

PORTRAYAL OF HUMAN STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND PROSPERITY IN THINGS FALL APART AND ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH BY CHINUA ACHEBE

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ABSTRACT: Chinua Achebe is one of the most imperative African writers. He is best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). He is also considered as one of the remarkable and high ranking African authors due to his revolutionary work in post-colonial literature and his politically-conscious writing that offered the world with the view of colonial understanding from the perception of the colonized. This research paper emphasizes on comparative study of the first and the last Achebe's novels, namely *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Let's try to examine the author's inspiration for crafting stories that talks about the drastic changes took place in African societies persuaded by colonization. Similarly, the paper explores the narrative techniques Achebe employed in his writing to appropriate English language for the purpose of challenging the dominant image of Africa, which was represented in colonial discourse as the continent of savage. Further, the paper tackles the elements of Igbo oral poetic tradition that Achebe threads his narratives and the major role he ascribe to writers (storytellers) as social critics, educators of the common people and preservers of African history and culture in post-independence period.

Index Terms: Post-colonial literature, *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Things Fall Apart*, colonization, narrative techniques, role of a woman.

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe is one of Africa's literary greats and the founder of the modern African novel. Born and raised in Nigeria, the author dedicated himself to representing African experience from the point of view of an African person, which was not common at the time he began to write his first novel in the 1950's when his country was still under British control. Due to underdeveloped African literary tradition, Achebe relied primarily on oral poetic tradition of his people to realistically represent African heritage and negate misrepresentations about Africans promoted within colonial discourse, which created an image of Africa as inhabited by savage, uncivilized tribes. To achieve his goal of validating black people's humanity, Achebe wrote stories that cover various aspects of his native Igbo tribe's culture, society, religion and lifestyle. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* is composed in English, a language not native to Africa but imposed on its peoples by the British colonizer, as a means of communication and literary production. However, he appropriated the language in such a way as to deflect the illusory linguistic standard and foreground the difference between colonial and colonized cultures. The form of a historical narrative that he acquired further underlined the disputed existence and complexity of pre-colonial Igbo culture. The focal point of his novels changed over time with the ripening of his political thought. *Anthills of the Savannah*, written in the late 1980's, describes a typical modern African nation which is faced with deep-rooted inequality, widespread poverty and is ruled by corrupt political elites formed back in the colonial days. In this novel, Achebe brings to the forefront such themes as the prominent role of a writer in African societies and the importance of female emancipation for a developing nation's overall prosperity. An attempt is made to discern the points of connection between the above mentioned novels by analyzing the development of the author's political and social critique, then by covering the various methods he used to appropriate the English language to genuinely represent African culture, and finally by tackling the role of women and writers in both pre-colonial Igbo community and post-colonial Nigerian society, to whom Achebe ascribed the utmost importance for safeguarding the identity and practice of African people.

THE CREATION OF AN AFRICAN NOVELIST

The prime factor that the paper discusses the thorough analysis of the two novels whose plot and themes are so firmly grounded on criticism of colonial representations of Africa and imperial suppression of colonized peoples in general without first tackling the specificities that characterize the life circumstances of the author of these works. Achebe was popularly called as "**Father of African Literature**", born in 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria in the community of Igbo people who populate the southeastern corner of the country. His parents were early converts to Christianity, evangelists, and had even traveled eastern Nigeria to promulgate the gospel. Being a son of an instructor of Christian catechism for the Church Missionary Society, Achebe was in a position to receive an English education, which only privileged, primarily English-speaking members of Nigerian society could attain. However, before he began learning English at the age of eight, his primary language of instruction for about two years had been Igbo, his native tongue. The fact that his young mind's perceptions were initially molded by his native language allowed for developing in Achebe a sense of appreciation for his people's indigenous culture and tradition.

Achebe spent his valuable time in his father's library reading the works of English literary greats, thus learning the history "of other people and other lands", fascinating to him because they were about "things remote, and almost ethereal" However, he equally enjoyed listening to his mother and sister's interpretations of traditional Igbo stories – folk tales, myths and legends. The two women passed on to Achebe bits and pieces

of Igbo people's rich oral tradition, of which storytelling is an important part. At a very young age, Achebe became fond of stories and storytelling, regardless of their culture of origin. However, the stories about Africa that he read were written by the colonial writers and more often than not offered a skewed image of African people as uncivilized savages, who have "only heard of culture for the first time from Europeans", as he puts it in *The Role of a Writer in a New Nation*, one of his most influential essays on the devastating effect of colonization on African peoples. In 1948 he was admitted to a prestigious University College in Ibadan, the first college in Nigeria, then within the structure of the University of London. Initially his intention was to use the scholarship he was awarded to study medicine, but after a year in college he opted for a rather different academic path and selected the courses more in sync with his story-loving nature, namely the courses in English literature, history and theology – all of which proved rather conducive to his successful literary career. He was particularly impressed by theological studies because they were not devoted only to discussing the Christian dogma, but also to examining the religious practices of West African tribes. Achebe was troubled by the representation of his people that was created within the structure of colonial power and for decades dwelled unchallenged in the Western minds – an image of a monolithic, cultureless African continent, inhabited by barbarian tribes who are in a desperate need of enlightenment that only a civilized, white Europeans could provide. Compelled by the necessity to offer a truthful, more complex history of his people, he crafted *Things Fall Apart* (published in 1958), a gem of postcolonial literature that conveys an unambiguously didactic message, which helps reinstating self-respect and self-acknowledgement in his compatriots and keeps rebuffing prejudices about Africans to this day. The education Achebe was provided with by the colonial institutions helped him see through all the ways a foreign culture was imposed on his people, trivializing and repressing the Igbo identity in the process, and it also equipped him with a means of struggle for re-establishing his native culture on a global scale. The post-colonial writer first had to become familiar with European literary tradition to even try to challenge the dominant representations of Africa, and on top of all, to succeed in his endeavor by using the language that was imposed on his people as a means of communication. By becoming proficient in English and by gaining knowledge of traditionally European literary modes of expression, Achebe managed to modify both the colonizer's language and the concept of a novel in such a way as to create a narrative that represents African heritage from a distinctly African perspective.

His novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, which turned out to be his last one, was published in 1987, after a hiatus from novel-writing that lasted for 21 years. This is a novel that embodies the totality of Achebe's socio-political thinking. With his ideas ripe and ready to be promulgated, the great writer created a fictional country not unlike a typical modern African state inhabited by characters from both ends of the social spectrum - representatives of both impoverished and disenfranchised masses and of indigenous ruling elite which he accuses of maintaining the devastating status quo at the expense of the great majority of Nigerians. Nevertheless, Achebe also ascribes to the Nigerian elite the responsibility for breaking with the nation's history of oppression and for creating a more promising future for its citizens. By then Nigeria was going through a 30-months-long civil war in the late 1960s incited by the secession of its southeastern region populated mainly by the Igbo, Achebe's native tribe, who declared independence from the African state to form the state of Biafra.

Chinua Achebe's novels and non-literary output represent balanced social critique – balanced in terms of focusing on the brutality of the colonizer, but nevertheless highlighting the flaws and delusions of his own people exhibited in the pre-colonial era and afterwards. He was well aware that change first had to occur in the minds of his compatriots before any of it became transposed to the reality of life.

LANGUAGE AND TEXTUALITY

Postcolonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of the country especially relating to political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people such as racialism and colonialism. Post-colonial literatures by the middle of the last century was preceded and accompanied by the spirit of national liberation and enlightenment that demanded swift and total decolonization. Political decolonization was all but attained, but the independence of political entities hardly presupposed the "decolonization" of former colonial subjects' psychology. Reason behind such factuality was the irrevocable predominance of the colonizer's language that still served its purpose of creating a coherent mass of communicators within a multilingual society, as it had been at the time it was imposed upon the colonized. Despite doubtlessly heterogeneous nature of the means of subjugation, language was the European colonizer's primary tool for achieving and perpetuating his political dominance. By wielding the power of representation in his hands, the British used the English language for instilling in the minds of the colonial subjects false representations about themselves – representations which were essentially supporting the western conception of African people as inherently inferior to their European masters. The native's notions about their identity and culture were shaped within the colonial discourse, which operated on an imperial agenda that only sought to legitimize European claims on authority over indigenous peoples.

IGBO ORAL TRADITION AND THE ROLE OF AN AFRICAN WRITER

It is known that African languages had not developed writing system until much after the colonial onslaught on the continent when, at some point, attempts were made to standardize and codify the grammar of the indigenous languages and provide them with a Latin script inherited from the European colonizer. Although it is evident that African literature in the narrow sense of the word had not existed before colonial occupation of African lands, the societies that inhabited the African continent were not devoid of any kind of literary and artistic expression, as the dominant image of Africa may suggest. These tribal societies had actually developed in the course of history a complex and varied oral poetic tradition which is argued to be on par with its European counterpart. The significance of verbal craftsmanship in Igbo society is reflected in the peculiar and venerable role of the artist in their society. The role of an artist in African close-knit, tribal communities was to perform first and foremost an important social function centuries.

Achebe's political attitudes and orientations were voiced most elaborately through speeches and ponderings of one of the main protagonists of *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem Osodi. Ikem is a journalist and a talented poet. He is a member of the "troika" who took over the reins of power in Kangan and devoted themselves to the nation-building task. Despite being the editor of government-controlled newspapers *National Gazette*, he launched many "editorial crusades" in which he fiercely criticized rotten policies of Kanganese government and constantly draw attention to widespread poverty, corruption and inequality in Kangan. Still, he belongs to the educated, upper class of the Kanganese society, and is ultimately detached from the majority's problems. However, in the course of the story he is gradually becoming aware of the full extent of the common man's suffering. As the narrator puts it, Ikem "had always felt a yearning without very clear definition to connect his essence with earth

and earth's people", so the problem for him was not "whether it should be done but how to do it with integrity". What made him see the state of affairs crystal clear was the powerful speech given by the Abazonian sage.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* was written under a principal premise of describing objectively Igbo society before the British colonization of Igbo land. As a conscientious man, Achebe did not approach the task with the intention of mitigating the unsavory social practices of his people, nor did he avoid tackling those traditional values of the Igbo that would be considered retrograde by modern standards. As a matter of fact, the one, if not the only, incontestably dreadful custom of traditional Igbo society was directly related to the female experience, that being the practice of abandoning of newborn twins in the Evil Forest because, according to their religious beliefs, they represent an abomination. Ethno historical nature of this narrative obliged Achebe to realistically depict pre-colonial Igbo society with all its merits and demerits, but his political intention at the time required dealing chiefly with intercultural conflict that arose with the arrival of white colonizers, so the criticism of the oppression of women within Igbo community was expressed only indirectly through sporadic insights into certain values and cultural practices of the natives, which nevertheless creates a hidden feminine counter-discourse within the master narrative. Critics agree that what sets apart *Anthills of the Savannah* from other Achebe's novels is that it decidedly propagates the fundamental change in the role of women in Nigerian society. Having in mind that the author's literary agenda underwent considerable alterations in the course of his career, reflecting the changing political status of Nigeria and its people, the change of focus in his writing comes as no surprise.

The Nigerian society would never experience profound betterment if one half of the entire population was faced with disempowerment that has been only slightly extenuated since the departure of the British colonizer. Hence the writer's resolution to stimulate female emancipation i.e. gender egalitarianism in his last novel. His intention is realized in a twofold manner: *Anthills* includes a strong female protagonist who is also one of the narrators of the story and who embodies the essential, newfangled role of women as instigators of change; it also incorporates an entire essay produced by Ikem Osodi, arguably Achebe's alter-ego, on the historically marginalized position of women in societies all over the world which, as he posits, has to be challenged and subverted by women themselves. The novels examines differing social position of women in pre- and post-colonial period and take account of Achebe's considerations on the role of women in modern Nigerian society.

THINGS FALL APART DURING PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Female characters in the novel are removed from any position of power or the prospects of individually making decisions on their life choices. The concepts of free will and self-initiation are utterly unrealistic for an Igbo woman. Men are considered heads of their families and upon marrying a girl she virtually becomes their property, as well as any children she may give birth to. Getting married and giving birth to as many children as she can is the only feasible life prospect for a woman in traditional Igbo society. Her role does not go much beyond taking care of "her husband's" children and of their household, serving as his sexual object whenever he desires and growing "female crops" like cassava and coco-yam. For both men and women, procreation is considered obligatory because thereby they continue ancestral life. The greatest failure for a woman is to end up being childless. One can assume that the bitterness Ekwefi accrued after burying multiple children, who did not even go beyond their infancy, was induced by her not being able to fulfill the role of a mother, the primary social role of a woman in Igbo community. Feminist critics bring forth the concept of *double colonization* that was the result of women's subjugation in colonial societies "both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women" in male-dominated cultures (ibid. 95). However, the two Achebe's novels we are taking into account deal with historical periods in Nigerian history when the colonial oppression was either yet to be experienced in its full might or it had been long extinguished, but still lingered in the hands of indigenous ruling class and in the psyche of yet "unliberated" lower classes. Therefore, marginalized position of women in *Things Fall Apart* can only be ascribed to the patriarchal disposition of traditional Igbo society.

Women in Okonkwo's compound and in Igbo culture in general had no voice of their own and were exposed to both psychological and physical violence. Moreover, he wished his sons to become "real men" able to keep their "women folk" under control, so he told them "stories of the land – masculine stories of bloodshed and violence" (ibid. 46) so that they would develop into powerful masculine figures and perpetuate the traditional ways of patriarchy. Deeply ingrained inferiority of femininity in Igbo culture rendered Okonkwo terrified of any prospect of being deemed weak. One straightforward advocacy for valuing women's role in Igbo society, although primarily as mothers, is given by Uchendu, a kinsman of Okonkwo and a dignified *ndichie* of Mbanta, the village Okonkwo takes refuge in after he commits a "female crime" when he unintentionally kills one of his clansmen during a frenzied funeral ceremony given in honour to one of the Umuofian elders. Being banished to his motherland for seven years, Okonkwo is "full of sorrow" for being removed from his clan and for discontinuing his ascent up the social ladder.

ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH IN MODERN NIGERIA

Unlike other Achebe's novels, *Anthills of the Savannah* has a woman as one of its essential characters. Beatrice Okoh is an educated, self-reliant and sophisticated woman, which immediately distinguishes her from other female characters in the novel, like Elewa or her maid Agatha, who belong to the underprivileged majority of the Nigerian population. She earned a degree in English with first-class honors at Queen Mary's College, University of London and works as a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Only after the reader is introduced to all the major male characters and was given insight into the dynamics of power relations within Kanganese government does he meet Beatrice Okoh – the fiancée of the Commissioner for Information Chris, an intimate friend of the editor of *National Gazette* Ikem and an employee of His Excellency Sam, the seemingly all-powerful president of Kangan. Her belated appearance in the story is symbolic of the newly-found appreciation for female cause in African societies that Achebe embraced in this novel, but nevertheless, her connection to the trio of main male protagonists immediately qualify her as the cohesive agent of the story.

The fact that Beatrice is a successful woman in a close relationship with people within the Kanganese power-structures brought her plenty of enemies. BB (as her friends call her) is quite bothered by male chauvinism in Kangan society which readily assumed that she uses "bottom power" to boost her career prospects, while pretentious journalists "created an image of which could not be farther from the truth.

Beatrice grew up in a patriarchal family with her father wielding complete authority over his wife and children. They lived in an Anglican Church compound, her father being a deacon at a village church famous throughout the diocese for his frequent whipping of village children. He was a very stern man who, similarly to Okonkwo, showed no kindness to his family members and on top of that, often flogged them. Her mother was a victim of domestic violence, but BB never actually saw her father beat her mother because it all happened behind closed door. On one occasion, upon her mother leaving their room wiping her eyes, BB rushed to her and hugged her, but her mother pushed her away so violently that she hit her head against the wooden mortar.

CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe employed his writing talent to revive the culture of his ethnic group and provide modern Nigerians with a history that had been forgotten in the course of time due to British colonial oppression. With a historical reference point, the national identity of an African people no longer represents the colonizer's fable about European superiority. Achebe's novels serve as an anchorage from which the modern Nigerian man can draw conclusions about his origins, which ultimately enables him to stand proud in front of neo-colonial assertions of power and fight for his freedom and prosperity. Syncretic nature of African societies requires syncretic literature that embodies both the ancient tradition and modern inclinations, critically assesses pre-colonial and colonial heritage and promotes blending of old and new values in such a way as to create a modern African man characterized by a healthy and stable sense of identity. "Patriarch of the African novel" Chinua Achebe was the first African writer to piece together Nigerian identity, thereby successfully re-asserting African humanity.

The paper explores the ending of *Things Fall Apart* predicts the future devastation of the Igbo people. The nuisance of Christianity, colonial institutions and the English language on the Igbo exposed the flaws of the natives' traditional society whose members proved to be unwilling to uncompromisingly stick to its values. Okonkwo's fierce rejection of complacency to British authority was futile because a great number of the Igbos found in British institutions something they were lacking in their culture of origin. The tidal wave of converted brothers was simply too powerful for those faithful to indigenous tradition, so the gradual disintegration of traditional Igbo community turned out to be inevitable. *Anthills of the Savannah*, on the other hand, ends on a positive note. Despite the political strife and seemingly dire prospects for the future, Achebe shows that the hope lies in the unity and enduring spirit of Nigerian people which can solely help them prevail over brutal autocrats and corrupt governments that have been terrorizing their nation for decades. The final chapter of the novel imposes on us the image of Nigeria that has rejected gender, class and ethnic divisions and is prepared for creating a just society for the generations to come.

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