



Achebe's 'Refugee Mother and Child': Reflecting Dreadful Effects of Colonialism in African Countries

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Abstract

During nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, more than half of the world was under the colonial rule. Many countries of the African continent were literally ruined by the terrible effects of colonialism. Even after independence these nations went through civil war, chaos, and violence. People were forced to live like refugees without food and water in their own country. Achebe's poem, 'Refugee Mother and Child' written in the late sixties gives a compassionate portrayal of a mother and her baby living in a refugee camp. These refugee camps were the outcomes of civil wars after the end of colonial rule in African countries. Present paper aims at describing how Achebe's poem 'Refugee Mother and Child' reflects the dreadful effects of colonial rule in African countries.

Key words: mother, refugee, camp, African, Colonial

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was a renowned Nigerian novelist, poet, short story writer and critic. He is known as the father of modern African literature. He was working as a professor at the University of Nigeria. He has also served as the director of two reputed publishing houses. From his five novels, poems and a number of short stories published between 1958 and 1987, he depicts Nigeria's history and the effect of colonial rule on his country and people.

Initially Achebe was admitted to Nigerian university with a scholarship in medicine. Being an extensive reader, his knowledge enriched by the rich library of the university. He realized that European literature has painted a negative and misleading picture of African culture, public life, and the African mindset as a whole. He decided to turn to the study of history, theology, English language and literature.

At the same time, he thought that by writing in English he can put forth a true picture of African life before the world through his writings. When he changed the branch of his education, the university denied him the scholarship which was offered for the study of medicine. Aiming to put forth the true history, tradition and culture of his soil through literature, he remained firm in his decision and continued with his studies in history, language and literature. His love for the nation, art of storytelling, study of language and passion to portray his country in true sense through literature made him a great figure in world literature. According to a critic:

Nigeria's literary history has reached a point at which one can talk safely about the old and new generations of writers. Chinua Achebe certainly belongs to the old generations of the writers who exploited nationalist sentiments against the

colonizer and showed great fascination for the traditional world view of Africans. (Agetua, 40)

He is the first African writer to achieve international fame. His writings have a profound effect on African language, literature and society. 'Things Fall Apart', 'No Longer at Ease', 'Arrow of God', 'A Man of The People', 'Dead Man's Path', 'Civil Peace', 'Marriage Is a Private Affair', 'Bearer Soul Brothers', 'Refugee Mother and Child', 'Don't Let Him Die' and 'Collected Poems' are some of his major literary works.

'Things Fall Apart' is Achebe's bestselling novel. The novel gives an account of a true African man and his social life. He took the title, 'Things Fall Apart' from the line in W. B. Yeats's poem 'Second Coming'. This novel has been translated into fifty different languages and nearly eight million copies of the novel are sold across the world. He is honoured with the 'Nigerian National Order of Merit' in 1979, 'St. Louis Literary Award' in 1999 and 'Dorothy and Lillian Crush Award' in 2010. He was also awarded with 'Man Booker Prize' in 2007.

Chinua Achebe was a native of the Igbo (formerly spelled Ibo) town of Ogidi in eastern region of Nigeria. Storytelling is a major feature of the Igbo tribe. As a child, he heard many such stories from his mother and sisters. Later, he used these folk tales, fables and parables based on African culture in his short stories and novels. Igbo traditions and culture, the impact of colonialism on African nations, capitalism, slavery of African people, the turmoil in African life, Nigeria's civil war, the miserable picture of war-torn countries of the African continent, lack of food, water, sanitation facilities in refugee camps are some of the major themes of his writings. He uses the canvas of war-torn African countries ruined by the after effects of colonial rule for his writings. As L. J. Menachery comments:

Refugee camps are common in the war-torn countries of the African continent. Millions of people live in squalid conditions, and do not have access even to the basic services of food, clean water and sanitation. (*The Realm of Fancy* 118)

European colonialism caused great damage to African countries' cultures and natural resources. Despite being liberated from European colonial rule, these countries had to face many transitions in their journey as independent nations. Achebe's five novels, several stories and poems, published between 1958 and 1987, give a detailed account of Nigeria's miserable history during and after the British colonial rule. Achebe's writings are like valuable national treasure for the people of Nigeria. His influence is also felt in the politics and culture of Nigeria.

'Refugee Mother and Child' is a heart moving poem describing the pathos and agony of a refugee mother who has to witness death of her child due to starvation. In the poem 'Refugee Mother and Child' Chinua Achebe describes a refugee mother and her dying child. The poem throws light on the pathetic conditions of the people who are forced to live in the refugee camps. The poet paints the picture of a mother holding her dying son in her hands. The poet compares this picture of a mother and her son in a refugee camp with the picture of Madonna and her Child (i.e., Mother Mary and Jesus Christ). The poet says that the tenderness of the picture in the refugee camp outshines the tenderness in the picture of Madonna and her Child.

Achebe describes the atmosphere of the refugee camp. It is filled with disease, starvation and death. He speaks about the odour in the refugee camp which is filled with diarrhoea of the unwashed children. He describes very little flesh is remained on their bodies and how their ribs are visible due to starvation. The poet also makes reference to the laboured movements of the starving inhabitants in the refugee camp with their large distended stomachs. Achebe writes in the lines 4-8 of the poem:

The air was heavy with odours
of diarrhoea of unwashed children
with washed out ribs and dried-up
bottoms struggling in a laboured

steps behind blown empty bellies.

(qtd. In Menachery 117-118)

The poet further adds that the other mothers in the camp have ceased to care for their children as they knew that their children are sure to meet untimely death soon. They are aware with the fact that their sick infants would no more be able to continue their struggle for survival. But the refugee mother mentioned in the poem does not fall in this category. Though other mothers in the camp have stopped caring for their children but she has not yet withdrawn her motherly duties. The poet says that the mother holds a remnant of smiles while she is taking care of her little boy. Her actions are filled with lot of affection and pride when she combs the hair of her dying son. The poem, visualizing the picture of a young mother combing the rust-coloured hair of her son before his impending death creates a pathetic effect on the mind of the readers. Achebe writes in the lines 12-16 of the poem:

In her eyes the ghost of mother's

Pride as she combed the rust-coloured

hair left on his skull and then-

singing in her eyes-

began carefully to part it... (118)

In general conditions, the mothers of the world who comb their children's hair while preparing them for the school or before the breakfast. The aim of such an act of these women of the world has no particular significance. But the mother in the poem is combing the hair of her son who is leaving not for the school but leaving this world for the death. Thus, the 'Madonna and Child' and the 'Refugee Mother and Child' are examples of motherly love confronted with ruthlessness of their child's unfortunate death.

British colonialism wreaked havoc on African countries. It ruined the culture, national spirit and natural resources of these countries. Despite being liberated from British rule, these countries had to face many transitions in their

journey as independent nations. Civil wars, violence and anarchy started in many of these countries. The people were forced to live in the refugee camps.

Everyone wants independence and peaceful life. But when this freedom gives birth to the domination that results from violent mentality, unlimited power and boundless wealth it is of no use. This countless damage is caused due to the colonial rule in the African countries. Achebe very well pictures this disorder in the countries affected due to colonial rule in his writings. In his writings; he dreams for the society which is free from fear, violence and anarchy. He depicted the real Nigerian man and his social life through his works. He vividly portrayed the devastation caused to the African people, society and culture by colonialism. He says, "Nigeria has had a complicated colonial history. My work has examined that part of our story extensively." (web n.p.)

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