



COLONIALISM AND THE IGBOS: A READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's first novel 'Things Fall Apart' (1958) is set in the period between 1850 and 1900 which marked the colonial penetration by Europeans into the Igbo territories of Western Africa or notably into Nigeria. It was a crucial period in the history of Africa because at that time European colonial powers were involved in the 'scramble for Africa'. Achebe's earlier novels like 'Things Fall Apart', 'No Longer At Ease' and 'Arrow of God' depict the history of the fierce encounter between the two cultures in different ways. An attempt is made in this paper to examine how colonialism influenced the Igbos of Nigeria as reflected in the novels of Achebe.

Key words: Colonialism, Postcoloniality, Representation, Igbo

Part of my artistic and intellectual inheritance is derived from a cultural tradition in which it was possible for artists to create objects of art which were solid enough and yet make no attempt to claim, and sometimes even go to great lengths to deny, personal ownership of what they have created. ('The Writer and His Community', *Hopes and Impediments*, 48)

Chinua Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is set in the period between 1850 and 1900 which marked the colonial penetration by Europeans into the Igbo territories of Western Africa or notably into Nigeria. It was a crucial period in the history of Africa because at that time European colonial powers were involved in the 'scramble for Africa' and *Things Fall Apart* depicts the history of the fierce encounter between the two cultures. It is pertinent to note that at that time the European powers were busy dividing the African continent amongst themselves in Berlin with King Leopold II of Belgium celebrating Congo as his private possession and Chancellor Bismarck along with other European leaders drawing lines over a map of Africa in 1884. (Davidson, 50) However, before going to the novels, I would like to give a brief description of the Igbo community.

Nigeria is characterized by three major ethnic groups- Igbos in the south east, Hausas in the north and Yorubas in the west. Though A. E. Afigbo in *Igbo Language and Culture* says that the origin of the Igbos has been a subject of much speculation, it is assumed that the community stretched from the Niger Delta to the northern hill region of Onitsha. (Gunther, 43) The Igbo community was characterized by various socio-cultural features. G. D. Killam in *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* remarks that Igbo society was marked by pluralistic features and the people shared homogenous traits like speaking in a number of related dialects. One of the most distinct features of the Igbo society was the complete absence of absolute power. In marked contrast to the Hausa or the Yoruba, the Igbo people had no centralized body or source of power. The Igbo community was governed by a patrilineal system where the basic social unit was a hamlet consisting of homesteads. (Singh, 55) Each homestead was made up of a few huts belonging to a male individual, his wives and children. Every single lineage in an Igbo village lived under the moral authority of an elder known as 'okpara'. Each

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village existed as an autonomous political unit in the absence of central power structure. (In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, we see that each Igbo village like Umuofia, Mbaino, Mbanta, Abame etc. is an autonomous political unit) The villages were interlinked by means of matrimonial alliances, titles, beliefs in god and deities, oracles, religious men and shrines. Intra village marriage was prohibited and it, in turn, served as a crucial unifying factor amongst the different villages.

The system of titles had a significant role in integrating the villages as it denoted status, prestige, and regard while making demands for people for its attainment. Titles among the Igbos were not conferred by authority such as a king or chief, but by payment of initiation fees by those who had succeeded in earning wealth by their own effort. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, earned two titles by his own efforts in the very opening of the novel. In this society "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered." (TFA, 6) Men of titles were respected and honoured not only in their own village but in the other villages as well.

The Igbos believed in the existence of many deities, ghosts, and spirits. Three important classifications, however, emerged in terms of belief and faith: the worship of *Chukwu*, the supreme god, the worship of ancestors or public deities and the cult of personal god or chi. Moreover, there is masquerader known as *egwugwu* who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village and is very much respected. Chinua Achebe in 'The Igbo World and Its Art' expresses that in Igbo religion all the people must placate all the gods all the time. (HI, 61)

Moreover, the community had various festivals, method of cultivation, marriage system which is reflected in the novels of Achebe. In fact Achebe's trilogy can be taken as the mirror of the Igbo society since in all the three novels we find striking examples of such customs practiced in the society.

Taking a typical Igbo village as the fictional locale in TFA, Achebe tries to show various aspects of the Igbo community in the novel. TFA begins with a wrestling match in which Okonkwo has shown immense capability. Such game indicates the kind of celebration that was prevalent in a multi-dimensional society. At the same time, the wrestling match can be said to play a symbolic role to show the extreme sense of community life within the Igbo society. We see that the Igbo people have a strong sense of community life. (In *No Longer At Ease*, where the plot is rooted in a city like Lagos, the Igbo people make a union so that they could keep in touch within themselves.)

The novel depicts the Igbo society as agriculture based one. Yam is the chief crop that the Igbo people produce. Coco-yams, beans and cassava are also cultivated. There is no scarcity of land and a man's fortune depends solely upon his strength and hard work. He, who owns many barns, is a rich and respected man in the clan. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, becomes one of the powerful men in the clan only because he is able to produce large number of yams. So also is Nwakibie. Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility, plays a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. The people celebrate the New Yam festival which is meant for expressing gratitude towards Ani. That the society is fully dependent on agriculture is evident when we are told about the man who hangs himself in despair as all his crops have been destroyed. This agricultural society is found in *Arrow of God* too. The catastrophe in *Arrow of God* occurs because of the delay of the New Yam festival which is related with cultivation.

The occasions such as *umuada*¹ and *isa-ifi*² beautifully reflect the rich cultural traditions among the Igbos. The tradition of offering palm wine and cola-nut to the guest is a significant part of their culture. There are certain procedures which the people of Umuofia follow while conducting matrimonial relationships. It is arranged by the older one by fixing the amount of bride price. Before going to further proceedings, the two

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parties fix a bride price through mutual understanding. Sometimes it is done peacefully whereas at some other times the bride price is so high that it leads to quarrel between the two parties. We see in the novel how the marriage of Obierika's daughter, Akueke is arranged in a systematic order. Further in the trilogy we see that the Igbos live in well built huts. It implies that they are not like those people living in jungle, uncultured as depicted by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*.

The novelist shows in *Things Fall Apart* the coherent social order in the Igbo society. The *ndichies*³ gather at Umuofia for great decisions such as war. The deity *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, speak through his priestess the will of the Earth in communal and domestic matters. Above all, the clan itself rules all. The masqueraders are inevitable part of life in Umuofia. In "The Igbo World and Art" Chinua Achebe opines:

Of all art forms, the dance and masquerade would appear to have satisfied the Igbo artistic appetite most completely, If the masquerade were not limited to male sex alone, one might indeed call it the art form *par excellence* for it subsume not only the dance but all other forms- sculpture, music, painting, drama, costumery, even architecture...(HI, 65)

In several ways, Okonkwo, the protagonist of *TFA*, represents the Igbo society of that time. He is a man who has grown up in a community which places its faith, above all, in the individual quality of 'manliness'. Therefore people like Unoka, Okonkwo's father, has no significant place in his society because he is lazy and spiritless. But the meaning Okonkwo attaches to 'manliness', in a way, amounts to violence. The killing of Ikemefuna, thus, suggests an irony in the meaning attached to manliness in this society. This act of murder, otherwise justified as the collective desire of the community, serves as a turning point for Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, who finds his religion, tradition and custom repulsive.

Achebe's second novel *NLA* (1960) is set in the mid nineteen fifties, just before the independence of Nigeria. The novel captures the dramatic changes- social, political, cultural and economic - evident in Nigeria during that time. The novel narrates the story of a young British educated African in the senior civil service called Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo of *TFA*, who is caught and convicted for accepting bribes. Though the plot of the novel is rooted basically at Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, we can trace a few Igbo socio-cultural norms even in that limited space. As it is mentioned above, the sense of community life among the Igbos is still found at Lagos.

It is, however, a very different Igbo society which has witnessed certain unbelievable changes within it. Achebe describes the advent of white man into the Igbo society, his 'lunatic religion' and 'for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price in Umuofia' towards the end of *TFA*. But in *NLA*, even this society is no longer there. Here we find a very different society where greatness has changed its tune, where titles are no longer great; neither are barns or large number of wives and children. Time has changed different things in Umuofia. But customs like breaking of cola nut or drinking palm wine during any occasion are still there as we find in case of Obi's homecoming from England after a long time.

Set in a time frame between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease*, Achebe's third novel *Arrow of God* (1964) reveals the impact of colonialism in African society and intends to present a dynamic Igbo society in a critical manner. Based on the story of an Igbo village called Umuaro, the novel raises various important issues. Umuaro as a village shares a collective history of six different tribes or six different villages. Each village has its own deity but the common deity is called Ulu and the priest of Ulu is the Chief Priest of Umuaro. We find here various religious and cultural celebrations such as the Festival of the Pumpkin leaves and the New Yam Festival. The sound of *ogene* (a musical instrument) announces the coming of joy and glory to the people

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of Umuaro during such occasions. The novelist beautifully expresses the richness of one such traditional festival in the following words:

The market place was filling up steadily with men and woman from every quarter. Because it was specially their day, the woman wore their finest cloths and ornaments of ivory...Most of the men brought palm wine in pots carried on the head or gourds dangling by the side from a loop of rope...today they drank palm wine freely together because no man in his right mind would carry poison to a ceremony of purification... (AG, 66)

Here if we just go back to the description of Conrad about the people of Africa as mostly naked or black shapes who moved about like ants, and then make a comparison with the above one, we will be aware of the huge gap between the two. With the onset of colonialism, things began to change and questions regarding the value of Ulu and Ezeulu, the Chief Priest, began to arise.

But the novelist does not present only one side of the Igbo society in his trilogy. He depicts some of the flaws in the traditional Igbo society. The clan's practice of throwing away of twins, treatment of *osus* etc. are some of these flaws. In *TFA*, Okonkwo's conscious and consistent efforts to uphold Igbo values and tradition come to a tragic end when he accidentally kills Ezeudu's son. Obierika feels the pain of such rules when Okonkwo is banished from Umuofia for seven years for the incident. Obierika comments:

"Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?"
(*TFA*, 87)

The novelist presents Nwoye as a sensitive young man whose psychology turns against certain customs of his society. In comparison with *TFA*, however, *AG* provides a much more critical insight into the Igbo community. In *AG*, from the very beginning, there is a constant focus on complex relationships and rivalries, and the jealous concern for status influences almost every social contact in the novel. In *Umuchu*, there are quite different views- not only those that represent the conflict between generations, and between Christians and believers of tradition, but also the opposing views and statements of Ezeulu and Ezidemili concerning the founding of *Umuchu* and the status of their gods. Similarly, there are conflicts between Ezeulu and Nwaka concerning the farmland claimed by Okperi, between Akuehue and Ofoka concerning the motives for Ezeulu's action. But the novelist presents such conflicts as if these are very common to any society, as Nwaka relates such conflicts with individual's idea, saying "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own" (*AG*, 16).

Such critical presentations imply that Achebe depicts the Igbo past without any definite idealization. G. D. Killam argues that to reconstruct an African past objectively, Achebe had to rely on every anthropological and social dimensions of the Igbo community, whether positive or negative. (Killam, 29) Achebe himself writes:

We cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's past ours had its good as well as bad sides...I maintain serious African who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God's advocate, he must also do duty for the devil. ('The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', 125)

In a way, all the three novels attempt to subvert colonial construction of Africa by offering a society with various social and cultural practices. In fact, Achebe has created an African paradigm in the trilogy. He foregrounds the element of change in any society and the vindication of a society entangled with its own fallacies and faults. Lewis Nkosi urges:

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Here we are doing no more than recognise certain features in Achebe's approach to the past, his skill and precision in the documentation of that traditional African past...The two themes form a backdrop to the action of his two novels about traditional Ibo life, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Indeed, it is when Achebe explores the inner dynamics of the Ibo society as it comes increasingly under the external pressures of the twin movements of European colonialism and Christianisation that he involves us more directly in matters of historical considerations as well as of interpretations. (Nkosi, 33)

We see that Achebe creates an African paradigm in his trilogy by presenting various aspects of the Igbo society: religion, marriage, agriculture, customs, festivals etc. Construction of such an African paradigm is indeed crucial because it is in contrast to these paradigms that the representation of the whites can be assessed. To put it in other words, when the dominant colonial discourses projects the blacks as negation of the moral, aesthetic and cultural self of the white Europeans, Achebe almost subverts this tendency, offering some 'positive' images of different aspects of African lives - something that can be a background against which the representation of the whites can be assessed more fruitfully. At the same time, it can also be assumed that in order to present Igbo past of a certain period authentically, Achebe takes recourse to the European colonialism in Africa and its nature and ways, because colonialism played a vital role in bringing change into the society. It is relevant therefore to look briefly how and why the African natives were subjugated by the colonial power of Europe.

With the increase of production of goods, Europe witnessed the rise of nationalism and national movements led to the formation of several nation-states with a keen sense of rivalry and competition amongst them. The discoveries of new lands during the time of Renaissance made these nation states to establish empire overseas. Perpetrated by European state-based nationalism led mainly by Britain and France, followed by Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium in order to get huge market, colonialism gradually came into Africa and started affecting the natives by different ways.

However, a variety of explanations has been advanced to account for the explosive European competition for colonies that swept over Africa during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. One view is that from about the 1860s onwards, the rivalries between the great powers in Europe became so acute that they more or less inevitably spilled over into Africa. In this respect J.D. Fage offers an interesting opinion:

It is certainly possible, for example, to interpret Bismarck's sudden support for the aspirations of the German colonial party in 1884-5 in this sense - and it may also be noted that Britain required German support if France were to be outvoted on the Egyptian Debt commission established in 1880. (Fage, 327)

But such an explanation presents some difficulties as an overall interpretation for the colonial scramble in Africa. The most obvious of these is that the scramble did not involve all the major European powers and some states of little or no weight in the European struggle, such as Portugal, Belgium and Spain were in one way or other active participants in it.

Another argument is that Britain was the richest and most developed nation in Europe during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, and since she was then the only one possessing overseas empire, the possession of empire was essential if a European nation were to be rich and powerful. This kind of reasoning may well lie behind Italy's bid for empire in North-East Africa and Libya. The European colonial propagandist at that time argued that the acquisition of colonies was necessary if there were to be major growth in European foreign trade and industry. Yet it is said that European traders and investors showed very little interest in the

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greater part of Africa. North Africa, of course, had long been a part of a Mediterranean trading system involving the merchants of southern Europe, while South Africa had become a focus of interest following the discovery of its mineral wealth. (Fage, 328) In the matters of trade and investment, Europeans found it more profitable, and thought it safer to deal with more developed parts of the world. In fact, in 1913, about 80 percent of British and French and 90 percent of German foreign investment was in other European countries or, if outside Europe, was in territories which had long been settled by Europeans and where considerable development had already taken place- for example in North and South America and Australia. The question that arises then is: what were the reasons for colonial subjugation of Africa by the Europeans? Thus, a considerably longer perspective is needed to understand why by the 1870s the French were established in Senegal or why the British had formed colonies in Sierra Leone, on the Gold Coast, at Lagos? The European scramble for African colonies that became so virulent in the 1880s and 1890s must, in fact, be seen as the culminating stage in a process of interaction between Europeans and Africans which had been growing in momentum over a much longer period. In this respect, along with the issue of expansion of empire, exploitation of native resources, market or large profit, issue of Christianity and Western education etc. are also important. J. D. Fage comments:

During the eighteenth century, European civilization was achieving the full maturity that is exemplified in the scientific, industrial and French revolutions. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it possessed means to create material wealth and power unparalleled in the history of mankind...In any clash between European and African interests or beliefs, Europe now possessed both the material means-steam power, firepower, medical power-to impose its will upon Africa...(Fage, 333)

Thus along with other tribes, the Igbo community of Nigeria had to witness the expansion of colonial power in its own domain. It is found that the community witnessed penetration by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. (Singh, 54) They took slaves to America from the coast of Bonny. In spite of these incursions, the region was relatively free from the infiltration of European missionaries. But the political intervention by the British in the mid-nineteenth century virtually changed the atmosphere. With monopoly trade practices which eventually led to the establishment of the Oil River Protectorates in the Niger Delta region in 1885, political subjugation followed over Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1900. The colonial forces gradually overran the whole country.

Notes

¹ A family gathering of daughters, for which the female kinsfolk return to their village of origin.

² A ceremony: if a wife had been separated from her husband for some time and were then to be re-united with him this ceremony would be held to ascertain that she had not been unfaithful to him during the time of their separation.

³ The village elders.

Abbreviations:

TFA: Things Fall Apart, NLAE: No Longer At Ease, AG: Arrow of God, HI: Hopes and Impediments

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