RESISTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC IDENTITY IN A HYBRID CULTURE: A STUDY ON CHINUA ACHEBE’S NOVELS.

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe has proven his worth among English – speaking African novelists by representing the African social and cultural environment in a thoroughly realistic way. His novels depict life within a cultural background, and convey a sense of growing disgust and unrest within Nigerian society due to colonization. When two cultures confront in a land of values, customs and traditions, it results in cultural conflict, alienation, assimilation and acculturation. The paper attempts to explore Achebe’s novels Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God, A Man of the people and Anthills of the Savannah on the basis of cultural disintegration and conflict. Achebe’s Characters and works explore the tension between the allure of a holistically narrative life and its potential severity. The paper portrays the cross pollination of African society and the individuals struggles to cope this change.

Keywords – cultural conflict, alienation, assimilation, Ethical identity, cross pollination.

In a globalized society, Ethnographic identity seems to be disintegrated and problematic. African literature is having a celebration of multifaceted gruesome portrayal of the ailing self in a hybrid society. Chinua Achebe is a versatile writer of Africa. His characters and works explore the tension between the allure of a holistically narrative life and its potential severity, concentrating specifically on the cultural consequences. Colonization has left a deep scar on the psyche of the colonized. Achebe’s resentful “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” ripped off the mask of goodness and benevolence covering the dark face of colonialism. Achebe’s painful reply to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is just a tip of the iceberg. His fiction is more often an exploration of the African tradition and its culture. His fiction has changed the mindset of the third world that Africa is not just a geographical mark but an identity with its own customs and beliefs. Achebe’s reputation as a prolific writer mainly rests on the novels Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God, Man of the people and Anthills of the Savannah. These novels voice like a social activist, strive hard to protect the age-old customs of Africa which is disintegrated and misshaped under the phase of acculturation.
The monumental success of his debut novel *Things Fall Apart* elevates his position as the novelist with a difference. Achebe through this novel shatters the pictures of Africa depicted by Europeans. It reveals the real picture of the Nigeria’s white Colonial government and the indigenous Igbo ethnographic cultural clash. Scrutinizing this novel, one can witness the struggle that the indigenous people carried out in order to re-define their identity and tradition in a cultural pluralistic society.

Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel is all against the proposed new political and religious orders. Okonkwo’s in-depth beliefs in machismo do not alter with the cultural change. His sense of self-esteem is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society esteems him. Okonkwo has an opinion that when he does not resist the cultural change, he may lose his societal status. Achebe’s depth of vision is that he is able to place the tradition and culture of the Igbo clan in a larger perspective. As Roderick Wilson points out:

Achebe sees traditional African Society as being broken up by the forces of a civilization that is disintegrating - - - As far as Things Fall Apart is concerned, that force, British - Christian Imperialism, the external element responsible for the breaking down of Umuofian society is itself a part of something which is breaking down. There is thus a falling apart within a falling apart. (161)

The Villagers in *Things Fall Apart* in a contrary between opposing and accepting change and they face the dilemma of cultural identity. Influence of European culture threatens to extinguish the traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building and cooking. Machineries and techniques replace the traditional style of living that the Igbos were familiar with. Okonkwo is an embodiment of tradition, and his son Nwoye, embodies change and cultural transformation. Okonkwo values the conventional ideas of masculinity, societal rank and power. He painfully observes that, his own son Nwoye in one of the victims of cultural change. Nwoye stands for a change; this proclaimed change leads to the conflict in the mind of Okonkwo who worries about identity and culture. Okonkwo’s pride and confident personality springs from his loyalty to the tribe, when the ‘shape and set’ of Igbo culture falls, it ultimately leads to the tragic flaw of Okonkwo. It is evident that the lives of individuals articulate with the life of the community.

*No Longer at Ease* portrays a complete compromised society. The novel is set in the city of Lagos, in the 1970s. The plot is developed thoroughly on corrupt and chaotic caused by a clash of two incompatible value systems. These incompatible systems create a moral void as the result of the absence of an authentic cultural power. The collapse of the traditional order under the colonized world is portrayed by Achebe in this way:

The success of (Ibo) culture was between the two, the material and the spiritual - - - Today we have kept the materialism and thrown away the spirituality which should keep it in check. A
cultural collision result in “the moral anarchy’ and it is into this’ moral anarchy’ that Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, is going to plunge headlong.(62)

Obi, having been exposed to the western world and western education, becomes a hybrid man with dual cultural value. When Obi returns from London to Nigeria he was filled with idealistic hopes, aspirations and dreams to develop a country rid of corruption. He joins the Civil Service with a view “that the public Service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities” (208). But he is bewildered when he confronts the realistic the corrupted society and moral anarchy everywhere. The Nigeria that he visualized in his dream during his stay in England has completely changed. His clan’s men expect Obi to behave like a European, but at the same time they expect him to value his tradition. This conflict situation brings crisis in Obi’s life. He finds himself no longer at ease, because he stands, “cross road of culture” (83). Obi hurts the sentiment of his clans’ men when he does not attend the funeral of his mother;

Obi’s father Isaac Okonkwo, is also a divided man in a divided society. He firmly believe that, Obi should get married with a girl of the same clan, for him accepting an Osu is considered as something undignified. Mr. Green Obi’s boss, a powerless leader who failed to observe the chaos and commodity of Nigeria, is a real portrayal of western administration. Through these characters, Achebe pictures the battling conflict and problems between tradition and modern Nigeria. It was difficult for the Igbo people in Nigeria to construct the unified identity during the colonial process. The indigenous identity of them is blended with influence of the colonizer’s culture. The persistent struggle of the native people to identify themselves as unified clan poses the question of identify which was concerned with their desires, predicaments, aspirations and failures. Therefore the issues of cultural conflict and identity are visionary throughout the novel.

The identity of Igbo people in Arrow of God is projected with the religious influence of the domestic forces and their nature, effect and manner. The Igbo clan had their own protective Deities in the villages like Idemili, Ogwugwu, Udo and other gods of Umuaro and Ogba of Aninta. Individual life of the Igbo people is controlled by the native deities. The traditional Igbo society is monitored by Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the most powerful god of Umuaro. African social and cultural system is represented through the ethnicity of Igbos and their practices. Mr. Winter Bottom and the other missionaries were able to convince the Igbo people regarding the superstitious and age old customs of the clan and appealed them to join Christianity. “Mr. Goodcountry told the converts of Umuaro about the early Christians of the Niger Delta who fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana”(47). Oduche, the son of Ezeulu comes under the influence of the missionaries and tries to attack the sacred python which is known as the mark of holy and tradition. Oduche’s effort to put the snake into the box, made by missionary carpenter, is symbolic of the efforts of the Christian forces to vanquish the traditional Igbo religious and
cultural faith. Ezeulu tries to defend his son’s act; this is an indirect approval of the new forces of the missionaries and the cultural hybridity.

The fight between Ezeulu and Nwaka, the two villages, makes the fertile ground for the missionaries to take over the charge of the society. The disintegration of Igbo social identity leads to conflict and crisis. Ezeulu’s imprisonment in Okperi by the missionaries for thirty two days prevented him to attend the sacred yam. Therefore, he couldn’t proclaim the New Yam feast this incident shatters the belief of Igbo people, and they started to go against the traditional ethics of the society. It is evident in the novel when Igbo people accepted Christianity; it marks the changes in their personal identity. Achebe portrays that the ethnic groups, unified identity of tradition alters with the hybrid culture.

*A Man of the People* is Achebe’s first post-colonial novel, a satirical one. Odili, the young educated narrator tells his conflict with Chief Nanga, a former teacher of him. Achebe brings two groups of people with different ideologies. Odili represents the new intellectual circle, while Chief Nanga represents the old style of bush politicians. Achebe captures the inside reality of the lives of the contrasting characters as he demonstrates energy and brightness as well as violence and corruption. The western influence on Africa in the different layers such as political and cultural aspect is represented through Chief Nanga’s diplomacy and adaptation of western culture. The traditional way of the rituals and customs are altered and replaced by political concerns. The traditional wrestling matches were replaced by the dancing group of the girls to welcome their politician. “Five or six dancing groups were performing at different points in the compound. The popular ‘Ego Women’s Party’ wore a new uniform of expensive aura cloth” (2).

The politicians use their rapport with the people to win their favor rather than to make them to believe in the strength in unity. The changing scenario in the customs of the Igbo people throws light on the charging identity.

The novel *Anthills of the Savannah* narrates the political farm oil in the fictional West African country of Kangan. It reveals the fact that the problem with Kangan is a total lack of leadership, similar to that of *A Man of the People*. The Novel seems to be in search of a solution to such problems. The novel portrays the post independent situation in Nigeria. Its protagonist 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. Beatric is 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 crisis. Unlike Achebe’s previous novel’s *Anthills of the Savannah* has character who is not at all bothered about negotiating a way between black society and white government, nor with making a direct transition from colonialism to self-government. Achebe’s women were flat, domestic and passive. But Beatrice is a dynamic and round character, independent, educated,
unmarried, compassionate and politically active. The novel ensures that traditional customs will endure, but with progressive adjustments. The ceremony demonstrates the necessity of reworking tradition, as found when the old uncle states, “I am laughing because in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! you have put the world where it should sit - - - - you people gather in this Whiteman house and girl the girl a boy’s name - - - - That is how to handle the world ”(210). The uncle’s notable use of these words shows the cultural tension of Nigeria. Tradition is altered and during the process of reshaping traditional values ethnographic practices vanquished.

The novels of Achebe portrays that the individual cannot escape from a social identity. In a hybrid society, the individuals are confronted with two orders of morality, values and practices. In a pluralistic society the sense of ethnographic identity alters during the course of their life. Up holding only the traditional values makes a person isolated from his social circle, two dissimilar cultures always travel in the opposite directions and do not pave the way for a healthy space towards the growth of the individuals in the society. Nigerian people is not an exception of this, they find the fact that the resistance of ethnographic identity in hybrid culture is as tough as digging a well in the desert.

WORKS CITED


