

**REINSCRIPTION AND REGENERATION OF CULTURE THROUGH LANGUAGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *AFRICAN TRILOGY***

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ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural turmoil created due to the religious unrest in Achebe's Nigeria is far from being resolved. The problems arose mainly due to the loss of indigenous culture that held the people of the land together. The Igbo culture of which Chinua Achebe's ancestors belonged to is almost extinct now. The people of the country are left groping in the darkness of an order less state. They are culturally "neither there nor here", after being cut off from the cultural roots and made acquainted with an alien culture. The loss of culture was initiated by Colonial domination of the land. The imperialists have not just robbed natives off the precious resources but also the socio-cultural values with which they lived till then. The colonial mission propagated the idea that the natives never had a culture and civilization of their own. Chinua Achebe through his fiction strongly challenges this assumption and re-asserts that the Igbo people of the Southern Nigeria did enjoy a culture of their own. Every language and literary genres are product of a culture. Achebe's means of expression are Novel and the English language, which are both products of the western culture which Achebe resists. So in order to overcome this dilemma Achebe reshapes the conventions regarding the genre, Novel. He has extensively included elements of Nigerian indigenous oral tradition such as oratory, proverbs, folktales, folksongs etc to make this appear as something that is essentially Nigerian. This paper analyzes how Achebe succeeds in personalizing the language of the "other" and how significant are the elements of folklore in recreating the orient culture through language.

Keywords: Colonialism, Culture, African Trilogy, Folklore, Proverbs, Chinua Achebe, Oral Tradition.

“When Europe came to Africa and said, “You have no culture, no civilization, no religion, and no history”, Africa was bound sooner or later to reply by displaying her own accomplishments. To do this, her writers and intellectuals – stepped back into what you might call the “era of purity”, before the coming of Europe. What they uncovered there they put into their books and poems, and this became known as their culture, their answer to Europe’s arrogance.” – Chinua Achebe

Although Chinua Achebe’s novels treat the issue of colonialism and the encounter between Africa and Europe, they are at the same time works that attempt to discuss the crisis of culture generated by colonial days. Achebe has observed that, even though decolonization had changed the African cultural landscape, it was foolish to pretend that Africa had “fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe”. Achebe went on to argue that his role as a writer was “to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement” (*Morning Yet On Creation Day*, Achebe 2).

As the colonial rule had established its cultural authority by insisting on this racial hierarchy, Achebe’s effort in reinscribing the pre-colonial Igbo culture is not just about romanticizing with the past but its political intention ranges up to shattering the Eurocentric stereotypes regarding Africa. For Achebe, it is the only way of redemption for his people who are left in the present day cultural turmoil.

Culture can be defined as the learned, accumulated experience of communities and it consists of socially transmitted patterns of behaviour. According to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, culture is an ordered system of meanings and symbols in terms of which social interactions take place. Most ancient cultures, even those in possession of a script, have displayed a phonocentric preference. Henry Louis Gates Jr. records the process whereby European phonocentrism reverses its speech-writing hierarchy to set up a new logocentrism as it is confronted with the orality of other cultures. Writing thus became Europe’s chief weapon in inferioritising other cultures as the central argument of enlightenment of language as the sign of reason. They advocated that reason lies solely in the written word.

Achebe believed that the African writer should be at the same time be a cultural fundamentalist, explaining the tradition of his people to a largely hostile world, and a teacher instilling dignity into them.

Similarly post-colonial critics, implicating the written text in the ideologies of imperialism, have described how it has served as a tool of silencing and control. Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their *Introduction to Post Colonial Studies Reader*, speak of the recurrence of the trope of writing as an offence in postcolonial criticism. Edward Said uncovers the working of the ‘power/culture’ nexus in the creation of the knowledge about the cultural otherness and its exclusionary procedures by examining the canonical texts of Europe.

For postcolonial writers the task of challenging this western philosophy poses an issue of greater relevance since they have to prove them wrong and at the same time project a different picture of their world and their culture and life. When a writer like Achebe is writing in English, this is a tall ask, because he is inscribing his culture in the language of the ones who dehumanized it.

The million dollar question is that, how can a writer write the self in the language of the other without being a part in the othering? But great thinkers like Achebe thought otherwise. The oppressed can project themselves as equals only if they communicate the idea to the other. Writing in one's own language, inaccessible to the other will only comfort you, but if you want to reply and convey a message, it must be done in a language which both can understand, which is in this case, English.

Achebe through his novels attacks this superiority of Western logocentrism by using his texts as means of propagating the phonocentric cultural codes and traditional elements. These traditional elements are not just the carriers of the culture, of which they are part of. They are reservoirs of undocumented history of the land.

Any reader of *The African Trilogy* comes away with at least a limited knowledge of Igbo words and phrases. Some words such as *obi*, *chi*, *osu*, and *egwugwu* become assimilated very quickly into this knowledge through the way in which Achebe scatters them casually through the text. Others, which occur less frequently, require translation or a few words of explanation, such as *ilo* (the village playground), or *agbala* (woman, or 'man without title'). The *English* translations of words and proverbs provided by Achebe are a personal rendering, attempting to invoke the spirit of the proverb, while retaining faithfulness to the phraseology and terminology. Oral and communal storytelling traditions are very much a part of the Igbo culture, and Achebe has stressed in the past how these have been an inspiration to him, and admitted that he continually appeals to this oral tradition in his writings, wanting to record and therefore preserve it.

The issue of language is also raised directly throughout *The African Trilogy*. There is a telling exchange between Obierika and Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*:

"Does the white man understand our customs about land?"

"How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" (145)

Achebe points out the way in which language can act as a barrier between two cultures. Around thirty years later, in *Arrow of God*, language is still a barrier to communication, yet the Igbos have been made to realize that the acquisition of English is crucial to understanding the white man and his religion. Ezeulu sends his son to Oduche to be educated at the missionaries' school, reminding him of the importance of "knowing what the white man knew" : "If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things, tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time".

In non-literate societies, folklore is virtually identical with culture but in literate, industrialized societies it is only a fragment of culture. The African novel is an outgrowth of a society in which oral traditions still form a "living reality". There is a considerable

difference in the revival of traditional forms in a literate, technological environment and its adoption in a setting where it is a “living” discipline. By “living” is meant that oral traditions are a part of the everyday life of the people. Oral tradition has survived in West Africa despite the introduction of the foreign language and the alien culture it bears. Oral forms such as stories, proverbs, dance, folk tales and folk songs etc still perform a significant role in shaping the values and beliefs, actions and behaviour of the people. Traditional forms, rituals, ceremonies provide a framework for experiencing reality. In contemporary Nigeria, those forms continue influence the sensibility of most Nigerians, not merely of the illiterate majority but also of the educated elite. Thus for the modern African writers folklore is not a mere aesthetic device; it connotes for them a means to bring alive an entire value system and world view. Many African writers began to take up traditional life and culture and its manifestation really seriously.

Proverbs rather than folktales and folksongs, form the core of the oral literatures of many African societies. The continuing popularity of proverbs may be partly attributed to their symbolic import, economy of expression and linguistic sophistication. Chinua Achebe has fondly remarked on the Igbo’s predilection for proverbs, “among the Ibos the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten”.

Donatus Nwaga, stressing the contextual relevance of Igbo proverbs mentions two ways in which they may be used – the illuminative and the corrective. Achebe’s novels literally interspersed with both types. “Illuminative” refers to the usage which directly reinforces ideas by recalling traditional wisdom to support a given statement. These proverbs are often found in formal address, oratory, discussion etc. and generally make use of the formula “as our people say”, “the Igbo used to say that...” etc. They are generally attributed to the elder people. these proverbs often figuring in advice from adults to the young, are a way of introducing the youth to the system in which the wisdom of the group is enshrined. A large number of proverbs in Achebe’s novels fall into this category:

“As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.” (qtd. Achebe)

“But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad, you should look for a fat and juicy one.”

“Corrective” usage on the other hand, is indirect and oblique in its application. It is designed to produce “an understanding or reaction in the person concerned without directly involving the speaker”. Okonkwo is chastised at that meeting by the oldest man present with one such proverb when he shows contempt for a less successful man;

“....those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent deity should not forget to be humble.”

The significance of Igbo proverbs as vehicles of native sagacity and as embodiments of traditional value is well-known. Through proverbs Achebe is able to acquaint his non-Igbo readers with the milieu and value system within which his novels operate. As far as the Igbo reader is concerned, proverbs help Achebe to invoke a system of shared values. Proverbs, along with other oral forms like stories, songs, myths and sayings constitute the social, cultural, religious and ethical framework of the society, which forms the background of Achebe's novels. But we see characters in *No Longer at Ease* using proverbs in oratory which are completely out of place. This is indicative of the displacement from the cultural framework spreading through the denizens of the land. Here proverbs function another symbolic function also.

Achebe's use of Igbo folktales demonstrates his familiarity with the story telling traditions of his community. He employs them to evoke the working of the traditional Igbo society. He depicts this society as one in which folktales answer certain practical needs, constituting at the same time the wisdom of a non-literate age and its ethical and legal fabric. Achebe reproduces the exact manner in which the folktale was employed in instilling of moral and social values in the young. Ekwefi's tale in *Things Fall Apart* and Ugoye's tale in *Arrow of God* are a case in point. Mothers appear to play a significant role in the moral and spiritual development of their offspring in Igbo society. Achebe shows how knowledge and values were orally transmitted from generation to generation. Ekwefi's tale combines an encyclopaedic function, i.e. the knowledge about how the tortoise broke its shell, with the ethical advice – the evil consequences of greed and selfishness. It also serves the purpose of educating young ones in the communal ethic of sharing.

Besides embodying the values and beliefs of the group, folktales also serve as guides to future action and behaviour. The novels exemplify the traditional habit of apprehending individual, immediate situations against folktale precedents. It is appropriate that in *Things Fall Apart* Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle, should suggest a strategy for confronting the white man in folkloric terms. Like Mother Kite who warned her offspring to keep away from the silent duckling, the villagers must keep away and avoid and fear the silent white man, a stranger to the land. A new situation is, thus, explained and evaluated against a familiar reference.

Conceptualization is not non-existent in traditional societies such as the Igbo. It assumes a concrete, metaphoric form. Achebe often invokes the folktale to elucidate complex concepts and ideas. One of the stories which lingers in young Nwoye's memory in *Things Fall Apart* is about the quarrel between the Earth and the Sky. It illustrates the process of the objectification of abstract concepts. There cannot be a more explicit poetic evocation of the complementary nature of the masculine and the feminine as visualized by Igbo than this brief tale which shows how Earth and Sky, the male and the female are independent. Okonkwo, in overemphasizing the masculine ideal, in his obsession with "manliness"

overlooks and upsets and equipoise that sustains the Igbo community. Significantly, this is the kind of story that Okonkwo was likely to reject as “womanly”.

Besides providing complex philosophical ideas and beliefs of the Igbo as codified in their folktales, Achebe is attentive to local conventions about the variables of oral performance, narrator, occasion, audience etc. His novels depict how, in traditional societies, folktales arise naturally and organically from real, living situations. He gives us not the bare story but the entire context in which storytelling takes place. For example, the story told by Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart* to an audience of women and children is a popular Igbo trickster tale. It provides wholesome entertainment while imparting a moral lesson. Uchendu’s retelling of the fable of Mother Kite and her daughter, in the same novel, to a group of young men is entirely different in tone and texture. Ekwefi’s tale is designed to engage the interest of the young listener. It dwells on picturesque details, humorous asides and bits of dialogue. Uchendu’s tale is brief, befitting the age of his listeners and the seriousness of the occasion.

Achebe is also faithful to other conventions of African storytelling, for example, those of time and place. While storytelling is generally regarded as a leisure time activity in Africa beginning towards nightfall, certain types of stories are deemed appropriate only to serious discussions held in the course of the day. In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu cites the legend of the wrestler, who challenged his *chi* to a match, to embellish and strengthen a public speech addressed to the people of Umuaro. Although Achebe introduces the reader to a wide variety of tales from the traditional repertoire and renders them with consummate skill, the tales go beyond a documentary purpose. They are integral parts to the framework of his novels and become a part of his narrative technique. Like the traditional storyteller, Achebe narrates stories within stories in a way that sets up an oral reverberation.

The other oral form that Achebe borrows into his novels is that of the folksong. Traditional songs – lost wanderers in the novels’ territory, have always exercised their rightful access to the folktale. It was not uncommon to find songs being used to mark structural divisions in folktales. Achebe appears to be doing strange things to novel, leaving his reader mystified as to the status of tribal songs in his novels. Without violating the conventional norms, Achebe makes them indispensable to his borrowed Western form.

Eze elina, elina :
Sala
Eze ilikwa ya
Ikwaba akwa ologholi
ebe Danda nechi eze
Ebe Uzuzu nete eqwu
Sala

Ikemefuna’s childish game and the accompanying description reduces him once again to a little boy as contrasted with his newly acquired manliness mentioned at the beginning of the same chapter. The author’s intention is to place the vulnerability and trustfulness of

Ikemefuna against the grim, implacable and righteous brutality of his assailants so as to emphasise the heinousness of their crime.

Achebe has spoken of the existence of satiric songs in Igbo villages, which were often employed to exert social pressure. He speaks of how groups of young men and women would go, at night, to the houses of those who has violated social norms and condemn them in the strongest possible language. In “No Longer At Ease”, Obi is accosted by female singers with following “Song of the Heart” when he visits his village during his mother’s illness. This folksong underscores the corrective function of songs in Igbo community. The conventional form of songs permits criticism sans the embarrassment, which comes from direct speaking. The singers are indirectly reminding Obi of his responsibility towards his kinsmen. Obi, in his newly acquired Western individualism and his involvement with Clara, an Osu girl has far disregarded the group’s norms. The singers remind him that his social responsibility towards his kinsmen is greater than his personal feelings towards Clara.

Ukwa killed Nwaka Dimkpolo
Who will punish this Ukwa for me?
Matchet will cut up this Ukwa for me
Who will punish this matchet for me?
Blacksmith will hammer it foe me
Who will punish this blacksmith for me?
And who will punish the fire for me?
Water will quench this fire for me
And who will punish the water for me?
Earth will dry up the water for me
Who will punish this earth for me?

This apparently non-sensical piece of a song is part of a singing game between Ezeulu’s children in *Arrow of God*. This song exchange between Nkechi and Obiageli possesses a strangely ominous quality in the context of the novel. The immediate association between the offence and the inevitability of retribution highlighted in this song is linked to the main theme of the novel. Ezeulu’s chastisement of his people, while believing himself to be an instrument of his god’s retribution on the community, meets unnatural retributive justice at the end of the novel leaving him stunned and almost insane. The Earth and Ulu cannot be questioned as in the song.

Another oral form that Achebe uses is oratory. It is part of the Igbo culture to assemble at the village ground to decide on serious issues. Men of titles, priests and such dignitaries speak during the meeting. The better you talk, the more applause you get. Nwaka and Ezeulu are good orators. Their speeches are given prominence in *Arrow of God*. Each point is stressed with phrases like “*Umuaro Kwenu*”, in order to access support for the point that has been raised during oratory. Achebe has elaborately described such village assemblies

in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and the meetings of the Umuafia Progressive Union in *No Longer at Ease*.

By this sort of an elaborate use of the oral tradition that constitutes the core of an indigenous linguistic tradition and culture, Achebe is making the alien language and genre his own. This process of altering the western tradition and breaking their literary conventions along with the re-invoking of the orient oral tradition not just marks an assault on the logo centrism, but an instinctive and resistant act which is more importantly post colonial.

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