly emasculated and self divided Ibo clan pitted against a foreign government.”¹⁷

But racial superiority and despise for the black races find expression once again in this novel when Wright abuses the workers saying: “Shut up you black monkeys and get down to work.”¹⁸

Achebe condemns this attitude of the colonials when he writes: “It is this dignity that many Africans lost during the colonial period. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of this dignity and self respect.”¹⁹

The novel Arrow of God wonderfully explores into how the British Administration in Nigeria comes to a margin leading to wane due to its coloniality reflected in degenerating and victimizing not only the locals but also its own people like Winterbottom. British Administration’s glory and glamour are portrayed as almost diminished in this novel. Too much of everything comes to an end sooner than expected. Local African’s tactful surrender to the British and the boomerang colonialism led to a suitable response to colonialism. Winterbottom strongly resents Indirect Rule as this would reduce his status and limit his power.

The diminishing rapport of the British Administration with the colony which was witnessed in Arrow of God (1964) is found to be extinct in A Man of the People (1966), Achebe’s fourth Novel. The action is set in the postcolonial period in the 1960’s when Nigeria has ceased to be a colonial state under the British Rule. But the colonialism remains existent in a different form, as G.D. Killam notes:

There are indications that Europeans are deeply enmeshed in the complicated system of bribery and corruption, which informs the political life of the community. However the legacy of colonialism is apparent.”²⁰

CONCLUSION

The themes of colonial encounter, human condition and sustenance of African culture and traditions receive the main focus of Achebe in all his novels in general and in Things Fall Apart in particular. The important thing is that Nigerians seem to be losers but through their substantial encounters with the colonizers and the timely responses they manifest, they, ultimately, stand gainers. The natives could, through this adversity, gain a Pan-African consciousness, which in spite of all losses, is the biggest achievement.

If the themes depicted in Achebe's novels are put to the honest conclusion, they certainly manifest mixed response to colonialism. Notwithstanding, there emerged neocolonialism, probably as a natural characteristic of human tendency to learn to be dominant – an unwelcome response to colonialism, the postcolonial Africa has, nevertheless, been, not a loser. It might have, under the colonial rule, fallen apart, but it is colonialism that created such intense adversities that Africa as a whole got united, learnt English, the global language and of course, the English ways to grow, develop and make progress.

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