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Cultural Predicament in the Select Novels of Chinua Achebe

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Abstract:

Literature is a real expression of culture of an individual and society around him. It has the ability to build cultural perception of a nation. Africa has had its own tradition and ancient religion and culture and customs. It has had its own cultural heritage in addition having its own language and literature. Through modern changes in this globalize world, the African traditional setting or ways of managing crisis can't stay unblemished, however they are by no means extinct. Culture is an essential part of the society to shape definite moral values. It involves a totality of behaviours and characters that are strange to people to the degree that it marks them out from other people groups or social orders. Achebe has tried to show the real image of the Africa people's culture and its history. He is aware of the hidden potential of African culture. This paper shows the communal changes in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People*.

Keywords: colonial, tradition, Igbo, values, cultural.

Literature has the ability to build cultural perception of a nation. It reflects views, attitudes and a belief in the sense of the writer's committed. Every country has its traditional culture and customs, which can make it not quite the same as others. These culture and customs values are domineering for every individual of the country. Culture is a way of life. The features of culture are the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the language we talk in and the God we worship. Africa has had its own tradition and ancient religion and culture and customs. It has had its own cultural heritage in addition having its own language and literature. Through modern changes in this globalize world, the African traditional setting or ways of managing crisis can't stay unblemished, however they are by no means extinct. Africa has a particular social legacy with an unmistakable past. African Literature oftentimes impacts assumptions about the nearness of the bound together African culture.

Culture is an essential part of the society to shape definite moral values. It involves a totality of behaviours and characters that are strange to people to the degree that it marks them out from other people groups or social orders. Cultural heritage combines all values of culture transmitted to human beings by their ancestors from generation to generation. They are esteemed, ensured and maintained by them. Schaefer remarks, "Culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects and behaviour" (76). There are certain essential values and qualities that comprise the culture in all the social orders and these should be sustained in light of the fact that the loss of culture would mean a loss of identity for that society. R.C. Aziza states,

Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs.(31)

Chinua Achebe is an artist and a recorder of his people's history, and he can cast light on his culture's past and help his society to all the more likely comprehend their present and future. As a postcolonial writer, he builds a new world through his novels and rejects the British colonial portrayal of Nigeria. He pictures the Africa people and its history to provide the true images of Africa. As a post-colonial novelist, he has the power to give their characters different personalities, all with unique ways to deal with life. These characters act differently whether they are invented to live under peaceful conditions or during colonialism. His novels describe colourful characters that have different methods of coping with life during and after the colonization of their countries. African culture is an exemplification of different values with all of them firmly identified with one another. Some social values, particularly in African culture, cannot be isolated from political, religious, moral values and so on. As G.E. Idang remarks, "all the material and spiritual values of the African people in the course of history and characterising the historical stage attained by Africa in her developments"(142).

Achebe has been the first Nigerian writer to change effectively the conventions of the novel, a European art form into African literature. He is the cultural antenna of his society. His novels develop through the central theme with which he is concerned the loss of cultural identity and the tragic collapse of the Nigerian culture. The three novels of Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People* are analyses of colonisation and establish

a chronicle of life in Nigeria. These novels show in a sequential order the communal changes that have occurred during the first Igbo contact with the missionaries and the colonial officials and the change after Nigeria's freedom.

Achebe reflects the pre-colonial features of the Igbo people in his novels by including the beliefs and social patterns of the society which are profoundly established in the primitive culture. In all his novels, the characters and the circumstances give the tunnel to the African soil to plough profound in order to follow the visible changes in culture, tradition and religion. His protagonists Okonkwo, Ezeulu and Odili signify a people, a set of beliefs and cultures, and an image of life and are products and sufferers of circumstances. Judith Butler states:

Limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that distort what is assumed to be true about the formation of identity and subjectivity and restricts the imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. (12)

Igbo culture contains the numerous customs, practices and traditions of the people. Achebe desires to exhibit that Igbo culture is independent, tolerant, adjusted and open to progress. Igbo has a well-established belief system and effective justice system. Achebe needs to have his cultural customs, the oral tradition, ceremonies, family, social life and religion in the accounts.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a tragedy penetrating the colonisation of Nigeria and its effect on traditional culture and customs. It represents the cultural roots of the Igbo with a specific end goal to give self-confidence, but at the same time he states them to general ethnic values which destroy their destructive potential. The novel is to shed light on the systematic destruction of a country by colonisation through its effect on a village Umuofia. Okonkwo, the protagonist follows the tradition of the tribe. He desires to establish himself and his individuality. He tries to become a leader of his community. He has sufficiently attained and gained acknowledgement among his people. He feels at the disrespect of an invading culture. Igbo people have established an equally democratic system of government where "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (*Things Fall Apart* 11).

The Christian Missionaries get triumph in converting villagers into Christianity. Okonkwo's elder son, Nwye becomes Christian. After completing seven years of exile,

Okonkwo sees many changes happened in Umuofia. As new religion is taking profound roots in the soil of their village, there is a gradual disintegration in their community; old values of their culture, custom and tradition are at danger. The Igbos has a great position for women in their lives. Aside from taking care of the children and support the economy of the family by working in the fields, they additionally hold a supreme position. Okonkwo is dealt with respectfully by the elders because of his fondness towards the culture, beliefs and custom of Igbo people; consequently Okonkwo's identity rests upon the cultural beliefs of the society. The entry of European colonisers in the Igbo society the Igbo cultural values change. This change is obvious in all aspects of the Igbo's lifestyle.

African culture is entrenched in solid ethical considerations. It has a system of numerous beliefs and customs which each individual should maintain in control to live long and to avoid expediting curses them and others. The conviction of the Igbo people allow talking the brutal word to someone else during the week of peace, however Okonkwo beats his wife Ojiugo for delaying his meal. His brutality amid the holy Week of Peace throws him a punishment. The clan says, "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" (*Things Fall Apart* 23). The entry of White missionaries demolished the cultural identity of the people by convincing them. Okonkwo's suicide is an example of the loss of cultural identity of the Igbo tribe. Achebe attempts to convey in a realistic way the pressures of Igbo people's experiences affected by colonisation.

Achebe's *Arrow of God* speaks to the battle for power and authority between the African and the Christian missionaries and within the Igbo tribe. The past Igbo culture is portrayed through the engaging method of portrayal with the broadened change in African culture because of new religion like Christianity, raising the issues of cultural identity among Igbo community. Franz Fanon states:

The colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil! Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values.....The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of the values, but also the negation of values.(6)

Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the most powerful god of Umuaro, observes the traditional Igbo society. The Nigerian social and cultural system is symbolized through the ethnicity of the Igbo people. The mollification caused by the White missionaries among Igbo

people establishes the arrow heads of the clashes between Ezeulu and Mr. Winterbottom. The identity of the Igbo tribe mirrors through the festival of the celebrations which contributes the firm sacred aspect and the custom strengthening to bind together them in the community. Notwithstanding these focal celebrations of Igbo people, the prayers are performed to all the minor divinities in the six villages. Achebe says “it was the only assembly in Umuaro which a man might look to his right and find his neighbour and look to his left and see the God standing there” (*Arrow of God* 203).

The White missionaries are able to convert the Igbo in regards to the superstitious and terrible traditions of the tribe and tempt them to join Christianity. The battle between the two villages, Umuaro and Okperi, makes the fruitful ground for the Christian missionaries to assume control over the charge of the society. The missionaries intentionally cause the emergency by removing Ezeulu from Umuaro to demonstrate that the God Ulu is a false God. Thus, the Igbo clan calm from their convictions and acknowledged the new religion. The Igbo people psychologically set them up to acknowledge the unavoidable change during the colonial period. The customs and traditional rules are uncontrolled by the people for the pleasant existence of the society. The natives of Umuaro are gone without any options in contrast to complying with the Christian missionaries and their religion. George Padmore says, “The Chief is the law, subject only to one higher authority, the white official stationed in his state as advisor” (317). *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* record in the arrival of British imperialism and Christianity in Nigeria, and the decay of the native cultural beliefs, customs and tradition in the post-colonial society of Achebe.

Achebe’s *A Man of the People* focuses on the radical dissimilarities between the tribal politicians and the new politicians. Chief Nanga is reflected as the representative of the common people to clash with the European concerned with post-colonial intelligent people. Achebe reveals the cultural issues are cleared away the traditional patterns of their culture by the new change. The alterations in the traditional values disturb the people from each other. Odili gives knowledge about the western impacts in Nigeria, when he comes to identify that Chief Nanga intends to marry the girl Edna calling her as ‘parlour wife’ however she has the right to be someone’s first wife. He states, “Just think of such a cultureless man going abroad and calling himself Minister of Culture. Ridiculous. This is why the outside world laughs at us” (*A Man of the People* 23).

Achebe uses the proverbs, myths and folktales as the collections of values, traditions and customs. He deals with the articulation to the theory of the Ibo world through the

proverbs and myths. Igbo folktales are entertaining, structured with beginnings, conflicts and resolutions. Ernest Emenyonu states, “The artist was for the audience, the educator, entertainer, philosopher, and counsellor. He entertained as he instructed and endeavoured to make the values and beliefs portrayed in the tales come alive” (2). In his novels, Achebe describes Igbo culture, which involves polytheistic religion, father-son inheritance, farming traditions, and belief in evil spirits.

Man’s individual achievements and triumph and Ibo life and culture are emphasised through a number of proverbs. Achebe introduces Okonkwo is one of the greatest men of his period in the very presence of elders in light of the fact that “as the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (*Things Fall Apart* 60). When Nwoye leaves, he says “a chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches” (*Things Fall Apart* 46). Proverbs explain about the courage and duty of the Igbo people that “If the lizard of the homestead neglects to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland” (*Arrow of God* 17) and “When an adult is in the house the shegoat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether” (*Arrow of God* 18). Chief Nanga utilizes the proverb about the strange response that “It was like the man in the proverb who was carrying the carcass of an elephant on his head and searching with his toes for a grasshopper” (*A Man of the People* 72). Achebe endeavours to set up that Africans have realistic semantic codes with which they characterized life and their surroundings.

Games are another form of entertainment and relaxation in Igbo land. A little of them include wrestling, hide and seek, hunting, swimming and numerous others that are played in the sunshine and under the moon. They are shared and taking part like the dance and fine art forms. The games are operators through which the Igbo build a healthy community, exchange sporting skills and show its philosophies to the young Igbo people. In the Ibo culture, the wrestling matches link to ideas of skill for the individual and to superiority, pride and honour for the individual and the village. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo earns reputation and respect by doing wrestling well. He is a great wrestler, a brave warrior, a title-holder among his people and a respected member of the clan who actions to sustain its traditions.

The new generation of Nigeria is isolated from the roots of their culture. The people are enchanted by the changing cultural patterns. The country turns into the open victim of the bribery. Evals remarks, “The whole country welcomed the change. We have experienced a totally corrupt and incompetent civilian regime, and the military seemed disciplined and right at the time” (17). They worship the political gods rather than their gods of the place of

worship. Chief Nanga signifies the elite class of the people of Nigeria. He likes to speak in Pidgin English instead of his native language. *A Man of the People* attempts to demonstrate that the social problem and political disorder are not to be dealt with as the only evil effects of colonialism, but instead the savage control of the Africans themselves. His novels gain observation into the legislative issues of the nation progressive first class, and, specifically, into the conflicts between his cultural background and professions of political persuasion.

Achebe sees himself as an instructor whose novels are utilized to show the Africans, particularly the Nigerians, to recognize the root of their inconvenience with the goal that they can dismiss their European stereotypical picture as inferiors. He expresses that his own society is of a free and effective culture and that his people are of dignity before the entry of the European colonisers. Cultural identity arises naturally from the search for roots.

Conclusion

Achebe often talks his national culture and custom clashes in his novels. He has capably exhibited the events of the novels to demonstrate how collective moral and cultural issues are defied at the individual level. The select novels mirror the issues of culture identity through inside tribal conflicts and the arrival of the White missionaries to interrupt the Igbo people from their religious concerns. Achebe tries to recreate the cultural life of the Igbos at the exceptionally essential moment in their history. It is reflected as a sensitive recreation of the multi-faceted Igbo cultural reality.

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