

The Novels Of Chinua Achebe

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المخلص:

Abstract:

The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe conceives of writing <<as an activity through which the African writer can define his identity and recover his historical roots>>. He also believes that <<writing should assist the decolonization process in Africa>>.

This article reviews Achebe's novels, namely "Things Fall Apart" (1958), "No longer at Ease" (1960), "Arrow of God" (1964), and "A Man of the People" (1968) to discuss a few of the themes treated in the four novels which document Nigerian history between 1890 and 1965. It will also include an analysis of how Achebe's commitment to "applied art" as opposed to "pure Art" and his sense of social responsibility towards his own society and towards Africa are expressed in his writings.

يعتقد الأديب النيجيري Chinua Achebe أن الكتابة الأدبية تسمح للكاتب أن يعبر عن هويته و جذوره التاريخية وثقافته , لأنها تساعد الشعوب على التحرر من التبعية الاقتصادية والثقافية وغيرها .

ومن دراستي هذه تعرضت لأربع روايات للروائي المذكور وهي تعالج قضية الاستعمار ومخلفاته منذ دخوله إلى أرض نيجيريا حتى خروجه منها . يعتقد أن الأدب هو فن تطبيقي له مغزى وهو مساعدة الشعوب في النهضة و بالتالي فإن رسالة الأدب في الحياة هي تحريك أفراد المجتمع من أجل التحرر والخروج من التبعية.

Introduction:

The English speaking Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, conceives of the African writer as a man with a mission. In his writings, he transcends time and space to continue the educational mission traditionally devoted to the oral tradition. He thinks that the role of the writer today should not be any different from that of the story teller in traditional African societies, who through stories, proverbs, charades, initiation rites and songs has contributed to the education of successive generations of young Africans and to the transmission of the cultural heritage and wisdom of African societies as accumulated through centuries of harmonious communal living.

Achebe talks of art as “applied art” as opposed to “pure art”, of writing “as an activity through which the African writer can define his identity and recover his historical roots”[1] and of the novel “as a vehicle of self-discovery”[2].

This paper reviews Achebe’s writings in order to analyze how Achebe’s social commitment and responsibility to African societies are expressed in his four novels, “Things fall Apart”(1958), “No Longer at Ease” (1960), “Arrow of God” (1964) and “A Man Of The People” (1966) considered by critics as a tetralogy documenting Nigerian history between 1890 and 1965. It will also attempt to show how Achebe <<assists>> the decolonization process in Africa and the construction of a better African society .

“Things Fall Apart” and “Arrow of God”

Unlike other African writers, China Achebe draws his major themes from the “Ibo” terroir, the Ibo experience of which he has first hand experience being himself a native of Eastern Nigeria.

He believes that the writer, through his privileged status in society, can effectively contribute to the education of his people,

especially, about their past, history, customs, values...etc. It is this mission that he successfully pursues in “Things Fall Apart” and “Arrow of god”, his first and third novels respectively .

“Things Fall Apart”, set in an Ibo village in Iboland, Eastern Nigeria between 1850 and 1900, the period extending prior and after the arrival of the first British colonizers in this part of West Africa, describes the rise and fall of Okonkwo, a leading clan member, a farmer of modest origin, who << makes it to the top>> as a result of hard work and display of unusual valor. Exiled from his clan, for accidentally killing a member of the clan, he starts a new life in his mother’s village and works hard again to regain his former status upon his return to his people. His dream is shattered by the changes in his community, the most dramatic being the presence of the “white man” as illustrated by the church, the missionary school and the colonial administration. Unable to cope with the changes, the reality of the presence of the British colonizer, he tries to arouse the village against the foreigners and their institutions, but the clan fails to follow him because of internal dissensions created by the “white presence”. In a fit of anger, he slays one of the messengers of the district commissioner and hangs himself afterwards, act considered by the Ibos as the worst abomination.

In “Things Fall Apart”, Achebe describes the fatal encounter between African and Western civilizations, the final outcome being the desintegration of traditional African society under the repeated and forceful blows directed at its economic, political and social structures as well as against its traditional values, customs and culture by an alien and more powerful force, hence the title of the book “Things Fall Apart” taken from a poem written by Yeats *The Second Coming* (1921). Okonkwo’s death symbolizes the end of African traditional society under the blows of western civilization as well as under the

weight of its own internal contradictions exacerbated by the colonial experience.

“Arrow of God” , also set in Iboland after 1900, period during which the colonial presence was firmly established, describes the plight of Ezeulu, a chief priest of a snake cult who unlike Okonkwo ,acknowledges the presence of the British and tries to accommodate himself to it .He tries to exorcize it by sending his son Oduche to a missionary school <<to be his eye there>> and << to learn the white man’s ways>> .Ezeulu’s compromising attitude draws him criticism from some of the leaders of the clan, criticism which arises to total opposition when his christianized son is caught trying to kill a “sacred python”. His problems with the clan are compounded by the lack of understanding displayed by the district commissioner who puts him in jail for failing to accept an appointment as a paramount chief of his village. After his release from prison, he refuses to perform certain rituals before the new yams could be harvested. His uncompromising attitude leads to a crisis with the clan and to his subsequent madness. Ezeulu’s madness is interpreted by the members of the clan as a sign that the gods had sided against their priest. Achebe writes << for a deity who chose a time such as this to destroy his priest or abandon him to his enemies was inciting people to take liberties ; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so. The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika’s death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. <<In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man’s fields was harvested in the name of the son>>(3).

This last act in “Arrow Of God”, symbolizes the further erosion of traditional society, and its religion in particular.

In both “Things Fall Apart” and “Arrow Of God”, Achebe draws a vivid picture of Ibo society which in many ways epitomizes traditional African societies , as << highly integrated , stable, governed by tradition and custom .He ascertains that African societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth , value and beauty...>> .<<This theme , put quite simply is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth, value and beauty, and that they had poetry and above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that they must regain now>>(4)

Achebe’s return to the past-to his roots-, his probing into the recent history of the Ibos and his insistence on the depiction of traditional Ibo society and its political, religious, economic, cultural and social traditions is not fortuitous. Nor is this undertaken for the sake of exotism or from feelings of nostalgia; therefore, leading to the presentation of an idyllic Africa before the clash with Western civilization, a mythical Africa that is no more. In these two novels, Achebe pursues an educational mission because according to him <<modern African writing in on sense assists the decolonization process of people who have suffered the trauma of foreign conquest and the imposition of an alien culture>>(5)

Achebe’s ultimate goal is on one hand to provide an insider’s view on African society as perceived by an African writer, and on the other hand, to re-establish the truth about the African people who had been mostly described by Europeans either in quest of exotism or with a reductionist and distorted vision of Africa. He writes <<I knew around 51-52, I was certain that I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel, set in Nigeria, Mr. Johnson which was praised so much and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of not only the country but

even the Nigeria character and so I thought if this was famous then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside >>. (6) Achebe attempts to set the “record straight” through his demystification of many of the myths surrounding the African continent, the “dark continent”, namely the myth that the Africans were a primitive race, devoid of civilization, a degraded race. The Africans were portrayed either as “noble savages”- this image prevailed in the literary field-or as “cannibals”. David Carroll reports that in the 18th and 19th centuries the status of the African people- the Negro race- became an issue of public concern and that eminent voices rose to place the Negro lower down the human ladder than the white race >>. (7) The “inferior status” of the Africans even received religious sanction since the Bible was interpreted to suggest that the Negro race as a lower race was condemned to serve the superior white race. Such an ideology appeared to justify the extraction of millions of people from Africa and their enslavement and the settlement of Africa as a “civilizing mission”, “the white men’s burden”. Achebe ironically writes <<it is our greatest pride that they do albeit tearfully, send us fearless and erect to the lead of the backward people into line, we are surely, we are the people>>. (8)

Achebe urges the African writer to be at the vanguard of the people engaged in the fight for the rehabilitation of the African past and for a re-appraisal of the traditions of these societies for the recovery of their lost identity. This task is of utmost importance as many of the Africans themselves, the western-educated in particular, have internalized many of the myths, beliefs and prejudices held by Westerners, namely that all manifestations of African culture were inferior and worthless. Achebe reports that in Iboland to say that a product was Ibo made was to brand it with the utmost inferiority>>(9).

This leads us to conclude with Achebe that the decolonization of Africa has not freed the minds of the Africans themselves <<it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their identity>>.(10) The role of writer is to lead his people to reclaim their identity, and more importantly, to reconcile the Africans with their past, their history, their civilization, in other words, to reconcile the Africans with themselves <<there is then an adequate revolution for me to espouse, to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of self-denigration and self-abasement and it is essentially a question of education in the best sense of that word>>(11).

Achebe cautions though the African writer from succumbing to the temptation of bringing an idealized African past, an Africa depicted as a <<garden of Eden>>to the reader. Such an attitude will challenge the truthfulness and the integrity of the writer. He wonders if the writer will be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him. If he succumbs, he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness but it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved, the credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts>>.(12).

Achebe's social commitment and responsibility lead him to identify the weaknesses of traditional societies which contributed to their falling apart. He acknowledges that the Ibo's intolerance and rigidity led many of the disgruntled elements in the Ibo clan to fall prey to the promises of the missionaries and colonial administration and contribute effectively to the falling apart of the clan .

“No Longer at Ease” and “A Man of The People”

Achebe's commitment to applied art extends to the contemporary scene with "No Longer At Ease" and "A Man of the People". In these two novels, Achebe's role as a writer changes from that of interpreter of the social and cultural worth of his society to that of social critic. In his previous novels, Achebe depicts the ambiguities created by the colonial experience, in "No Longer at Ease" and "A Man of the People", he explores the aftermath of this experience or the long-lasting consequences of the breakdown of traditional African societies. He also analyzes the conflicting political, cultural and social forces which determine contemporary Nigerian society. "No Longer at Ease", Title of the second novel written by Achebe, taken from a poem written by T.S Elliot describes a young Nigerian's professional, social and moral decline just before independence. Obi, the grand-son of Okonkwo, returns to Nigeria after completing a B.A. degree in England. Idealistic as are all young people, he hopes to contribute to the establishment of a better society in Nigeria through fighting social ills such as political nepotism, corruption, bribery,...etc. which have become part and parcel of his own society. Obi's fate is tragic just like his grand-father's before him. Under external and internal pressures such as his inability to maintain a social standing in accordance with his new social status while paying back the UPS(Umuofia Progressive Society) which financed his studies abroad, and his parents' opposition to his marriage with Clara , an osu (outcast, descendant of slaves), he weakens and succumbs to the very ill he wanted to extract from his society- bribery. When his conscience wakens and he decides to stop the practice, he is caught and tried. Obi is a young Nigerian, pulled between two sets of values, unable to reconcile traditional Ibo values and western values acquired through his education and his life abroad. Achebe is concerned not only to show that Ibo society has lost

its wholeness ,both moral and spiritual, both political And social but also that Obi Okonkwo... the young protagonist fails to bring back any fresh imaginative synthesis from his western education, any new vision to take the place of the old.(13)

Achebe holds western civilization responsible for the alienation of the young educated Africans; Obi's case is illustrative of the feeling of enstrangement experienced by the western educated in all the developing countries because torn apart between two conflicting systems of values and traditions belonging to two civilizations, antagonistic and unequal

In <<A Man of the People>>, Achebe perseveres in his analysis of the different forces which affect Nigerian society but the tone is for more pessimistic than even <<No Longer at Ease>> where the hero redeems himself because his conscience wakens before he is caught. In <<A Man Of the People >>, the alienation is total. This novel is set in an unnamed African country, which is probably contemporary Nigeria, just after independence; the events which Achebe describes are probably real either witnessed by the writer or drawn from daily news reports that Achebe had access to as director of External broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation . As with "No Longer at Ease", Achebe moves away from the village to the city as a center of interest, as a center of focus and depicts a country on the verge of chaos, gangrened by political opportunism, corruption, material gain, nepotism, moral and social decline... just to name a few. The main character, chief the honourable M.N Nanga (MP) is described as one of the finest rogues in Nigerian fiction. Claiming to be a man of the people, Nanga is actually a self- seeking, grossly corrupt politician who lives in flamboyant opulence on his ill-gotten gains>>(14). Nanga is a representative of a dominating political class for which the main motivation for political action is material

gain and where the most widespread maxim is it did not matter what you know but who you knew and Nanga was obviously a man to know >>(15). Achebe attributes the appearance of men like chief Nanga to the breakdown of traditional Ibo society. He acknowledges that Ibo society encourages acquitiveness and the pursuit of wealth-wealth was required for clan leadership; however, religious observances and traditions put a check on excessive love of material gain. Achebe has written in this connection <<Ibo society has always been materialistic, this may sound strange ,because Ibo life had at the same time a strong spiritual dimension, controlled by gods, ancestors, personal spirits or chi and magic. The success of the culture was the balance 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 >>(16). The loss of balance between the spiritual and the material, the loss of “moral center” explains the emergence of corrupt people like Nanga, whom Achebe qualifies as the <<most monstrous off- spring produced by the tawdry union of Europe and Africa>>(17).

Achebe also remarks that the further the distance from traditional society from tribal life, the less moral society becomes (more social ills emerge).In the village, the Ibos still cling to traditional values, and the sense of social responsibility is still strong. This is illustrated through the boycott of Josiah, a village trader who steals a blind beggar’s walking stick “to make”, as one old woman says, <<a medicine to turn us into blind buyers of his wares>>(18). Achebe explains that in the village, there is still some kind of social code which can mobilize people for effective action. This code does not exist any more in the city where people do not even identify with their own government.<<The nation over which Nanga presides is

nonexistent because most of the individuals within its boundaries do not perceive themselves as components of an organized national whole, but as members of specific communities described by the limits of village or tribe>>. (19)

<< “A Man of the People” is a serious indictment of post-independent African countries where the political leadership is detribalized but imperfectly westernized adhering to no systematic code of values>>(20)

And where the majority of people live a miserable life of hopelessness and helplessness under the authority of an indigenous leadership as oblivious of its responsibilities as the former dominant, colonizing class it replaced. Fiction and reality merge in this novel which describes a decaying society on the verge of chaos and dismemberment and which Achebe ends with a “coup d’état”. This novel has often been described as “prophetic” since shortly before it was published, the then Nigerian government was overthrown by the army in as much as the situation in Nigeria had become impossible.

In conclusion, Achebe’s novels have done a lot to change the perceptions of the Western world vis à vis the “Dark continent” and led to a better understanding of Africa and the African people through the demystification of many of the myths surrounding the African continent.

Achebe’s writings, which display a remarkable and splendid mastery of the English language adapted skillfully to describe the Ibo African experience, have received universal recognition and are read and studied in universities worldwide. Moreover, thanks to Achebe and other African writers, African civilization and African literature have found their “niche” in African studies programs in most Western Universities.

Reference Notes:

- (1) C: L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* P.68.
- (2) *Ibid*, p. 68.
- (3) Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, p.287.
- (4) Chinua Achebe, *The Role of the Writer in a New Nation*, Nigeria Magazine, N° 81, 1964,p.157.
- (5) G.D., Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, p.2.
- (6) Cosmo, Pieterse and Duerden, Dennis, ed,*African Writers Talking: a collection of Radio interviews*, p.4
- (7) David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe, the Role of the Writer in a New Nation*,p.158.
- (8) Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, p38.
- (9) G.D, Killam, *African Writers on African Writing*, p.9.
- (10) *Ibid*, p.3.
- (11) *Ibid*, p.3.
- (12) Chinua Achebe, “the Role of the Writer in a Nation”, Nigeria Magazine, 158
- (13) C.L. Innes and Berth. Lindfors , *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*,p.163.

(14) *ibid*,p.61

(15) *ibid*,p.61

(16) Chinua Achebe , the Role of the Writer in a New Nation, Nigeria Magazine ,p.158

(17) C: L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors, Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe P.62.

(18) *ibid*,p.256

(19) *ibid*,p.34

(20) *ibid*,p.62