

# ETHNOGRAPHY: A NEW AVENUE IN CULTURAL STUDIES

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**Abstract:** Ethnography is a branch of anthropology that considers man geographically and descriptively. Ethnography focuses on the ethnicity of particular group of people. We can treat it as a literature of knowledge that gives us authentic information of particular group of people. In fact all postcolonial literature can be treated as ethnographies, because the post-colonial literature deals with cultural background of the respective group of the people. If we study postcolonial, literature we get substantial knowledge of the ethnicity of particular group. Ethnic literature is the product of an author who is ethnocentric and deliberately chooses to feature the significance of ethnicity in his Writings. Ethnic writing is a result of author's own ethnic gaze inward, reading of self as ethnic subject. Chinua Achebe the inventor of African novel, the teacher of African People and guardian of their custom wants to establish Africa as independent nation. He traces Igbo ethnicity in details and through his novel.

**IndexTerms - Ethnography, Anthropology, Post-colonial.**

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is popularly defined as "a mirror of the society." It is a true reflection of the society. Literature deals with life in all it's varied aspects. As it is a vision and reactions of men who see better and feel better and have the power to convey their vision in a beautiful manner, literature has wide appeal. It enlarges the vision of the readers and enriches their personalities. Literature is also is an art. It is an essential characteristic feature of the art that it is not exact reproduction but it is life seen through the temperament of the artist. It is always something more or less than life. Hence even in so called realistic literature, the writer does not aim at mere photographic reproduction but it is painting or portrait.

Literature in its broadest sense includes all books. However, to limit the scope we can divide it as literature of power and literature of knowledge. The literature of power includes all creative writings like epics of Homer, Milton, Shakespearean tragedies etc. This literature gives us the vision of the writer. It is also the literature that teaches, pleases and moves us. In another word it has aesthetic value. Whereas, the literature of knowledge is concerned with facts, It is based upon truth. It is also known as applied literature and it is basically read for the knowledge or information it contains. The books dealing with history, travel books, biography, philosophy, theology and so on. Recently ethnography has emerged as a popular branch of literature. Ethnography can be defined as "Literature pertaining to particular race or people or group having certain physical, mental or cultural characteristic in common".

## A REVIEW OF CULTURAL STUDIES

In fact ethnography is a branch of anthropology that considers man geographically and descriptively. Ethnography focuses on the ethnicity of particular group of people. We can treat it as a literature of knowledge that gives us authentic information of particular group of people. In fact all postcolonial literature can be treated as ethnographies, because the postcolonial literature deals with cultural background of the respective group of the people. It also deals extensively with the cultural contradictions, clash and crisis. If we study postcolonial literature we get substantial knowledge of the ethnicity of particular group.

Every tribe as a Social group has its own ethnicity that suggests distinctive features of the tribe and separates it from the other tribes or groups. Ethnicity is not just the matter of identity but also the matter of pride. The term ethnicity is derived from Greek word *ethnos* – meaning by nation. Ethnography is a search of meaning, the development of an understanding of how culture works, whether it's of an institution, a classroom or the culture of the phenomenon. Brewer defines it as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by means of methods which capture their social meaning. It involves researcher in participating directly in order to collect data in systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

Being a member of a particular ethnic group implies maintaining the language or custom of the group. Ethnic literature is the product of an author who is ethnocentric and deliberately chooses to feature the significance of ethnicity in his Writings. Ethnic writing is a result of author's own ethnic gaze inward, reading of self as ethnic subject. Chinua Achebe the inventor of African novel, the teacher of African People and guardian of their custom wants to establish Africa as independent nation. He realizes that as Africa is changed radically under the influence of colonial era, it is high time to make Africa aware of it's own cultural heritage. The British and fellow Europeans identified the Igbo as a tribe. China Achebe being didactic in his approach does not approve it for its negative connotation. Being sensitive to the ethnicity of Africa, Achebe is fully aware of the several problems that hinder the identity of Africa as a nation. In fact, it is very difficult to define a single Igbo identity because the groups are heavily fragmented and politically independent. Moreover Igbo became Christians under the influence of colorization. Achebe wants to suggest that the Igbo group should be defined as a nation similar to other nations although the Igbo the natives of Nigeria do not have official recognized state of their own. Achebe has deliberately used English as medium of expression because he wants to communicate African identity, ethnicity to the world.

An ethnic quality or affiliation results from racial or cultural ties. Achebe wants to bring out the very cultural and racial ties through his novels. He conceives this ethnicity as a Whole and celebrates it in fictional discourse. His trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* is an attempt to form and codify this ethnicity in literature. While reading these novels we feel this strong urge of Achebe to textualise this ethnicity. Igbo is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria numbering more than five million people. They live in south eastern Nigeria in a rainforest region between the Niger and cross rivers. The Igbo are more accurately regarded as a linguistic group than as a single unified tribe. They consist of over 200

relatively separate though culturally similar groups each comprising as many as 30 or more villages or local communities. The region inhabited by the Igbo is one of the most heavily populated in Africa with population density ranging as high as 1000 person per square miles. These people speak Igbo which includes various Igboid languages and dialects. Igbo people are referred to as the Ibo, Ebo, Eboans or ebo. Majority of Igbo people speak English along with Igbo as a result of British colonialism. Igbo was spelled as Ibo by British colonist until 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the same spelling used by Achebe in his novels. Ibo can still be found in use but Igbo is considered the correct and preferred spelling by the Igbo and has been used in difference publications.

Achebe's very first novel *Things Fall Apart*-(1958) presents a comprehensive ethnicity of Igbo tribe. The novel is set in the village called Umuofia which is a town with the cluster of nine villages. Achebe traces the ethnicity of a Igbo by going to the very root of Igbo life. He creates the structure of Igbo house. The Igbo house is compact and well-designed. Every Igbo house has a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. The hut of the head of the family is called as obi. It is at the front of the compound. Igbo man is allowed to marry more than one wife. In fact the status of Igbo man is determined by the number of wives and number of barns of yams that he has. Every wife is provided with a separate hut. These huts surround the Obi in half circle. The barns of yams are built against one end of red compound wall with stacks of yams coming out of it. At the opposite end of the compound there is a shed for goats and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for her hens. Near the Barn there is a small house which is called as medicine house or Shrine where the wooden symbol of the personal gods and ancestral spirits are kept. Everyday these gods are worshipped with sacrifice of kola-nut, food and palm wine. Ezulu's obi, the priest of Ulu (the central character of *Arrow of God*) is little different with a hole in it to watch the arrival of new moon. The guests are welcome in the obi with palm wine and kola-nuts. The Kola-nuts are shown around and prayer is offered for the wellbeing of the family.

Along with the structure of Igbo house the structure of Oracle of Hills and Caves is very interesting. Oracle of Hills and Caves is an important element in Igbo's religious ethnicity. In fact oracle is a place where god and man meet each other. In another word oracle of Hills and Caves is a temple or a place of worship. Igbo people go to the Oracle of Hills and Caves when misfortune dogged their steps or when they have a dispute with their neighbors or when they want to know their future. This oracle is at the outskirts of the village. The way to the Oracle is a tiny round hole at the side of a hill. It is just bigger than the round opening into a hen-house. Worshipper who want to see Oracle have to crawl on their belly through the hole and they reach in the dark endless space in the presence of Oracle. Oracle is also called as Agbala. Nobody can see Agbala except his priestess who proclaims the will Of Agbala. The will of Agbala is treated as a final word to the whole Clan. There is a continuous fire built up inside the Oracle with the help of glowing logs. Here inside the Oracle, people can consult the spirit of dead father or relatives. Igbo man believes in many god and goddess apart from Oracle or Agbala. There is a personal god that is called as chi. The personal god is also called as Ikenga in *Arrow of god*. The priest of earth goddess Ani is worshipped during the week of peace. For Igbo people Chukwu is the supreme main god. Chukwu appoints the smaller gods to help him because his work is too great for one person. Igbo people make sacrifices to the little gods but when these little gods fail and when there is no one else to turn to, they go to Chukwu. Igbo people can form or design the gods or deities. In *Arrow of God*, there is reference to the establishment of Umuaro a village formed of six small villages. The leaders of six villages came together and hired a strong team of medicine men to install common deity for them and the deity was called as Ulu, and the weakest amongst them was made priest of Ulu so that none in them become too powerful. And if god fails in it's duty, they even burn and destroy the deity. The Igbo society is polytheistic and has many deities.

Evil forest, a separated land is another important part of Igbo existence. It is a place where all evil-spirit are supposed to dwell. This is the place where Osu or the out casted people live. The twins are considered as abomination to the earth and are thrown in evil-forest. When a man suffers from incurable disease like swelling in stomach and limbs he is carried to the Evil-forest and left there to die.

Igbos are basically farmers and yam is their staple crop. They make single mounds of earth in straight lines all over the fields and sow the yams in them. Yam which is regarded as king of crops requires very hard work. And therefore it is called as man's crop, whereas, women's crops are maize, melons and beans. They plant them in between the yam-mounds. Igbo children get training and moral-lessons at home in a traditional way. During the raining season when there is a continuous raining or on dark moon lit night children sit around their mothers cooking fire telling the folk stories of morals or in the father's obi listening to the masculine stories of violence, bloodshed and warfare.

Igbo calendar is based upon the calculation of market days. It is the duty of chief priest to declare the market days and various festivals. He decides these days according to the arrival of moon. The arrival of new moon is celebrated every time. The new-moon is greeted with prayer. The festivals play very important role in Igbo life. Various festivals are celebrated with devotion and great enthusiasm. The week of peace is observed in honor of earth goddess before plantation. During this week a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbors and live in peace with the fellow to honor the great goddess of earth, without whose blessings the crop will not grow. If the rule of week of peace is broken the priest of earth goddess Ezeani declares the punishment. There is yet another celebration known as pumpkin leaves festival. During this festival people forget all their differences and gather to the market place where every woman carries a bunch of pumpkin leaves in her right hand. A circle is made at the center of market place. The chief priest and his assistance run in the circle in order to trample down bunches of pumpkin leaves thrown in their direction. The purpose of this type of dancing is to destroy the sins of people, for the pumpkin leaves are the symbol of sins. After the chief priest and his attendant all the women dance on the pumpkin leaves to destroy the sins of the village. It is a festival and women decorate themselves with finest clothes and ornaments of ivory and beads according to the wealth of their husband. There is a celebration of new yam feast too. It is celebrated before the harvest in honor of earth goddess and ancestral spirits of the clan. It is thanks giving festival for new yam festival is the beginning of plenty. The preparation of the festival begins quite earlier. The walls and huts are scrubbed until they reflect light. Then the patterns are drawn on them in white, yellow and dark green color. Women especially decorate themselves by painting with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomach and backs. Children are also decorated with their hair shaved in beautiful patterns. On the eve of the festival, all the cooking pots, calabashes and wooden mortar are washed and the yams of previous year are destroyed, because the New Year should be celebrated with the tasty and fresh yams. All the relations and large number of people are invited for the festival.

Igbo judiciary system is made up of council of elders who pronounce the justice in most impartial way. The leaders of the village disguise themselves as ancestral spirit. They are called as Egwagwu. They are nine in number representing

the nine villages each and they emerge as if from the earth. The masked spirit coming out is a terrifying spectacle. In chaotic sound of drum beating they occupy their seats on the stool. They listen to the disputes of the villagers and pronounce the final verdict. The verdict of the ancestral spirits is followed without any challenge. The ancestral spirits also occur at the funeral rituals.

The Igbo society has a specific structure. The Igbo society is rank-based society. There are four titles in the society. The man with all four titles is the respected one but very few can have all the four titles. The title holders are the leaders of the society. Another group of people is the one who do not have any title. They are less respected or they are treated as womanly character. There is yet another class known as outcaste or osus. These are the people who live in evil- forest away from human society. Moreover they are not allowed to cut the hair.

After death man's funeral is performed according his status. The man with all four titles is given first rate funeral in the presence of ancestral spirit and with the salute of gun powder. The second rate funeral is normally for all who have lived their lives respectably, whereas the man suffering from incurable diseases is given third rate funeral. They are thrown in evil-forest .The fourth rate funeral is for the man who commits suicide. The clansmen do not touch his body and it is the stranger who performs death-rites.

Chinua Achebe creates the total picture of the society from birth-rites to death that includes structure of the family to society at large, religion, law-system, medications, beliefs etc. To make this picture more authentic Achebe uses the direct proverbs from the native language. The proverbs literally give us Igbo experience community to highlight it on the world map. Thus Chinua Achebe traces Igbo ethnicity in details and through his novel we can construct authentic knowledge of Igbo ethnicity.

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