



History Through Fiction: Chinua Achebe A Case In Point

Dr.Haseeb Ahmed

Director, Indian Institute of Islamic Studies and Research,
Okhla, New Delhi

Research Academy of Social Sciences (RASS)

Matiwala Building, 25/27, Piru Lane, Mumbai - 09, Maharashtra

Corresponding Author - Dr.Haseeb Ahmed

E-mail : therass2019@gmail.com

DOI- [10.5281/zenodo.11654626](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11654626)

Abstract:

Chinua Achebe, the father of African Literature in English, was one of the most prominent Nigerian writers who dedicated his novels to represent the psychological, historical and cultural conflicts that Africans experienced as a result of the European intrusion in to African life. History plays a prominent role in postcolonial novel. The five novels of Chinua Achebe cover the Nigerian history from the pre-colonial days to the late 80s. Each novel is set in a particular period of Nigerian history.

Key words: History, Postcolonial Novel, Culture, Art for art's sake

Objectives:

The aim of this paper is to study the inter-disciplinary nature of history and literature especially through an analysis of Chinua Achebe's five novels in the backdrop of Nigerian colonial and postcolonial history.

Colonization of Africa began in the fifteenth century itself. However, the impact of European colonialism in Africa was more intense than in Asia. The slave trade transported about one crore slaves to Europe and America. The colonized people of Africa were subjected to racial arrogance and cultural denigration. Their age-old tribal cultural patterns were looked down upon as inferior, backward, and meaningless. European philosophers equated blackness with stupidity and regarded blacks sub human. After reading James Cary's Mister Johnson a European novel about Africa, Achebe felt that it is a superficial picture of Africa. Someone from within must tell the real story. Chinua Achebe schematically projected African history in fictional terms through the various positions his fictional heroes take up to squarely confront the issues generated by colonialism and postcolonial conditions.

Being a committed writer, he rejects the idea of art for art's sake. He believes that art should operate in service of the nation and ultimately man. It should address the contemporary issues of a society that is deprived of its freedom and integrity. Achebe asserts that in the

African context a novelist is primarily a teacher. It is his duty to educate his people and to help them regain the dignity they have lost during the period of the colonial rule.

Chinua Achebe's novels, therefore, naturally, record the phenomenon of history in the African context. They deal with the Nigerian history right from the pre-colonial times to the post-independence era.

Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to explain that Africans did not hear about culture for the first time from Europeans. They have their own culture. The story is set in pre-colonial days and depicts the first African encounter with the Europeans. The hero, Okonkwo, is an embodiment of African tribal value system. He in continuous agitation; he desperately tries to check the intrusion of the colonizers into his land. He is dauntlessly engaged in giving ceaseless resistance to surreptitious infiltration of exploitative social system and masked cultural imperialism. He concentrates his endeavours to motivate his clansmen to rise up against the onslaught of the white men. He urges them to stand united in defending and protecting their culture and freedom. However, he fails to get timely support from his clansmen. He finds his own people mentally enslaved. The hero feels that there is no place for him to "live" among the "dead." He is not ready to

surrender himself to the alien forces. Nor is he ready to live disgracefully under the alien rule. His failure in establishing a balancing power to counter the intruding forces leaves suicide as the only course of action open for him.

The second novel entitled *Arrow of God* depicts time subsequent to the first novel. The colonialists have gained much ground. However, resistance has not subsided. The hero a chief priest of a clan, Ezeulu, wants to equip his camp with the same strength his enemy has. He sends his son to learn the skills the British has to an English school and attracts criticism from his rival's clan. "Only a fool will run after a leopard with bare hands" is the proverb that operates. He has to face the pressures of internal politics within the clan. When he is troubled by the colonial brutality, his clansmen, like Okonkwo's clansmen, do not side with him. Instead of using wisdom and appropriate strategy in dealing with his own people, he resorts to punishing them. It is argued that here, the hero's predicament is intensified owing to his indifference to proverbial reality "Drive the wild cat first, then warn the hen into bush" that greater enemy must be fought first; rifts at the domestic level can be taken care of later. The hero however ignores the fact, opens up two fronts simultaneously, and suffers the dire consequences. This shows the reality of most of the colonized nations where divide and rule policy wins and internal rifts destroyed natives.

The third novel is set in Urban Nigeria under British rule. The hero Obi, is representative of a modern Nigerian and manifests the painful process of adjustment to the values the modern life prescribes. On a scholarship he goes to London for studies and loses his tribal identity. He becomes hybrid African, half black and half white. Through his character, Achebe highlights the inescapable corrupting influences of the colonial rule. The new generation of educated Africans find it impossible to resist the temptations of the new world order. In the beginning, the hero resolves to cleanse Nigeria of corruption. However, ironically, he himself becomes a victim of the corruption. Consciously or unconsciously, he chooses to abide by the dictates of the system and shuns the communal values of life for the sake of ulterior considerations. His hometown

union pays for the lawyer to fight his case in court. The president of the union is not bothered that his clansman was caught taking bribe but the president's agony was he was caught for merely twenty pounds bribe.

The fourth novel *A Man of the People* focuses its critical attention on Nigeria after independence. The new rulers their own people are as bad as the whites. A character comments "they will not hesitate to sell their mothers for political gains. The hero represents the young men of post-independence Nigeria. His antagonists are his own people in the form of corrupt rulers of independent Nigeria. His demeanor betrays a determination to reform the deteriorating socio-moral conditions of his milieu. He is considered as a vacillating character. When he attempts to take an arm against the antagonistic forces, his resistance is mitigated by the corrupting ethos and he surrenders quite unlike a hero. His dwindling nature has to be viewed in the light of his cultural predicament. He aims at purifying his country of the corrupt practices in the field of politics since the political leaders of that time were pushing down the country into an abyss of chaos. Set against a shrewd and extremely opportunistic political leader, the hero, violates the very code of conduct he himself frames. He adopts all those unfair means in his election campaign for which he has been condemning the other politicians so far. Thus, he succumbs to the disorder and corruption prevailing in the realm of politics. The predicament of the hero lies in his failure to put his idealism into practice. Being unable to realize that whatever he does is wrong he becomes the least heroic of all the Achebe heroes. This is also an analysis of Achebe's art as a political satirist.

The fifth novel is *Anthills of the Savannah* where the hero is in Revolt. He now understands that mere political freedom of his nation is not an end in itself. The process of decolonization is yet to be completed. The intrigues of colonialism persist in some or the other form. The present situation in Africa needs a man absolutely clearheaded and devoted to cleanse the land. Therefore, the hero is left with no option but to revolt. He rises up from the un-heroic disposition he manifests in the preceding novels. He regains the heroic stance and

gallantry of Okonkwo of Things Fall Apart and the intuition of Ezeulu of Arrow of God. Now he is neither like Odili, who is lost in the maze of oscillation and indecisiveness, nor like Obi, who simply surrenders to the corrupting influences and subjugating pressures. Now he is a pioneer supercharged with abundant courage and worldly wisdom. Living in a troubled post-independent African country, he is highly sensitive to the life thwarting forces. He launches a bold anti-dictatorial campaign against the tyrannical power- centre of a diabolic military ruler. The chapter focuses on how the hero is ready to embrace martyrdom for the cause of peace and order. One is, Chris, Minister of Information in the Consequences need not be elaborated. Both are victimized and becomes martyrs.

The story ends with a story within a story told by an old experienced Abozonian to his fellow villagers and comrades.

Once upon a time the leopard who had been trying for a long time to catch the tortoise finally chanced upon him on a solitary road. Aha, he said: at long last! Prepare to die. And the tortoise said: can I ask one favour before you kill me? The leopard saw no harm in that and agreed. Give me a few moments to prepare my mind, the tortoise said again the leopard saw no harm in that and granted it. But instead of standing still as the leopard had expected the tortoise went into strange action on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand furiously in all directions. Why are you doing that? Asked the puzzled leopard. The tortoise replied: Because even after I am dead I would want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here (128).

The old man concludes his speech with the following words which stand as a metaphor for the hero's struggle:

'My people, that is all we are doing now. Struggling. Perhaps to no purpose except that those who come after us will be able to say: True, *our fathers were defeated but they tried*' (128). (*Anthills of the Savanna*)

In its final analysis, an Achebe-novel tells the story / history of every third world county across the globe. It stands as a metaphor for a war against oppression, injustice and exploitation with all its possible universal implications.

Works Consulted:

- Achebe, Chinua, A Man of the People. 1981 ed.
London: Heinemann Books, 1966.
- - -. Anthills of the Savannah. 1988 ed.

- London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1987.
- - -. Arrow of God. 1974 ed. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- - -. Hopes and Impediments. Great Britain: Heinemann, 1988.
- - -. Morning Yet on Creation Day (Essays). London: Heinemann, 1975.
- - -. No Longer at Ease. 1981 ed. London: Heinemann, 1960.
- - -. Things Fall Apart. 1966 ed. London: Heinemann, 1958.
- - -. Trouble With Nigeria. London: Heinemann, 1987.