

# THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN NATION BUILDING: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF ACHEBE

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the roles of the writer as teacher, visionary and social critic, his the ease of Chinua Achebe, he combines the three roles but over-whelmingly, the role of teacher who not only teaches but encourages and warns his nation against any impending disaster. These he carries out in his works, especially (he novels: *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *The Trouble with Nigeria*. This paper in a nutshell, discusses (he plots and the basic message that Achebe has for his society, thus .showing that Achebe is no! only a writer with a troubled conscience but one who also exposes and tackles the problems of his society. In this way literature has become a medium for nation building and societal advancement.

## Introduction

Literature can be defined as the study of works of literary arts whether in the form of poetry, drama or prose. Afolayan (1974) goes further to present literature as "a slice of life". Literature mirrors down the life of a people, a race or nation at a point in time. It is most often an applied art because in literature, art is used to tell a story, portray an era or leach a lesson. In this case, literature transcends History or History is subsumed in literature.

Literature has a very high potential of serving as an instrument for nation building or as a weapon of political ideologisation and self-determination. It might be needful to remind the reader here that part of the battle for independence in Africa was fought through literary works of art in form of poetry, drama and prose. When Achebe released his *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, his aim was not to portray (he Igbo culture per se. His philosophy of writing can be seen from the point of view of his role as a teacher: "to help his people regain their belief in themselves after years of degradation".

In the colonial era, accounts of life in Africa and the Africans were nothing more than a dehumanized picture. It was said that Africans were the immediate progenies of the black African jungle monkeys who.,the early colonialists captured, cultured and make human, a people without history, past or culture.

Writing along this line and reference. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (1963) wrote that:

The history of Africa as presented by European scholars has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people ... such disparaging account had been given of African society and culture as to justify slavery, and slavery posed against these accounts, seemed a positive deliverance of our ancestors.

Apart from the political struggle for independence, another virulent struggle was going on literally through African writings. Foremost in this struggle were the committed writers like Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the French writers like Senghor, Diop, brothers (David and Biragio Diop) and a few others who saw the need to correct the appalling image of Africa and the black man in Rurope through what came to be termed "Ncgritude" writings. On the same plane, the'Apartheid system in South Africa might not have been successfully demented were it not that political stalwarts like Nelson Mandeia, Walter Rodney etc and the guerrilla fighters were eloquently backed up by literary artists like Hzekiel Mphahlele, Dr. Mzamane, Alex La Guma and others, who unceasingly beamed out the evils of the Apartheid system in South Africa through'prolific writing in poetry, drama and novels.

Apart from being an effective weapon of waging a political struggle for freedom, literature is also an efficient medium for enhancing social order and nation building. Through works of social critics like the Nobel prize laureate (Wole Soyinka), T. M. Aluko, Ohukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah. Kofi Awoonor and the late Chris Okigbo etc,

the society is called to order and given a leeway (o its political destination. To limit this subject to a manageable proportion that can be handled within the purview of this column and space this paper will centre on the writings of Chinua Achcbc but passing references may be made of other works of

art.

### **Achebe The Author**

Chinua Achebe, a graduate of Classics from the then University College, Ibadan, started his writing career with his first novel - *Things Fall Apart* which made its debut in 1958. This novel was quite unique in terms of the language, style, theme, characterization and technical confidence that characterised its authorship, the world wide acclamation that greeted this novel had hardly died down when Achebe came out with another successful novel - *Arrow of God* in 1960. Then came *No Longer at Ease* in 1963, followed by yet *A Man of the People* later in 1965. During the Nigerian civil war years, Achebe compiled a series of essays and letters published under the title *of Morning Yet On Creation Day*. In 1970, he came out with the collection of short stories title - *Girls at War*, followed by *Beware, Soul Brother, Anti/ill in the Savanna* and shortly after the inception of the Second Republic in 1983, he published *The Trouble With Nigeria*.

### **Rendition And Social Content Of Achebe's Works**

To illuminate the place or role of literature in nation building, we shall look at the various works of Chinua Achebe so as to understand the philosophy behind such works, in order to determine and assess the overall contribution of Achebe's literature to nation building.

*Things Fall Apart*, we have already said, was written from the viewpoint of the author's position as a teacher. He teaches his people to have belief in themselves following years of denigration and dehumanisation through slavery and colonialism by the white men. It was known that Africans used to be referred to as "black monkeys" in America and some parts of Europe. The accounts of Africans who had the opportunity of travelling to Europe and America before the Second World War - the "been tos" (because they have been to these parts) did not help matters because they served to perpetrate and perpetuate racial superiority of the white men - a mentality they were made to absorb as a result of indoctrination during their stay abroad. However, apart from the writings of people like Achebe which came much later, the African Second World War veterans who fought side by side with the white people witnessed the weaknesses of the white people who were not better at battle fronts. These were people that came back to debunk the invincibility tales about the white man, having fought in India and Europe.

In its content, *Things Fall Apart* is literally about the African community of Umuofia at the time the white men were coming into the scene in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Achebe portrayed the village organisation before the coming of the white men and how the white man disrupted and disorganized this stable and well-organised system. The novel therefore shows that contrary to the malicious accounts of colonialists about Africa, we had a well-organised society which was moral-based; and in spite of the self-acclaimed superiority of white culture, the people wanted to live the way they lived and rejected the interference from the western world. Achebe's nostalgia of the past does not however make him reject westernisation, since he obviously feels that westernisation should modernise Africa, not replace traditional life. Hence, he lets the current of modernisation sweep Okonkwo, the arch-opponent of westernisation away.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe looks at a religious theme of the actual power of the priest, Ezeulu vis-a-vis the power of the Republican people who installed his god as a symbol of tribal unity and for protection. Achebe shows that the nature and interest of a people are paramount in relation to the integrity of their god and its priest. Ezeulu, in his pride and pig headed obstinacy, failed to see that more than anything else, he must strive to maintain and sustain the interest and confidence of (the people, not see himself as "the arrow with which the god shoots at and punishes the people that created it". In his fall, Ezeulu sees himself as the victim of fate following his tragic end. However, his sympathy never leaves us, as we see that his sufferings are overwhelming first the death of his son, Obika whom he loved so much, then his madness both of which are spiritually crushing on him.

*No Longer at Ease* portrays the life of Okonkwo's grand son, Obi, an English graduate of the University of London, against the high expectation placed on him by virtue of his elitist position as the secretary to the nation's scholarship board, who falls from Olympian heights to serve a jail term for accepting a bribe to favour a candidate for a scholarship award to Britain. Although one feels the effects of a crushing economic hardship on Obi who had ideologically hoped to wage a war against corruption the other social malaise on his return to his country, but got himself overwhelmed by the

economic situation he found himself; Obi is not viewed as a tragic hero. In fact, he hardly can be called a hero because the forces that crushed him are not things of legitimacy but of compromise, which he could have wriggled out from. However, the judgement and comments of the judge are very unsympathetic and lack understanding of the elitist position which Obi must maintain. He works with elites. Obi's salary cannot keep him comfortable as an elite. In his inability to understand this issue, the judge cryptically comments:

I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise should have done this".

Commenting on why Obi cannot be a tragic hero, Maryronne MaCarthy (1980) opines that:

The problems that pull and mould him are all pressures making for compromise and accommodation, these are not the stuff of tragedy but of failure and decline.....

Earlier, she remarked that "Achebe does not see Obi as a tragic hero"<sup>11</sup>.

In his comments on Obi's character. Professor Gerald Moore (1962) says: Obi is indeed a weaker character than the heroes of Achebe's two novels and he does not fall from any great height unlike Okonkwo and Ezeulu. Obi is not presented as the antagonist of the colonialist.

In *No Longer at Ease*, in spite of the embarrassing economic situation that constrained Obi to take a bribe that leads to his disgraceful imprisonment, Achebe does not try to palliate his offence because no matter under what constraints the offence is committed, bribery is a corrupt practice and should not be condoned anywhere. In this angle, Achebe is a moralist and a teacher, who expects people to "cut their coat according to their size".

In the fourth novel *A Man of the People*, Achebe is concerned with the theme of official corruption. Chief Nanga is not only an epitome of vice ignorance and graft but also a true reflection of the people who elected him into office and who feel proverbially that no man who is opportuned to have a pinch of salt put into his mouth would spit it out. In other words, since Chief Nanga is opportuned to occupy a ministerial position, he should "enjoy" it to the fullest and no one should begrudge him of this "good fortune". Achebe uses this novel to condemn the society for its ignorance and misdirection in honouring and extolling crookedness in its citizens. The little of the novel refers to Chief Nanga whom the society regards as their true epitome. Achebe somehow prophetically uses a military coup which sacks the corrupt civilian regime and takes over the government of the country; although by some allusions, he shows that the military that came in would not perform any better than the corrupt civilian regime it stacked prophetically, the first military coup in Nigeria came barely a few months after the novel was published.

Achebe's social criticism is climaxed in his novel - *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Achebe teaches the nation so as to build her up. He postulates as no writer had done before that, "where the individual fails to rise to the responsibilities, to the challenge of leading by personal example, he leads the country by the short route to chaos," to use the words of Robert Bolt in *A Man for All Seasons*. In his book, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, Achebe writes:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of Leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian Land or climate or air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of the leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmark of the true leadership.

This view of Achebe's is the all time truth about Nigeria. In spite of all the natural and human resources abundant in Nigeria, it is regrettable that the nation remains doddering and undeveloped -

not looking on to the industrialised nations for emulation, but to the less resourced third-world countries for comparison. This is simply because the leadership of the country is mediocre and cannot rise to the responsibility of leadership. Since Achebe passed this remark in 1983, Nigeria has passed through not less than half a dozen regimes (four military and two civilians) without being the better for it. If the remark of Achebe has any challenges, it is to the present civilian democratic dispensation of President Obasanjo era which is called upon, like the previous regimes before it to "rise to the responsibility to the challenge of personal example.... "Unless the present leader do so, they shall one day, be called upon, like the previous rulers, to appear before a Human Rights panel as their

predecessors who are now shying away from the current Justice Oputa Panel, knowing their misdeeds in the past.

Looking at the works of the celebrated prolific writer, Chinua Achebe, the Professor Emeritus of literature of Harvard University, USA, one can see a great commitment to nation building,

Writing on "Art and Sympathy"<sup>11</sup>, Donald Carter notes that sympathy must be exercised before art, and sympathy must lie with the tradition. Achebe has been able to exercise sympathy for his culture, he is thereby able to use art to help his people regain confidence in themselves, build the nation up by teaching the people to believe in themselves, avoid autocracy and its attendant anarchy, live a life free of corruption and vice and more than ever, live up to the challenge of power thump by living by example.

The work of the teacher is not only to impart knowledge but also to encourage his pupils to have belief in themselves that they are not inferior; to correct them where they go wrong, as well as to warn them about the impending disaster for not taking to warnings and corrections. All these can be seen to have been accomplished in the writings of Chinua Achebe who can appropriately be referred to as a nation builder.

When *Things Fall Apart* appeared at the time of struggle for independence, it added fire to the struggle because it not only gave Nigeria a new image in the eyes of Europe but also made Nigerians confident in their traditional culture; despite the malicious colonial propaganda against Africa. *Arrow of God* reveals the Republican character of Achebe's society and shows that no kind of autocracy -whether religious or political can work among these people. It is a lesson that Achebe handed out, as well as a warning. So far, the issue of chieftaincy positions which were instituted by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the late 1970s and early 80s in Igboland, triggered off a lot of negative reactions from the people and unleashed internal communal clashes and bloodshed. Igbos do not have kings and the introduction of chieftain positions in Igboland was seen as planting a new political institution hitherto non-existent. *Arrow of God* was also a prophetic warning that any such institution would not last and might lead to chaos, just in line with the chaos and anarchy that ended the novel.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe teaches the negative consequences of westernisation in that the modernisation will definitely carry along with it some casualties. Here, Obi is representative of a class - the novel intellectual class. The society that sets them up destroys them because they are alienated from that society and so are hated because they cannot meet up with the high social expectations placed on them. In an attempt to survive, they are led to corruption and other social miasma and finally are destroyed like Obi was destroyed in the novel.

*A Man of the People* is also a prophetic warning against corruption, greed, avarice and graft in the national life, especially among the political class. Achebe's novel warns the nation that though corruption, greed and incompetence may abide for a while, they will surely be washed away by a stronger current of fate or destiny,

## **Conclusion**

Achebe can be seen as a nation builder. His art is seen as applied art because he uses this genre, the prose, to enhance the political, social, economic and religious development of Nigeria. It will be recalled that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the most successful 'African novel, has been dramatised and translated into more than thirty-five languages all over the world. This has gone a long way to teach the outside world that contrary to preheld impressions about Africa, Africa is historical people, with a moral-based cultural life that was not introduced to them by the early colonialists and explorers. These white men came to Africa and met these cultural settings and milieu well-established.

The interpretation of the novels of Chinua Achebe to societal values shows not only that Achebe has played much part in nation building but that arts, generally and literature in particular, is a great war-head that can be used to achieve not only political survival but also nation building.

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