

PARSING THE PAST AND PRESENT NIGERIAN NOVELS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ACHEBE AND ADICHIE

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Abstract

Fiction is a mirror through which the society is seen. It is a work of imagination. However, the writer draws his or her inspiration from what happens around him or her. This is why we have certain works of art that fall within a particular age; the happenings of the age influence the writer. The reader who perhaps was not born within the age decodes the activities of the age and understands how life was lived within the era. In this essence, literature helps us to appreciate life as lived within the period as well as why things are the way they are today. In this article, the researcher examines the life of the African within the pre-colonial/colonial and the contemporary eras as perceived by Achebe and Adichie with the aim of making the audience see the semblance in the belief system of the African in the past and present despite the profuse transformation that has taken place since the 20th century.

Keywords: Fiction, Proverbs, Historical realities, Society, Culture

Introduction

Anderson (1999) observes that the main aim of discourse analysis is to give an answer to the question, how it is possible for us to make sense of what we read in texts, understand what the writer means, recognize a coherent discourse as opposed to an incoherent one. According to him, to arrive at an interpretation of a text, we rely on our grammatical, formal and structural knowledge; but we do have a lot more knowledge than that (3). To determine whether a set of sentences do or do not constitute a text is dependent on the cohesive relation. We know that a text has a texture and this texture is created by the cohesive relations.

The Europeans' View about Africa

Before *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, the Europeans had believed that nothing good could ever come from Africa. To them, Africa was such a primitive place and that Africans were not different from lower animals. Herodotus, a Greek geographer in his book, *The History*, has described Africa as the land where huge serpents were found, and lions, and also wild men and wild women. Similarly the 19th century German philosophy, George Hegel made an aggravating statement about Africa when he said, "What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Underdeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature.... At this point we leave Africa, not even to mention it again, for it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit...." Their views about Africa were well x-rayed in their presentation of characters in their novels set in Africa. According to Emenyonu (1991), Before *Things Fall Apart* was published, most novels about Africa had been written by Europeans, and they largely portrayed Africans as savages who needed to be enlightened by Europeans. Joseph Conrad's classic tale, *Heart of Darkness* {1899}, for instance, presents Africa as a wild, dark and uncivilized continent. In his *Mister Johnson* {1939}, an Irishman, Joyce Cary's protagonist is a semi educated, childish African who, on the whole, reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africans.

A Discourse on Achebe

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe categorically made it clear that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. *Things Fall Apart*, portrays the Igbo society with specificity and sympathy and examines the effects of European colonialism from an African perspective.

Achebe is meticulous in managing his setting to aptly cohere with the characters. Umuofia is a typical rural area inhabited by people whose philosophies are in line with the setting. With the traditional setting and its inhabitants, Achebe chronicles the rich Igbo tradition and culture. We understand through the chief character, Okonkwo that a typical Igbo man should be industrious because the Igbo

people are not lazy. This explains why Igbo tales are told only at night, a time for relaxation after working so hard in his farm place in the daytime. Unoka is abhorred because he does not live up to the expectation of the Igbos. He is seen as a loafer because he is not indefatigable. In Igbo land, children aspire to be like their fathers only when their fathers are known for something good. In the case of Unoka, Okonkwo vows and decides to be everything his father was not. In the beginning of the novel, we are told that Okonkwo is a brave man. He threw Amalinze the cat in a combat. In spite of all odds too, he is determined to survive. He goes to Nwakibie and borrows yam seedlings. He marries many wives and his farm lands are enormous.

In the view of Emenyonu (1987), Achebe's novels are set in a historical perspective and reflect the process of change in the Igbo society from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s, the first post-independence decade. The first among his novels, *Things Fall Apart* {1958}, is set at a time when early Europeans were first coming to Igbo land. The novel is all about European culture contacting and conflicting with traditional Igbo culture.

***Things Fall Apart* as the Ethnography of the Igbo**

Through the novel, the reader understands that the people of Umuofia depend for their livelihood on men cultivating the soil to plant yam. Unoka is laughed at for not being an ambitious person. This is why his son, Okonkwo determines, as a typical Igbo man, not to be as lazy as his father. The people of Umuofia admire Okonkwo because of his fame; a man who has a big compound with wives, many children, large farms and yam bans is admired in the Igbo society.

The novel chronicles aspects of the Igbo traditions and culture such as the new yam festival, the Egwugwu masquerade cult, wrestling and marriage rites in such a way that a non-Igbo who reads it tends to appreciate the way of life of the Igbos. We equally understand that in a typical Igbo society, when certain crimes are committed, it has to be atoned. Okonkwo has to go on self exile with his entire family when accidentally, his gun explodes and kills Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son.

The extensive use of the Igbo proverbs gives credence to the novel. Achebe himself believes that a typical Igbo man must be one who knows the Igbo proverbs, understands proverbs and knows how to apply them in natural context, hence he sees proverbs as the oil with which Igbo people eat words. He also maintains that any Igbo man to whom proverb is used and interpreted, that the bride price paid by his father to marry his mother is a waste.

Nnolim (2009), says that Achebe tells about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan (163). In the society, men are the most powerful. From the way Okonkwo rules his household, the audience immediately understands that in a typical traditional Igbo society, women's voice is not to be heard. Okonkwo has three wives and they cower at the sight of him. Achebe's portrayal of women in the novel as the weak folk unable to help themselves; is an apt representation of women in the historical Igbo society. In the contemporary Igbo society, polygamy is no longer a norm and any man in the present day society who tries to act like Okonkwo would have himself to blame. Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is poisoned by his lone wife for being autocratic in his home. Anybody who reads *Things Fall Apart*, not only sees and understands the way of life of the traditional Igbos, but also the changes which have taken place in Igbo as a result of the encounter between Europeans and Africa during the imperial colonial period.

Adichie's Style and its Affinity with Achebe's

Many critics believe that Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has an affinity with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Though Adichie's is a contemporary Nigerian novel, it still consolidates on Achebe's theme of culture contact and conflict. According to Wallaco, Cynthia R, "the opening sentence, an allusion to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, invites readers to interpret Adichie's novel in the light of Achebe's exploration of the patriarchy of Igbo culture and the arrival of colonizing Christian missionaries in a traditional village."

Recall that Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has started with, "things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurine on the étagère." The opening of the novel immediately gives the audience the impression that all is not well. It also tells the audience that the novel is either a post independence or contemporary novel for the novel establishes that the white man's religion has come to stay.

Through the naïve narrator, Kambili and her lone brother, Jaja, Adichie is able to pass across her message as well as explore the way of life of the contemporary Igbo people represented by the characters and the setting, Abba. The structural criticism maintains that the meaning of the literary text is dependent on the text itself and has nothing to do with any historical realities. In line with that, to some, Adichie's novel would only be seen as a display of fictitious characters and fictitious setting well united to have the aesthetic quality it has. However, for the purpose of this research, historical criticism would more appropriately be applied so that both Adichie and Achebe's novels under review would be seen as representing the Igbo societies at different periods of time; Achebe's during the precolonial and colonial eras while Adichie's is a contemporary era. Oseloke Obezi has vividly described *Purple Hibiscus* as a contemporary Nigerian novel set to mirror the enchanting beauty and richness of the country without shying away from capturing its trauma, tragedy, desperation, resignation and political tribulations. To him, to read *Purple Hibiscus* is to relive life in Nigeria for those who know it and a shock therapy education in the vagaries of everyday life. For those who perchance, might have been insinuated into Nigeria by Ms. Adichie. This is a book about Nigeria, its culture, extended family system, human desire, most so those adolescent, and the crash of Africa and western norms. Obaze's analysis reveals to the audience at once that the novel is an x-ray of the Nigerian way of life, particularly, Igbo.

Like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Purple Hibiscus* affirms that in Igbo society, even in the 21st century, women, like snails are made to perpetually remain in their shells and never to react against any afflictions. This is well dramatized by the author in the presentation of Eugene Achike's means of handling his wife. He beats her every moment which severally lead to miscarriages. In spite of that, she remains passive and life continues. We can recall that on one occasion when she can no longer bear the perils, she runs to Auntie Ifeoma in Nsukka where her children had been. After relating to Auntie Ifeoma how she was brutally beaten, leading to her miscarriage, Auntie Ifeoma advises her to jilt him but she quickly reminds her that if she leaves Eugene, the next moment, another woman would take her position. According to her, many people want Eugene to take their daughters even as a second wife. This simply brings to bare the fact that Igbo people are indeed, materialistic. Another fact to be decoded from the text, is the social fact that in our society today, polygamy is abhorred and would not be tolerated by the Igbo women in this modern era. When Beatrice could no longer bear her husband's ill treatments, she poisons him. In Achebe's era no woman would dare poison her husband for not treating her well.

Though in a different dimension, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* shares the same theme of culture conflict with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Eugene Achike on one side, represents the modern Igbo man who imbibed the white man's culture. Papa Nnukwu on the other part, represents the traditional Igbo man holding firm on the traditional African culture. Though they are a father and a son, Eugene, like Okonkwo, abhors everything about his father because his father is a traditionalist. Achike himself is a super fanatic who is more Catholic than the Pope. He is in enmity with his own father and never wishes to have anything with him; he always severally punishes his children for being under the same roof with Papa Nnukwu in Auntie Ifeoma's place all because his father fails to be converted to Catholicism. Eugene Achike's wealth is so enormous that his fame as a rich man is heard everywhere he also uses the wealth to help all and sundry. No wonder, in Abba, he is given the title "Omeluora". He pays school fees for many and pays hospital bills for indigent people even in foreign hospitals yet his own father wallows in penury and dies of illness he could have survived had adequate care been given to him. In a dialogue that ensued between Papa Nnukwu and Auntie Ifeoma, we can surmise that Eugene's philistine attitude towards him heralds his death. Papa Nnukwu laments thus "... Nekenem, look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba and yet many times, I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries." (p 91).

Papa Nnukwu's regret is akin to Ezeulu's when his son Oduche who is sent to be his father's eye in the white man's religion, disappoints him. When Auntie Ifeoma reminds him that Eugene's ill behavior was not because he joined the missionary, after all, she equally joined, Papa Nnukwu quickly reminded her that she is a woman and that as a woman, she does not count. This quickly reveals to the audience the belief system of the Igbo in both the traditional and modern Igbo societies about the perceived less importance of women.

To Adichie, in most cases, women are more important than men in many households. She makes this categorical through Auntie Ifeoma's response when she says to him, "Eh? So I don't count? Has Eugene ever asked about your aching leg? If I do not count, then I will stop asking if you rose well in the morning."

Like Achebe who indicts the Europeans for putting a sword on the thing that held us together resulting in our loss of unity, Adichie blames the white man for corrupting our people. Papa Nnukwu still not convinced that the white man's religion had not made his son a beast, says "Still, I say it was the missionaries that mislead my son."

He further reminisces and narrates to his daughter a story of his encounter with the missionaries to get his daughter convinced that it is the Christian belief that Jesus and his father are equal that has in the actual sense, corrupted the minds of the converts. He recounts:

I remember the first one that came to Abba, the one they called Father John. His face was red like palm oil, they say our type of sun does not shine in the white man's land. He had a helper, a man from Nimo called Jude. In the afternoon they gathered the children under the ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion. I did not join them, kpa, but I went sometimes to see what they were doing. One day I said to them, where is this god you worship? They said he was in the sky. I asked then, who is the person that was killed, the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission? They said the son, but that son and the father are equal. It was then that I knew that the white man was mad. The father and the son equal? *Tufia!* Do you not see? That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks we are equal. (p92).

Adichie, through the voice of Papa Nnukwu gives us a historical rundown of colonialism; how Christianity entered the Igbo land. Her view is similar to Achebe's diachronic exposition, using Obierika and Okonkwo to x-ray the ills the coming of the white man has caused the Igbo belief system. Obierika had said, "Does the white man understand our custom about land" and Okonkwo aptly responds; "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad." He laments about the docility of the Igbo who joined hands with the European to annihilate the Igbo tradition. He says, "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quickly 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 as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" {TFA, p125}. Adichie did not see differently from Achebe, the ills of the western tradition to our society. Adichie indicts our people who develop strong penchant for western culture to the detriment of their own tradition. Eugene Achike is typical of such people who believe that their own tradition and culture are barbaric because of their foolish embrace of the white man's tradition. He seems to forget that even Christianity preaches the love of one's parents and that Christ did not come for the righteous but for the sinners. He abhors his father that even his death does not appeal to his emotions. At a time, we wonder if Eugene is still normal or has he actually gone mad because of Catholicism? The type of punishment meted to his children for being under the same roof with Papa Nnukwu makes us ponder over his sanity. Kambili, the naïve narrator aptly captures the temperament of her father thus:

Then I noticed the kettle on the floor, close to Papa's feet, the green kettle Sisi used to boil hot water for tea and garri, the one that whistled when the water started to boil, Papa picked it up. "You knew your grandfather was coming to Nsukka, did you not?" ...He poured the hot

water on my feet slowly, as if he was conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen.... (Pp200-201)

Like Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* can be discussed under sociological approach. It is all about the way of life of the Igbos in the post colonial era. Walter Benjamin has adequately discussed the relationship between the novel and the nation in Nigeria. Benjamin believes that the novel mirrors the modern Igbo society hence the assertion that the novel neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it.

The Function of Literature in the Society

Aristotle, an ancient Greek thinker has disclosed that literature mirrors the society. Niyi Osunbade in a journal article in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, states that like most African writers, Adichie has demonstrated concerns for the happenings, in her society. She is therefore preoccupied with the reflections of the historical and socio political condition of her society. She is particularly concerned with the exposition of the ills {Social, political, economic, and religious} in her society and the attack of their imperfections. The attack is however governed by love for the society rather than by disenchantment with it. Significantly, her works generally enjoy the representation of the fictional reality through her incisive, graphic and apt use of language (p140).

Adichie, like other concerned writers, agrees with the Neo-classical writers, represented by John Dryden and Alexander Pope, that literature {satire} is the best tool for tackling ills of the society and individual. Adichie vividly condemns the state of insecurity in the society, poor administration in our institutions and in politics as well, government's philistine attitudes towards the welfare of her workers among other things. Adichie's novel aptly mirrors the contemporary society. According to Osunbade, *Purple Hibiscus* For instance, cinematically presents the oddities in Nigeria as well as Africa in general. Particularly, it x-rays the tyrannical trauma of anarchical – cum draconian leaderships {both within the family and society at large} being experienced by the Africans. This is portrayed through the family of Eugene Achike blessed with material wealth, but mined tragically by the cruel abuse of his father turned callous by a conservative form of Catholicism {140}

Adichie dispassionately, through the killing of Ade Coker, akin to the killing of Dele Giwa via letter bomb shows the state of insecurity in the society. However, she does not intend to paint the society black, but she believes that not until the ills in the society are fiercely pointed out and criticized, there would be no reformation. In her own words;

.... The baby was nearby, in a high chair, his wife was spooning cerelac into the baby's mouth. Ade Coker was blown up when he opened the package – a package everybody would have known was from the head of the state even if his wife, Yewande had not said that Ade Coker looked at the envelope and said "It had the state house seal" before opening it {p212}

Adichie had earlier pointed out that what eventually leads to Ade's death is because he never compromised the truth. As the editor of "The Standard", Eugene's newspaper, he always indicted the government where necessary, but the military government never wanted the truth to be told so Ade was first arrested and imprisoned for saying the truth. Eventually with the aid of Eugene, he regains freedom only to be killed for not laying his pen to rest.

Adichie is of the view that the worst that can happen to any society is military regime. Not only that the military regime had many innocent citizens unjustly killed, life was made miserable during the military rule in Nigeria. Auntie Ifeoma laments "Look what this military tyrant is doing to our country."

Purple Hibiscus aptly mirrors the society in such a way that anybody who reads it needs not wonder about the author's focus. Although Adichie did not use fictional settings, her use of real locations as Abba, Enugu, Nsukka and so on authenticates the fact that she focuses on using satire to correct social ills. Almost all societal ills are mirrored in such a way that the ill can be remedied. Through the vivid illustration of Auntie Ifeoma's suffering to give Papa-Nnukwu medical attention to save his life and of course, the eventual death of Papa-Nnukwu is the author's response to the incessant strike actions in

the country. The author's message generally is that strike is not a good thing and that any government that has the well being of her people at heart would not allow her workers to embark on strike. Workers deserve to be paid as and when due for it is their rights to receive their remunerations for working for the government. In Nigeria, the rulers and other political leaders amass wealth, that is meant for paying the government workers and they expect the workers not to revolt. The incessant strike in the country constitutes a lot of perils to the people. A lot of people die untimely mainly because their people cannot afford to pay the exorbitant hospital bills in private hospitals. This is well dramatized by the author, thus

"Will you take him to the medical centre today or tomorrow morning, mom?" Amaka asked
"Have you forgotten, *Imaroz*, that the doctors went on strike just before Christmas? I called Doctor Nduoma before I left, though, and he said he will come by this evening."
... But since the Doctors' strike had started, he had run a small clinic in town. The clinic was cramped, Amaka said.

Adichie is of the view that the perennial industrial actions have given the doctors the opportunity to set up their own private clinics which they pay more attention to than the government hospitals where they receive their wages.

Also social ills meted to widows in the Igbo society are unveiled and condemned. Auntie Ifeoma's husband has died in an accident but her in-laws indict her of abetting the death of her husband. Adichie, through the voice of Auntie Ifeoma, satirizes the follies of Igbo people who encourage such ill practices. Auntie Ifeoma in a dialogue with Mama, says:

"I don't have the strength for Ifediora's family right now. They eat more and more shit every year. The people in his *umunna* said he left money somewhere and I have been hiding it. Last Christmas, one of the women from their compound even told me that I had killed him. I wanted to stuff sand in her mouth. Then I thought that I should sit her down, eh, and explain that you do not kill a husband you love, that you do not orchestrate a car accident in which a trailer rams into your husband's car, but again, why waste my time? They all have the brains of guinea fowls? {p82}

Adichie's Narrative Techniques

In narrating her tale, Adichie prefers to use one of her characters in the novel. Kambili the naïve narrator tells the story as she perceives it, thus the use of the first person point of view. According to Wilbur (2004), the style is not widely used like the third person point of view. However, Adichie, painstakingly used the style to effectively pass her message. The style made the novel unique and natural. This is the area her novel slightly differs from Achebe's. However, the way she punctuates her sentences with certain Igbo words and phrases is akin to Achebe's and it goes a long way in showing national identity.

Conclusion

Although the two authors belong to different ages, their works have areas of semblance. Some critics are of the view that Adichie is a literary daughter of Achebe because Adichie copiously imitates Achebe's style. Like Achebe, Adichie's deals on the theme of culture contact and culture conflict. One reading *Purple Hibiscus* would think that Adichie experienced the history she has chronicled. Besides, she has equally demonstrated her ingenuity in the use of the Igbo proverbs. Like Achebe, Adichie has effectively applied the proverbs in natural context. The two novels aptly mirror the ways of life of the African man in both the pre-colonial and post colonial era.

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