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Paradigm of Diminished Identity in Achebe's Fiction

Ekta Sachdeva

Research Scholar

Dept. of English Studies and Research

Govt. KRG (Autonomous) PG College

Gwalior (M.P.)

The writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front.

Chinua Achebe

Abstract:

Discontentment of Achebe for the treatment of Africa in Western literature is the key element to analyze in the present paper. Achebe's works are a fettering source for an engrossing grasping of African pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial realities and its history. He had actually plunged into reforming the society and the world's perspective for visualizing Africa. The motif of change, reformation and progress in Achebe's works are at focus of research. The task to bring a change in society is imperative and indispensable element as the identity and dignity of African people has not recovered even after its political independence. Achebe has been hailed as the colossus of African literature and considered a promising writer too. The paper entitled PARADIGM OF DIMINISHED IDENTITY IN ACHEBE'S WORKS examines how Achebe is all set to rediscover Africa's past, its culture and heritage, in upliftment of his subjugated natives who were once colonized and in defining female power coming out of throes of patriarchy. His literary contributions outpour the representing of audacious aims for Nigeria and Africa.

Keywords: Identity, patriarchy, subjugated, African literature, culture

Diminished Identity in Achebe's Works

Human tendency to seek an identity for self which guides to the revealing of different cultures and traditions is the crux of all civilizations. Ngugi says, 'Culture embodies moral, ethical and aesthetic values through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe'. This set of values is 'the basis of a people's identity' (Ngugi 1994: 441). It is conspicuously known fact that identity gets transformed depending on the outcome of the power strife. For Africans, identities are eroded by Colonialism and slavery along with their values and their cultures. The force from the external overrode that of the internal. Anuradha Ghosh in her book *The Politics of Imperialism and Counterstrategies* says "the cultural encounter that the Igbo world of Achebe's novels undergoes can be mapped on different registers but what seems to be of fundamental importance is the notion of identity formation as a paradigm of cultural resistance against colonial rule" (Anuradha, 2004:33).

Achebe realizes that identity is a crucial weapon, which the Europeans used as a tool to devalue them. Rather than being passive and get defined by the European, Achebe takes part in the power struggle of identification, aiming at regaining culture of his people, and, more importantly, their worth. It is apprehended that Colonial and Postcolonial literature deal with Europe portraying a poorly conceived picture and fallacious accounts of Africa to justify European subordination of African and African writing trying to tell their own story portending the identity of indigenous people. Achebe opines, "Colonization may indeed be a very complex affair, but one thing is certain you do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honor."(Achebe, 2009: 112)

The African work that has attracted the entire world is Achebe's *'Things Fall Apart'* presenting Africa's own side of the story which is apparently realistic in true sense.

In *'Anthills of Savannah'* and *'A Man of the People'*, Achebe has not only recorded the disastrous changes in the history of the African nations but even offered solutions objectively. These two novels unravel to a writer the ways to propel and steer people so as to make their political freedom more significant, utilitarian and pertinent.

African past can be seen without any kind of idealization and extolment of the society which suffered the depredation of time. Though this was the external force driving Africans out, the internal force which problematizes the Igbo society was patriarchy and one dimensional of victimized presentation of women who are demoted and assume peripheral roles. Female genders are belittled in the name of patriarchy, tradition, culture, gender socialization process, marriage and domestic enslavement. Thus we see issues of identity are germane with the outsiders as well as insiders. Literature review Chinua provides an accurate picture of the African past and present- of life with all its pains, pleasures, and puzzles with their history and actuality in simplest sense.

In his novels, he also speaks of his disillusionment of post-independence era and internal strife within the country, its inherent anarchy, and struggle for independence, identity crisis, patriarchy and changing position of women .The remarkable insight with which Achebe has painted the Nigerian landscape becomes the microcosm of whole Africa. In proposing a critique of his society, Achebe is more powerful and accountable than the francophone writers. Perceiving realistic themes of Chinua Achebe many research papers and world renowned books have been published. Researcher has read ample works, written on Chinua's realistic themes.

Neeta Pandey in *'Moulded and Shaped Literary Identity of Africa'* (2011) depicts the Ibo society where men are allowed to marry several times depending upon their social status where Neeta voices about the social reality in female characters who are silent and voiceless and whose position is no more than a household object.

K.V. Dominic's *'African and Afro-American Literature Insights and Interpretations'*(2012)

deals with the stories of colonization, hegemony, oppression, servitude, exploitation, unfairness, pride in indigenous culture, identity crisis etc. Gajendra Kumar in *'Empowering the third world women: The Post Colonial Perspective'* (2007) lays down the notion of women empowerment which is the key and constitutive part of postcolonialism. Moussa, Ndiya in *'Realism in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Anthills of Savannah'* (2012) is concerned with cultural and political crisis. In international journal on "Multi Cultural Literature"(2012) by K.V. Dominic, the contributor Kiran Thakur in *'Representing Pre and Post colonial African Reality in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and A Man of the People'* compares and bring to the fore traumatic impacts of colonialism where the erstwhile compatible units of the individual and society cease to exist in harmony. Martin in *'African and Pacific Literature: A Comparative Study'* (1982) Literary writing in Africa and the Pacific locates the themes that show colonial experience and how the fledgling nations withstand the change and conflicts between traditional and modern existence.

Analysis of Impulsive Changes

"African people didn't hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people had but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost". (Achebe 1973:8)

The above passage reflects clearly Achebe's writing intentions. He aims to abolish inferiority complex and earn self-esteem for the Africans. Whatever the servile nation has lost during the apartheid regime has to be regained and for this Achebe beckons the writer to acclimatize the African people with the European reality without endangering their cultural roots. Chinua has thus initiated his writing by working on identity crisis.

Joseph Cary's *Mister Johnson*, in which an African is portrayed as a figure who is at servility of his colonist boss, provided Achebe with a starting point: "I know around I was quite 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, Mister Johnson, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of- not of the country - but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside". (Innes 1990:12) This novel let Achebe to get determined to offer a peep from the inside, to tell Africans who they really are, to grapple with the hegemonic European-imposed identity to "help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement" (Achebe 1976:58-59), and reinvent a new identity considering their history too.

Like other postcolonial writers, Achebe too recognizes the importance of rehabilitating their once-destroyed history. His first novel, *'Things Fall Apart,'* set in Igbo land, Nigeria, traces

the pre-colonial and moment after advent of colonists. So rich is the pre-colonial set of Igbo's collective identity that it is in itself self sufficient to offer to modern Nigeria its set of values. It has predominantly a rich cultural heritage and historical background which defines African identity. But this history, according to Achebe, has been grievously interfered. In fact, it has been said that several years ago they were taken out of their history and somebody else's history was gloated down their throats. This lost historical initiative needed to be restored imperatively to locate their existence in the mainstream of their very own thought and feeling and experience and perception. Therefore, besides telling people that Africa has a culture of dignity and human complexity, Achebe's other purpose in recreating history is to know who Africans are for the production of the new identity. He says, "We are all engaged, we are all embarked on a journey through history." (Qtd. in Vijayasree 226) In '*Things Fall Apart*,' colonizers made believe the colonized that there had been no pre-colonial civilization and were devoid of government systems or any native culture, and if at all they had it was non-sustainable in equality to white superior civilization. Europeans considered themselves superior to the blacks.

Here, Achebe puts the stress on rehabilitating the culture that was overlooked and warped by colonial culture, reflecting the need of the society at that time. '*Things Fall Apart*' had been a perfect vehicle for expression of self-discovery to fight for independence and build a new nation, and getting Nigerians assured of their right and ability to define themselves.

Achebe attempts to bring a change in the vision of how others see Africans and his people's view of seeing their own culture, which affects the ways they perceive themselves. In '*No Longer at Ease*' Obi is shown growing in a society which is at "the crossroads of cultures" (Achebe, 1989:34). The situation quite synonymous to Achebe's. The society although neither discovered Obi's talent nor ensured a suitable environment for his development.

Balancing on these divergent ways was a complicated affair for him. He could neither abandon his roots, past and cultural heritage nor deny the western education on which his education qualification and civil service rested. He is imprisoned between two cultures. He is torn between African consciousness and western progressiveness. "No decent restaurant served Nigerian food" in London (Achebe, 2010:27) was a shocking revelation of self-denigration and self-abasement for him. The society was directionless suffering from dichotomy. At times people emphasized: "We have our faults, but we are not empty men who become white when they see white and black when they see black" (Achebe, 2010:43), and, sometimes, they opined: "Today the greatness has changed its tune.... Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune" (Achebe, 2010:43). These notions keep working through out in Obi's consciousness and in the society, exhibiting the symptoms of disillusionment, imbalance, dichotomy, conflicts and indecisiveness in his behavior and annihilation of his self. He started feeling rootless and took bribe reluctantly but was caught in a modus operandi.

On the other hand, Ezeulu in '*Arrow of God*' has all the tremendous power in his hands, but he knows he depends on the supernatural forces whose ways nobody can understand; which

makes him helpless. Ezeulu's authority is deemed to be strong only when he works synonymously with the supernatural powers. Throughout the novel, he seems agonized by his authority, nagged by fear that his power is threatened and under challenge. It is because he exercises authority over the year, the crops, and over the people. It is rather society which dictates the behavior of its high priest than Ezeulu himself. He is subjected to society's behavior and when he does not pay attention to her signals and codes he is brushed aside. The refusal of Ezeulu to represent his people and act as a spokesman for his people brings him into clash with the colonial administration. This administration declines to approve that there is no centralized power within the Igbo community. The main character in this novel is Ezeulu, who is chief priest of the god Ulu, of the village of Umuaro.

Ezeulu is torn within himself in a pursuit to retain power although he is now a man of age and he wishes to control both his people and the British administrators. Ezeulu believes his clan will trail him and the British will revere him as an authority. His son is sent to the white man's missionary school where the boy adopts new religion and sacrifices his own. Ezeulu does not reprimand his son although the clan forces him for it. Achebe's novel shows that men cannot vie societies' will and that the latter can bring a man to insanity. This is again a crisis with the identity seen within the society.

It is transparent that the colonial situation of Africa influenced the lives and education of most of the African writers like Achebe, and it became a matter of thought in their novels too. Achebe studied the works of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene during his university days and the reaction of Achebe to the representations of African people and African culture in these novels demonstrated great impact on his writings. After reading their works which framed false images of Africans Achebe of course, discarded the stereotypes that English writers have created about Africa in their works. He knew that African identity is distinct from that of Europeans. He was a writer with a strong political commitment. Achebe's shouldered the foremost responsibility of African writer in a lecture entitled 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation' expressed to the Nigerian Library Association in 1964.

For him, the African writer should confer the utility of culture and traditions to its people by being both a cultural nationalist, and a teacher, imbibing dignity in the people. Achebe bolstered this stance in his paper entitled 'The Novelist as a Teacher'. He does not accept that African writers could be different being, as though like aliens, from their own societies. It is believed in common parlance that a writer should lead a nation. The period of subjugation to alien races has brought disaster on the African psyche. All over the continent, people still suffer from the traumatic effects of their confrontation with Europe. Thus he is involved in a process of 'writing back to the empire', projecting the identity of his culture and society. Thus, Achebe is seen at re-writing the canon.

Achebe proves to be successful in his task. Achebe retorts to the allegation that west Africans were devoid of cultural organizations. He declares that: "... it is only the story that can continue after the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war drums and exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others that saves our progeny from

blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence ...the story is our escort; without it, we are blind ..." (Achebe,1987: 124)

Chinua Achebe took to writing novels as a means of protest against what he thought racial misinterpretation. The Africans were alienated from their native roots and transplanted to a totally hostile world. He captured their past in fictional terms to instill in his people confidence to some extent to grow out of their self-denigration. Achebe was in time to also comment on the goings on of language politics in African literature beginning in the early 1960s. Achebe takes almost the exact opposite position to Ngugi's regarding African writers' use of English (or other European languages). He doesn't deny that colonialism had its evils, including factors "that [have] conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa", (Achebe, 1997: 344) but he does not deem the English language one such evil. On the contrary, he is of the opinion that English was a tool, a positive inheritance that came in the evil 'package' of colonialism.

He contends, "But on the whole, it [colonialism] did bring together many peoples that had previously gone their several ways, and it gave them a language with which to talk to one another." (Achebe, 1997: 344) For him, present day African nations have no option but to tame and make one's own the language(s) imposed upon the continent's literature.

Indeed Achebe practices and encourages such appropriation of English and making it tell the unique African experience. This skill at appropriation he suggests is a new site of creativity for African writers and thus comparable. He says, "I have in mind here the writer who has something new, something different to say. The nondescript writer has little to tell us, anyway, so he might as well tell it in conventional language and get it over with." (Achebe, 1997:347) He praises the writer who grapple with the English language in such manner creates a new breed of African literature. He suggests that a true writer has the artistic instinct to undertake this task while the issue of native language vs. colonizer's language for lay people may materialize differently.

Now, another grappling situation with Achebe was the patriarchal system prevailing in Africa. Chinua Achebe, one of the most influential and impactful African novelist and patriarch presents his early women as victims of a society regulated by cultural norms and traditional values. Achebe attempts to recapture the strength of the African past hence the stress on masculine domination.

This male dominant approach is reflected in '*Things Fall Apart*' (1958) and '*Arrow of God*' (1982). His '*Things Fall Apart*' famous for the macho image of the protagonist-Okonkwo leaves little room for the stand of feminine values. Okonkwo expresses his anger at his son Nwoye, who was inclined to more of his mother's stories to his father's masculine stories, is very instructive.

When Nwoye committed the ultimate 'abomination' of establishing links with church goers, Okonkwo repudiates him "How then would he have begotten a son like Nwoye... Perhaps he was not his son! No! ... how could he have begotten a woman for a son?" Looking at his

favourite daughter, Ezinma, he had thought: “she should have been a boy” (Achebe, 1958:61-63) In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), women are thought only to bear children and help their husbands.

Achebe opens before us a patriarchal world which is oppressive in all domains of existence. The world in ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ is andocentric where the man holds the superior position and the woman nothing. The coming up of Christianity with the white man confirmed the development and progression of Igbo women with the increase in the urbanization and modernization in Achebe’s work also.

Achebe convinces the readers that African women can be partners with men in national progress and development, and can gain individual self –realization and fulfillment. It is clearly demarcated that the women who earlier assumed peripheral roles in the earlier novels of Achebe are now playing a vital role in shaping the social and political scenario in ‘*Anthills of the Savannah*’.

Beatrice becomes a source of motivation, inspiration and encouragement to Ikem, the artist and social conscience and to Chris, the political conscience. In Beatrice, Achebe ameliorates his previous handling of women restricted to household chores by presenting a woman standing equitable with the most powerful men. From patriarchal worlds of Okonkwo in ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, Achebe has journeyed on a progressive feminism in ‘*Anthills of Savannah*.’

The delineation of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of female emancipation. He drives the point emphatically in the following quote ‘You have to tell us. We never asked you before. And perhaps you’ve never been asked... you may not have thought about it; you may not have the answer handy’ (Kolawole, 1997:90).

‘*Things Fall Apart*’ is a male dominated text which hardly offers any space to women. Though polygamy is practiced in post independent Nigeria, women are coming out of obscurity. In A ‘*Man of the People*’ women have significantly been given ample space and assigned active roles. Chief Koko’s wife is the leader of women’s wing of P.O.P. and was chosen by the prime minister to the senate and later was made a minister of Women’s affairs. When Max was attacked by Chief Koko, his wife Eunice “stood like a stone figure...she took out a pistol and fired two bullets into Chief Koko’s chest. Only then she fell down on Max’s body and began to weep like a woman” (Achebe, 1989: 144) Thus, Eunice emerges as a strong feminist. She was a political activist and a lawyer by profession. This was a positive role played by Eunice during political upheaval. Max’s death was good for nation because it “had inspired someone (Eunice) to come forward and shoot... (his) murderer in the chest’ (Achebe, 1989: 137). Chinua Achebe has skillfully depicted the ushering of new Nigerian women, from the home-makers to the generation changers.

Beatrice’s role in ‘*Anthills of the Savannah*’ is commendable which resonates breaking the shackles of the patriarchal ethos of women domination in society. The oppression which

woman faced in his earlier novels is resolved in Beatrice's emerging as strong woman complimenting their men as well.

Conclusion

Achebe's novels are very powerful social documents, portraying oppressive racist forces, the struggle of the natives to chisel their hyphenated identity and Achebe's does not choose to be deterred by the color line or curtailed by binary vision. He has been an honest writer with clear intentions of regaining the lost self-esteem of Africans. Though his earlier novels charge him for condoning patriarchy but it cannot be denied that the position he assigns to characters such as Beatrice in '*Anthills of Savannah*,' Chief Koko's wife and Eunice as a crux of social change in the scheme of society and politics. Beatrice has not been created out of pressure rather we can trace the presence of Beatrice in all his fictions, from *No longer at Ease*, '*A Man of the People*', to *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe's works show the progress of Igbo woman with urbanization and modernization Achebe has been successful in carving out his own niche with his own set principles and has been adamant too when he adopts English as a medium for expression for his works..

Achebe also invites fellow Africans to define Africa in the wake of its development. He states. "Africa is masquerade and you don't stand in one place to see it, you move around the arena and take different perspectives."(Bernth, 1997: 156)

The analysis has implicated that Achebe has pioneered in Africanizing English language and bringing to the fore front revitalized identity of Africans. Undoubtedly, he made paraphernalia for the Africans to possess and survive and thus successfully devised a path for modernization.

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