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## THEMES AND STYLE IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE

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### Abstract

The manifestation of multiple themes such as cultural conflict, corruption, generation gap, pride and egoism etc. is presented in the major novels of Chinua Achebe like *Things Fall Apart* (1957), *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of People* (1966) and *Anthill of Savannah* (1989). These themes speak to us through language. This paper throws light on how author's style makes ideas crystal clear before us. Style, here, refers us to the usage of language. Achebe's style includes different modes of narrative in each novel, there are Meta narrative, folk tales, igbo words and proverbs suitable for the emotions of the characters and for the occasions in the novels. The physical conflict of Okonkwo, the psychological conflict of Obi and the philosophical conflict of Ezeulu are evident in a limpid style of Achebe.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Cultural Conflict, Corruption, Generation Gap, Pride and Egoism.

It is in the fitness of things to define the terms themes and style as they have been used in the title of the doctoral dissertation. Oxford Dictionary defines themes as the subject of a talk, piece of writing, exhibition etc., and a topic.

The same dictionary defines style as a particular procedure by which something is done. If the two words theme and style are applied to a work of a writer, a clear idea emerges before us. It becomes crystal clear that any writer, great or small, has to follow a particular procedure to bring the subject of his writings to the reading public and a writer of the stature of Chinua Achebe is no exception. But it is not in the fitness of things to

remain hedged on the rudimentary definition of themes and style.

Achebe's major novels are *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *Man of the People* (1966). After twenty-one years of "fictional silence", in 1987, he published his fifth novel *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Achebe is widely known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The destructive impact of European Christianity on pre-colonial Igbo culture is the essence of this novel. It has sold more than 10 million copies and has been translated into forty-five languages.

Okonkwo, the stubborn hero of this novel goes to a great extent to defend his native. He kills the court messenger when he learns that this black native is an agent of the colonial administrator. He expects his clan to put up a fight so that the clan can uphold the existing order of things. He is disappointed by the indifferent attitude of the members of his clan and he commits suicide. Obeierika, the friend of Okonkwo and his ardent admirer lacks courage and so he holds the District Commissioner responsible for Okonkwo's suicide.

There are several themes in *Things Fall Apart*. The theme of the ascent and decline of the Igbo community is sketched by Achebe in a brilliant *tour de force*. Okonkwo's ascent and decline are equated with the disintegration of the ritualistic tribal society. The coming of Christianity in the tribal society leads to the fall of tradition, once held pious by the natives.

A discussion of theme and style of a novelist is incomplete unless we consider the narrative strategies employed by the novelist. *Things Fall Apart* is a novel divided into three parts. The first part has thirteen chapters which are laid in Umuofia. This is followed by Okonkwo's return from his exile and finally his death. This part also consists of six chapters. The division of the plot into four groups of six chapters was extolled by the critic, Robert M.Wren:

*"These twenty five chapters are divided into four groups of six chapters each, with one pivotal chapter xiii, in which Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeulu's son and must flee."* (Achebe's World, p.10)

The theme of the arrival and settlement of missionaries in Umuofia is an important theme of the novel. The conflict between the traditional religion of the Igbo and Protestant Christianity is echoed by Chielo, the priestess of Agbala by the image of a mad dog and a piece of meat. To her, the Igbo converts to Christianity are "the excrements of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up." (*Things Fall Apart* p.130)

Achebe was always concerned about the proper use of the African language. He devised for his African reading public, an African vernacular style

that is communicated in English in a highly efficacious manner. He translated Ibo words, figures of speech and proverbs into English. Those translated expressions do not serve as exotic verbal ornaments. On the contrary, Achebe used such expressions as agents of characterization and culture. Achebe may be labelled a novelist who gave the English language a new prose style, an African style that truly mirrored the African message. The tribal society which Achebe depicted was an Ibo society that was fully self-contained. In such a tribal society there are myths, religion, proverbs, legends and customs which are given hands and feet by Achebe's prose style. Critic M. Mani Meitei makes a trenchant observation: "Chinua Achebe, while trying to represent his African culture in the most realistic terms in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has used materials from culture as the most effective and efficacious fictional techniques. The culture he reproduces is not only first hand but also an exquisite representation of the complex ramifications of the Nigerian culture. (*African Literature* p.43)

Achebe's next novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960) was intended as a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's second novel has its setting in Lagos the capital of Nigeria in the fifties of the twentieth century. The novel is set in the cusp of independence. We must do well to remember that Nigeria attained liberation from British rule on October 1, 1960. Achebe employs the third-person narrative in telling the story. Achebe has highlighted the decline in social values in colonial Nigeria.

The protagonist of *No Longer at Ease* is none other than Okonkwo's grandson, Obi Okonkwo. He, being a brilliant student, has trained himself in a British University. He returns to Lagos to serve as a bureaucrat in the British administration. During his stay in England he imbibed the high ideals of the British. Small wonder, he was determined to prove that he was a scrupulously honest and assiduous bureaucrat. With the passage of time he became corrupted because he was incapable of reconciling the demands placed upon him by his girlfriend Clara and his tradition-abiding parents. Though he had imbibed the British ideals of love in England yet he was incapable of maintaining those ideals. We see him yielding to the pressure of his parents against his

plans of marriage to Clara, a girl of the Osu community.

We saw Okonkwo as a victim of cultural conflict in *Things Fall Apart*. His grandson, Obi Okonkwo is also a victim of cultural conflict. But there is a difference in their cultural conflict. Whereas Okonkwo's conflict was physical, Obi's conflict was purely psychological. Obi's position is peculiar. On the one hand he has been weaned away from traditional values. On the other hand, the western ideals have been imbibed by Obi, but they have not been fully assimilated by him. Owing to his being bereft of moral convictions, he is confused by his individual psychological crisis. He is compelled by social and cultural pressures to accept bribes and consequently he is sent to jail.

Achebe does not trace Obi's downfall to Europe. He is keenly alive to the degeneration in the traditional society. His fictional objective was to show that during the colonial rule people had lost their moral values. The spiritual vacuity left Obi and his society 'no longer at ease' in the modern world. Obi was used as a symbol of the African educated youth that is both fickle-minded and culturally rootless.

There are many themes in the novel. A colonized person's slavish adulation of the land of the colonizers' is a significant theme of the novel. The narrator in the novel gives a graphic description of his life in England and his liking as well as loathing of Nigeria. He also gives a graphic description of his love for Clara, a nurse with attractive features and manners. On his deplaning at Lagos airport, he finds the customs officers indulging in bribes freely.

Another theme of Achebe is the sobering effect which Christianity has over traditional Igbo religion. Pastor Ikedi advises Obi prior to his leaving for England to pursue higher studies:

*"Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But those were days of darkness from which we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge. Remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* (*No Longer at Ease* p.9)

An important theme is the generation gap between parents and children concerning marriage. Obi's father Issac, denounces Obi's decision to marry the Osu girl, Clara and he likens his marriage to the spreading of leprosy in his house. He is doubly sure that nobody would give the hand of his daughter or son in marriage to children mothered by an Osu woman. Obi's mother opposes Obi's decision by saying that she shall commit suicide in the event of Obi's marrying the Osu girl, Clara.

Another theme of the novel is Obi's pride and egoism. It brings about his personal as well as his financial ruin. The narrator says: "The chief result of the crisis in Obi's life was that it made him examine carefully for the first time the psychological motivations of his actions. In doing so, he uncovered good deal that he could only regard as sheer humbug." (*No Longer at Ease* p.141). For instance, we can take the case of his sending twenty pounds every month to his town union which became the principal cause of all his troubles. He failed to swallow his pride and accept the four month's exemption which he had been allowed.

Achebe shows that with the death of Obi's mother, Hannah, the idealist in Obi dies a natural death. Symbolically he feels a new kind of peace, but it is a peace that brings about his doom. Obi starts accepting bribes from aspirant girls who vie for scholarship. He also enjoys carnal pleasure with them.

Robert M Wren is of the opinion: "Through the grandson of Okonkwo, the novel becomes a parable of modern Nigeria, a commentary on apparently universal corruption and on the colonial judgement of the new African generation." (*Achebe's World* p.38)

Achebe's style is manifest in his imagery. For instance on the streets Obi comes across a group of young women in damask and velvet "swiveling their waists as effortlessly as oiled ball bearings." Achebe uses a dynamic kinesthetic imagery here. Kinesthetic imagery is the cognitive creation of the feeling of movements while physically moving. Bernth Lindfors comments on Achebe's use of appropriate language and style: "Achebe uses a style that will not only suit his subject and awaken right cultural milieu but

will also help to define the moral issues with which the novel is concerned." (*Power above Powers* p.50)

When we examine Achebe's use of language we see that it can enhance the narrative mode of the writer and the subject matter which he is describing. Achebe's style is seen in the way he tries to capture the speech habits of the colonial officials, educated Nigerians like Obi, the judge or the Secretary of the UPU, or the urbanized labourers who have only a smattering of English. In Lagos we see the wide range of the English language from the pidgin of Obi's driver to the grandiloquent welcome address of the Secretary of UPU and finally to Obi's lucid prose.

In his next novel *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe turns back to the 1920s. His protagonist, Ezeulu, is the Chief Priest of an Ibo snake cult. This Chief Priest becomes a victim of the rapidly changing times. His inordinate pride is equally responsible for his downfall. The Church as well as the colonial administration has made certain innovations and Ezeulu tries to come to terms with those innovations. As a consequence he earns the ire of a few of his rivals and followers. Okonkwo's conflict with the colonial administration was physical, whereas Ezeulu's opposition to the colonizers was philosophical. He thinks that if the Umuaro clan cannot drive away the colonizers, the best course of action would be to study their weaknesses and then think of a new strategy to oppose them. With this end in view, he sends one of his sons, Oduche to learn the language of the whites and also their Christian religion.

Now Oduche imprisons the royal python which is sacred to the Idemili and in doing so, Ezeulu's household becomes a detestable place. Ezeulu had angered his clan by waging an unjust war against Okperi clan over a piece of land. Now, he makes his clan more angry by sending his son Oduche to learn the English language and their religion which is Christianity. Mr. Winterbottom is highly impressed by Ezeulu whom he regards as the only witness of truth in the land case. In his capacity as District Officer, Winterbottom appoints Ezeulu as the Warrant Chief of Umuaro. Ezeulu declines the appointment for the simple reason that in his

capacity as Chief Priest and an upholder of the Ibo traditions of his people, he cannot become the principal agent of the colonial administration.

The colonial administrators detain Ezeulu for three months at the Government Hill in Okperi. During his incarceration, Ezeulu cannot eat the three sacred yams that kick off the New Yam Festival. Neither can Ezeulu perform any priestly function. During his detention, Ezeulu had expected his clan's folk to register some kind of protest against the colonizers but they disappointed him badly. When Ezeulu is released, he comes back home. He decides to punish his clan for their not supporting him during the period of his detention. The elders of his clan request him repeatedly to eat the three yams which shall herald The New Yam Festival. But he declines their request adamantly and as a consequence the clan is thrown into starvation.

The catechist of the Church makes use of the opportunity to sound the death knell to the traditional religion. The traditional people are swayed by the preachings of the catechist and the teachings of Christian God have a firm hold on the beliefs of the people. Ezeulu gets a rude shock when his promising son Obika dies. Ezeulu thinks that he has become an arrow of the Christian God for the conversion of the natives to Christianity.

One of the themes of *Arrow of God* is the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves. On the day of the festival, women adorn themselves with ivory ornaments and beads. They put on fine dresses. The men carry palm wine pots. The whole scene creates the impression that all the six villages are united. It is the women who are given the prominence of holding the Pumpkin Leaves. Ezeulu is greeted by the loud clamour of the people. Ezeulu's left half of the body is painted with white chalk. He dons a leather cap. In his right hand he holds a staff called Nine Ofo and in his left hand he wields an iron staff. Ezeulu runs to and fro and his running strikes terror in the hearts of the natives. The women circle the Pumpkin Leaves on their heads and fling them at Ezeulu. Ezeulu runs into the shrine. He buries six bunches of leaves deep into the ground. The Festival draws to a close when the people of the six villages tread on the spread out leaves to drive away the evil spirits

symbolically. The Pumpkin Leaves Festival signify the rich tradition of the African people.

Another theme is the struggle for power both on the religious and the political level of Igbo thought. It is Achebe's narrative focus that controls the complexity of the situation. At first Ezeulu performs his rituals and he is focalized. But the perspective widens with the progress of the plot. Though Ezeulu occupies a pivotal position yet other characters like Nwaka and Ezidemili, who are Ezeulu's rivals interpret events from their point of view. C.L. Innes speaks of the struggle for power in the Igbo society: "In *Arrow of God*, stories are told and retold in differing modes not only by the Priest Ezeulu and the Captain Winterbottom but also by other members of each society, so that once again the reader must become involved in the problem of judging the relationship between knowledge, language and self-interest and the responsible exercise of power." (*Chinua Achebe* p.151)

The multidimensional conflict that revolves around the persons of Ezeulu, Winterbottom and Ezeulu's rival, Ezidemili and his other themes of the novel. Emmanuel Obechina observes: "The conflict in *Arrow of God* develops around the person of the Chief Priest of Ulu, who is the ritual and religious leader of Umuaro. On the other hand, there is the conflict between the local British administration represented by the old-fashioned administrator, Winterbottom and the native authority represented by the Chief Priest. On the other hand there are the internal politics of Umuaro and the conflict between personal power, the temptation to constitute himself into an 'arrow of God, and the exigencies of public responsibility. All these are handled in the main plot. A subsidiary plot deals with the domestic tensions and crisis in Ezeulu's own house, the tensions and stresses between the father and his grown-up sons and between children of different mothers in his polygamous household. Not all these conflicts are a result of culture-context. Personality deficiencies and mistaken judgements have something to do with some of them. The intervention of fate and chance also plays a part." (*Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* pp. 170-171)

Achebe uses proverbs many a time in the novel. Whenever Ezeulu opens his mouth, he uses a proverb. For instance, Ezeulu says: "The death that will kill a man begins as an appetite". Or "He is a fool who treats his brother worse than a stranger". M.M. Mahood in his article entitled, "Idols of the Don: Achebe's *Arrow of God*", is all praises for the aptness of Achebe's proverbs and images. He states, "If we are to attempt to discover why Achebe's writing achieves such vigour in *Arrow of God*, it may help us to look closely at the substance as well as the style of saying." (*Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* p.200)

*A Man of the People* is Achebe's comment on civilian and military regime in post-independent Nigeria. This novel is historically set in the present and treat the political situation in independent Nigeria. In *A Man of the People* Achebe brings the historical record right upto contemporary times in *A Man of the People*.

Achebe shows his uncanny foresight in the delineation of the country's first republic. Achebe scripted the novel with the protagonist of this novel, M.A. Nanga is a corrupt politician. He has elbowed himself into the corridors of power by hook and by crook. If we look into a sick post-colonial African society, we cannot find a better symptom than Nanga.

Achebe desires to show that men like Nanga who have seen the colonial rule under their very noses show a cynical outlook regarding political corruption. Such people turn a blind eye to the excesses of their leaders because they think that leaders who spearheaded the struggle for political independence have every right to eat 'The National Cake'. Achebe broods over the 'sick states' and he is of the belief that 'such sick states' should go through a grave political convulsion before the people are able to transform their minds from cynicism to hope.

When the novel draws to its finale, we see Nanga being removed from government in a military coup. Achebe's major fictional concerns are relevant. Just as Achebe had found fault with Europe for Obi's moral confusion in *No Longer at Ease* in similar fashion, Achebe found fault with Europe for contributing to the moral confusion and political

chaos of Nanga. The characters that Achebe has portrayed in his novel are representative men and women of his age but they are symbolic of the great ills that pain African society. The narrator, who is also a participant in the story is Odili Somalu. Odili tells the story in the first person. The narrator states distastefully an unnamed newly independent West African country in the natives of the twentieth century in which Africanization is the order of the day.

Odili Somalu, the dramatized narrator of the novel, *A Man of the People* is most critical of corruption in post-independent Nigeria. Odili exposes the repercussions of the colonial rule. Achebe adopts an innovative technique by making the dramatized narrator speak in the first person.

Corruption is the principal theme in the novel and John Povey is point devise when he states in Introduction to *Nigerian literature*: "The theme of this book is the corruption inherent in the system, intensified by Achebe to such a vehement degree that it virtually constitutes an attack on the entire political process. The title is with deliberate irony proved to be the exact truth." (*Introduction to Nigerian Literature* p.110)

The political scenario and its elaborate description is a major theme in the novel. Odili told us that The people's Organisation Party was a popular front and they ruled the country. Nanga did not hold any office. The opposition party was formed by the Progressive Alliance Party. Odili points to the sudden slump in the International Coffee Market. The supporters of the People's Organisation Party had to be paid in full without making any reduction of the prices. The government was in dire financial straits. Even though the Finance Minister was a Ph.D degree holder in Public Finance and suggested a good plan but his plan was turned down by the Prime Minister who had both eyes fixed in the general elections.

The post-colonial theme is limpidly clear in sentences such as these: "The trouble with our new nation ----- as I saw it then lying on that bed----  
--- was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say 'To hell with it'. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a

handful of us ----- the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best ----- had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. (*A Man of the People* 42)

The theme of corruption in post – colonial Nigeria becomes very clear in the words and actions of the characters. Chief Nanga explains to Odili that his cabinet colleague T.C. Kobino is delaying the construction of the road between Giligili and Anata for want of expert opinion on the soil. He labels such people as selfish who lay importance to the improvement of their constituency. It is ironic here that it applies to him also. The real news to Odili is that Nanga has ordered for ten luxury buses to ply on the route as soon as it is asphalted. Each bus would cost him six thousand pounds. It is evidently clear that Nanga is eager about the quick asphaltting of the road because the thought of the general elections is uppermost on his mind. Nanga states that the buses are arranged with British Amalgamated. Odili is not wrong in guessing that the buses are a free gift to Nanga.

Achebe's stylistic device is evident through images. For instance, "Memorable events were always flying about his stately figure and dropping at his feet, as those winged termites driven out of the earth by late rain dance furiously around street lamps and then drop panting to the ground." (*A Man of the People* 51)

Achebe uses different speech patterns for the different characters and this brings out the contrast between the two styles in their mode of communication. Odili uses sophisticated correct English in order to show his disapproval of Nanga and the society he represents. But Nanga is a man of the people who finds a rare delight in speaking the west coast pidgin: "You cal this spend? You never see something, my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so troway." (*A Man of the People* p.16) Bernth Lidfors appreciates Achebe's style thus: "to use untranslated Igbo and unadulterated pidgin in his fiction is evidence of a significance in his orientation as a writer. (*Power above Powers* p.30)

In each of his novels, Achebe has carefully selected a style that suits his 'content'. He has used

the language of narrative, which is more cosmopolitan, westernized and more suited to life in the city in *A Man of the People*. For instance, there are similes drawn from narrative portions of the novel.

- (1) Let us now for all time extract from our body politic as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth. (*A Man of the People* p.4)
- (2) Memorable events were always flying about his stately figure and dropping at his feet, as those winged termites driven out of the earth by late rain dance furiously around street lamps and then drop panting to the earth. (*A Man of the People* p.29)

Achebe published his fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987 after twenty one years of fictional silence. A close perusal of the novel shows that it is an allegory on military dictatorship. Ever since Nigeria became free on October 1, 1960 political power has changed hands from politicians to military generals. The setting of the novel is an imaginary country called Kangan. In writing his novel, Achebe focuses his attention on the military elite that has ruled Nigeria.

Sam is the President of Kangan. He is trained in military warfare from Sandhurst, the British military college. Chris and Ikem, his boyhood friends focalize Sam. It is through a military coup that Sam has become President. He cherishes being called 'your Excellency'. He relishes the thought of being President – for – life. His ambitions for becoming President – for – life are frustrated. It is only then that he begins to feel insecure of his position. It is amusing that he perceives his childhood friends as trouble-makers. His actions seem to suggest that he has found an inkling of unity among the long suffering masses in Africa. He is hopeful that something positive will come out from the newfound unity of the Africans.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe has used multiple narrative strategies. The character of the military dictator Sam is focalized by three participant narrators, Chris, Ikem and Beatrice. Achebe employs an authorial voice that narrates the story. Achebe takes recourse to one of Ikem's prose poems to break into the realistic narrative. Achebe tackles the

basic question of power politics by his use of myths, legends, folktales, lectures and poetry.

In his earlier novels, Achebe was concerned with the role of the speaker. In this novel, Achebe was concerned with the role of the writer. In the earlier novels, Achebe explored the dichotomy between the African Oral and European literary culture. But *Anthills of the Savannah* is a different novel altogether. In this novel, Achebe is concerned with African literary culture that has evolved ever since the publication of his first novel, "*Things Fall Apart*". Critic Emmanuel Ngora makes an authentic remark: "Character portrayal and the use of language alone do not fully account for the success of Achebe's art. There is in addition, the writer's skill in telling story: his narrative technique." (*Kunapipi*, Vol. XII, No.2, 1990, p.115)

In *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe has made an attempt to fictionalize the Nigerian problem discussed in the booklet, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). Fiona Sparrow observes: "While *Anthills of the Savannah* is a political novel ----- it illustrates many of the themes Achebe voiced in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, it comments on much more than the political scene." (*A Review WLWE, Vol.28, No.1, Spring 1988, p.62*)

The first theme which strikes even a casual reader of the novel is power politics and problem of governance. Achebe uses different narrative methods to show how the military leaders have left no stone unturned to place their interests above the nation. Achebe lays emphasis in the problematic of power in the Third World Postcolonial context. It showcases how the power hungry military leader Sam distorts social reality and designs many things to stay in power. T.R.S. Sharma while writing on the problematics of power in *Anthills of the Savannah* underscores the importance of several strands and many voices in the novel: "The novel comprises many strands, registers and multiple voices and is wrought much more intricately than his earlier fiction." (*Journal of Contemporary Thought* 1991, p.125)

The theme of the lacunae in the political set up of Nigeria has been taken up by Achebe. Achebe demonstrates the cupidity for power in the hearts of

military dictators and their utter responsibility for the damaging ills of their country. Achebe answers a wide range of questions in his interview to Anna Rutherford. The questions which he discusses are: question of leadership, the role of women and the role of the people in supporting a corrupt regime. In his interview with Anna Rutherford, Achebe states that the role of leadership in a community should be reserved for the elite. He expatiates that the moral responsibility of the community should be entrusted on the shoulders of a bunch of thinking men and women. The point that he clarifies is "the role of leadership is to create the circumstance in which the people begin to act with awareness... their duty is to use their special training and education to initiate the upward movement of the people." (*Interview* p.5)

Achebe's style is manifest in the novel. Pidgin is used freely by the half – literate Elewa and the taxi drivers. It shows Achebe's concern for linguistic mimetism. By his dexterous manipulation of language, Achebe has created wonderful satirical effects. In the lecture of Ikem, Achebe inserts a real essay, a sub-text in which he makes a parody of a University lecture. By this method, Achebe makes a satire of intellectual debates. Achebe uses the form of communication in myth, poetry, lectures, journalism, diaries and fiction and showing their interaction as well as their difference.

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