

Review

REVISITING AND RETELLING THE HISTORY: ACHEBE'S NOVELS AND THE STORY OF NIGERIA

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It was part of the colonial project to highlight an image of the colonized as a mass without proper cultural roots and history. This was a means to justify Euro-centrism. It is after long years of anti-colonial struggle, political independence 'emerged'. As a result post-colonial novels of the 1950's were essentially case studies of these struggles, in other words they were about history. Colonizer's version of history was a mere distorted version of reality suppressing the facts related to orient culture and life. But these novels are experiments in history challenging the 'so called' authentic version. This narration of native history utilizes the resources in native forms of history-recording such as the folk songs, folk tales, stories etc. Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* set in early colonial days is actually a work in historical revisionism concentrating the spread of Christianity, the decline of native religions, and also the colonial measures of tactful and "effective" governance.

Keywords: History, Revisionist Reading, African Trilogy, Nigeria, Chinua Achebe, Post Colonialism

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INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe like many other Nigerians of his generation have witnessed his land being victimised under the colonial regime. Even though Nigeria managed to attain political independence in 1960, the new generation of Achebe, who were trained by the British authorities to believe that the duty of the colonialists were to educate the uncivilized mass how to be cultured. The propagated an image of Nigeria having no inherent history, value system or tradition of their own. Nigeria had no documented means of history to oppose this claim as they had no custom of writing down history. The folk tradition of the as it promises to be, is a rich reservoir of the past. The history of Nigeria is passed from one generation to the other through these songs, tales etc. Achebe understands this role of oral tradition and uses folk elements in his novels such as proverbs, folk songs, folk tales etc. to give his fact based or historical fiction, a

true flair of indigenous mode of story telling and narrating history.

DISCUSSION

In Nigeria the central problem with the British rule was related to language. Nigeria was living a social life of fragmented tribes, and ethnic group. Despite being fragmented throughout the land, no real issues stirred up until the colonial invasion. These facts are elaborately discussed in Nigeria's foremost writer in English Chinua Achebe in his novels. Historically the British found it difficult to get to the people to become Paramount chiefs and other puppets in the hands of the regime even though the Christianity was winning the people. The rule with interpreters and Kotmas proved less efficient

because these people were lowly placed in the tribes so most of the people showed no respects to their orders. So bringing some respectable native figures to the administration was the need of the hour especially in South-Eastern territory realizing this General Lugard initiated the Indirect Rule system. Britain governed Nigeria via this system in which native leaders continued to rule their traditional lands so long as they collected taxes and performed other duties ensuring British prosperity. Uncooperative or ineffective leaders were easily replaced by others who were more compliant or competent, and usually more than willing to enjoy the perks of government. Britain was thus saved the huge economic and political cost of running and militarily securing a day-to-day government.

Indirect rule operated relatively smoothly in the north, where the British worked with the Fulani aristocracy, who had long governed the Sokoto caliphate and who were able to administer traditional Islamic law alongside British civil law. In the south, however, traditions were less accommodating. In Yoruba land indirect rule disrupted historical checks and balances, increasing the power of some chiefs at the expense of others. Moreover, although the Yoruba kings had long been powerful, few had collected taxes, and citizens resisted their right to do so under British mandate. In the southeast, particularly in Igbo land, many of the societies had never had chiefs or for that matter organized states. Consequently, the chiefs appointed by Britain received little or no respect. In Nigeria's culturally fragmented middle belt, small groups were forcefully incorporated into larger political units and often ruled by "foreign" Fulani, who brought with them alien institutions such as Islamic law.

The British carried out a few reforms, including the gradual elimination of domestic slavery, which had been a central feature of the Sokoto caliphate. They also provided Western education for some of Nigeria's elite; however, in the main Britain limited schooling as much as feasible.

Britain redirected almost all of Nigeria's trade away from Africa and toward itself, a move that undermined the northern region's large, centuries-old trade across the Sahara. Britain further changed the economy by introducing new crops and expanding old ones, such as oil palm, cotton, groundnuts, and cacao, almost all of which were sold for export. Iron and tin were also mined, and railroads were built to transport products. Because Britain required Nigerians to pay taxes in cash rather than goods, most Nigerians had little choice but to grow cash-yielding export crops or to migrate seasonally to areas where paying jobs could be found. The problems of colonial governance in this period are striking.

Contemplate the differences in the cultural values of the European and the colonized. Consider the differences in power between the two groups.. Indirect rule was the plan to use existing tribal structures and traditions as

conduits for establishing rules and regulations while English officials worked behind the scenes and could exercise a veto power. This was not the only approach to colonial rule in Africa. The French employed direct rule, the idea that, because of these differences, European officials should call the shots for themselves by establishing and administering the rules and regulations for their African colonial subjects.

This difference between French and British policies is exemplified through the conversations between Captain Winterbottom and his deputy Toni Clarke. Winterbottom fancies the French model where they carry out what they wish without many considerations. But creating goodwill as well as ensuring safety was the serious concerns of the British administrators. So they employed Indirect rule to ensure more cooperation from the natives. But not all colonials were in favour of it. This caused a flaw in the officiating function. When people like Ezeulu turned their back towards the offer made by the Colonial masters they were forced to bring willing men from North to be appointed as the paramount or warrant chiefs. Anyway the system proved a big flop, but before this realisation struck the colonial officials the adverse impacts it created on the people was deeply ruining the traditional society and keep on doing the same even now in the independent Nigeria.

There are few greater ironies than the term "pacification" being used for what occurred in the Igbo hinterland between 1900 and 1920. The first action was against the Aros. The Aros didn't even realized that they were conquered until a court was set up in their land and the White men started to try the natives there. The unknown court of jurisdiction hanged all the priests including the chief priests, the Oracle and even burned the sacred "Long Juju". In the fictionalized story the Abame's sacred Iguanas are wiped out. Villagers who resisted were destroyed but few resisted. Most greeted the strangers because it was not customary to shoot strangers before discovering their intention. The 'tale of the Mother Kite and the duckling and the chick' is their basis for such reasoning as Uchendu cites this as the mistake of the people of Abame.

But the fictionalised people of Umuofia didn't know about the tragedy of the Aros. They were unaware of this expedition. But they know there was something called 'the white man'. For them, white man has "no toes", the reference here may well be to their shoes. They have only heard such mysterious stories like this, but had no direct contact before 1900. This was the case with most of the villages in the South of Nigeria. Only when Okonkwo was in exile, does the word About the White man reaches him. It is the story of the massacre in Abame told by Obierika. When the White man was first seen in the Igbo hinterland of the country, he was an alien vision. He was believed to be a strange species and they captured him. This historic incident is portrayed in

the novels through the accounts of various characters.

It is a real-life tragedy at the community of Ahiara serves as the historical model for the massacre of the village of Abame in Chapter 15 of *Things Fall Apart*. On November 16, 1905, a white man rode his bicycle into Ahiara and was killed by the natives. A month later, an expedition of British forces searched the villages in the area and killed many natives in reprisal.

The Ahiara incident led to the Bende-Onitsha Hinterland Expedition, a force created to eliminate Igbo opposition. The British destroyed the powerful Awka Oracle and killed all opposing Igbo groups. In 1912, the British instituted the Collective Punishment Ordinance, which stipulated punishment against an entire village or community for crimes committed by one or more persons against the white colonialists.

After giving a true picture of what has happened in his home land during the pre-colonial and colonial period of Nigeria's history, he goes on to show how things were in the 1950's when Nigeria was on the threshold of independence. The story of Okonkwo's grandson Obi in the third novel of the African Trilogy, *No Longer at Ease*, is very much a similar tragedy. But unlike Okonkwo who stood firm by the traditional values, Obi was the victim of the Europeanised values. However, this tragic story is not aimed at the purgation of feelings, but instead tells what was working behind such a tragedy and is an urge to the people to understand these faults and correct themselves (Pandurang, 1997).

The British were sure that they would have to leave Nigeria by the sixties, so they were giving more participation to the Nigerians in the administration, so as to train them how to rule in the "British model". Rev. Sam Okoli, the minister in the novel, and even Obi and others working in various government departments were the trainees. But the increasingly high popularity of government jobs encouraged many to sail to Britain and get educated there and win government post. Getting scholarships and all became key to this success, thus moral and financial corruption reached its zenith. Even the colonial officials were no exceptions. Nigeria was living a lifestyle strange to them, pub, dance, balls, cars, luxurious apartments. The natives could take even the white girls to their beds as Obi and his friend had tried in the novel. The purity of man-woman relationship which we see in the first two novels disappeared and relationships were getting sex-oriented. Young men took one girl for a day and another for the next as the young boys and girls who were introduced to the European way of living thought free sex was the sign of western liberation and more girls flew into the dancing clubs and all.

The city of Lagos, which the British made the capital became the centre. People started to move away from their villages and started to settle there for money and opportunities. The mass industrialisation caused the loss of the natural forests and other characteristic features replacing them with roads and buildings. The chaotic life is the very story of this period and Nigeria was moving towards independence. The colonial officers were preparing for this change, as we can clearly see in *No Longer at Ease*. But Nigeria is clearly not at ease even after 1960. Thus Achebe revisits the history of his country and gives a thorough going analysis of what actually happened through his fictional venture. The three novels *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 2001), *Arrow of God* (Achebe, 2001) and *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2001) picture the history of Nigeria from the pre colonial to the independent states going through the traumatic colonial experience.

CONCLUSION

Thus setting the three novels of his *African Trilogy* in three different but crucial junctures of the history of the nation, Achebe wants to correct whatever untrue and cooked up stories that the colonizers used to represent the land. The challenge to these 'authorial' flawed representations is clearly one of the finest examples of 'historical revisionism' being cleverly employed as a tool in fiction. Achebe begins the trilogy in the pre colonial era exploring various aspects of the tribal life. He later on invents the faults with the traditional system that enabled the foreigners to spread their command throughout the newly colonized region. Thirdly Achebe evaluates the impact of colonisation on the socio cultural fabric of his native land. Thus Achebe stands neither with the romantic version of indigenous culture nor with the empire's version of history which is distorted. Achebe's efforts in historical fiction can thus be regarded a success as it truthfully explores the history of a land which is on the verge of total disintegration.

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