

Retrieving Africa from Western Institutions: From Achebe to Obioma

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Abstract

Last four or five centuries have seen the complete domination of the west. Western ideas are only ideas that have been validated over the centuries, the other systems of knowledge have been systematically attacked and berated. The west exercised an influence that remained unchallenged for so many centuries. The west not only decimated the local institutions, but also thrust alien western institutions on these countries. These western institutions have played havoc with Africa. Till now these institutions have been sacrosanct, beyond any criticism; but now the African Writers have developed a critique of western institution's influence on Africa of Western institution's influence on Africa. The bold works of African writers beginning with Achebe have developed an intellectual critique of these institutions. This paper attempts a study of Achebe and Obioma who have criticized the transplanting of such ill-suited institutes on African soil.

Today when one looks at the world, one that everything in the world is defined from a western perspective. Whatever is western is modern, progressive and acceptable and every other body of knowledge is illegitimate. In other words, every body of knowledge become legitimate only after getting an approval of the western people/world. This puts a question mark on the culture and civilization of people across the world. When one looks at the contemporary world, it seems that only Europe could nurture a civilization and all the other peoples across the world remained barbaric or savage. This legitimacy of western body of knowledge and civilization is derived from colonial policies. The people across the world were declared barbaric. The worst sufferer in this case was Africa. The west declared that Africa was a dark continent where the rays of civilization could not penetrate. The colonial narratives like the *King Solomon's Mines* portrayed the Africans as Cannibals.

The people of Africa were made to believe that they were inferior. The lies that were told again and again to the people became a truth for the people across the world and ironically for the people of Africa also. The local cultures of Africa were decimated and the African languages were brought to the verge of extinction. Even now the African people are struggling with the cultural occupation of their people The pain of cultural occupation of Africans articulated by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings. (Achebe 101)

Here Achebe points out a problem that exists in almost every post-colonial society; the challenge of articulating Native experience in a colonial language using the idioms and vocabulary of an alien language that seems inadequate to write about the experience of the Native. Chinua Achebe further asserts:

One final point remains for me to make. The real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. It is right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. (Achebe, *The African Writer* 102)

The African literature is in fact, a battleground where intellectuals are engaged in a battle for resuscitating their cultures and traditions. Ironically for this purpose they have to utilize the colonizer's language. The choice of language is important because the African writers are not writing only for the Africans, but the readers across the world. Noted African writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo solved this problem by switching to his native language for writing and then translating his works into English. He quotes Cheikh Homidou Kane to justify his choice:

On the Black continent, one began to understand that their real power resided not at all in the canons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore behind the cannons was the new school. The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fight weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and school fascinates the soul. (Thiong'O 9)

In the above lines Cheikh Hamidou Kane points out how the colonizer's educational institutions made the conquest permanent. Today Africans are independent, but physically they are still slaves as the western institutions keep them bound to the alien factors. The common people in Africa still remain fascinated by western institutions and prefer the western model of education, but the African intellectuals have thrown away the shackles that bound them to the west. The Africans have started criticizing things which were considered sacrosanct. The greatest resistance comes from those Africans who have become pseudo-whites because of their western education. Western schools have deracinated them to the extent that they still question the wisdom of their ancestors. Ironically, it has been proved that most of the western institutions imported from the west have failed in Africa.

The western invaders have planted certain institutions in Africa and they have often justified colonialism on the basis of these institutions. The people who invaded Africa and other continents proclaimed that they were on a divine mission to plant these institutions; a mission/ a responsibility bestowed upon them by God:

God has not been preparing the English speaking and Teutonic people for a thousand years for nothing, but vain and idle self-administration. No! he has made us the masters organizers of the world to establish systems where chaos reigns... He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savages and senile people. (qtd. in Pal 66)

It is clear that the invaders thought that they have developed the best of institutions that were backed by the only legitimate civilization in the world. These feelings were an outcome of ethnocentric myopia. This ethnocentrism forced the people to think that civilization could arise and develop only in the places where climatic conditions were same as Europe. They believed that any place that did not have a climate similar to Europe could generate a civilization. A paragraph about Tibet clarifies this misconception:

The kingdom of TRIMIC is all surrounded by mountains which give rise to many fountains and lives. This has a healthy climate and Aguilada so that those who are born and live here have very long lives. They are men of clear understandings and good memories, learned in sciences and live according to law. They say that men who first heard of science and learning were these and that Persians heard of those things from them. This is because they are at birthplace of east and rest of the towns and great cities and the root of this

kingdom are all due to the temperate climate which tempered their bodies and the good extended to their spirits and gave them better understandings and clearer memories. (Espada 40)

The prejudice of the Whites in the above paragraph are clear where intelligence and good memories are a result of cold climate. Good health is associated with Europe like climate. This automatically proved that the Africans who are inhabitants of hot and temperate lands are unhealthy and mentally inferior to the Whites.

However, the African writers have started exposing the lacunae in the theories of the Colonizers. The colonial masters used the lack of many institutions in the Native societies: religion, government, healthcare and west like education system. The Natives were also degraded for developing a writing system for their languages.

The first thing that was used to degrade the Natives was religion. The westerners came from Europe were Christians. The Natives did not know about Christianity; the only true religion, so they were branded as uncivilized. Gill tells about the problems, he faces in analyzing such societies:

In term of my training as a student of religion, I had no text, no canon upon which is to base an interpretation of... highly complex events. There is no written history, no dogma; no written philosophy, no holy book. (6)

Christianity has some ingredients: a prophet or a Christ like figure, a holy book that has descended from heaven and a Church or a building where the faithful can gather for prayers. When the invaders arrived in Africa, they could not find any of these three ingredients of religion, so it was announced that they did not have any religion. Christianity was used in Africa to break the strong tribal unity and the people where outcastes of the society were taken into the fold of only true religion. The society broke and the local duties were neglected which had severe consequences for Africa and the Africans.

Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be god; people worshipped. It They erected shrines in its names, and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This Changed when colonialists came from Europe and introduced the Bible, which from Europe and introduced the Bible, Which then prised Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians began to see it as an evil place. A cradle besmeared. (Obioma, Fisherman 25)

The impact of such a change in belief system was that Omi-Ala became neglected and it ultimately turned into a drain of dirty water. This happened because the religious status of Omi-Ala was lost and it was considered as an altar of demon. This neglect lead to its degeneration into a drain Obioma clearly makes a statement that the Native beliefs were instrumental in safeguarding the environment, but Christianity and its belief in anthropomorphic God has disturbed the balance and led to an ecological disaster. In fact, Obioma tells that the ecological, disaster is only one side of the coin. In criticism of Christianity Obioma takes where Achebe left. Chinua Achebe on his novels like *Things Fall Apart* has criticized Christianity as a totalitarian religion:

The Ibo's religion did not fully understand the nature of Christianity. Even the next village has a different God, so they must have theirs. They simply thought this was another same kind, but they were mistaken because this was totalitarian religion we used to talk about. The way, The Truth and The Light. But I think, in the end, Ibo common sense prevailed after the initial clashes. (Bonetti 77)

Achebe called Christianity a 'totalitarian religion' because it did not acknowledge any other belief system. Any other belief system was considered deviation and branded as demonic religion. On the other

hand, Native belief system were very liberal and democratic. Fights happened in the Native societies, but they were never for religion. The Natives accepted all the belief system. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe shows that the Natives provided land to the White man for constructing a Church. The skirmishes occurred between Ibos and Christians but they were never initiated by Ibos. The people who converted to Christianity started to look down upon the beliefs of their ancestors which resulted in fights between the neo-Christians and the Ibos.

Native religions were liberal and respected one another, but Christianity which claimed to be the only true faith was divided into many denominations and each denomination considered the other one as deviant and false. Achebe shows this through a song:

Palm fruit eater, Roman Catholic teacher,

His misses a devour of toads. (Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* 40).

This song clearly is sung by the Protestants and is insulting to the Catholics. Here Achebe shows us how the Protestant Children specially mention that the teacher follows the Roman Catholic Christianity. His wife eats toads. This kind of altercations never took place between the Natives. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe further stresses on the liberal aspect of Native beliefs. Obi's father being a devout Christian reject the ritual of breaking of Kola nut and calls it a heathen custom. However, a tribal elder defuses the tension and tells Obi's father that he will offer this nut in a Christian way and he prays:

Bless this Kola nut to that when we eat it, it will be good in our body in the name of Jesu Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end. Amen. (*No Longer at Ease*. 242)

Achebe presaged about the impact of Christianity. He could not write about how Christianity affected the Africans. His heir designated Chigozie Obioma studies the impact of Christianity on the Nigerians. The people of Nigeria have been made inactive by Christianity who think that everything can be done by God only. This is stark comparison to their ancestors who depended on themselves for all the works. In *The Fishermen* Obioma introduces the readers to the damage Christianity has done to the Nigerians. In the novel, Obioma shows how Christianity has reduced the Nigerians to level of the beggars who can only genuflect in front of God rather than doing anything. Christian God dominates every aspect of life, He can save the football from crossing the boundary (20), He can stop the father from beating (39), He can intervene when Children does not stop wetting the bed (186). The impact of this over reliance on God is that society has become static and has lost its desire to move foreword. God is expected to do everything from providing food to providing money and stamping visa. In fact, introduction of Christianity has done greater damage to the Nigerians that anything else. Obioma shows how this kind of reliance on God can lead to tragedies. In the novel, tragedy happens only because of God.

The second important institution that the Whites thrust upon the Africans is the government system. The colonizers introduces the Africans to democracy. Over the decades democracy has been projected as the ideal system of government. Over the decades, democracy has become sacrosanct and nobody can even criticize it. If anybody criticizes democracy then that person can be branded as a Nazi or fascist. Obioma makes clear that democracy is not the only the system of governance in the world. The African tribes had their own governing system. In African tribes, the old people used to take decision. It was a kind of gerontocracy (Briscoe 151). Obioma shows that democracy may be a good system of governance for the Europeans, but it has certainly failed in Africa. Obioma writes:

The most viable pathway would be the vast political and ideological resources on which successful civilizations (The Zulu The Igbo, The Malian dynasties of Timbuktu, The Oyo empire, etc.) were built. In most Igbo states, for instance, there was an egalitarian system where an older member of a clan represented his people is the elder's council. There were no kings or presidents. Perhaps there could be a way to about this unique political structure to replace the Western one has so far failed. (Obioma, *Africa has been failed*)

Obioma made this bold statement against democracy which can be equated with blasphemy in the contemporary world. However, whatever Obioma says about violence is backed by the history of Africa, particularly Nigeria. In Obioma home country, democracy has been a failure and it has been punctuated by dictatorships, assassinations, corruptions and riots. All these problems show that politics and democracy in Nigeria have been a failure. Obioma feels that Africa can progress only and only if it goes back to its roots. The progress gained in the name of westernization is a phony progress that has only complicated the conditions in Africa. In fact, Africa has ceased to be Africa only because it has blindly followed the west. And it is blindly following the west only because it has blindly believed what was written about Africa by the Whites and tragedy is that it still believes that Africa was a 'dark' continent peopled by savages.

Writers like Achebe and Obioma try to bring the truth in front of the Africans and bring naked truth in front of them. Obioma further writes about this:

Today most of nations in Africa should not even be called African nations, but western African nations. The language, political ideology, socio-economic structures education and everything that makes up nation, even down to popular culture do not originate from within these countries African nation have a total dependency on foreign political philosophies and their shifts and movements. (Obioma, Africa Has been Failed)

Achebe and Obioma try to retrieve Africa from the west. For them indigenizing Africa seems to be only option. For that, both of them suggest that Africa has to go back to its institutions and resuscitate them. The western education has to be shunned in the favour of indigenous models and the Native wisdom has to be brought back into the life of people. Only then Africa can progress in true sense of the word.

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