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## TRILOGY OF ACHEBE : A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF REBELLION THROUGH BLACK PROTAGONISTS

Dr. DIBAKAR MAUT

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tingkhong College, Dibrugarh (Dist.), Assam, India

Email : [maut.dibakar@gmail.com](mailto:maut.dibakar@gmail.com)



### ABSTRACT

The African Trilogy- *Things Fall Apart*, *No longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, narrate an era, recalling the story of a people and the universal truths of human nature as the characters react to changes with courage, honesty, generosity and with pessimism and cynicism . The three novels cover the period from late nineteenth century to the eve of Nigeria's independence under colonial encounter . "Postcolonialism", in the words of Charles E. Bressler , "is an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries" Achebe's representation of this period in Nigeria's history depicts conflicts in the Igbo society, generated partly by the impact of colonialism and also by tensions within the society itself. The disruption of the balance is depicted through the ruin of Okonkwo, Ezeulu and Obi in the three novels. Individual tragedies of the three characters do not represent the destruction of the entire culture. While narrating Nigeria's, specifically the Igbo community's colonial encounter with the British, Achebe reveals impact of colonial power on Igbo people's political , economic as well as whole social setup. By representing unregistered voices and events, Achebe provides an alternative paradigm where the stories go beyond African identity and becomes universal in appeal.

Key words : Postcolonialism, , *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*, pacification, conflict of religions, Africa.

### Introduction:

The colonial encounter featured in the three novels, *Things Fall Apart*, *No longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, cover the period from late nineteenth century to the eve of Nigeria's independence. Achebe's representation of this period in Nigeria's history depicts conflicts in the Igbo society, generated partly by the impact of colonialism and also by tensions within the society itself. The disruption of the balance is depicted through the ruin of Okonkwo, Ezeulu and Obi in the three novels. Individual tragedies of the three

characters do not represent the destruction of the entire culture.

### Aims and Objectives & Research Methodology:

The aim of this study is to critically examine from postcolonial point of view how the so called modern Christianity displaced the primitive Igbo religion, its history and culture in the process of pacification by European powers. The impact of colonization not only killed the old culture but the new generations after the freedom from the "colonization" could not cop up with new problems.

For the Hypothetical statement of the study we hold that the primitive Igbo history and culture

was in a form of democratic and well balanced state which was not inferior to that of the colonizer. The backbone of their identity is actually crushed by the colonial system even in the post-independence period of such African countries. The study is bound to the mentioned three novels only and hence doesn't claim representation of whole African culture and literature.

The methods adopted for the study is based on the primary sources like the original text and interviews as well as secondary sources like criticisms, reference materials with textual discussions.

#### **Definition of Post Colonialism**

The Post - colonial Literature and theory investigate what happens when two cultures clash and one of them with accompanying ideology empowers and deems itself superior to other. The term 'post-colonial' can also cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to even the present day. Post-colonialism marks the end of colonialism by giving the indigenous people the necessary authority and political and cultural freedom to take their place and gain independence by overcoming political and cultural imperialism. Postcolonial discourse was the outcome of the work of several writers such as Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiango, Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft and his collaborators, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aizaz Ahmad and others.

The concept of Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. The term as originally used by historians after the Second World War such as 'post-colonial state', where 'post-colonial' had a clearly chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. Although the study of the controlling power of representation in the colonized societies had begun in the late 1970s with the text such as Said's *Orientalism*, and led to the development of what came to be called 'Colonialist Discourse Theory' in the work of critics such as Spivak and Bhabha, the actual term 'post-colonial' was not employed in these early studies of the

power of colonialist discourse to shape the form and opinion and policies in the colony and metropolis.

Although there is little consensus regarding the proper content, scope and relevance of postcolonial studies, as a critical ideology it has acquired various interpretations. Like deconstruction and other various postmodern approaches to textual analysis, postcolonialism is a heterogeneous field of study where even its spelling provides several alternatives. The critics are not in agreement whether the term should be used with or without hyphen : i. e. 'Post-colonial' and 'postcolonial' have different meanings. The hyphenated term 'Post-colonialism' marks a historical period as is suggested by phrases like 'after colonialism', 'after independence', 'after the end of empire' whereas the term 'postcolonialism' referring to all the characteristics of a society or culture from the time of the colonization to the present.

#### **Discussion**

The three novels can be studied as examples of narratives that offer nuanced responses to the British district commissioner's myopic articulations contained in a single paragraph with regard to Okonkwo. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book :

Everyday brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.<sup>1</sup>

Achebe has to say about his commitment to his people:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct and pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup>

Achebe's this sense of commitment does not consist of merely writing against the imperialists' versions, or rewriting to set the facts right. It has far reaching and a deeper sense of association with the written word and the world. The past of Igbo society cannot be categorized only as a counter discourse. As G.D Killam says, Achebe's novels "... from a sequence and reflect broadly speaking, the changes which have taken place in Ibo, and by implication Nigerian life as a result of what Achebe calls the 'chance encounter' between Europe and Africa during the imperial-colonial period."<sup>3</sup>

Fanon views this as: " Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it."<sup>4</sup>

Narrated within a specific locale, Achebe provides alternative sets of traditions, ideals, values and behaviour while reclaiming his heritage and at the same time provides directions for constructive changes. This is evident in the absence of sentimentalism and nostalgia for the past of the nation. The author recognizes not only the weaknesses but also the strong points of the old dispensation. Achebe's narration of the pre-colonial world presents. The unsullied, untarnished image of an Africa with her several gods and goddesses, rituals and taboos, languages, cultures and traditions, songs and dances, bounty and grace, health and well-being may be a romantic reconstruction of the primal world of peace and happiness – a kind of golden age that is posited in order to counter-point the humiliation, the squalor and the ugliness of colonial exploitation. The notion of freedom and beauty and the poignant rendering of a world that has not yet lost its fine sense of balance is a harmonious extension of trying to find roots in the collective unconsciousness of the people who had their own folk forms of expression, ways of living and belief systems suited to the needs of their contexts. "The Igbo world is based on an equalitarian principle. Equality or near equality ensures that no one person or group of persons acquires too much control over the life of others."<sup>5</sup> Their leaders were never allowed to become too

powerful over their people. This fact is represented in *Arrow of God* when Ezeulu refuses to be chief and is imprisoned, he refuses to eat the sacred yam. Ezeulu's decision disrupts the daily life of the people and they no longer seek his religious advice and move away. Igbo leaders were "...essentially "opinion" leaders ... sensitive to public opinion and embody what is the best in Igbo tradition."<sup>6</sup> Igbo society allowed an individual considerable freedom of action to move up the social scale and also to express his views. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* stands tall as one who in spite of his father's failure could acquire titles, improve his finance and be counted as an important and respected member of his village. Individualism and communalism are reflected not only in the political sphere but also in the social and ritual life of the Igbo. The Igbo world maintains a cosmological balance where change is expected and where man's existence is interrelated with the material and the spiritual. In Igbo land, which had never had chiefs, those appointed by the British received little or no respect. This is reflected in Achebe's works where court messengers, called kotmas were never welcomed (*Things Fall Apart*) and in Ezeulu's refusal to be appointed as chief (*Arrow of God*).

The British carried out a few reforms which included the gradual elimination of domestic slavery from the Sokoto Caliphate and introduction of western education. Britain redirected Nigeria's trade away from Africa towards itself which undermined the northern region's large and centuries-old trade across the Sahara. Nigeria's economy was further changed by the introduction of new crops and expanding old ones, such as oil palm, cotton, groundnuts, and cocoa, which were sold for export. As Nigerians had to pay taxes in cash, most of them had little choice but to grow cash-yielding crops. The *Arrow of God* heralds the far reaching changes that are to come in the wake of the spread of the new religion and the establishment of the British administrative control. Though *Arrow of God* was written after *No Longer at Ease*, it captures the times and events that took place between the coming of the colonizers and the eve of independence.

The suppression of the traditional African way of life is shown as leading to conflicts between the individual and the community with the corollary of British intervention in the administrative, educational and religious fields. The early signs of this conflict between the community and individual which was featured in *Things Fall Apart* is dealt with at length in *Arrow of God*. Here it spreads deeper. Ezeulu with all his powers as the chief priest of Ulu stands tall in his responsibilities towards his people. Achebe presents Ezeulu as a man wedded to the traditional values of his clan and yet pragmatic enough to accept changes. He

even sends one of his sons to be educated by the missionaries. Ezeulu is doomed because while defending the traditions of his people, he is unyielding and unable to compromise with the new dispensation. He is afraid of losing his authority. His madness, as narrated in the novel mercifully spares him the "knowledge of the final outcome" (555) that his society had not only failed to understand him but had also embraced the new religion. Ezeulu's story is based on a real incident in which a priest named Ezeagu rejected a District Commissioner's offer to be Warrant Chief in 1913. He was imprisoned and so could not roast the sacred yams during the days of his imprisonment.<sup>7</sup> Ezeulu's refusal to eat the yams delays the feast of the New Yam as he cannot announce the appearance of the new moon. The villagers suffer from hunger and some begin to turn to the Christian harvest festival. Ezeulu's outburst of arrogance, his attempts to restore his prestige and to reassert the power of his god alienates him from his community and the missionaries alike. The historical factors behind these events are placed in the background by Achebe. In colonial Africa, records exist of instances of desecration of ancestral masks, indifference to the customs and traditions of the people and conversion to Christianity to project the unquestioned white supremacy over the African people. Amidst these changes, Achebe narrates how human nature changes along with the struggle to accept the altered situations. Ezeulu's decision divided Umuaro into groups and the infighting set the stage for British intervention. The white man, not satisfied that that he had stopped the war, had gathered all the guns in Umuaro and asked the

soldiers to break them in the face of all, except three or four which he carried away. Afterwards he sat in judgment over Umuaro and Okperi and gave the disputed land to Okperi. (347)

The white man occupies larger space in Achebe's narration as he debates on the theory of the white man's burden. The book which the District Commissioner had planned to write in *Things Fall Apart* is now consulted by new British administrators. One now comes to know that The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger was written by George Allen who in his book calls upon the British race to come to Nigeria and "lead the backward races into line" (352).

Achebe does not merely conform to the norms of postcolonial discourse while showing how colonization made inroads and disrupted the old order. He goes further than that: in Ezeulu he shows a character who can foresee the changes that were about to take place. In a spirit of accommodation he sends his son to receive the new ways. At first he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of his deity. That was why he had agreed to send his son Oduche, to learn the new ritual. He also wanted him to learn the white man's wisdom, for Ezeulu knew from what he saw of Wintabota and the stories he heard about his people that the white man was very wise. (361-362) Ezeulu is insightful enough to understand that the new religion was threatening to displace the old religious order. It is "...like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace"(362). He understood that it was difficult to thwart its progress: "The world is changing,...I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: "Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching"(365).

Ezeulu's son Oduche also realizes this when a West Indian missionary visits his church:

"...this man, although black, had more knowledge than white men" (366).

Alongside the progress of the new religion and education, came the measures of administrative control. The British saw that the Igbo did not have any kings or chiefs and so decided to impose indirect

rule. To many colonial nations native administration means government by white men. In place of the alternative of governing directly through Administrative Officers there is the other method of trying while we endeavour to purge the native system of its abuses to build a higher civilization upon the soundly rooted native stock that had its foundation in the hearts and minds and thoughts of the people and therefore on which we can more easily build, moulding it and establishing it into lines consonant with modern ideas and higher standards, and yet all the time enlisting the real force of the spirit of the people, instead of killing all that out and trying to start afresh. We The imposition of indirect rule had its own limitations because as things turned out, it became apparent that power was abused by those who held it. Captain Winterbottom appointed James Ikedi as Warrant Chief for Okperi as he was "an intelligent fellow who had been among the very first people to receive missionary education in these parts"(376). But within a short time there were rumours of his setting up of an illegal court and private prison.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe turns to the last phase of the colonial rule. The novel opens with the trial of Obi Okonkwo on a charge of accepting bribes. He stands in the dock awaiting justice for a crime in accordance with western legal system. The British judge is shocked to learn that he is a beneficiary of western education yet corrupt. Achebe in this novel weighs the materialistic gains of western education against traditional African values and shows that it is the failure of an individual to hold strongly to his values which leads to his downfall and the death of his community's dream. As Nigeria is looking forward to freedom and yet is enmeshed in corruption, we are witness to enactment of the crisis of the nation in the life of the protagonist. As Nigeria stands at the threshold of independence, Achebe raises various questions in his narration – Is Nigeria ready for freedom from foreign rule? Is western education to be held responsible for leading the nation to corruption and if so to what extent? How long would the traditional bonds of communities survive in the face of the attempts by individuals to break away from them? How has the spread of regionalism affected the

federal structure? The history of former colonies is full of stories of the struggle for independence to bring to an end the colonial rule. But Achebe's narration does not present a very hopeful future as he questions not merely the colonizers who would eventually grant freedom but also the people who would receive it. He wonders at the future leaders' sense of commitment to their traditional values and their sensitivity to the aspirations of their people. The liminal point at which the novel is set identifies the colonial experience as a phase of crisis, both for the protagonist as well as the nation, due to the conflicting value systems it engenders. The personal crisis of Obi Okonkwo raises questions on how western education altered the values of an individual, and the crisis at the level of the nation. The novel reveals the extent of corruption in society. The personal and national crises lead to the inevitable question which Achebe poses regarding Nigeria's readiness for independence. Though the novel does not anticipate a better future for the nation, yet it identifies the rays of hope that come from the still prevalent sense of the community. Standing at the crossroads of cultural changes, Obi Okonkwo is caught between his inherent values and those he is exposed to because of his western education and "European post" (248). Obi is influenced by the traditional Igbo culture of Umuofia where he grew up, the Christian teachings of his father, the idealism of English literature which he studied in England, and the corrupt and yet sophisticated lifestyle of Lagos. But he is not at ease anywhere. Bonnie J Barthold says that Obi "...inherits a social limbo, "at ease" neither in Umuofia nor in money hungry Lagos, unable to live up to his own ideals and equally unable to conform happily to the materialistic view of those around him."<sup>8</sup> As a school boy Obi had heard of the brightly lit Lagos but on his return from London, the sight of corruption had disillusioned him. His pastoral vision of Nigeria idealised in his poems, ironically enough are shattered. During his journey to his village he is shocked to see a policeman accept bribe from a lorry driver. At home he is pained to see his family's condition even "after nearly thirty years' service in the church"(219). The rejection of his marriage to Clara by his parents and his community's

interference in the matter because she is an osu alienates him from his family and the Umuofia Progressive Union. His job requires him to maintain a lavish lifestyle and this leads him to accept bribes resulting in his conviction. But it was he who had at first refused to resort to the practice of bribe-taking and even believed that the new generation of educated Nigerians would eradicate it.

G.D. Killam says that *No Longer at Ease* "shows the nature and extent of the changes wrought by colonial intervention in Nigeria as they are revealed in the career of Obi, a character intensely individualized yet nevertheless representative of the young and educated Nigerian."<sup>9</sup> As in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, here also Achebe shows the failure of his protagonist to exercise freedom and control over decisions during the changing times. Achebe could have presented his protagonist as a hope for the future of his nation, but instead shows his failure to deal with the challenges engendered by an elder of the village, Odogwu had said: "...He is a son of Iguedo,...There are nine villages in Umuofia, but Iguedo is Iguedo. We have our faults, but we are not empty men who become white when they see white, and black when they see black"(217). He had gone on to say that Ogbuefi Okonkwo "who faced the white man single-handed and died in the fight" (217) had come back as Obi and had compared him to the great men of the clan. „Iguedo breeds great men,...when I was young I knew of them – Okonkwo, Ezeudu, Obierika, Okolo, Nwosu." He counted them off with his right fingers against the left. „And many others, as many as grains of sand. Among their fathers we hear of Ndu, Nuosisi, Ikedi, Obika and his brother Iweka – all giants. These men were great in their day. Today greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large number of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune. We are the first in all the nine villages to send our son to the white man's land. Greatness has belonged to Iguedo from ancient times. It is not made by man. You cannot plant greatness as you plant yams or maize. Who ever planted an iroko tree – the greatest tree in the forest? You may collect all the iroko seeds in the

world, open the soil and put them there. It will be in vain. The great tree chooses where to grow and we find it there, so it is with the greatness in men."(217-218) Their greatness is also mentioned many years later at the time when Ikemefuna's killing is remembered: "Even in those days some elders said it was a great wrong that a man should raise his hands against a child that called him father."(286) The voice of the people in a unison „Ya" to „Umuofia Kwenu' is mentioned in all the three novels.

### Conclusion

The study shows that the major black protagonists of Achebe in his trilogy represents the complex problems faced by the Igbo identity in the beginnings of colonoization and also aftermath it.

Through this group of choral characters Achebe tells the story of his people; since nations are made up of people and not states. The voices of the subaltern groups have to be heard. Achebe shows how the colonial encounter changed the lives of his people, and how the strong bonds of kinship held his people together. M. M. Mahood says:

Achebe's recognition of the positive values that bind a society together Counter balances the individual disasters in all of Achebe's novels, much as it has prevented the communities of West Africa – in contrast to some in other parts of the continent – from falling totally apart under the pressure of colonial annexation.<sup>10</sup>

The African Trilogy, as the three novels have been published together, narrate an era, recalling the story of a people and the universal truths of human nature as the characters react to changes with courage, honesty, generosity and with pessimism and cynicism. By representing unregistered voices and events, Achebe provides an alternative paradigm. The stories place general humanity above Africanness. The black protagonists of the trilogy are also able to rise universal appeal and acclamations.

### End Notes :

1. Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy - Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God* (London: Picador, 1988) 168. Print.
2. Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher" *Hopes and Impediments – Selected*

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45. Print.
3. G.D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969) 2. Print.
  4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington (New York:
  5. Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* 19. Print
  6. Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* 90. Print.
  7. The incident on which Chinua Achebe based the character of Ezeulu is mentioned in C.L.Innes, "Religion and Power in Africa: Arrow of God" Chinua Achebe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990) 64 and in Jago Morrison, *The Fiction of Chinua Achebe*(Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan,2007) 98. Print
  8. Bonnie J. Barthold, *Black Time* 84. Print.
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  10. M M Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter – A Reading of Six Novels* (London: Rex Collings, 1977) 175. Print.
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