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## “POWER IS VIOLENCE”- READING CHINUA ACHEBE’S POETRY AS A STATEMENT OF RESISTANCE AND ASSIMILATION IN “AFRICAN MODERNISM”

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### ABSTRACT

Modernism, which is often regarded as a Eurocentric phenomenon, meets the non-European intellectual and cultural movement through the paraphernalia of post colonialism. Chinua Achebe’s poetry, as much as they are subversive, often draws on the Imagistic patterns of European poetry of High Modernism in technique and representation. Poems like *Agostinho Neto*, *The Explorer* or *Pine Tree in Spring* talk about the postcolonial angst of a dislocated self that is searching to anchor itself in a political, ethical and cultural space. At the same time, the image pattern of the poems reveal that Achebe is assimilating European Imagistic patterns of Ezra Pound or Hilda Doolittle into his poetic discourse as perhaps a statement of resistance through a recognition of the culturally “double-self” in a postcolonial scenario. At times, as in his novels, Achebe’s poetry does get into the binarizations of the “European” and the “Other”, and therefore his politics get criticized over allegations of stereotyping both the spaces, but one must bear in mind that Achebe’s mission was always to become a “national poet” in the political sense of the term and thus one needs to look into that aspect too while commenting on his art productions. Yet, Achebe assimilates European model of Modernist poetry to subvert his power relations with the West in a quest to “consume” art as a form of resistive metaphor for simultaneous coercive and assimilating purposes.

**Key Words:** Cultural assimilation, postcolonial angst, “African modernism”, Igbos, ideological conflict, modernity.

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Chinua Achebe’s poetry is one of the best examples of post-colonial politics of assimilating colonial discourse with the dislocated self of postcolonial condition. As great a novelist he is, Achebe’s poetry is yet to achieve a cult status in world literature, but nevertheless, his poetry is equally significant in delineating the frustrations of the people of Nigeria related to civil wars, corruption and infighting in the political class leading to Nigeria’s postcolonial angst. Achebe’s literary politics is decidedly to resist the Eurocentric

appropriated notion of Africa being the “dark continent”. At the same time, he is unsentimental in depicting the disoriented priorities of the Nigerian political class in the postcolonial era, thereby raising the question to what extent the people of Nigeria has become “independent”. This of course, is one part of the story. The other aspect that needs to be reflected upon is how Achebe receives European Modernism in his poetic style and approach. Since Achebe is a postcolonial author, one can find the tension between the “foreign” and “native”

elements in his literary productions, where the question of identity is problematised by the cultural hybridity of a postcolonial generation. Achebe does not look at the past as a monolith, as a long unproblematic narrative, as he observes in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation":

"The question is how a writer re-creates the past. Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it-to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed. This is where the writer's integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts, which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist, which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called into question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's past ours had its good as well as its bad sides" (Achebe, web).

Like his novels, Achebe's poetry showcases the different aspects of African 'modernity' coming into clash with the traditional Igbo ethos, paving the way for a cultural assimilation of different ideas and representation. European Modernism was a quest for integrating the fragmented times within the classical past of 'unity', Achebe tries and receives that Modernism within his discourse as a model to portray the transition of African society from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial times. Any transition, when in action, will have a site of ideological conflict- in the case of European modernism, it was about capitalism versus feudal order, War versus classical social normativity, Fascism versus new democracy. Achebe's ideological conflict is not entirely different, though assimilated within the African social order. 'Tradition' as a dynamic enterprise would have been already firmly established in the Anglophonic literary world by the time Achebe was writing, and as a postcolonial thinker, Achebe does form a discourse of tradition

that is neither to be dismissively dispersed nor to be accepted as a norm.

In this paper, the focus will be on three anthologies- *Prologue, Poems About War and Gods, Men and Others*. The first anthology comprises of poems which are thematically linked in terms of expressing the poet's anguish at Racism and the general mood of despair in the post-colonial condition of Nigeria. The poem *1966* is an example how Achebe weaves a thematic pattern of post-colonial angst with a Modernist style of poetic discourse. The poem is written in an Imagistic pattern, exploring the 'fall' of Nigeria from the pre-lapsarian state of a 'past' that was not rigged by violence and social immobility. The poem begins on a note of tragedy and dislocation, but without the interlinked pattern of Victorian poetry:

"absentminded  
our thoughtless days  
sat at dire controls..." (Achebe, 2005: 3).

In the period of High Modernism, Ezra Pound had founded the Imagist school of poets and brought out *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* in 1914 to address a new form of objectivity in poetry that would capture reality in unprismmed manner. As a kind of manifesto to Imagist poetry, Pound wrote in the anthology that there should be a "direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective", "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Pound, web).

Achebe's style in his poems shows a poetic quest to assimilate European Modernist models with his literary politics. The above extract shows the immediacy of thought that Pound was campaigning for in his Imagist movement along with Hilda Doolittle. The phrase "thoughtless days" capture the mood of the times that Achebe is trying to decipher in the poem. The title *1966* refers to the Biafra War that was fought between the Igbo and the rebels from other parts of Nigeria. The Igbos were led by Colonel Ojukwu, and on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1967 a new independent state of Biafra was declared on the grounds that Igbos were not safe in Nigeria. Achebe was an emissary for Biafra, till the Colonel had to resign, leading Nigeria into absolute political chaos, instability and corruption. Achebe therefore interpolates this political context in his poetry, but

without subjectively going into nostalgia, marks the horrors of the Civil War in stark, direct phrasing. In the same poem he writes:

“blood in God’s face  
confirming His first  
disappointment in Eden” (*ibid*).

There is almost a sense of resistance against the political violence that causes his Nigeria to bleed. Nigeria is no longer the land of prosperity and flourish that gets represented in Igbo myths, but is now a place of coercion and corruption. The Imagist school of poetry provides Achebe with the tool to delineate this reality in the most objective and direct manner possible. The tension of a poet in appropriating European model of poetry is evident in the way Achebe expresses his disapproval of the internal violence in Nigeria, and yet has to revert back to the Modernist discourse of Europe to find the suitable of representation. In *Benin Road*, he writes:

“Speed is violence  
Power is violence  
Weight violence” (*ibid*, 4).

The repetition of the word violence accounts for the role of physical coercion and extermination in Nigerian politics. The word “weight” reminds us of the Foucauldian concept of power that dissipates laterally to consume social narratives in terms of power relations. In his essay *The Subject and Power*, Foucault states:

“When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by other men... one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar they are free” (Foucault, 790).

By “free subjects”, what Foucault means is not free subjects outside the political domain in which the power is functioning, but they are subjects who are the receiver of a new mode of power from the existing one, hence becoming a part of power coordinate that functions through a given mode, which may change, and with it the power relations. In a post-colonial space of Nigeria, Achebe portrays this relation of power that the citizens face from the

different political factions and do not know how to become “free citizens” in forming their own power relation with the State or among each other as a community.

On the question of ‘double-self’ of Achebe, who assimilates European Modernism with his own native elements, the poem *Mango Seedling* becomes an apt demonstration of such artistic ‘hybridity’. This poem is presumably addressed to Christopher Okigbo, who died in 1967 fighting for the independence of Biafra and Achebe writes the poem in 1968. In an Imagistic pattern of portraying reality in an uncluttered vision, Achebe writes that a mango seedling has been planted beside a “modern office block” which has purple coloured leaves and a “black yolk”. The images are hard hitting and symbolic of the socio-political putrefaction that has led Nigeria to a civil war. Achebe addresses Okigbo as the “holy man of the forest” who has followed the “Old Tortoise’s miraculous feet”. This line refers to a particular myth where a tortoise had gone to work for an old woman. However, at the end of a day’s hard labour, the tortoise is offered with a meagre meal of a cocoa yam on some cooked green leaves. The tortoise protests for being served such a piecemeal, but when he is persuaded to eat, he finds that each time he finishes the meal; another cocoa yam appears on the plate. The implication of this subtext is the narrative of deceit that recuperates with every passing war. There is a touch of irony, or even pathos in Achebe’s portrayal of Okigbo:

“Perhaps like the widow  
Of infinite faith it stood in wait  
For the holy man of the forest...” (*ibid*, 5).

It is notable that during the Biafran War, Achebe turned to poetry more and more rather than “feeding” his readers with prose fiction that encapsulates the consumption patterns of a mass culture. Achebe’s decision to turn avant-garde at this stage is interesting, since the oral drive in his poetry is evident in the images of death and waiting that ultimately showcases the futility of such a drive. In an interview to Dr. Reik, Achebe, when asked about his literary projects, said:

"Writing? A dirge in Ibo... All projects have been suspended temporarily, so we are all writing poems" (Achebe, web).

The image of waiting that Achebe paints of Okigbo is enmeshed in a tone of pathos, since he is waiting for the god of the forest, the head god in Igbo cosmology Chukwu to come and salvage the situation for Biafra that was never to be. Achebe was a close friend of Okigbo from their University days, but perhaps the idealism of Okigbo did not appeal to Achebe in the same manner. As a parallel poetic narrative, Okigbo's *Heavensgate* can be quoted:

"Before you, mother Idoto  
Naked I stand:  
Before your watery presence  
A prodigal (Okigbo, web).

Idoto is the water goddess in Igbo mythology, responsible for the feminine principle of life and creation. In Okigbo's poem, there is also a sense of vivid waiting, tempered by surrender and confession. In Achebe, the tone is more inclined towards cynicism and non-acceptance. In the same poem of Achebe as above, the speaker asks- "This day beyond fable, beyond faith?" This is where Achebe becomes a postcolonial subject, who assimilates the grand narrative of European Modernism to reflect upon the condition of general sense of apathy, faithlessness and loss. The speaker conjectures that if someday the rain would have come, then Biafra would "rise in power" but the "playful flood" has caused nature to turn from purple to sickly green, "before it died" on "tiny debris of passionate courage" (*ibid*, 6). These lines/phrases almost sound Eliotesque in their representation of the dislocation of the self from the space of social cognition. The 'images heap upon images' to create a pattern of Modernist style fragmented narrative that come together as a whole to decipher the broken consciousness of the speaker vis-a-vis the non-operational space within which the speaker's self functions, or becomes dysfunctional. If European Modernism was about an exercise in self-introspection in representation of culture through arts and literature, then Achebe also uses his poetry to be incisive on his own race, tribe and nation to express his protest against the internal dilution of

politics. In *Pine Tree Speaking*, a poem dedicated to the Negritude Movement leader Leon Damas, Achebe writes:

"Pine tree  
lost now in the shade  
of traitors decked out flamboyantly  
marching back unabashed to the colors  
they betrayed" (7).

The above extract shows that more than reserving a political/social/cultural antagonism towards the erstwhile colonisers, Achebe is more inclined in exercising resistance against the people of his own race who have stage managed the chaos in Nigeria. He does voice his protest against the Europeans for manhandling and destroying the economic and political scape of Africa, as in *Agostinho Neto*, he points to "half a millennium of alien rape" but as an artist, he asserts that the community of Africa will "keep the darker legend" going (*ibid*, 10). The African space is designated as a "holy" entity by Achebe, much in line with the earth myths of Igbo community that hold one's soil as the sacred cognition of the self and hence "our trampled race" are disgusted by "Africa's idiot kings" and hence they wait for a "Healer, Soldier, and Poet" who is presumably "The Man who rode a trinity" (11). There is an irony implicit against the use of Christianity as a political tool, both by the colonisers and the post-colonial rulers, who misuse religion to register and maintain power relations. Achebe's quest has always been to resurrect the Igbo religion over the coloniser's religion, which has been used politically to binarise between Europe and Africa, the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised', the 'white' and the 'black'. In *Chi in Igbo Cosmology*, Achebe writes:

"...the central place in Igbo thought [is] of the notion of duality. Wherever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute" (Achebe, 1975: 94).

It is the very absolutism of the colonial discourse and post-colonial political mismanagement that Achebe resists in his poems.

The anthology titled *Poems About War* is Achebe's most vehement attack against the politics of violence in Africa. In *A Mother in a Refugee Camp*, Achebe talks about the Oedipal relation between a mother and a son to symbolically portray the

umbilical tie between earth and the body. The image of Madonna and child replicates a condition of the 'virginity' of Africa being molested by the war in Biafra, leading to destruction in the body politic itself. The images of horror and squalid, like the air being heavy with "odors of diarrhea", "unwashed children with washed-out ribs" and the "dried-up bottoms" of children remind us of the images of dirt and squalor in the poems of Eliot that talked of moral impotency and spiritual annihilation. Achebe follows the Modernist technique of shock through representations of horror, as the mother combs the "rust-coloured hair left on his skull" (16). Eliot's theory of depersonalisation in poetry, in treating text as an autonomous space where the emotions and intellect merge and fuse at the textual level without being intervened by the persona of the poet is followed at times by Achebe, as in this poem. He describes the mother's serving food in the war camp as "putting flowers on a tiny grave" (16)- the speaker's emotion not linked to the poet's persona in terms of representation. Achebe was opposed to blindly imitating English of Britain and he sought to assimilate English to suit the African experience. Instead of looking at writing in English as a horrible treachery, he wanted to use English as a tool to reach out to a wider audience in order to resist the politics of violence through intellectual activism. In *Colonialist Criticism*, he writes that:

"Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them that destiny does not include a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship" (Achebe, 1975: 7).

Hence, the poems on war become a representational form of resistance that Achebe seeks to convey to the English reading people. Another notable poem in this series is *Christmas in Biafra*, where he writes:

"Christmas irretrievable in the heights its exploding inferno transmuted" (17).

The 'silenced' population in Biafra experiences an implosion that is ripping apart the very foundations of the Nigerian civilisation, thereby leading to antithetical imagery at the social space, with nuns preparing a model of Bethlehem and the Babe in the

manger outside the gates of a hospital. As in *The Waste Land*, there is a muted procession of shadowy beings, in this case a "black Othello", who is spitting out his vengeance against the 'innocent' Desdemona, without really knowing who the Desdemona is. The "poorer than the poor worshippers" can only "pray wide-eyed... at those pretty figures of God and angels" but they suffer from "sunken eyes" and famine. Their participation in religious rites is not only mechanical, but an expression of their impotency where a 'Modernist' angst of a being lost in time and space is observed. In these poems, there is an unabashed critiquing of the culture of violence, often perpetrated by international violence. In *Air Raid*, Achebe talks of fighter planes that come from "evil forests of Soviet technology" (19) and hence the attack is directed at international forces that have used Biafra in their own vested interests, thereby causing humanitarian crisis in Nigeria. In *Biafra, 1969* Achebe repeats his attack on Soviet Russia for being responsible in creating bloodshed with its rifle quashiokor, as he rhetorically asks:

"Must Africa have

To come a third time?" (21)

The 'third time' refers to a vocation of a nation that is needed after getting politically and culturally battered in the colonial and post-colonial phases of its history. Talking about culture and history, Ngũgĩ WaThiong'o notes:

"Culture embodies... moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race... language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Thiong'o, 15).

What Thiong'o does not bring into cognition is the horizontal axis of language construction- language is not a monolith as a signifier of culture but a diversified discourse that signifies culture(s) as also itself dispersing into multiple signifiers to construct the signified(s). Achebe's poetic discourse does not become as dispersive as may be some other poets of

his times, but at the same time, Achebe does not express culture as a monolith of a pre-colonial identity that is idealised. Definitely there is quest to identify poetry with nationalistic discourses, but nationalism in the broadest possible sense of the word. In *A Wake for Okigbo*, there is an intense assimilation towards a cultural artefact associative of Igbo identity:

“Brave one of my blood!  
Brave one of Igbo land!  
Brave one in the middle of so much blood!”  
(28, trans. from Igbo by IfeanyiMenkiti)

So, even though reinstating culture (in the pre-colonial meaning) is an important motif in his poetry, Achebe knows that Utopia is far from achievable and hence such project of “cultural re-transformation” needs to be tempered by assimilation with colonial discourses and artefacts. Power relations do not remain static after a colonial rule is over, and hence the hierarchy of it needs to be taken into account before any “purification” of culture can be done, even though the charge of hegemony remains.

In the concluding part of this paper, we need to look at another collection of poems- *Gods, Men and Others*. These poems are cultural artefacts to produce the representations of ‘Africa’ or Igbo community specifically through, what Eliot had called the ‘mythical method’<sup>1</sup> in a different cultural and spatial context. To Achebe, myths of the Igbo community posit as opportunities to explore the ‘traditional wisdom’ inherent in legends and tales, which are problematised by their clash with modernity. In *Penalty of Godhead*, a fire breaks out at night, with everybody escaping in the human and natural world, but:

“Household gods alone  
frozen in ritual black with blood  
...perished in the blazing fire...” (57).

The European Modernists like Yeats, Pound, Joyce and Eliot had found the Greco-Roman myths to be a unifying factor in the slippages of modern fragmentation, in Achebe however, there is no such unidimensional nostalgia. He receives myths as cultural signifiers that need to be critiqued in terms of contexts. Isidore Okpewho writes:

“It is therefore important to establish that when the narrator counterbalances the ‘pastness’ of his tale by giving it a contemporary stamp, he is not merely dragging it from one extreme to the other but seeking a balance which frees the tale from any kind of commitment to determinable time... But the ideal of the mythmaking effort remains one in which the narrator manages not to overstrain our sense either of the pastness or of the presentness of the tale” (Okpewho, 1983:105).

As a contemporary myth maker Achebe, he tries to come to terms with the fluid responses to identity in the post-colonial condition that change with time and space. Hence, only a “fool” will parochially accept “the precedence of ancestors and gods” but the “wise” will take tales as “grandiloquent lullabies” (*Those Gods are Children*, 58). In *Lament of the Sacred Python*, Achebe effectively portrays the confluence of Igbo rituals and Christian faith, as with the arrivals of the missionaries, the ‘new religion’ was used as a political tool to colonise the natives. In the poem “a wandering god” arrives, taking refuge in “the people’s holy tree” amidst a “charlatan bell that calls” (63). The anti-thesis is the holy python that is revered by the Igbos as a principal deity of the forest, but the children cry out:

“Look out, python! Look out, python!  
Christians relish python flesh!” (64)

Achebe’s notion of history is based on this conflict between Igbo “traditionality” and “modern” European ideology, that binarises each other, but Achebe as a critical observer does not overtly reject or accept either of the two unproblematically. There is a synthesis of ideas in the narrative of Achebe, also in show in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. In his book *Myth, Literature And The African World* Soyinka notes a very important point while he is studying the inter-relationship between art and social ideology:

“When the reigning ideology fails finally to retain its false comprehensive adequacy, it is discarded. A new set, inviolable mould is fabricated to contain the current body of literature or to

stimulate the next along the predetermined patterns" (Soyinka, 1976:62).

Achebe does use Igbo cosmology and tale narratives to construct an ideological or identity pattern in his novels/poetry, but he does not essentialise the past as a nostalgic principle. He does not essentialise the pre-colonial times as a historical necessity but as a narrative that is critiqued in terms of contemporary ideological and social contexts. Instead of using poetry as a tool of activism, Achebe politicises the issue of identity as a fluid denominator of culture that keeps shifting its sensibilities. There is a vehement attack on the missionaries for completely disregarding the faith of the *Idemili* (goddess of the sky) followers which leads to "the orphan snake/ Abandoned weeps in the shadows" (64) but there is a simultaneous hope for "a black cross/ Set in an orb of rainbow" (*Flying*, 69). Assimilation of ideas pre-figure central in the discourse of Achebe's art, and he seeks to promote the culture of a violence-free society where oppression in any form will be abandoned.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For further details, look at T.S Eliot's essay on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) "Ulysses, Order and Myth".

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