



THE DISINTEGRATION OF AFRICAN SOCIETY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS

Dr ARPANA

Associate professor & head, Department of English, SSM College, Dinanagar



ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe presents the African society from the perspective of an unbiased man who records everything with sensitivity and objectivity. In his novels, he has described whatever happened to African society in last hundred years. Chinua Achebe views life as a continuing experience the present growing from the past and containing in itself the seeds of future. In his writing, Achebe has concentrated on the traditional society of Africa that has undergone the process of disintegration. Achebe not only presents the contemporary socio-cultural problems but also probes into the whence of the present and follows up these problems to their roots. The paper explores how integrated African society has become in Achebe's fiction

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Chinua Achebe presents an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch in his works of fiction. His four novels cover the entire colonial history of Africa, from the early days of European advent to the post-independence chaos, highlighting the confrontations, crisis, conflicts and complexes of this period of perplexity. To Achebe, all art including literature is a communal activity and must deal with the evolution of people. To quote Achebe, every literature "must in other words speak of a particular place; evolve out of necessities of its history, past and current and aspirations and destiny of its people. Achebe's fictional works explore the organic connection between life and history and offer an unusually authentic and accurate picture of the fluctuating fortunes of his society and the consequent social and moral problems of his people.

Achebe's historical authenticity lies not so much in the re-telling of great historical events as in the artistic awakening of the ethos of the times. Achebe achieves the artistic success through an effective dramatization of certain crucial moments in

history, a broad delineation of manners and circumstances attendant upon those events, an ingenious portrayal of characters that embody the spirit of age in which they live, and transcription of the popular idiom of time and milieu.

Colonialism as a mass experience of history, engages the creative attention of Achebe. He explores the political, social, cultural and human dimensions of the colonial phenomenon and portrays the transformation of popular life in the wake of these rapid and radical changes. His primal concern is not so much the historical problems as their impact on the actual life of people. In fact we get to know everything about Achebe's Ibomen, their hopes, aspirations, desires and disappointments in the throes of historical changes through Achebe's fictional works. In brief, the material and moral disturbance of popular life caused by colonization becomes the central task of his artistic portrayal.

Achebe realized that it was a vital cultural necessity to fight and rebel against the view. Achebe

states the primal objective of his creative endeavor when he says:

I would be quiet satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on god's behalf delivered them.

Achebe goes back to pre-colonial times and evokes the ethos of the traditional African society. Furthermore this going back in terms of time becomes necessary for Achebe because he views life as continuing experience, the present growing from the past and containing in it the seeds of the future. The past becomes the Achebe important to Achebe because he like George Lukas, considers it as the "the concrete pre history of the present" to put it in typical Achebe expression, he wants to show to his people where the rain began to beat them" in things fall apart and an arrow of god the historical causes for the fall of traditional society are explored and artistically portrayed.

TFA, by broadly depicting the traditional tribal life and the impact of the European encroachment on this self sufficient society raises the great colonial problem and shows how different classes, institutions and individual are related to it. AG represents the same problem at much later point of time by when the colonial effect has sharpened further. It dramatizes the ultimate surrender of African people not only to western political system but also the new religion as and when the powerful pressure of contemporary problems becomes too great for him to dwell for long on the history of these questions, Achebe turns to the present with a discerning eye. No longer at ease(1960) deals with the decline of moral standards in the colonized African society and a man of the people(1966) gives an authentic expression to the disenchantment that followed independence in the new African nations as a result of the spread of corruption and megalomania.

A reading of the four novels of Achebe in conjunction reveals how the traditional society of Africa has undergone a process of disintegration through its exposure to and subjugation by an alien force. While colonial experience becomes the basic thematic concern linking together Achebe's four

novels, each novel in turn concentrates on certain specific ramifications of this theme depending upon the time and locale of situation depicted.

The tribal society of Umuofia is based on sound moral and spiritual values. It believes in toil and achievements. An able man paves his way to success through hard work. Honours and distinctions are to be acquired through sheer diligence. Christian virtues like peace and humility are not known to them. It has its own system of law. Egwuigwu or the nine masked elders decide the issues of internal strife and people submit themselves to the tribal law and religion unquestioningly. Umuofians love music and their feet dance automatically to the beat of drum. Their talent in painting and sculpture can be seen In the myriad masks they make for various occasions. Their literature is mainly in the form of oral tales and wisdom of the clan is capsule in their proverbs. Achebe thus shows that Africans before the advent of European had not been uncivilized in any sense of the term. On the other hand they had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty...they had poetry and above all they had dignity.

Achebe does not try to idolize the African past but exposes the chinks in the traditional society without any reservations Achebe admits "we cannot pretend that our past was one long Technicolor idyll we have to admit that like other people's past ours had its good as well as bad sides."

On the negative sides are the superstitious beliefs of the tribe such as branding some of the families as osus and ostracizing them throwing off the twins into evil bush mutilating the dead and sometimes killing the innocents in obedience to their oracle etc.

What happens to this traditional tribal society in the wake of European advent constitutes the content of Achebe's TFA. The yeastier title aptly suggests the predicament that befalls Africa. The fate of the community is depicted in the tragic fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo. Okonkwo is a typical Ibo hero who rises to power and affluence through sheer diligence and assiduity. He epitomizes the essence of Ibo beliefs and values. As Okonkwo is steadily progressing towards the highest title in the tribe fate removes him from his race ruthlessly. He

kills a clansman inadvertently and is exiled from the community of seven years.

These seven years of Okonkwo's exile coincide with the British penetration and consolidation in umuofia. When Okonkwo returns he finds that the tribe has become subservient to the white power. While to the village the change has been gradual to Okonkwo it is sudden he who has always been an unchallenged tribal hero fails to reconcile himself to subdued position.

Okonkwo seizes the opportunity to fight the British as a feud breaks out between the ibos and the Christian converts. Okonkwo decides to stir his people to action and protest. He kills the court messenger when the latter tries to disperse the crowd. This unexpected outburst of violence shocks the people beyond words. Okonkwo realizing that the tribe will not back him hangs himself in his compound.

Though spatially Achebe's stories are set in Nigerian society the depiction is so close to truth that it moves from the particular to embrace the general and the local scene can be extended to exemplify what has been happening all over the neocolonial world. Herein lays the triumph of Achebe's historical method.

Achebe's portrayal of his protagonists adds an extra dimension of reality to his narratives. Achebe's protagonists embody the spirit of age to which they belong. While the traditional heroes of Achebe personify the essential virtues of African characters his modern men obi and oddly display fragmented schizophrenic personalities which undoubtedly are the products of colonial education. Achebe after making his protagonists quintessential of their classes, carefully individualizes them to their smallest human peculiarities. He endows them with certain personal traits that distinguish them from the other members of their class. For instance in a society based on group allegiance, Okonkwo and Ezeulu stand out with their individualistic temperament. In the corrupt world of Lagos Obi stands in the predicament of being an idealist sans strength of will Odili of course cast in a satiric mould is more a type than an individual. Achebe's characters exhibit an excellent combination of the typical and individual traits. Being typical they

remain true to their times and being individual they emerge as convincing characters.

Furthermore the lives of these men exemplify the essential social, cultural and psychological conflicts of their respective times. Their fates are largely determined by the historical changes of the time. In fact their characters develop through their responses to these changes. To recall David deices perceptive comment on characters "what is man's character but his reaction to environment and potential"

He moulds his fictional medium to suit the requirement of time and place of action. He chooses diction that is appropriate to the content, historical context, time, participants in action and narrator. For instance the novels of traditional life TFA and AG set in rural Africa are replete with native expressions, similar drawn from tribe's range of experience and translation from Ibo. He evokes the ceremonial traditional Ibo life through a richly cadenced proverb laden rhetoric English. The language provides an appropriate cultural matrix to fictional narrative.

On the other hand in the action takes place in urban and modern Africa. The language used is westernized marked with conventional English idiom and linguistic habits like contractions. The similes used are drawn from science and other spheres of urban experience, The educated characters use a strange mixture of standard English and pidgin. This linguistic confusion is symbolic of the moral and cultural confusion prevalent to the society. In mp Odili uses a highly effected language with redundant metaphors and clichés. It is thickly sprinkled with idiomatic expressions imported from the west. Odili's language betrays not only the speakers striving after effect but also his eagerness to imitate the west.

In Achebe language not only seems from the requirement of action but also evokes a sociable cultural atmosphere and throws light on the historical realities that form the basis of his plots.

Achebe's choice of fictional themes and content, characterization and stylistic experimentation enable him to transcribe history in fiction to make the past present to bring near the distant and to historicize the presents. As Bernth Lindfors aptly remarks "Achebe's novels read like

chapters in biography of his people and his nation since the coming of Whiteman. Culture contact and consequent conflicts emerge as the major thematic in Arrow of God. These conflicts are lived through by the protagonist Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu. Ezeulu faces two major conflicts externally to assert his sense of self-respect before the domineering authority of the British administration and internally to keep the God Ulu supreme over the other tribal gods. While the culture contact creates the former, it exacerbates the latter.

Ezeulu occupies an important place in the tribal society of Umuaro as the time-keeper. He names the day for the feasts, festivals and plantation and harvest, guided by the movements of the moon. His power is challenged repeatedly by the rival groups and the white administration. The relationship between Ezeulu and the administration typifies the colonizer colonized encounter. It is one marked by mutual miscomprehension created by a cultural chasm that exists between them. Ezeulu's self-respect is mistaken for intransigence and the British officer sentences him to two months imprisonment. Ezeulu's anger is turned not only against the white rulers but also his own people who remain complacent over his predicament. Hence, after his return, Ezeulu tries to use his priestly power to reach his tribe a lesson.

In NLE and MP Achebe passes from the portrayal of past history to the portrayal of the present as history. NLE is set in Nigeria on the verge of political independence. The ancient African tradition portrayed in TFA and AG has become a part of history by now though the remnants of tradition yet survive in the villages; the westernization/modernization imposed by the colonial rulers has spread far and wide and the society in brief is shown to be at the crossroads of culture. Achebe depicts the ambiguity, indecisiveness, dichotomy of values and moral chaos that the colonized African society and focuses his attention on the plight of an education youth caught in the whirlpool of consequent contradictions and complexities.

Achebe's fourth novel, MP in his own words is "a rather serious indictment of post independence

Africa" Achebe chooses the satiric mode to expose the moral decadence in the newly independent African States. He is more a social critic than a historian here. As Achebe he explains. "I realized after dependence that they (politicians) and I were now on differentbecause they were not doing what we had agreed they could do. So I became a critic".

He moulds his fictional medium to suit the requirement of time and place of action. He chooses diction that is appropriate to the content, historical context, time, participations in action and the narrator. For instance, the novels of traditional life TFA and AG set in rural Africa are replete with native expressions, similes drawn from tribe's range of experience (agriculture, hunting) and translations from Ibo. He evokes the ceremonial traditional Ibo life through richly cadenced proverb laden rhetoric English. The language used provides an appropriate. Cultural matrix to the functional narrative.

On the other hand, in NLE and MP, where the action takes place in urban and modern Africa, the language used is westernized, marked with conventional English idiom and linguistic habits like contractions. The similes used are drawn from science and other sphere of urban experience. In NLE, the educated characters use a strange mixture of Standard English and Pidgin. This linguistic confusion is symbolic of the moral and cultural confusion prevalent in the society. In MP Odili uses a highly affected language with the redundant metaphors and clichés. It is thickly sprinkled with Idiomatic expressions imported from the west. Odili's language betrays not only the speaker's striving after effect, but also his eagerness to imitate the West.

In Achebe, language not only stems from the requirement of action but also evokes a sociable cultural atmosphere and throws light on the historical realities that form the basis of his plots. As Berth Lindfors aptly comments, "What gives each of Achebe's novels an air of historical authenticity is his use of English language"

Achebe's choice of fictional themes and content; characterization and stylish experimentation enable him to transcribe history in fiction, to make the past present, to bring near the

distant , and to historicize the present . As Bernth Lindfors aptly remarks:" Achebe's novels read like chapters in a biography of his people and his nation since the coming of the Whiteman" .

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