



## CHINUA ACHEBE AS AN AFRICAN ENGLISH POET

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### ABSTRACT

This study is an exploration of a writer Chinua Achebe who for the last half century has been as the forefront of modern African writing. Since the publication of *'Things Fall Apart'* in 1958, Chinua Achebe has been credited with being the key progenitor of an African literary tradition. His poems *Vultures*, *Mango Seedling* and *Refugee Mother and Child* express intensity about the human condition of the modern world. All the three poems end on a pessimistic note, which perhaps reflect the speaker's attitude to life in the present world. They evoke sense of sadness and horror.

Keywords: Commandant, camp, canopy, despondent, drizzle, glow-warm, perching, sarcophagus, sprouted and Vultures.

### INTRODUCTION

Africa has emerged as a powerful nation in common wealth circles. The literary world, in particular, has been enriched by their contribution to native literature. As a result of colonization, most of the literature written in Africa is either in English or in French. The earliest form of African writing is the slave narratives or autobiographies written by Black Slaves. These slaves gained literary in spite of many odds against them.

African literature is rich in poetic tradition. Oral poetry was composed as a part of the religious rituals. Songs, dirges and other poetic compositions were used to celebrate an event or mourn somebody's passing away. They deal with a range of human experience. They use figurative language and present beautiful pictures in words. African poetry in English was just a transition from this old tradition to the written one. Poets of the early phase followed the Victorian poetic tradition. The second phase in poetry was to include social, political, cultural and physical environment of African society. The modern stage has a heavy influence of T.S.Eliot.

The writers of this period used native and tribal forms of expression. Ken Goodwin in "Understanding African poetry" says, we have seen African poetry undergo the process, first of modernization and then radicalization and indigenisation."

**Chinua Achebe as a Poet:** Chinua Achebe was born on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1930 in Nigeria in Africa. He is the leading and certainly, the best known, writer of Black Africa. His novels are read all over the English speaking world. His influence on the development of African Literature in English has been considerable. He has travelled extensively. He gained knowledge and experience of literary trends in USA. His first novel "Things Fall Apart" got good recognition for him throughout the world.

The Nigerian civil war (1967-70) which was the culminating point of the series of political crises in that country since 1962, has provided some of the Nigerian poets with the opportunity of manifesting throughout, the nature of their feelings about life and human values. The war period, period of death

has, thus, become a period of poetic harvest. Chinua Achebe, then, published a book, "Beware, Soul Brother and other poems (1971)." It speaks about the 'horrible things' of the civil war and its aftermath. In other words, it is a moving account of the poet's traumatic experience of the war period and poet's consciousness of his role.

Three poems-'Vultures', 'Mango Seedling' and 'Refugee Mother and Child' are taken from *Beware, Soul Brother and other poems* for our examination of Chinua Achebe as Nigerian/African poet.

**Critical Appreciation of the poem "Vultures":** Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian Writer, who would probably be familiar with the sight of Vultures, which are scavenging birds, feeding on the carcass of a dead animal. This is the image that he explores in his poem entitled "Vultures". In this poem, the speaker is contrasting two levels of being 'Love' is contrasted with Vultures and Man. The poem has Five Sections.

In the first section, A Miserable scene is set with grey weather, and Achebe uses alliteration in the phrase 'drizzle of one despondent dawn' to emphasize the depressing atmosphere. There is not sign of Sun at the start of the day. A pair of Vultures is sitting together on the branch of a tree. Achebe uses both alliteration and metaphor in describing the branch as 'broken bone' and the tree is dead. This reinforces the bleakness of the scene. Achebe tells us that the male vulture is 'nestled close to his mate', conveying the feeling that they are fond of each other's company.

In the second section of the poem, Achebe comments on the nature of the love, using personification. He begins with a single word 'Strange' that attracts attention. What Achebe finds 'strange' is that love is usually 'so particular', fussy about its appearances perhaps, but in this case exists in a 'charnel house', a building when bodies or bones are stored. Achebe observes that love can be found in such a place where these Vultures fall asleep peacefully.

In the third section of the poem, Achebe identifies the 'charnel house' as Belsen Camp, which was a German concentration camp where many people were gassed during the Second World War. Here the speaker wonders at the marvellous nature of love. The commandant of that camp is returning home from the war front, but stops to buy sweets for his child. His love for the child is utmost in his heart.

Here Achebe creates a feeling of a loving family children await their father's coming.

In the fourth and final section of the poem, 'Vultures', Achebe depicts us with two alternative conclusions to draw from the behaviour of the Vultures and the Commandant using a metaphor to describe the element of love. The very same love is a two-edged sword. It can cut both ways. It has the capacity to light up one's life and at the same time, the wart, the seat of love becomes the fertile ground for the seeds of evil to grow. The soldier at the camp had ample love for his child, only because it was his own. But the people he killed in war were killed without pity or mercy. He only thought of them as his enemies. There is no kindred feeling of love for fellow human beings in today's world. Man has alienated himself behind tall walls of hatred and love which can warm hearts and break any barriers. Love can light 'a tiny glow 'worm' even in an ogre and the 'icy caverns of cruel heart'. They are provided with warmth, but this does not get extended to everybody in the world. It fails to be an all-enveloping force and in it are planted the seeds which perpetuate evil in the world.

*Vultures* is perhaps not the easiest poem to fathom on first reading, but it worth taking the time to understand the exempts and imagery that Achebe so skilfully presents here. The poem is laden with striking images. It is very evocative in nature. The 'charnel house' scene is so vivid that it haunts one with its agony and terrible connotations of war. The entire poem is filled with certain 'greyness'. It evokes a sense of sadness and horror. The language of the poem is modern and free verse. At the end of the poem, one wonders who the Vultures really are. Are they birds literally, who are not living a life of any presence, but are able to love each other fully or are they human beings who only pretend to love everybody, but are always ready for destruction of people?. The speaker of the poem has 'telescoping eyes' for he has described in detail how the Vultures feed on the corpses. The poem, 'Vultures' is not divided into stanzas, but it is clear where one section ends and another begins through the use of ellipsis. The poem is in free verse with lines of varying length that flow from one into the next. Although there are fifty-one lines in all, there are only six sentences. Achebe skilfully combines contrasting descriptions with one sentence to give a sense of love and evil existing together rather than separately. The conclusion of the poem is ambiguous. On one hand, Achebe praises providence that even the cruellest of beings can

show sparks of love, yet on the other, he despairs—they show love solely for their family, and so allow themselves to commit atrocities towards others. It is a very impersonal narration of a sentiment which is profound its aspect. The use of the word 'Daddy' for father brings out the affection shared between the father and child.

**Critical Appreciation of the poem 'Mango Seedling':** The poem *Mango Seedling* expresses a sentiment which is very touching. It talks of a small, tender Mango Seedling which is courageously battling for life in a small corner in a city. The poem uses this as an extended metaphor to refer to modern Africa itself. The state of degeneration has set in so much to a large extent that man literally has to battle for life. It portrays in clear detail the modern, busy, indifferent city where life goes on mechanically with man having a little time for the small beauties of nature. It reminds us the poem of D. H. Davis "Leisure".

At the outset, a distance is created between the speaker and the mango seedling. It is a thoroughly modern set up and it is a concrete jungle with no space for nature. The distance is established through glass window pane two floors below 'on wide jubing concrete canopy'. The mango seedling has sprouted on this concrete canopy. The place has become so dry and lifeless. This seedling does not have soil on the earth to plant itself. But it can only have the concrete canopy. But even there, it has not lost its favour and enthusiasm for life. It waves brightly to Sun and Wind. The rains do come but they do not nourish the seeding. Here the speaker asks rhetorical questions which point out the transient of its life, "How long the happy waving from precipice of area swept sacrifices"? The word 'Sarcophagus' is the key to show that the mango seedling's birth is rooted in its death. "How long it will be at pot bottom"? Such series of questions are rhetorically pessimistic in tone.

There are references to the native myth (old tortoises' feast) and faith (the holy man). But he/the speaker asks again, if there will be of any use in today's modern world where logic and reasoning have replaced myth and faith.

How long.....this day beyond fable, beyond faith"?

But the seedling nevertheless waves courageously waving its head between the primordial quarrel of Earth and Sky, striving bravely with sink roots in

objectivity, mid air in stone. Everything seems opposed to its survival. But the fight is still on; the rain may by some miracle keep the spark life in it alive. But it quickly lost its vitality with absolutely no help from any quarter. It went from purple to sickly green deliver to towards the earth blow for its survival.

The struggle for life and renaissance that is displayed by the mango seedling has echoes of an archetypal, a prime ordinal struggle for existence and identity by man. Apart from this, viewed in the African context, it also reflects the struggling of the native for identity and roots, against the western influence and colonialism. The poem is written in a clear impersonal tone, but it is this very impersonality that evokes immense sympathy for the seedling. Indirectly the poem reflects the effects of civil war on the Africans by comparing the status of poor mango seedling.

**Critical Appreciation of the poem "Refugee Mother and Child":** Chinua Achebe is a poet of great sensibility and humanity. He is sensitive to the pains and sufferings of follow beings. His poem "Refugee Mother and Child" illustrates this with innumerable instances. It is a pathetic picture of power politics and poverty. Natural calamities or artificial conflicts inflict misery and suffering on the innocent. The poem is also about motherhood and pain. The title drives home this point well.

People in refugee camps live in squalor and disease. Here, the picture of the child and her mother is significant. The refugee mother is compared to the Madonna—the picture of Virgin Mary that Christians hold dear. The Camp is very dirty. Children there suffer from diarrhoea. They are not even properly washed. Hence there is stinking all around. But their bodies are washed out. It is like skin covering the bones. Nowhere in the body of those children can one see either flesh or life. The refugee mother is unable even to feed the child, which is the most essential thing or the part of a mother. There is a little hair on the child's skull. Parting hair is normally not at all significant. But here, it is like putting flowers on a tiny grave. In other words, it looks like paying floral tribute to the departed at the grave. It is even moving. A normal child wakes up, gets ready, takes breakfast and attends school regularly. Mother wear ghost smiles and ghost pride as they caress their children. They became helpless witnesses to the suffering and death of their dear ones. Thus, the poet evokes the images of death. Signify of this type are pervasive all over Africa. The

people of Africa suffered enormously due to 'alien' rule.

The earlier part of the poem presents the pathetic condition of the child. But the last two lines directly refer to death. The portrayal of the child's suffering and illness and the mother's reaction to it establish Achebe's sensitivity. The poet seems to suggest that what the refugee mother has experienced perhaps never 'touched' even the greatest of our mothers: the Virgin Mary.

The visual quality of the poem makes it all the more pathetic. The poem touches the deeper cords of the heart mainly through its simplicity and directness.

### **CONCLUSION**

Thus Chinua Achebe has a multidimensional view of wars in general and of the civil war in particular. Besides this, Achebe underscores the moral loss. The views about the unhappy event have been expressed most artificially by means of approximate images, irony and contrast.

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