

Chinua Achebe: An Exemplar in the Postcolonial Epoch

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Abstract: *The impact of colonization and its aftermath have created indelible political and identity crisis in many countries. Though most countries have achieved their independence and self governing status, they are still experiencing the exploitation under neocolonialism. The perennial problems since colonization in these countries is getting rid of the brutal colonial legacy in most formerly colonized countries has been its life sapping challenges for its people to show their real cultural identity to establish the real colonial-legacy-free country. In order to create such country many writers from the so called third world countries took up writing in English as weapon to destabilize not only colonial mind but even the neocolonialism of today. Chinua Achebe is one among the writers who dedicated his life for creating new Nigeria, free from the influence of others. This paper is a simple attempt to highlight Achebe's efforts through writing in decolonizing the mind of his people inducing assertiveness against the Europeans' false ideology.*

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Colonialism, Identity, Writing.

1. Postcolonial Literature and its Mission

The period that followed the state of colonialism is called Postcolonialism. When Postcolonialism is the state and condition of the people who were the victim of colonization and its after affect, postcolonial writing is about the attempt made by the writer, scholars and intellectuals from these colonized countries to restore the local & nature's histories, entire customs and beliefs which were wiped out either completely or partially at the time of colonization through their writing or speeches. The literary pieces of them is called postcolonial literature which address the issues and suffering of the people of the once colonized nation and how they have been neglected and marginalized by colonialism, imperialism and its later form of neocolonialism which aim to exploit the nature and the people economically.

In short postcolonial literature and postcolonial writings can be defined as the literary processes through which formerly colonized people seeks to assert their difference from, resistance to and negotiation with European colonial master and their culture which falsely propagated the native's culture, society, custom, religion and sensibility. It was well defined by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, who said,

"We use the term ,post colonial"... to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggressions. (1989:2)

Although these writings from the formerly colonized countries have different features they share some similar concerns, themes and characters such as reclaiming the spaces and places, asserting and attempting to restore their cultural integrity, revising their history written by the Europeans. It invokes ideas such as social justice, emancipation, and democracy in order to oppose the oppressive structure of racism, discrimination and

exploitation. To decolonize the mind of the people, many writers from the colonized countries tried out their hands in writing.

2. Chinua Achebe's practical wisdom in postcolonial writing:

Among many postcolonial writers, Achebe has been a trend setter by the way of his novel writing which showcased the world that a so called third world writer can adapt and excel in English. Above that he, through his writings, demonstrated to the world that culture, customs, religion and the native beliefs of the formerly colonized people can alive in the world today. Throughout his writing he encouraged his people the confidence to discard the inferiority complex entrusted by the European. To instill the morale value and inspire his people he not only wrote novels but also taught his people to get shed off the racial inferiority which he once said,

"Here then is an adequate revolution for me to spouse to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of denigration and self-denigration".

Achebe created a new style for his novel writing with his native Igbo myths, legends, folksongs, proverbs, traditional customs and beliefs which not only popularized his novels but also challenged the derogatory image of the African and rejected the European attitude on the African. He was a practical man who attempted everything which is pragmatic in the postcolonial world.

This paper is a simple attempt to show how practical and organized Chinua Achebe was in writing his novels under postcolonial epoch. One must remember that colonial exploitation and its aftermath in the African countries are severer than any other part of the world due to its geological resources, tradable sea route, lack of written languages, and pittance for human labors. It also shed light on how Chinua Achebe casually but effectively utilized the colonizer's language and education against them to assert and regain his

people's racial equality, superior culture, social structure and traditional value which were cunningly brought down by the European. The paper is in the form of enumeration in which each highlights Achebe's oeuvre and his unparalleled talent of exposing his native glory.

3. Achebe on selecting English over his native tongue:

Due to the lack of written languages when most of the African writers struggle to find the suitable medium to write, Achebe selected the language of English, the colonizer's language, as a counter weapon to encounter the false image created by the European. Though he selected English over his native tongue for his writing, it was a conscious effort by him to narrate the eventful history of his people. He created unique English which carry his native's culture without losing its value. On selecting English, Achebe says,

"The real question is not whether African could write in English. But whether they ought to. Is it right that mass should abandon his mother tongue for someone else. It looks like a grateful betrayal and produces a guilt feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given their language and I intend to use it". (Morning yet on Creation day, p. 62)

Achebe's striking features of using English in the use of native literary and cultural discourse such as proverbs, legends, traditional ceremonies, rituals and folktales which give the readers of any countries to remember their pre-colonial native setting. Achebe has used his native oral literature befittingly throughout his career to expose the vast flourished culture of his people which was intentionally considered inferior by the European. From the close examination, one can discover that Achebe's use of English language mirrors the culture of his native society from the entire sphere of political, religious and spiritual. On his writing he once said:

"I don't know for certain but I have probably spoken more in Igbo than English. But I have definitely written more words in English than Igbo"

Despite many writers' concerns over selecting of language to establish one's true identity such as Kenya's Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o and Nigeria's Wole Soyinka who faced similar problem, Achebe has gone with English and said:

"There is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language"

It's because it can expose the colonizer's abomination on the colonized countries to the world.

4. Achebe's novels and its Chronology:

Ayi Kwei Armah, African polemical writer, defines the process of decolonization as the search or research for positive African ideas, perspective and values. He further states that decolonization involves a parallel process of, re-Africanization" or a discursive formulation wherein the artist reconstruct an identity he has hitherto been denied or deprived of. Achebe's novels and his writings are parallel process which not only recognize and decolonize the mind

of his people but also aimed in making country. His novels were written chronicling the historical incidents happened in Africa especially in Nigeria from 1890's to the present day.

Unlike many other post colonial writers who have written their works without any link to their previous work, Achebe has written all novels in sequence which project the early happy climate of the Africa to the social, political and religion turmoil during colonization and finally the aftermath disastrous effect of neocolonialism with which the present postcolonial countries struggle. Each of his work has different theme and characters from the other but together they legitimately can be seen as aspects of one gathering sequence of human imperfection caused by the colonization. His novel can be divided into two major categories. Among his novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* represent pre-colonial Igbo culture struggling against the entry of the Europeans. The remaining novels such as *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are on the people's identity and economic crisis of Postcolonialism and neocolonialism. Thus Achebe has cleverly written all the novels coherently to make his people to realize the different political and social scene created by colonization. So Achebe's novels and even his literary criticism comprise an important literary archive for Nigeria-in-the making.

5. Importance of using myths, legends and proverbs in his writing:

Achebe remained as an exemplar and proved that indigenous values such as myth, folktales, folksong, proverbs, riddles, customs and rituals could survive in the form of Orality even after centuries without losing its original vigor.

Throughout his career as a writer, he strongly believed that in order to keep one's unique identity in the world each community should preserve and follow its original culture with some epistemological dynamism according to the time for the survival. He vehemently used the myth, folktales, folksongs and proverbs not just for the rhetorical purpose but to show the world that these are the real identity and cultural representative of his own community. Achebe has not only used these form to express his opinion and rhetorical skills but also showed his people's identity and civilization by bringing back the traditional tales and myths with new vigor and meaning though the medium of English to suit to the modern world. Achebe has shown the world how to use the colonizer's language effectively as counter weapon against the established colonial legacy in his country. Though it was thought to be impossible to transfer one's native sensibility into a foreign language, he conquered the thought and succeeded in transferring his native values, sensibility and Orality into English without losing its nature and meaning. All his works include proverbs, adages, folktales, myths, legends, traditions, customs, politics, economic conditions and the native's life style and various details that were once inextricable among his people.

Achebe strongly believed that every native and nation has its own myth, folktales, legends, traditions and value which are not just a part of rhetoric in conversation but an inseparable

part of people to expose their true identity, value, tradition and culture.

6. Achebe's rejection of Art for Art's Sake and his justification:

For Achebe, it is not what the writers expect from his society but what society expects from its writers especially in the postcolonial world in which people struggle to assert their identity and equality under the instable socio-political condition created by the European. He took up writing to be the conscious of the his community's needs as possible as he can and wanted to use his writing as weapon to shift the society from a point of ignorance to enlightenment. Achebe's oeuvre and proposition show that writing is not making the people to read and get entertained but he wished for the radical reorientation and emancipation of a colonial society from the ineptitude, the lies and the creation of colonialism. So he expected the novelist to raise his status as a teacher besides a writer who could help his society regain belief in itself and put away the self-abasement. Like Sydney and Horace, Achebe rejects the theory of art for art sake and strongly attacks it saying:

"Art for art's sake in just another, piece of deodorized dog shit"

Nardine Gordimer says,

"To the transformation of reality in whatever form and modes of expression.... (and is set) to make sense of life" as he knows and experienced it, their social themes naturally come in since any human being is a political and social animal. A writer does not need to laboriously work social issues into his writing, and spend his time theorizing on that.

It is apparent why Achebe never wanted to entertain people but teach them to raise their social, moral, educational and political status to enlighten their lives as well as their future generation. So it is overt that expecting a literary work from Achebe for Art for art's sake, or delight his audience or even to entertain the people is not possible due to the life challenging circumstances in which his country is left by various forms of colonization. To eliminate that insidiousness from his people to his maximum capacity, he perceives himself as a teacher with the noble task of reeducating his society against the acceptance of denigrating colonial prejudice.

7. Achebe as an exemplar in postcolonial writing:

Achebe, in addition to novels, has also penned stories for children. Today when most of the countries are studying hard for self-assertion and self-definition which were destroyed by the colonizers, writing literary works for the children has been highly a challenging task because children cannot comprehend the real situation of their countries especially the Africa though they are not supposed to experience that turmoil from the ideology or post colonial point of view at that age. Yet they somehow need to be imbibed about it for the self-assertion in the future. So writing for children inevitably involves an attempt to

inculcate in their norms and other ethical practices which the writers assumes are uphold by the society as its essential premises of cultural formation. John Stephens, popular children's literature writers, says:

"writing for children is usually purposeful its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive perception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audiences. These values include contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture's past, and aspiration about the present and future. (1992,93)

These socio-cultural values in Africa have themselves come under the onslaught first by colonialism and later by imperialism, so that decades after the end of formal colonization, the task remains one of the reconstituting national culture and values.

Achebe took up writing for children as a challenge and succeeded in it making himself a trend setter. His works are high degree of ideology focusing on thematic and moral significance. Achebe's *Chike and the River* and *The Drum* are written for children. When *Chike and the River* is about western-style luxuriant life, *The Drum* is adapted from traditional African folklore. On his attempt to building new Nigeria with full self-governing and control, Achebe was ready to sacrifice his life which he said:

"The country will perish unless somebody comes forward to save them. Somebody who is prepared to risk his own life for the sake of his fellows. And so I decided that person had to be myself. (1988-16)

He, through his writing and speeches, tried all the possible ways of creating a new Nigeria. To achieve that vision, he even went with aggressive way by supporting Biafra civil war in 1960's for which it was believed that he went to America to raise fund for the war for establishing a stable government in his country. Even his novels stirred a lot of political riots in the 1960s and 1970s for demanding self stable government. On a number of occasions, he reasserted the firm belief that political rhetoric is not enough in his place. He supported for the reform to come i.e., the change at the level of the individual's consciousness and the requested the writers not to give answers but to pose the appropriate question. He says to the people,

"No I cannot give you the answer you are clamoring for. Go home and think I cannot decree your pet, textbook revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives, because as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living,... as a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination" (Anthills of the Savannah,188)

8. Conclusion

These easily delineate Achebe and his works a great contributor for liberating Africa and its people from imperialism and even liberating African literature from the Europeans who stamped it as "naïve", "bush" and "young". By rooting his writing with the traditional oral narrative

form, he has promoted the spirit of African renaissance both in Literature and in world politics. His effort is so significant that his fiction authoritatively documents Africa's social evolution. He also made great changes in the mind of his people to appreciate their traditional value for the dignified and refined society. Thus he fulfills the responsible duty of a writer.

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