

Transition from African culture to colonial modernity in Chinua Achebe's novels

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Abstract: - Culture is the knowledge about humanity which is learnt or acquired and not inborn. It draws ideas from Marxism, feminism, popular culture, racial and ethnic studies and more. Recently three types of cultural studies that are getting particular notice are new historicism, postcolonialism and American multiculturalism. All are concerned with social and cultural forces that create a community or that threaten it. Group engaged in cultural Studies share the assumption that within any society there is a dominant group that determines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for the larger body. Cultural critics challenge the powerful and promote the voices of those unheard. Many literary texts highlight how with the coming of colonial power different cultures collided and the culture of the subjects are usurped by the colonizers whose culture is considered as superior. Colonialism involves political, economic and cultural domination. It is concerned with what happens to a culture from the beginning of colonization to the present. Postcolonial literature which is written by culturally displaced people, investigates the clash of cultures in which one deems itself to be superior and imposes its own practices on the less powerful one. I will try to analyze cultural clashes in postcolonial countries and demonstrate a gradual influence and impact of the British Empire in Chinua Achebe's novels.

Keywords: Culture, power, postcolonialism, modernity, Achebe

INTRODUCTION

British anthropologist Edward Tylor defines culture as "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Raymond Williams had termed culture as "a whole way of life".

Now-a-days cultural studies are influencing research scholars for various reasons. It makes people sensitive towards relations of power and domination as encoded in cultural texts. There is startling agreement among cultural studies writers about the centrality of the concept of power. It is a coercive force subordinating one group of people to another. The forms of power that cultural studies explores are diverse and include gender, race, class, colonialism, etc. cultural studies seeks to explore the connections between these forms of power and to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilized by agents in the pursuit of change.

Since the British considered their culture to be superior and looked down upon the colonized culture and tradition, they introduced many changes in the political, ideological and educational spheres. Because of their power they tried to impose their own on the subordinate people. Thus, the native cultures came under peril and suffered damage and distortion with the coming of colonial powers.

My study will be informed with the relevant critical theories and how the power of the colonial culture collided

with the subordinate culture reflected through the novels of Chinua Achebe. I will explore the theme of intersection of different cultures through the analysis of plot, character, dialogue and situation. The conclusion will be an attempt to sum up the discussions and argument held in the foregoing chapters and to assess the impact of power on culture through the works of Achebe.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A rich body of critical writing is available on Chinua Achebe focusing on his art and also offering criticism on his individual works including novels, short stories, and poems. They have dealt with various thematic concerns in his work and explored the issues related to African identity, culture, community and identity excluding the topic undertaken for study where I have taken all of his novels specifically focusing on the idea of intersection between the African culture and the colonial modernity and how it has defined and marked the nation during the colonial phase and after. The notable critical works worth mentioning on Achebe are as follows:

Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe (1978) edited by C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors which offers valuable commentary on his novels excluding the latest *The Anthill of Savannah*. The editors have collected essays that offer a comprehensive analysis of Achebe's works from various perspectives. From the issues of language and the role of the writer to representation of the African world and the interaction with the Western cultures, the book critically

examines the complexity and richness of Achebe's vision as a writer. Apart from her edited book Catherine Lynnette Innes's has also written *Chinua Achebe* as part of the Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature series, which offers a detailed examination of Achebe's writings chronologically in the context of Nigerian culture and politics and their interaction with Western cultures and powers.

Colonialism in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (Social Issues in Literature (Library)) (2010) by Louise Hawker examines the novel from the colonialist perspective while offering biographical and critical information about the author at the same time.

Published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017, Thomas Jay Lynn's *Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Narration: Envisioning Language* (African Histories and Modernities) is a recent critical book on Achebe that explores the intersections of narration, linguistic innovation, and political insight that mark Chinua Achebe's fiction as well as his non-fiction commentaries. The book takes into account his narrative response to Western Authors who have written on Africa, his integration of Igbo folklore, the political implications of writing African literature in English and his use of Nigerian Pidgin, and the Nigerian Civil War, making the book indispensable for a researcher to explore the works of Achebe from a fresh perspective. Apart from these, biographies, monographs and scores of study guides and critical books are available on his individual novels. However, no full length book including all of his novels written till date and exploring the topic chosen for research has been taken.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper follows a qualitative style of research and analysis to reach the goal of the paper. In this process, a standard amount of previous literary endeavors concentrated on the African literary canon has been taken care of and brought under considerations. Specifically, the previously published articles, books, webpages, and dissertation have been used for the analysis as presented in the paper. However, the paper re-reads the novels of Chinua Achebe to re-investigate to find out what actually happened to the colonized people after the white missionaries came and when two different cultures collided.

ANALYSIS:

Africa is the world's second biggest and most crowded mainland after Asia. Africa was colonized by England in the year 1885. The creative writers of Africa have delineated the

crisis and cultural confrontations that the African individuals faced during this colonial phase and its lasting consequences. One of the highly acclaimed African authors and hailed as the father of modern African literature, Chinua Achebe, portrays the impact of western traditions and lifestyle on the African culture in his works, especially the novels—*Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of The People* (1966) and *Anthills of The Savannah* (1988). The first three novels form a trilogy and poignantly describe the confusing and often destructive influence of the European colonialism and western values on individual characters as well as on Igbo society, Nigeria, and the newly independent African nations. *A Man of The People* is a political satire that foreshadowed Nigeria's 1966 coups, and *Anthills of The Savannah* explores the corruption and idealism of political life in postcolonial Africa.

Chinua Achebe was born in the town of Ogidi in 1930 in Eastern Nigeria. He was one of only a handful of young men selected to study at Government College, Umuahia—one of the best schools in Africa. He chose to communicate the accounts of the African individuals, especially the Igbo society and used the western literary traditions and techniques to express his views in English in order to reach the maximum number of readers in all parts of the world.

His recognition as a noteworthy writer of significance lies in his contribution to the development of a new postcolonial consciousness, especially in his fictions dated from the eve of African independence, giving earnest voice to the Pan African motivation that found political expression in African independence. In the manner of a historian, he discovers the cultural heritage of his people and chronicles all the important events that changed and shaped their destiny. Achebe's works center on the customs of Igbo society, the impact of Christian influence and the conflict of Western and African values amid and after colonial period. His style draws heavily on the Igbo oral tradition and consolidates straightforward narration with representations of folk stories, proverbs, and oratory.

Things Fall Apart looks back elegiacally at the pre-colonial culture and the epochal changes wrought by British colonialism, but at the same time it anticipates the future, engraved with both the vision and the nerves of the decade in which it was composed. Okonkwo, one of the convincing manifestations in all of modern African literature, stands for both the convictions and conventions of his way of life, and implacably against the infringing influence of the colonial usurpers. The novel delineates graphically how colonized subjects perceived the arrival of the colonizing Europeans, and Achebe's accomplishment in the novel lies in the manner in which he succeeds in depicting Umuofia as a lively and sophisticated society with its own complex.

The novel describes Igbo community in the period between 1850-1900, which covers life both before and after the arrival of British colonies and Christian missionaries. Achebe offers a detailed account of the daily life, customs, ceremonies and beliefs of the Igbo people. Africa was always misrepresented by the West and hence Achebe tries to portray the colonization by the West and the Christianity confronting a tribal system in Nigeria in its full complexity character and elaborate moral and ethical code.

Things Fall apart accounts the clash of two cultures. Okonkwo, a very well-known public figure in his community falls under the threat of a new culture brought by the white missionaries preaching Christianity. After the arrival of the Christian culture, the first collision that takes place is the division at the individual, and then at the societal levels.

The novel focuses on the early experience of colonialism as it occurred in Nigeria in the late 1800's, from the first days of contact with the British to the widespread British administration. Achebe is interested in showing Igbo society in the period of transition when rooted traditional values are put in conflict with an alien and more powerful culture that will tear them apart. Achebe paints a vivid picture of Ibo society both before and after the arrival of white men, and avoids the temptation to idealize either culture.

The first thing on the basis of which the British wanted to colonize was religion. In the novel the religion is very important to the survival of the tribe and the people often work together for the betterment of the tribe. There are also individual aspects in the Ibo society. Each person has his own *chi*, or personal god. This personal god is to watch over a person and protect them. Some people have a stronger *chi* than others do, and they will achieve a higher standing in the society. This is very important to some of the people in the tribe, and Okonkwo is one of those people. He does a lot to help better the Ibo society, but he also wants to have a high standing in the Ibo society for himself.

The missionaries forced the Ibo to break with their strong past and not pass on their stories to the next generation. As Achebe writes, "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 10). This would be equivalent today of destroying all written and visual communication. The missionary enterprise often seemed like an attack on the very structure of Ibo society, a society that had withheld myriad of challenges over centuries of time. Before the European colonial powers entered Africa, the Ibos "had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, in that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (Achebe, 1978,8)

Samatar argues that "when *things fall apart* and Umuofia's independence is lost, it is due to cracks in its own structure;

unhappy and outcast people whose desire for a different way of life allows Christianity, and with it the colonial project as a whole, to take root" (65). If we consider the last part of the book in which Okonkwo killed the messenger with his machete, some people asked "why did he do it?" and this situation is revealed in the book with these words:

How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer acts like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (162)

Gikandi explained the situation, "By introducing Christianity into the villages, and creating conflict amongst the natives, they were able to gain a foothold into the psyches of the tribe's people. Converted Christians, having been ostracized by the rest of their communities, were

forced to rely on the British for support. The presence of natives loyal to the Queen gave the British blanket jurisdiction over the entire village, and the Royal administrative and judicial

system could now enforce British law over the Ibo. (45)

Achebe presents Igbo society which has a complex, self-sufficient, harmonious culture before the colonization of their land. There are no jails; justice is accomplished by the reconciliation of the opposing parties. On the other hand, the colonialists try to impose their laws, their police, and their jail on Africans. "They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law" (160). The result is a group of people who are caught between the conflicting demands of two cultures. Furthermore, the colonialists and the missionaries also have other things to offer: a government, trade, money, schools, salvation of people. The white missionary, Mr. Brown tells them "that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them...From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand" (166).

Things Fall Apart not only reveals African culture but also describes the transition coming with colonization. This study shows how the African black culture represented by Ibo tribe comes into disagreement with the white one imposed by the British imperialism. The greatness of Achebe lies in the vivid

description of place which is Nigeria and people who are the native Africans and how he was able to show the inner conflict that took place inside the major characters, like Okonkwo, in their pursuit of mere existence within a declining culture in the face of a tyrannical white one.

No Longer at Ease begins with Obi's trial for taking bribe and delineates his life in Nigeria and his education in the University of London. He holds the belief that he can initiate a change by replacing "the old Africans" at the top of civil service positions by a younger generation of idealistic and educated university graduates. But he ends up accepting bribe though faced by circumstances beyond him. But the novel seems to suggest that it is his Western education that has made him feel a stranger in Nigeria and finally succumb to the temptations that came his way.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe aims to show what his society had lost as a result of colonial rule. In *No Longer at Ease* he focuses on the problematic gain of the society, through the life and experiences of its protagonist Obi Okonkwo. The fragmented world in which Obi and the other characters find themselves is a result of the process initiated in *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe in this novel is preoccupied with the social forces at work in his society, particularly the clash between the two cultures. But this time the new force is not an alien religion or administration, but the attitudes of the young, urbanized Nigerian, who having been liberated from the taboos of tribal life through exposure to other values, now comes to question the traditions and beliefs of his ancestors. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) epitomizes issues of cultural identity caused by colonial power in Nigeria. The native Igbo people in Lagos are captivated by Englishness in daily routine making them aware of their social status and the challenge to preserve the culture.

Achebe explores the Igbo people in Nigeria with old values of Umuofia as well as the modern Nigeria in Lagos. Obi Okonkwo the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo is a typical product of the modern era that mixes motives and values. *No Longer at Ease* proves that the individual and the society are equally responsible for shaping the patterns of their culture. The colonial power had the greatest impact on the traditional culture of the Igbo people in Nigeria. It is identified that the western influence disrupted African traditional society. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) begins with the trial of Obi, the outcome of his guilt and the decline of his career, who has been caught in the trap of modernity and tradition of Nigeria.

Achebe explores cultural osmosis in Obi as well as the other leading characters of the narrative. He explains that when two cultures interact with each other, neither can remain intact and pure as of their pre-colonial state after the process of colonization. Similarly, Achebe explains the

consequences of the colonization when the British and Nigerian cultures came across each other. For that, Achebe remarks that Obi ahead of leaving for England has been a staunch follower of his native culture and religion, but after studying in England, his perception got changed. He is unable to preserve his indigenous culture in its pure and pristine form, but unconsciously, he is advocating British culture, as their lifestyle strongly influences him. Moreover, Obi's perception of religion and culture also changes. The English language, culture, lifestyle and behavioral pattern conspicuously influence him. Also, he turns against his cultural values, norms and practices. He desires to marry Clara Okeke because she is an outsider, and does not hail from Ibo tribe. In his tribal cultural setup, exogamy is not deemed as befitting, but Obi yearns to marry Clara despite all socio-cultural constraints. He holds less value for his own cultural practices.

Obi is used by Achebe to explore the dilemma of the young "Nigerians trapped by the conflicting demands of two worlds, exiled from both the traditional and the contemporary situations." Obi is torn between acceptance and rejection of "two cultures [i.e. the traditional and the modern] of which he is a hybrid product".

Multi-dimensional conflicts and clashes characterize the novel *Arrow of God*. These conflicts emerge because of different reasons such as internal political conflicts, concern for status and above all the colonizers' domination in the religious domain. At first there is a strife between the local British administration represented by the old fashioned administrator, Winterbottom, and the native authority represented by the chief priest. The sub-plot deals with the personal tensions in the house of Ezeulu where the conflict is between the father and the grown up sons because of the cultural confrontation. There is a clash and conflict between the colonial authority and the traditional authority. The colonial authority has withdrawn the judicial and legal rights from the traditional authority. The scenario has changed from what it was earlier and people see it as an opportunity to shake off an irksome hegemony.

In *Arrow of God* Achebe examines more thoroughly the interaction between the Africans and the Whites and the dynamics of social change is more subtle than in the earlier novels. The novel demonstrates an awareness of the similarities as well as he conflicts between cultures, the continuity as well as the disintegration involved in social change. *Arrow of God* represents the struggle for power and authority between the African and the missionaries and within the Igbo clan. Achebe points out the continuity of African cultural confrontation the arrival of the missionaries in Nigeria. The e Igbo culture is depicted with the diversified change in African culture due to new religion like

Christianity, raising the issues of identity among Igbo community. The conflicts in the Igbo tradition and European culture evoke the identity issues.

Arrow of God is a novel about the fact of power and the urge for power is evident in the temperament. The delineation of power forms the identity issues in the patterns and the structure of power. The conflicts between the missionaries and the traditional Igbo system are reflected from the representatives of them and their entities. The conflicts in power between Ezeulu and the colonial authorities constitute the underlying factors responsible for emerging the issues of identity. The traditional Igbo society is represented by Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the most powerful god of Umuaro. The Nigerian social and cultural system is represented through the ethnicity of the Igbo people. On the other hand, the pacification caused by the missionaries among Igbo people constitutes the arrow heads of the conflicts between Ezeulu and Mr. Winterbottom. The protagonist Ezeulu resembles Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) but he doesn't suffer from inner conflicts and uncertainties. Achebe reflects the religious and social power in a representative community with irresistible forces of colonialism.

Achebe portrays the traditional structures of the social order and leadership in Igboland of Nigeria. The internal turmoil regarding Ezeulu's place in the clan poses the issues of cultural conflicts among Igbo people. David Cook points out; "the novel searches into the limits of individual power in a system controlled by tradition" (Cook, 1977:18). However, Ezeulu tries to consolidate his 'power' by unchanged cultural patterns. The culture of any society changes as per the changing situation because it is fluid rather than static. The change in the cultural patterns on the part of the Igbo people poses the quest for identity. The religious beliefs of them are provoked till the acceptance of the Christianity.

A Man of The People deals with the conflict between values of two different cultures and the struggle between old vs. new is visible throughout the novel. It recounts the rise and fall of Chief Nanga, the minister of culture in the country. He is referred to as the Man of the People by the narrator as he is seemingly the most approachable and friendly politician ever. He is supposed to be the custodian and protector of the pre-colonial African culture by coming out in defense of the common African people and opposing the European-oriented intellectuals but there is a lot of difference between what he seems to be and what he really practices. The novel highlights his corrupt and opportunistic policies. He grabs a lucrative ministerial post in the government of an unnamed independent African country but all his lofty desires are shaken by the idealistic young military officers. In the novel, Achebe predicts the end of the

country's first republic.

A Man of the People (1967) is Achebe's fourth novel. He referred to it as "a rather serious indictment of post independent Africa" (*Ibid*: 13), in particular Nigeria, which turned into "a cesspool of corruption and misrule" (Heywood, 1975: 82) after independence. Achebe's first three novels were set in Igbo villages in Nigeria. *A Man of the People* was set in the fictional African country. The novel doesn't expose the certain ethnic groups or the cultural groups of the people in Nigeria. It throws light on political corruptness and incompetence experienced by many West African nations in the neo-colonial period.

Achebe's *A Man of the People* reflects his distaste for post-independence Nigeria as a place where leaders who had fought for independence became traitors after attaining power, and sacrificed their country in exchange for middle-class comfort. In contrast to Achebe's earlier novels, *A Man of the People* delineates the conflict between morality and corruption by contrasting the protagonist Odili Samalu with his opposite, the Minister of Culture, Chief Nanga. These characters hold different ideologies.

Through the satirical mode of the novel Achebe expresses his dissatisfaction with the way the legacy of colonial Africa continues to affect the strong values and traditions of the African culture. Through his portrayal of the capitalists and political leaders colluding with the colonizers led by a lure of power, Achebe seems to suggest that the military coup is the only solution to put an end to the massive corruption and the misdeeds of the hypocrite politicians in the post-colonial days of the independent Nigeria. Achebe emphasizes the fact that people achieved the moral obligation to safeguard their independence after a long mighty struggle against the colonizers and they should also shoulder the responsibility to preserve and protect their traditional ethics without yielding to the immoral and corrupt misdeeds of the so called politicians.

Anthills of the Savannah is recognized as a political allegory for the state of affairs in Nigeria. The novel is set in fictional postcolonial Kangan, where the political system is presented as elitist and patriarchal, and it functions to weaken the voices of the masses. Its protagonists include Ikem, the editor of the Kangan newspaper and the novel's idealistic activist; Chris, the Commissioner of Information in the novel's regime who questions the motives of the country's dictator, Sam, who is the novel's antagonist and a former friend of Chris and Ikem; and Beatrice, a mutual friend of both Chris and Ikem as well as Chris's lover, who offers a resolution to the novel's political and social crises.

Anthills of The Savannah, showcases the fictitious state of Kangan, where hunger for power and control takes over any other consideration. Through the story of three childhood

friends Sam, Chris and Ikem, the novel criticizes the neo-colonial set up of the government in modern Nigeria. The desire on the part of Sam who ironically replaces a dictator of a President to remain the *President-for-Life* shows how the lust for authority has poisoned his soul. The position that Sam seeks is unheard of in the nation's history and requires a nationwide plebiscite but Abazon, one of the regions in Kangan, rejects this idea and as a result receives the anger of Sam who makes the region suffer during a drought. The pleadings for mercy through representatives from the region are mistakenly taken as some sort of "rebellion" by the already paranoid Sam. Further he suspects Ikem, one of his friends and his most vocal critic as the head of the Information Ministry, to be involved in this and finally gets him killed.

Although the political turn of events finally lead to his murder and fall, the journey of Chris to Abazon makes him realize how the region has suffered under a despotic rule. The murder of Sam forces him to think he might have been just a tool in the hands of someone else controlling him. Seeing the anthills on the side of the road he realizes the disaster that his friend Ikem saw before him.

In the novel, tradition is represented as a series of social expectations and a knowledge of Kangan's ancestral rituals and customs, as well as its storytelling history. Tradition then shapes how people see the world as well as the future, and it links a country to its past. It creates common ground within a country and it often defines a community.

Anthills has become a political allegory calling for government responsibility, critiquing corruption within the current system, and offering women as the idealistic resolution to the problem of an exclusive, oppressive political and social structure.

Since the effects of colonialism have worked to undermine the emphasis placed on the improvement of the community over the desires of the individual, the replacement of tradition's role in governing has been tyrannical regimes. According to scholar Solomon Laleye, whose piece "Democracy in Conflict" takes a critical look at the role of conflict in the emergence of Nigerian democracy, conflict is a product of the discordance between the desires of community groups against those of the individual. He argues that democracy in Nigeria can prevail if it is based in customary Nigerian principles.

CONCLUSION:

Achebe in his novels has tried to establish the identity and history of Africans foregrounding the culture and traditions of Africa which came under peril and suffered damage and distortion with the coming of colonial powers. Achebe takes us through a journey where he unfolds, step by step, the

refashioning of indigenous culture and community life in the process of adjustment with the colonial modernity. There is an effort to protect and preserve the tradition, the community and its specific cultural identity in the wake of the confrontation that the nation faces with the arrival of the new colonial powers. Colonial modernity operates on the praxis of considering the colonized as uneducated, uncultured and uninitiated into the process of development and enlightenment. The entire effort is to overtake and sabotage the native culture in its entirety to reshape and mould it to suit the interest of the colonizers. This leads to a strife within the individual and between the individual, the society, and those being responsible for the unhealthy transformation and deplorable change in the society. Chinua Achebe's works focus on the intersection of African culture and colonial modernity and its consequences and study how the expansion of the British occupation brought about changes to the society of Africa in the political, ideological and educational spheres. His novels show how colonial modernity created this crisis with regard to the cultural identity of Africa and how it shaped its post-Independence life.

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