



THE IMAGE OF AFRICANS: IN ACHEBE'S AND CONRAD'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore how successful Achebe is in responding to Joseph Conrad's biased view of Africa and his wrong presentation of African characters in his novella *Heart of Darkness* by portraying real African characters in his novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The research employs the descriptive analytical method, and in it is revealed that many critics, and African writers think that in the *Heart of Darkness* Africa and its people were humiliated. They were depicted as savages and given no voice throughout the novella's events. In response Achebe shows real African characters with their positive and negative images. He shows their responsibilities as priests and priestesses, healers, educators to their children. Proverbs, folktales are used by many characters to illustrate their points, which indicate how deep rooted culture they have. Achebe is attempting to prove that Africa has a great and rich religious system, which had organized people's way of life spiritually, socially, and politically. In addition, he wants to prove that African did not come to know about culture from Europeans but they had their own philosophy of life, and they had dignity.

Keywords: Savages, inhabitants, response, image, representation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Achebe is one of the most important writers from Africa with a literary vision that has profoundly influenced the type and content of modern African English literature, thus he is considered a father of African literature. He is completely different from many other African writers who struggled for acceptance by their contemporary English novelists; he was able to avoid imitating the trends in English literature. Instead, he used African oral traditions to transform colonial realities into fiction in order to create intellectual rejection of colonialism and the European thought and way of life.

Before Achebe wrote his novels *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *No Longer at Ease*, all the novels about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans, except for Amos Tutuota's novel, "The Palm Wine Drunkard". In the Europeans writings the Africans were described as uncivilized, savages, and uneducated people. The Europeans, on the other hand, portrayed themselves as civilized more advanced than the Africans. Nonetheless, they were inclined to help, educate and enlighten the African natives whose countries they had colonized.

Sickels (2012:2) pointed out that *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, was one of the most popular novels after its publication in 1899. In it Africa is described as a "wild dark and uncivilized

continent". In 1952 Mister Johnson by Joyce Cary gained similar popularity. However, the novel's protagonist appears to be a "childish, semi educated African boy who reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africa".

Based on the descriptions of Africa and its people by both Conrad and Cary, it comes as no surprise that Achebe and other African writers were determined to give their own account of Africa and its people. Not only were Conrad and Cary's novels a misrepresentation of Africa but also they were thought to be humiliating to its people.

It was through the insights of Achebe's novels that the world comes to know Africa and its people and the truth surrounding the stereotypical ideas that were propagated by the European writers were proven as prejudiced and false.

2. Objectives of the Study

In this paper, it is attempted to explore to what extent Chinua Achebe is succeeded to response to Joseph Conrad's negative image presentation of African characters in his novella Heart of Darkness and provides a positive one, by presenting real African characters with their positions, social institutions, and philosophy of life in his novels Things Fall Apart (1958) and Arrow of God (1964). However, it is attempted to expound the aims of both authors in presenting African characters in the way they did in their novels.

3. Literature Review

The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is one of the novels that is heavily criticized by Achebe and many African writers for its portrayal of Africa and its people. In his essay "An Image of Africa" (1977) Achebe presents passages in Heart of Darkness that expose the Africans in a way he finds offensive and dehumanizing African people. He says that "Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (Achebe, 1977, p4). In addition, he shows the different ways in which Conrad describes the women in Kurtz' life, one of them is his African mistress while the other is addressed as his intended or his fiancée. The African woman who appears to be Kurtz' mistress is described as savage and wild-eyed.

In the same article, Achebe gives more detailed accounts where Conrad has very different view of how he sees black and white people. Conrad addresses a black man as "Black nigger", which is extremely offensive word for a black person, where the white man is addressed as "the unforgettable man".

Some scholars disagree with Achebe in these arguments and they have set out their own arguments against Achebe's. One of them is Sarvan (1977) who thinks that the narrator of the story and the author should not be seen as one and the same person. That is to say, the descriptions of black natives should not be interpreted as Conrad's views but as Marlow's. But Achebe counters this view by stating that Marlow "enjoys Conrad's complete confidence", and he says that Marlow is presented as a witness of truth and holds views appropriate "to English liberal tradition" but Sarvan focuses on one extract from the novel that may imply otherwise:

There are three reasons let the researcher agrees with Achebe in this argument. First, Kurtz is presented as a hero although he is the worst kind of colonialist. Secondly, Africans in Heart of Darkness are dehumanized and presented as uncivilized inhabitants. Finally, Africa itself is presented as fuel to Europe, uncivilized, place of a blank space or place of darkness as the title suggests.

4. Method of Research

In this research paper, the descriptive analytical method is used, and a comparison between the way African characters are presented by Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness, and Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God is made.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

Achebe is first and foremost concerned about the Europeans' wrong and biased view of Africa, its people and its literature, especially that by Conrad who portrayed the Africans as savages and uncivilized people. This is one major reason that prompted Achebe to write in retaliation. Through his selected novels Achebe's intention is obviously to refute this totality wrong view of the European writers. Hence Achebe's depiction of the highly civilized cultures and traditions of the Igbo people

were response to the European writers' wrong presentation of Africa and its people. However, He is also attempting to remind his people of the Igbo past and the cultural heritage that they possess.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* the tragic fate of the protagonists is depicted. Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* are the makers of history. Achebe has created them as characters who are endowed with a deep sense of dignity whether in their traditional communal life or in their readiness to resist and fight the colonizers of their native land. Achebe believes that it's his duty as a writer to help his African people to regain belief in them and overcome the state of disappointment and disintegration and endeavour to create the dynamic spirit of their community.

Things Fall Apart is centered on the life of the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo. He is projected as the tragic hero, who holds a position of power, dignity and prestige. He is depicted as a respected person in his communities before the arrival of white men with their new religion and government. Okonkwo is well known throughout the nine villages and beyond. His successes were based on his personal achievements. For example, he is a warrior and wrestler who brought an honour to his village. Manliness was characteristic that was greatly valued by many African societies including Okonkwo's people. Since Okonkwo was a wrestler and a warrior, this would defiantly prove that he has a higher social rank. He believes strongly in the value and justice of his people's traditions.

During a funeral ceremony Okonkwo's gun explodes and he accidentally kills a boy. He is exiled from his fatherland to his motherland for seven years. During his exile, vast changes happen in his village due to the arrival of white missionaries and government. When Okonkwo returns to his village he finds the major transformations that have happened in his village during his exile. Okonkwo along with other villagers decide to drive the white men out of their village. Their efforts were in vain as the missionaries send messengers to stop the meeting. Okonkwo kills one of them and in shock at his actions the villagers let the other messengers escape. Later, the commissioner came with a regiment to arrest Okonkwo, he was found that

Okonkwo had committed suicide to avoid the embarrassment of being taken to the court of justice by the white men.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad does not give African characters any voice, throughout the novella there is not any trace of dialogue between the African and European characters. In contrast, Achebe portrayed his African characters with ability to speak and debate with white missionaries. Achebe depicts in *Things Fall Apart*, a debate between the white missionary, Mr. Brown, and one of the elders of the clan, Akuna. The two men are talking about the forms, actions and attitudes of their respective gods.

"You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akuna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods." "There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood-like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akuna's carved *Ikenga* hung), "and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood." "Yes," said Akuna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messenger so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church" (p.179).

From this talk readers are learnt that the Igbo people believe in other deities beside the great god, Chukwu, to help him. As Akuna explains to Mr. Brown, below Chukwu are the non-human spirits, deities, and oracles. They claim that these lesser gods and goddesses get their power from Chukwu, and act as intermediaries between him and human beings. Achebe is attempting to inform his readers that Africans had their own philosophy of life including their religious belief.

Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are presented as if they have no religion and they are glad to worship any god even Kurtz. Audience learns that Kurtz gets the Africans whom he visited to worship him, because he possesses a gun, which they have

never seen before. This is confirmed in following quotation: "He came to them with thunder and lightning, you know –and they have never seen anything like it" (p.80). That is to say Kurtz convinced the Africans with his lethal powder of the modern gun to believe him that he is god of thunder and lightning. This biased image of Africans by Conrad is refuted by Achebe. He shows African ancients religious concepts and practices in *Things Fall Apart* and allows his characters to ask the white missionaries some difficult questions. After the missionaries told the people of the village that there is only one true God, and He judges everyone after death, and those who worship the true God get eternal life in His happy kingdom. An old man asks, "Which is this god of yours," he asked, "the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora or the thunderbolt, or what? (p.146). Then Okonkwo comments: "You told us with your own mouth that there is only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then"(p.147). African characters' questions and comments revealed to the audience that they have various deities and they strongly believe in them and it is false to claim that they were glad to worship any god.

In responding to Conrad's grunting and mute characters, Achebe emphasizes the importance of using proverbs in a conversation within Igbo culture. He states that: "Among the Igbo the Art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (*Things Fall Apart*: 7). Thus in both selected novels, African characters are presented using proverbs to illustrate their points while they are talking. Here are some examples, "The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did" (*Things Fall Apart*, 21). This proverb is uttered by Okonkwo while he was talking to Nwakibie and attempting to convince him to give him yam seeds to start farming. "Unless the wind blows, we do not see the fowl's rump" (*Arrow of god* p.59). This proverb is uttered by the time Oduche, the son of Ezeulu imprisons the sacred python which is an abomination in Umuaro. It depicts the bitterness and how angry the people are from Ezeulu for allowing his son to convert white man's religion. Achebe wants to prove that Africa is

dwelled with wise and civilized people and refute the view that presents them as barbaric.

European writers account that one of the reasons for the invasion of the African countries was to introduce civilization that would replace their savage ways of ruling their countries, but Achebe responded to them by depicting a true image of Africa. He depicts the African people with their great social institutions. Their culture is heavy in traditions and laws that focus on justice and fairness. The African people are not ruled by a king, they had their own type of democracy system, where the males meet and take decisions. In *Things Fall Apart* the following answer to the missionaries question supports the view that there is no king in the Igbo village;

"They asked who the king of the village was, the villagers told them there was no king." We have men of higher title and chief priest and the elders", they said" (Achebe, 105).

When they first arrived in Mbanta the missionaries expected to find a king. As depicted by Achebe the Igbo people evolved a humanistic civilization. Each village had a legislative assembly which usually takes place at the market place of the village and everyone is free to give his opinion. Priests, men of titles and the elders were responsible of taking decisions on domestic and social matters. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts how the elders of Umuofia have taken decision regarding the daughter of Umuofia, who has been killed by a man from Mbaino. The dispute is settled by providing the two options of either accepting the offer of taking a young man and a virgin in compensation or going to war.

Vees, on his website, confirms that the elders of the village are responsible for keeping and organizing social and religious affairs in their society. For instant, when Okonkwo accidentally killed a boy in the funeral ceremony, the elders were the ones who acted to enforce the punishment. Okonkwo, the most powerful and esteemed member of the clan and almost their ruler commits a crime of the female type. While he was participating in the funeral ceremony, he killed a boy by mistake. Despite his power, esteem, and importance he is

punished and expelled from Umuofia for seven years. His houses are burnt and his animals are killed to clean the land. In any other community a person like Okonkwo must have escaped the punishment for his social rank. But in Umuofia the law is equal for everybody and this is the greatness, and fairness of the Igbo society.

Achebe does not idealize his people's culture. He depicted its wrong side as well that needs to be corrected. Like any other societies around the world, Africans have some shocking customs in their past. "Bestiality" was a common feature of many societies around the world in the past. For example, the pre-Islamic communities in the Arabian Peninsula used to bury their daughters alive for fear of shame, or poverty, believing that these girls might bring shame to their families through illegitimate sexual relations. This calls to mind the ancient Egyptians sacrificing young girls to the Nile to ensure good flooding and a prosperous year of harvest. Achebe depicts the injustice of Igbo patriarchal society which was dominated by outmoded traditions and beliefs, such as the community's fear of twins who are to be abandoned immediately after birth and left to die in a ditch. This is depicted through many characters in the novel, one of them is Nowye, Okonkwo's son, who questions his society's traditions including twins to be taken in the forest and leave there to die, and the killing of his adopted brother Ikemefuna.

To refute European writers' wrong assessment to African characters in their novels, Achebe depicts the roles played by African indigenous religious men and women through his novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In *Things Fall Apart* readers learn that priests and priestesses play important roles in the religion and social life of Igbo societies. In Igbo religion, the role of the priest or priestess is to look for the needs of the god. According to Achebe, only the priest is allowed to enter the sacred area of the temple or cave and approach the statue representing the god. This role is vividly depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, chapter 11, when Chielo, in her role as priestess, informs Ekwefi and Okonkwo that Agbala, the oracle of hills and caves wants to see their daughter.

However, in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, the main character of the novel, is the chief priest of Ulu, a god created by the people of the six villages of Umuaro. He is responsible for protecting and looking after the traditions and rituals of the people. For example, he watches each month for the new moon, eats a sacred yam and beats the Ogene to mark the beginning of each new month.

Furthermore, all over the Igbo villages of Amuaro, only the chief priest of the god Ulu, can name the day for the feast. As chief priest messenger, the village crier announces that the day of Pumpkin Leaves Festivals by shouting:

"GOME GOME GOME GOME. Folks of the village. The chief Priest of Ulu has asked me to tell every man and every woman that the Festival of the first Pumpkin leaves will be held on the coming Nkwọ marked day." (P, 6)

Achebe is inclined to use literary devices to convey his message and make his novels interesting. He does not only attempt to inform his readers that African people have deep, rich religious systems but also criticizes those European writers, who are intent on portraying the Africans as barbaric people. Ironically, one of the main differences between the two religions (African and Christian) is the extent to which killing is allowed. The British may kill the inhabitants of an entire village in vengeance of the murder of one white man, while showing refrain from the local people's killing and fighting each other over religion. Indeed, the Igbo traditions forbid the killing of any clan member.

To respond to Conrad's biased and wrong presentation of African woman in his novella, Achebe has successfully created real African women's characters with their roles, positions and social problems as well. In *Things Fall Apart*, Women are depicted playing essential role and getting powerful positions in the Igbo traditional religion. Piper (2006) pointed out that at first glance, the women in *Things Fall Apart* are shown and seemed to be an oppressed group with little power and this characterization is true to some extent. Because the reader learns that the Igbo people allowed wife beating. The novel describes many instances, once when Okonkwo beats his second wife, because she

did not come home to make his meal. He beats her severely and Okonkwo was punished only because he beats her during the week of peace.

But on the other hand, the reader can see an Igbo woman plays important roles and gets powerful positions. The women regularly perform the role of priestess in Igbo religion. In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator tells the readers that:

"Many years ago when Okonkwo was still a boy his father, Unoka, had gone to consult Agbala. The priestess in those days was a woman called Chika. She was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared" (page17).

Achebe is attempting to refute Conrad's wrong view of African women by informing his audiences that in a long time ago the priestess was a woman called Chika and the current priestess is also a woman called Chielo, "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the hill and the Caves" (p, 49).

The ability of a woman to occupy the role of a priestess and a spiritual leader reveals and indicates that women were being present in the Ibo society. Audiences also see women in their role as educators of their children. The education process is done in part through the ritual of storytelling. The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* describes:

"Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives' huts as each woman and her children told folk stories" (page 96).

It is through storytelling that African women teach their children social value, moral lesson and about human condition and history.

It can be concluded that the women of the Igbo clan hold some very powerful positions: spiritually as the priestess, symbolically as the earth goddess, and literally as the nurturers of the Ibo people, the caretakers of the yam crops and the mothers and educators of the Ibo children. In response to European writers, who misrepresented and mocked Africa and its people through their writings, Achebe not only gives voice to his characters but also depicts their real life responsibilities.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Africans are presented as savages and have no dignity. Achebe

refuses this view by creating the main character in his third novel *Arrow of God* with dignity. Ezeulu, the main character refused to become a warrant chief when the District Officers were attempting to apply the policy of indirect rule to Western Nigeria. He is attained for several months, thus he fails to announce the feast of the new yam festival in his village. Meanwhile, the people's crops are rotting in the field and people are starving to death and some of them begin to harvest their crops in the name of Christian God. Achebe has based his novel on an actual incident recorded by Nnolim (1953) in the book *The History of Umuchu*, in which a priest called Ezeagu rejected to be appointed by a white man as a chief in 1913, was imprisoned and refused to announce the New Yam Festivals.

Achebe used these selected novels of the study to prove that the Africans did not come to know about culture with the intrusion of the Europeans and that their societies were not mindless. Indeed, they had a philosophy of their own, and they had dignity.

6. Conclusion

Literature is one of the best means for sharing thoughts, facts, ideas, and stories both fictional and none. The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature written by European writers, who looked down on African literary and cultural heritage. The people of Africa were portrayed as barbaric and uncivilized. This is one major reason that prompted Achebe to write in retaliation. In response to the European writers' biased and degrading attitude, many African writers stood out to refute the European negative image of Africa and provide a true and a positive one. Achebe's writings were forefront, and he endeavoured to lay the bare facts. His efforts are vividly shown through the novels that have been selected for this research. In them he shows Africa to be dwelled with civilized men and women, and their deep-rooted religions, traditions and social systems. However, many misrepresentations of Conrad's portrayal of African cultures, and people are refuted and corrected.

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