

Chinua Achebe's Works : Search For Identity

Dr. Rakesh Kumar Singh*

The African people, for quite a long time, were customarily written off as hopelessly backward. They were often described as savage. For the British, an African had “no cultural traditions of his own, no religious, economic or political background worthy of serious attention and certainly no history of glory in the creative arts”. (Roscoe.1) This arrogant big brother attitude led the British to think of Europe to be spiritually the giving and Africa the receiving partner. On the basis of this teacher pupil relationship Europe was thought to know better than Africa herself what is good for Africa. After the appearance of Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' in the 'London Times' on 4 February 1899 it became a popular slogan, and an integral part of the colonial policy. Lord Lugard who made important amendments in the policies of 'Indirect rule' characterises Africans as one of the 'child races of the world' and a race which illustrates every stage in the evolution of human society'. (Steen. 13)

Such a prejudiced view about the negro was created by generations of detractors and it is astonishing to note that such convictions have been lent support not by the unenlightened but by men of distinction like Thomas Jefferson, Kipling and Alfert Schweitzer.

The European view which saw Africa as a dark continent, “a symbol of the irrational, nourishing undifferentiated and child-like peoples governed by fear and superstition rather than reason”. (Sinha 81) continued to be taken as authentic until the appearance of the African pioneers like Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who

challenged this attitude of the Europeans with their writings. This was in fact a challenging task that could be taken up by none else other than an indigenous writer for he is after all-as Kzekiel Mphahlele says 'the sensitive point in a community'. (Achebe, The Novelist as Teacher, 4)

The pioneers who took the challenge were bent upon the task of demolishing the corpus of British ideology contained in their paternalistic notion of the 'white man's burden'. Chinua Achebe, the noted Nigerian writer was perplexed by the presentation of African life by English writers before him and was evidently led to come up with his own. Being particularly suitable for this important assignment he presents in his writing an insider's view with an authentic picture of the richly variegated social life of the Ibo community. For this he believes in recreating the past in order to show that “their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and above all they had dignity”. (Achebe, The Role of a Writer 8)

It is this effort of Achebe which crystallizes in the form of his first novel *Things Fall Apart*. which Achebe considers 'an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son'. (Achebe, Named for Victorian Queen... 70) As the title itself suggests the novel is concerned with the dislocation of the African Society caused by the impact of another way of life. Abiola Irele states:

“Achebe's novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the incursion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African Society and the disarray in the African consciousness that has followed”. (Irele 177)

Achebe presents the Ibo society as a living structure, an organism animated with the life and movements of its members. Okonkwo, the principal character, in the novel, in an embodiment of the values and lines of conduct proposed by the society. Achebe devotes great skill in evoking his society as it used to be and this is one of the reasons for the novel's enduring appeal. There is no description of noble savagery as was the usual Opinion about a novel about Africa. On the other hand, the stereo type image is broken by Achebe and Umuofia Society is shown as proud, dignified and stable, governed by a complicated system

of customs and traditions. It has its own legal, educational, religious and heirarchical systems. One can feel the dignity of the scenes on the very rhythms of life in the pounding of the drums whose rhythm may be easily likened to the heartbeat of the people of Umuofia. Adrian A. Roscoe rightly comments : "Proudly African... Achebe is obviously concerned to portray with all the power at his command the beauty and rhythm of African life", (Roscoe op.cit 123).

But Achebe is a novelist who does not deceive his reader by citing only the good points and pretending that the bad never existed. On the contrary he disapproves of this and the glossing over inconvenient facts as he himself states:

"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 its bad sides". (Achebe. *The Role of the Writer* op. cit 9)

Achebe's intelligent objectivity establishes the fact that although he is conscious 'of the strength and stability of traditional Umuofia Society he is not blind to its brutality. While recording the incidents of savagery he also leaves hints as comments on the native of the society he describes. For example when Okonkwo is expelled from Umuofia Obierika destroys his property but as a man who thought about things he meditates upon his friend's calamity and the situations in Umuofia :

"Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed so inadvertently... He remembered his wife's twin children whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just the offender". (Achebe. *Things Fall Part 87*)

This attitude of Achebe has been emphasized by Margaret Lawrence, a Canadian novelist and critic. She finds the African writers interpreting their world. making it" neither idyllic as the views of some nationalists would have had it, nor barbaric. as the missionaries and European administrators wished and needed to believe". (Achebe, *Colonialist Criticism* 55).

Achebe looks back at the Ibo Society specially at the period when the white man broke into it as missionary, trader and administrator. It is this period that throws into relief the relevance of the two lines from the poem, 'The Second Coming' by W.B.Yeats :

"Things Fall Apart. the centre cannot hold.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

Achebe chooses the title of his first novel from here and the appropriateness of it is shown in Obierika's accusation of the white man. "Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one, he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart". (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 124-125)

As the story of Okonkwo was intended to be a tetralogy this process of disintegration is viewed on a gradually widening scale in the other novels of Achebe. The disintegration of the old way of life is first viewed in the defection of Okonkwo's son, Nwoye. The inability of the tribe to face the white man leads Okonkwo to kill himself. And as Okonkwo represented this society his death symbolises the death of the old order.

In his next novel *No Longer at Ease-Achebe* turns to a more modern setting where the hero is Obi, the son of Nwoye alias Issac and grandson of Okonkwo. But Obi is shown to be weak in mind and character. In the words of Prema Nanda Kumar, "He hasn't the massive vigour of Okonkwo, nor the idealism of his father Nwoye; he is but a leaf in the wind, swayed easily by circumstances, succumbing to them". (Kumar 293)

Obi, after his European education has lost one set of values but not acquired a new one to replace it. Corruption, which is a by-product of colonialism has made way into the Ibo Society. Obi. unable to make both ends meet, having acquired lavish interests, falls a victim to the new structure and is ruined. He is caught red-handed taking bribes -a mere twenty pounds -for which he has to face a court of law and is jailed. Even in the case of Clara, his girl-friend, he has neither a strong Christian base nor a native one to stand by. He, in fact. is a shattered personality and a total failure in life.

In *No Longer at Ease* Achebe tries to set right the wrong opinion of the Europeans and their stereotype image of the African. This he does by exposing the views of Mr. Green the immediate boss of Obi. He is a man who despises the educated African and who claims to understand the circumstances in which Obi has acted in such an undignified way. He offers the following account to the British Council man for the failure of men like Obi:

“... the fact that over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him western education. But what use is it to him?” (Achebe. *No longer at Ease* 3).

The reasons he gives shows his total inability to comprehend the plight of Obi and it also reveals the outdated paternalist attitude of the whites in the colonial period to which Achebe reacts sharply.

In *Arrow of God*, which is considered to be one of the finest novels of the century, Achebe once again returns, to an earlier setting than *No Longer at Ease* -a period when colonialism had become entrenched in Nigeria. As in the first novel Achebe here also presents, at a particular and important point of transition. characters who are true representatives of a society as well as a firsthand account of the culture of Africa. According to G.D. Killam, ‘the Society of Umuaro is a society with a tightly organised system of beliefs -social, political and religious - understood by all members of the society and by which they conduct their lives. ‘(Killam 83)

In this novel Achebe juxtaposes the native world with the world of the alien and in this collision Achebe tries to show how the qualities of the native society are affronted by the representatives of the colonial power and by the display of the contradictoriness and ambiguousness of the ways in which that power operates.

The central character of *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu is a powerful and forceful character with nobility and in many ways he resembles Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* but he experiences none of the inner doubts and uncertainties of the latter. As the Chief Priest of Umuaro a

constituent of six villages -Ezeulu has power and dignity. He believes in the value of change and he has come to good terms with the white man by sending his son. Oduche to the mission school but as Achebe says, where his dignity is involved he cannot come to terms with anybody. Therefore when his dignity is abused by the white man he reacts sharply: ‘Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody’s Chief except Ulu’.(Achebe, *Arrow of God* 175) This refusal of Ezeulu of the offer to become the warrant Chief makes Clarke, the D.O. in charge so furious that he insults Ezeulu with the words : ‘‘A witch-doctor making a fool of the British Administration in public’’. (175)

This sort of contempt and ridicule from the white man led to the undermining of the self-confidence of the Africans and Achebe as a writer thought it his duty to restore to his people a good opinion of themselves.

The forces of colonialism as in *Things Fall Apart* are viewed as disruptive. In this novel Achebe together with broadening and deepening his treatment of Ibo communal life also expands his rendering of the influence of Europe. The collision of the two cultures results in the fragmentation of the traditional society, which in turn leads to the psychological disarray in the consciousness of the African. M.M. Mahood commenting on the Ibo society of Umuaro writes:

‘‘It is like all Ibo communities. an acephalic Society in which custom and tradition -rules rather than rulers -perform the function elsewhere vested in over lords’’. (Mahood 40)

Into this self-sustaining world of Umuaro the colonial force of the white power makes its way. The white man’s administrative presence undermines the confidence of the natives in his tradition and we witness a drama of a gradual transference of power from the natives to the colonial masters. According to the analysis of G.O. Killam, Achebe in this novel tries to point out: ‘‘the lack of apprehension among Europeans of Ibo customs and to counterpoint with the assurance, not to say arrogance, with which they involve themselves and control Ibo life’’. (Killam, op.cit. 71)

Winterbottom, the district officer who claims to know his people more than the starry-eyed fellows at head-quarters still lacks authentic knowledge of the African people or their customs. Even M.M. Mahood reflects that it is "because of his lack of the real knowledge that comes through imaginative insight he misinterprets Ezeulu's testimony against his own people as an acknowledgement of British might". (Mahood, op. cit 51) It is through such instances that Achebe wants to correct the views of outsiders as also to correct the stereo type image of the African drawn in the novels by expatriate novelists.

Another point that Achebe wants to drive home to his readers through this novel is the inadequacy or the superficiality of the policy of indirect rule with which the British set out to establish their authority. Captain Winterbottom is simply disgusted with the policy makers who expect the officers on the field to be at the mercy of every change of policy emanating from Enugu and Lagos. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the Indirect rule in Nigeria thus:

"Take this question of paramount Chiefs. When Sir Hugh Maedermot first arrived as Governor he sent his secretary for Native affairs "The fellow came over here and spent a long time discovering the absurdities of the system which I had painted out all along ... it was clear that he argued with us that it had been an unqualified disaster". (Achebe. *Arrow God* 108-9)

Works Cited

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