

The impact of Colonialism in the novels of Chinua Achebe

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Abstract

There are not many countries in Africa today. Where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore, those Africans writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart with an eye on the main chance-outside their own countries. They are by – products of the same processes that made the new nation states of Africa.

The paper discusses the selected novels of Chinua Achebe's opinion on the impact of colonialism and race and ethnicity of African people. Achebe is concerned with the history of his country, he take delight in working on the historical, political and social background of his people. His writing belongs to the part of a broader comprehensive tradition of literature produced in the commonwealth.

Keywords: colonialism, race and ethnicity, Igbo culture, Nigerian society etc.

Introduction

Robert pyne's remark in The Sunday Review that English language is being perpetually renewed from abroad, and the creative writers in many countries of the common wealth, where English is not the mother tongue, have repudiated the statement of W.B.Yeats who said that no one could think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue. Chinua Achebe of the Ibo people of Nigeria says,

Achebe wants the creative writer in English to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent, that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. Chinua Achebe came in to limelight with his first novel, Things Fall Apart published in 1958. In it, he tries to document the effects of the first contact of the Ibo clan with the European missionaries and government officials. The title of the novel comes from Yeat's is describing the collapse of the two – thousand – year - old tradition of Christian Civilization in Europe.

Achebe's story takes place in imaginary but typical villages. Umoufia and Mbanta, of the lower Niger in the period between 1850- 1900, the period just about the arrival of the white man. The theme of the novel is the

irremediable impact or break up of one culture by its contact with another. Okonkwo, the hero who is cast in a solid mould and described as “one of the greatest men of his times” says, He (the white man) has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” The organization of the novel is in three parts, the first part depicts “the ceremony of innocence” in Umoufia before the coming of the white man. Achebe takes care not to glamorize the pre – colonialist Africa. But the Umoufia society with all its barbarism was stable, dignified and was governed by a set of traditions from marriage to death. The society enjoyed its own legal, educational relations and hierarchical systems and marital disputes were settled with dignity and according to the customs of the land. Okonkwo protests against everything with his father. Unoka stood for and he is bitter against him as he committed the unpardonable sin of dying without taking any titles.

In the second part, he is banished to Mbanta, the village of his mother's people for sins committed against the Earth Goddess. It is significant that during his absence the white settlers arrive, establish their Church, Government, trading system, missionaries preach and make inroads into the traditional pattern of life. The third section deals with the death of old ways of life and it coincides with the death of Okonkwo. It was the end of phase it coincides with the death of Okonkwo. It was the end of a phase of

life. Achebe writes charmingly as a son of the soil about the harvest, courtship, marriage, death, belief in spirits and the solemn festivals and the elders' anxiety to protect the unity of the tribe by giving judgment in case of disputes. The village is held together by a network of relationships and the community is greater than the individual. Achebe succeeds in recreating pre – colonialist Africa as a mature and well knit society, which yielded to the impact of the new civilization in a tautly constructed narrative.

His second novel, *No Longer at Ease* came out in 1960 and its title is derived from Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi*. *No Longer at Ease* is set in modern Nigeria and it illustrates how things have fallen apart in the new society. Its hero Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, like the three Magi, returns from an alien country to discover that the traditional society to which he belonged no longer exists. Obi obtained his B.A., in England; he is full of idealism, he is unhappy to see his native country “vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle”. He is appointed scholarship secretary at the Federal Ministry of Education presided over by Mr. Green, an Englishman of long standing in the Nigerian Colonial service. Full of idealism he begins well, resists attempts at bribing him. Achebe introduces another related thread in the novel. Obi on his journey in a boat from England falls in love with Clara, an Osu, descendant of slaves. But Osu is a sort of

untouchable. He marries her, she becomes pregnant and she has an abortion and then she disappears. This is a great blow to Obi and he is unable to cope with the demands of the new society. The Umoufia progressive union, which paid for his education in England, makes a demand on him to pay back eight hundred pounds. The novel deals with the Obi's professional, social and moral decline. The central character is cast in ambiguous terms and is conceived as a Jamesian "Central Consciousness" around whom all the events revolve. One sympathizes with Obi receiving blow after blow, unable to make both ends meet, he cannot pay installments on his car, and cannot return money spent on his educational trappings of modern life. There are a number of loose threads, the hero's predicament is not gradually revealed and his portrait remains vague.

Arrow of God which came about in 1964 has richer and more ample evocation of the Ibo society under the colonial administration. It is set in period between Things Fall Apart and No Longer At Ease and hence it takes us back to the period when the colonization is fully entrenched in Nigeria. Its background is the same as of Things Fall Apart. The chief character is the priest Ezeulu, who is different from Okonkwo, as he can compromise, except where his dignity is involved. He is the other side of the coin although like Okonkwo, he also comes to the same sticky end.

The tension in this novel stems from Ezeulu's defence of his god, Ulu

and himself, against European culture and religion. Nwaka, a wealthy chief principal supporter of Ezidemili, the chief priest of the god Idemili, one of the deities displaced by Ulu, is set in opposition to him. Ezeulu's relationship with Captain Winterbottom, the head of the local colonial administration also promotes the internal division in the tribe. The rivalry manifests itself in a land dispute with a rival village and Ezeulu, who does not understand his sacred duties over reaches in his personal ambition which brings him disaster. As in Things Fall Apart, the forces of colonialism disrupt the society in a vicarious manner. We read about the tribal customs, the Feast of the New Yam, the Ceremony of ogbazulobodo, the night spirit chasing away the evil spirit all customs of the Ibo society in the first decade of the twentieth century.

While these novels present the Ibo life under colonial rule over a long stretch of time, A man of the People (1966) shows what the Nigerians make of their country when they are independent. The novel published was about the time of the military coup in 1966. But there is a military coup described in the novel, as well, it brings no hope of real reform but coincides with the military takeover in January 1966. It is an indictment of post – independent Africa. Achebe attacks crippling and corrupting powers of privilege, position and money. The man of the people in chief Nanga, and the hero is Odili, the narrator. It is a brilliant satire, where the interest lies not so much

in chief Nanga's corrupt activities, but the process whereby the supposedly idealized Odili gradually succumbs to the temptations of political success and starts to resemble in attitude at least, Chief Nanga himself. This is like the degeneration of the animals that drive out men in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Achebe with great stylistic virtuosity controls Odili both as his mouth piece against corruption and exposes Odili's gradual susceptibility to corruption quite, deliberately; the language has been vulgarized to indicate the indiscipline of Odili's mind.

The novel falls evenly in to two parts. At first it deals with Odili's contempt for Nanga's political prominence, and then he falls a prey to it. It is his proximity to Nanga and his high office that destroys his ideals and corrupts his soul. The extravagant life at the court lures him away from the path of virtue. Odili represents the young educated Nigerian, who accepts position of influence and defends corruption in the Nigerian society and thus he becomes comical. He has a 'grasshopper' mind, which never dwells long enough on a scene. Only two characters, Chief Nanga and Odili come to life, Odili because of Achebe's deadly irony and Chief Nanga because he represents a type in Nigerian politics – why only Nigeria. He is the type found in many democratic countries where corruption reigns. The novel is humorous and witty but the structure is artistically defective. The narrator – hero often lapses in to digressions; this affects

the internal unity and the impression is one of the haphazard reminiscing. Besides the first person narration imposes its own limitations, the technique is prone to incredibility because the narrator's point of view, uncorrected by any other, tends to prejudice.

Achebe is concerned with the history of his country, he take delight in working on the historical, political and social background of his people. His writing belongs to the part of a broader comprehensive tradition of literature produced in the commonwealth.

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