

CULTURAL AND PSYCHIC ANNIHILATION OF BLACKS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S TRILOGY: *THINGS FALL APART, NO LONGER AT EASE AND ARROW OF GOD: A POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY ANALYSIS*

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Abstract

The world, already nearly transmogrified by the Covid-19 pandemic, was deeply shocked on 25 May 2020 by the US police brutality shamelessly expressed in the killing of a “mockingbird” (George Floyd) by kneeling on his neck till the last drop of life left him. It is important to understand the background of this horrible scenario in order to avoid seeing it as an isolated case. Postcolonial literature gives us enough windows and doors to see and understand the background of this ignoble barbarity. Chinua Achebe, known today as the father of African postcolonial literature, uses his literary works, especially his trilogy, to portray a systemic cultural and psychic annihilation of blacks. The narrative of destruction of the black “other”, which Achebe delivers to the world in his *Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* has continued today, as seen in the killing of George Floyd and many other harmless black people in the world. In the literary analysis of the novels to explore our theme, we will rest on the foundation of the postcolonial literary criticism of Edward Said in his famous book, *Culture and Imperialism*.

Key Words: postcolonial, colonialism, imperialism, Igbo society, Cultural conflict

Introduction

According to Daniel J. Elam (2019), “Postcolonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century. Postcolonial theory takes many different shapes and interventions, but all share a fundamental claim: that the world we inhabit is impossible to understand except in relationship to the history of imperialism and colonial rule.” In other words, postcolonial theory lightens up our way in the thick forest of human actions, events and history. This explains why a reading of postcolonial literary texts in the light of postcolonial literary theory will often help us to understand the background of myriads of events in our world today. Chinua Achebe was one of the first Africans who felt that Africans needed to tell their own stories to counter the hypocrisies, prejudices, bared-faced and surreptitious subjugation and dehumanization of black Africans. Achebe was irritated by the fact that even European writers (like Joseph Conrad) who pretended to be writing against the heart-rending systematic crushing of black Africans only succeeded in making the African characters of his *Heart of Darkness* voiceless (Anieke, 2014). Africans (like George Floyd who was told to “stop yelling” while the officer knelt on his neck) had no right to express themselves since they were savages or brutes who did no more than “whimper” (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*). Chinua Achebe uses his novel to paint inerasable pictures of humiliation of black characters, even highly respected elders, traditional priests and titled men. What the researchers intend to do in this paper is to expose the instances of humiliation and subjugation of black Africans in these novels to reveal how they provide the background for understanding the endless dehumanizing treatment of the black ‘other’ in the world. Furthermore, postcolonial literature does not imply that colonialism and imperialism have been sent to the grave of reprehensible and forgotten human events and actions. It is rather an exploration of how the colonial and imperialistic experience has continued to define the relationship of races in politics and socio-economic life, leading to a gradual (somewhat successful) annihilation of the cultural and psychic life of blacks in the world. The movement “Black Life Matters” is only a gasping for breath in the impish grip of the Grendels (in “Beowulf”) of this world who are working assiduously to snuff out any remaining ember of life in the psyche and culture of the traumatized black people.

Statement of the Problem

Many writers and literary critics have written extensively on the novels of Chinua Achebe. Critical works based on the novels are legion. But no critical work has tried to show how Achebe’s trilogy provides a literary background for understanding the continuous dehumanizing treatment of the black “other” (as George Floyd’s death has revealed) in the world today. It is this epistemic gap that this research intends to fill.

Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the trilogy of Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*). We will try to show how the humiliation of black Africans in these novels provides the background for the explanation of the puzzling treatment of blacks in the world today. However, the researchers will also be wading in the streams of other African literary works like Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* to fish out cases of dehumanization of black Africans in order to buttress our argument.

Review of Relevant Literature

A lot has been written on conflicts in one or two or all of Achebe's trilogy. Olorunto (1986) discusses the notion of conflicts in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. These conflicts are within the traditional society and Olorunto tries to see the nature and instances of these conflicts ("domestic, personal, community and intercultural conflicts") and how they are resolved in the Igbo society. Mordaunt (1989) focuses on the personal conflict of the central character Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* and concludes that a personal conflict resulting in a fight against one's society can only end in insanity. Furthermore, Nworah and Eziafa (2016) beam their research light on social conflicts in *Arrow of God*. While pointing out that the conflicts are connected with colonialism, they conclude that there is a relationship between flexibility and good governance. Adegbite (2016) write on "Masculinity and Cultural Conflict in *Things Fall Apart*". Using the formalist approach for the analysis of the novel, he comes to the conclusion that African view of masculinity and "cultural trends" differ from the European perspective and this is the source of clashes in the novel (religious, cultural, ideological and social).

Ghandi Neena (2012) takes a different perspective. The paper describes the schism in the Igbo traditional society, which colonialism exacerbates and which reaches a high point in the postcolonial novels *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, where "cultural identity becomes problematic since the margins between the centre and the periphery become indistinct and social institutions collapse". In the context of marriage and clashes of cultures we are presented with a scenario "where cultural hybrids, equally skeptical about African and western values, struggle for identity".

Chris Barker (2000) discusses at length these hybrids which result from intercourse of cultures. Barker puts across the following theory of different kinds of cultural juxtaposing:

- Two distinct cultural traditions are kept separate in time and/or space. We would define ourselves as Asian or British, Mexican or American. This is the domain of nationalism and ethnic absolutism.
- Two separate cultural traditions are juxtaposed in time and space. We would define ourselves as Asian and British, Mexican and American, moving between them as situationally appropriate.
- Cultures are translocal and involve global flows. Hybridization occurs out of recognition of difference and produces something new. We are 'British Asian' or 'Mexican American'.
- Cultural traditions develop in separate locales but develop identifications based on perceived similarity and commonality of tradition and circumstance. For example, an essentialist version of pan-global black or Hispanic nationalism.
- One cultural tradition absorbs or obliterates the order and creates effective similarity. This could involve assimilation (my parents are Asian but I am British) or cultural domination and imperialism (one tradition is wiped out).
- New forms of identity are forged out of shared concerns along the axis of class, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. This is an anti-essentialist position in which similarity is forged strategically. For example, a strategic alliance in which black and Asian people share a common anti-racist strategy. Equally, strategic identifications and alliances occur on other axes, such as gender, so that a shared feminism might be more significant than ethnic difference.

Although all these writers discussed conflicts in the these novels, none of the writers have tried to understand the impish challenges of the African blacks from prism of the background of suppression of blacks in the trilogy of Chinua Achebe. This is an epistemic gap which the researchers intent to fill. This gap will be filled against the backdrop of the insight of Edward Said (2001).

"In his work *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said explains that the orientalist's interest in the orient is based on the desire to dominate. The way the orient is represented is indicative of the thirst for domination, the construction of the oriental world in a particular way under the pretext of knowing it. Orientalism is purely a matter of "discourses of power" designed to show the superiority of the West over its construct, the so-called "orient". The whole aim of oriental study (from the European perspective) is to show the "otherness" of the construct "other" as a way of stressing the difference or the superiority of the "we". This construct is of course based on the assumption of homogeneity that is non-existent." (Anieke, 2005). Said analyses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and comes to this conclusion:

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end...Since Conrad dates (sic) imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*), he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be.

The insight of Edward Said gives us a robust foundation for discussing the background of unmitigated dehumanizing of African blacks revealed by the trilogy of Chinua Achebe. "Like Said, the pioneer African writers believe that Conrad was not completely free from colonial mentality. They are irritated by the voicelessness of Africans especially in the novel *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe, for example, believes that Conrad deliberately sets Africa up as "the other world" in order to examine Europe. According to him, the picture of Africa presented by Conrad is that of "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality." (Anieke, 2014).

Analysis

We will take the novels one after the other to see how the foundation of the continuous subjugation and destruction of the Africans blacks has been properly laid and made seemingly irreversibly secure.

I. Things Fall Apart

The narrator of *Things Fall Apart* presents a picture of a society that is not in need of salvation as Rudyard Kipling and many Europeans believed (and still believe) with their perverse idea of the "white man's burden", which is to bring the light of civilization to benighted Africans. In this case, the European tutelage, as Edward Said, "was a given". In *Things Fall Apart*, we have a picture of a society with its robust economic life, which depends on agriculture (especially on the cultivation of yam); its strong socio-cultural life that does need the purgatorial fingers of imperial pundits; its multicolored entertainments (such as the wrestle at the beginning of the novel, moonlight dances, festival and marriages (with unforgettable imagery of mountainous fufu); its wide-ranging laws (with elders and the Egwugwu as judges); its efficacious medical treatment with local herbs; its vibrant, democratic politics based on elders and village assemblies; and above all its all-embracing religion. It is in this society with its incredible social dynamics that the European imperialists arrive. The upheaval as well as total annihilation heralded by Europeans is summarized thus:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. 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. (TFA,124)

This is the total destruction: cultural, social, psychic. It represents such socio-cultural transmogrification that is unprecedented in the history of the people. It is a complete extermination of all shrubs of independence and identity of the people. In *Heart of Darkness* the amoral character Kurtz echoes this total crushing of the black people with his impish cry "exterminate the brutes"! *Things Fall Apart* portrays the indescribable psychic pains of the people thus:

All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our own eyes.' '... No clan can boast of greater numbers or greater valour. But are we all here? ... Are all sons of Umuofia with us here? ... They are not. ... They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland.... (pp. 182-3)

The desecration of Umuofia, the humiliation of the elders by shaving their hands while in prison, the payment of cowries for their release, all this has broken the backbone of the proud Umuofians. The imagery of elders shaved in prison reveals the festering dehumanization of authority figures in the Igbo society (elders and titled from which the society may never recover). Ferdinand Oyono paints a similar picture in *The Old Man and the Medal* with the arrest of Meka, who is arrested and beaten by those who pretend to honour him with a medal for the services he has rendered to the colonialists. It is the horrifying narrative of the broken black African race, represented by Achebe's Igbo society. The scares of the brokenness remain today and can us help to understand events like the death of George Floyd.

When they return from prison, Umuofia assembles in the village square to deliberate on the seemingly impenetrable cloud of confusing happenings whirling menacingly over their land. Okonkwo is among his people

in this assembly and is poised to champion the battle to restore the “dignity of man” (as the motto of the University of Nigeria Nsukka says) trampled upon by the white imperialists. Little does he know that while in exile in Mbanta, Umuofia has changed irreversibly. It has, in fact, become a lame duck. When the messengers of the colonialists arrive to order the meeting to stop, Okonkwo sees a chance to defend his dignity and that of his society:

He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him. In a brief moment the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting. (TFA 144)

“The imagery of mute backcloth of trees underscores the inaction of this community. It has become a clay-footed giant and cannot but wait. Umuofia fails to recognize the decisive moment in its history. The emphasis on the word “waiting” is very important to the message of this scene. Umuofia waits, but beyond waiting there is nothing else. This message that beyond “waiting” Umuofia has nothing else to show is also pictorially conveyed by the position of waiting as the last word in the last sentence.” (Anieke, 2014) It is the picture of a society with a blackhole of psychic scare, of a society palpably emasculated. This deep and unmistakable scare lives on and has created a seemingly inexplicable inferiority complex among Africans today. It is a feeling indirectly expressed in the aping of the white culture and cultural elements among the black African youth.

In *Things Fall Apart* the colonialists never cease to brandish their power to cow the people (like the trigger-happy officers waiting as George Floyd battles to breathe); we see how they nearly wiped off Abame.

The last battle for the soul of the Igbo society is fought in field of religion. Religion is what holds the strands of Igbo cultural elements and life together. Here the elders show the superiority of their theological argument over the seemingly shallow arguments of the white missionaries:

At this point an old man said he had a question. ‘Which is this god of yours,’ he asked, ‘the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora of the thunderbolt, or what?’ The interpreter spoke to the white man and he immediately gave his answer. ‘All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us.’ ‘If we leave our gods and follow your god,’ asked another man, ‘who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?’ (TFA 102-103)

But this unanswered question does not stop the white missionaries from destructing the traditional religion and thus breaking the soul of the Igbo society since, as Edward Said says, the “European tutelage” is a given. Therefore, nothing can stand in the way of the annihilation of the savage culture and religion.

2. No Longer at Ease

No longer at Ease begins with the imagery of a devastated Obi Okonkwo who is a victim of both the intrigues of imperialists and his traumatized Igbo society which has completely been transformed by its encounter with colonialists. As the grandchild of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* he is a product of a fast changing society, a change which his grandfather tried fruitlessly to stop. His sad end is symptomatic of the destruction of even the educated people in the Igbo society. It presents a picture of inexpressible pessimism in the society. The state of the Igbo society is captured in a song:

An in-law went to see his in-law
 Oyiemu—o
 His in-law seized him and killed him
 Oyiemu—o
 Bring a canoe, bring a paddle
 Onyiemu—
 The paadle speaks English
 Oyiemu—o (NLE, 42).

“The deep cultural conflict implied in this song is not lost on Obi. The Igbo world is a ‘world turned upside down, a world where an in-law (called ogo in Igbo) kills an in-law and the local canoe (symbol of Igbo mobility and economic strength) speaks English. In the Igbo culture, as Obi rightly understands, it is unheard-of for an in-law to kill an in-law. With the intrusion of the European culture which has emasculated the Igbo culture, however, such bizarre things now happen.” (Anieke, 2014)

A minor character in the novel, Odugwu, captures the change well:

Today greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune.”(NLE 49)

This change has wide and far-reaching implications that have continued to reverberate till date.

3. *Arrow of God*

The cultural and psychic destruction of black Africans, represented by the Igbo society of Chinua Achebe, continues in *Arrow of God*, the third novel in the Achebean trilogy. The words of an elder Ukpaka summarizes the destruction succinctly:

Umuaro was here before the white man came from his own land to seek us out. We did not ask him to visit us; he is neither our kinsman nor in-law. We did not steal his goat or his fowl; we did not take his land or his wife. In no way have we done him wrong. And yet he has come to make trouble for us. All we know is that our ofo is held high between us and him. The stranger will not kill his host with his visit; when he goes may he not go with swollen back. I know that the white man does not wish Umuaro well. But in dealing with a man who thinks you a fool it is good to remind him sometimes that you know what he knows but have chosen to appear foolish for the sake of peace. (AOG 85-6)

This elder of course lives in a world where a stranger “will not kill his host with his visit” but this is a different stranger who, like Robison Crusoe, believes that the discovered island belongs to him and turns himself into an emperor in someone’s land. The brazen arrogance of the imperialists is unmistakable:

Tell them I shall not tolerate any more slackness

Unachukwu translated.

Tell them this bloody work must be finished by June

The white man says that unless you finish this work in time you will know the kind of man he is.

No more lateness.

Padin?

Pardon what? Can’t you understand plain, simple English? I said there will be no more late-coming.

Oho. He says everybody must work hard and stop all this shit-eating. (AOG 82)

“It is of course interesting that Mr Wright is annoyed that Mr Moses Unachukwu does not understand “plain, simple English”, but he cannot speak a word of Igbo himself. He does not even know that Moses sometimes translates him wrongly. This ignorance of the language of the other is one of the biggest obstacles to social harmony and bicultural rapport.” (Anieke, 2014) Since the “tutelage” of the black “other” is “a given”, it will be absurd to expect the imperialist to learn the language of the subjugated blacks. This echoes Robinson Crusoe’s first commandment to Friday (the “savage” boy): “call me master,” and goes on to teach him his English tongue. The target of course is to make the English language the only official means of communication, thus destroying the Igbo language, the beautiful world and *Weltanschauung* it represents. Crusoe also gives Friday a name without asking his name. He names him “Friday”. This is similar to what we have in *Arrow of God*: “He (the white man) asked me my name and I told him my name was Nwabueze; but he could not call it so he said he could call me Johnu.” (AOG 170). To name signifies authority over what is named. Thus both Crusoe and the white man brandish their authority with the act of naming their inferior blacks. “A change of name signifies a change of identity. With the new name John (which he pronounces “Johnu”), John Nwodika can no longer keep his Igbo identity intact. He has become bicultural. He learns the customs and traditions of the white man, and also has to learn how to reconcile all these with his Igbo customs and traditions.” (Anieke, 2014)

In addition, “Captain Winterbottom displays a shocking insensitivity and unawareness about the Igbo culture when he invites Ezeulu to come and take the title of a warrant chief. Apart from seeing Ezeulu as an honest man, he still thinks there is a relationship between his priestly duty and a political role (since he calls him priest-king). He is surprised that Ezeulu refuses this offer on the grounds that the priest of Ulu cannot accept such a political role. Rather than find out why this priest turns down his offer, Winterbottom lets him waste away in prison, consequently destroying the rhythm of life in Umuaro. Thus Winterbottom unwittingly damages the last fabric that holds Umuaro together: its religion centred around Ulu.” (Anieke, 2014) Here again as in *Things Fall Apart*, with the destruction of religion, the cultural and psychic demolition of the black “other” is completed. The black Africans (historically known as builders of pyramids: W.E. Du Bois) are now a mere shadow of themselves and are treated as such (as the death of George Floyd reveals).

At the end of *Arrow of God*, the priest of Ulu, Ezeulu, is psychically vanquished. What we have is a transmogrified, demented priest of Ulu. Ezeulu thus represents the psychic destruction of black Africans by amoral, marauding imperialists. Both the priest and his religion have been crushed, irredeemably. Nothing remains but a mere shadow of society and traumatized humans.

Conclusion

An Igbo proverb in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* captures our position in this paper, which is that the events of today (especially the death of George Floyd) will be better comprehended against the backdrop of the picture of cultural and psychic annihilation presented by Chinua Achebe in his trilogy: "The very thing which kills the mother rat prevents its little ones from opening their eyes." (AOG 61). The destroyers of the culture and psyche of black Africans (represented by the Igbo people in the trilogy of Chinua Achebe) will not stop their immoral song of subjugation even in the so-called modern world. The death of George Floyd is only one of many confirmations of this, since as Edward Said says, it is "a given".

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