

Chinua Achebe and the use of English Language

Abstract

Chinua Achebe is an influential writer. His profound impact is not limited to his country Nigeria, or Africa. He brings us a real picture of Africa and rehabilitates African history and culture that was once denied, disrupted and distorted by colonialism. The crowning glory of Achebe's novels is undoubtedly his use of English language. What sets him apart from other African writers is the fact that he is more successful than others in his flawless integration of language. He was able to perform a difficult task of transcribing the situation of African Psyche from one linguistic mode to another, from an indigenous oral tradition to an alien form of European origin. A whole range of human experience is presented before us by use of imagery, both native and alien. The artistic interplay of form, content and language in Achebe's novels contributes to our understanding of Ibo cultural ethics and aesthetics.

Keywords: Impact, Colonialism, Flawless, Integration, Linguistic, Indigenous, Psyche, Aesthetics.

Introduction

It is an accepted fact that Africa, unlike Europe, has to cope in its development with the prior existence of an immensely powerful and dominating developed world. This developed outside world has dominated Africa's political and cultural life and still attempts to do so in the present. The writers of these countries find themselves in a difficult position as the publishing and distribution of most of the African books has been largely done by the western countries. For the politician and the writer the focus is to shape a national identity within the boundaries left by the colonist and within a world order dominated by the developed world. The writer tries to fulfil his purpose by exposing to the outside world an authentic African identity within the colonist's language and literary conventions. The modern Africans find themselves at crossroads. On the one hand they have got an imposing colonist, western structure at their door step. On the other hand, they have got their own traditional, cultural and linguistic conventions. In some respects post-colonial Africa finds itself in a tricky situation. The modern African writer is understandably reluctant to accept without assessment the system of ideas imposed by the colonist. In this context, James Booth says, "While open to the most modern influences in technology and ideas, most African states still have largely agricultural economies in which traditional cultural values retain their power" (6). The traditional social and cultural values still motivate the lifestyles of the modern Africans.

Aim of the Study

Chinua Achebe is Nigeria's best known novelist and probably the best known writer of fiction from black Africa. His novels are widely read in Africa and are achieving an audience in Europe and other parts of the world. Achebe very well knows that the societies he evokes in his books will be generally unfamiliar to overseas readers. His novels have a mission of bringing before the world the values and attitudes of a group of people who have only recently achieved prominence. His novels form a sequence and reflect the changes which have taken place in Ibo land. In carrying out this mission, language is a powerful tool. The dilemma confronting the African writer is getting his message across a wide audience without losing the cultural peculiarity of African linguistic behaviour. Achebe has evolved a sort of English which mostly uses the English lexicon invested with values and concepts of African linguistic patterns. The aim of the present study is to study the brilliance of Achebe as a writer and the crowning glory of Achebe's novels is undoubtedly his language.



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Discussion

The African seeks to find a way for the expression of his identity by returning imaginatively to the pre-colonial past. This is the way of a number of novelists who attempt re-creation of traditional life. They try to creatively present the traditional life-style as it was before the European intrusion or as it was secluded from the direct European influence.

In Nigeria Chinua Achebe's own novels of traditional village life, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) present a detailed evocation of a harmonious traditional culture before introducing the destructive and imposing whites. Achebe takes this task of cultural retrieval as one of the primary duties of the African writer in the first years of independence. Achebe rightly says, "Here there is an adequate revolution for me to espouse- to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Booth 7).

Achebe feels language is impossible to decolonise. Achebe is perfectly bilingual and he does have a choice to use his native language in his writings. However Achebe goes for English, aiming to communicate with as many Nigerians as possible. More importantly, Achebe also hopes to change the outside public view of Africa, i.e. how others see Africans. Stressing upon the strength of the Ibo political and cultural system and its oral traditions, Achebe reconstructed a picture and narrative of the Africans caught in a particular moment of history. In this context James Booth critically comments, "In Nigeria, as in most of Africa, then the choice for the writer is between his vernacular and his European second language. The use of an indigenous language allows full expression of the writer's Africanness, but reduces its audience, sometimes drastically" (65). Booth continues, "The use of English involves adaptation to a second language, but gives access to the widest audience both inside Africa and outside" (65).

Gabriel Okara, another Nigerian writer, is quite self-conscious and very deliberate in his technique of presentation of African Identity. He says:

As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. (Okara)

Okara illustrates the method of approach which Achebe feels most appropriate to the assertion of an African cultural heritage. Then Achebe goes a step ahead. He insists that the Nigerian must first learn and master English, before modifying it. He should be capable of fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his own distinct cultural experience. The English Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart* about traditional Ibo life seems bold and correct. He introduces Okonkwo as the chief of the clan as:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. (04)

The words used by Achebe quite appropriately describe here the robust lifestyle of the village chieftain.

Achebe goes on explaining the mystery of the traditional Nigerian way of living of the Ibos. Even the brave people were afraid of darkness. Achebe describes:

Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would here. It was called a string. (10)

The story of Umofia, as told by Achebe, is deeply associated with the story of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. The Oracle was called Agbala. People came from near and distant places to consult and take the blessings of Agbala. Nothing happens in these lands without the sanction of Agbala, the Oracle of the Caves. The shrine of the Oracle is described as:

The way into the shrine was a round hole at the side of a hill, just a little bigger than the round opening into a henhouse. Worshippers and those who came to seek knowledge from the god crawled on their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark and endless space in the presence of Agbala. No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one who had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. (15)

The difference between Achebe's novel and others is that his novel thoroughly examines Ibo society as he portrays it in a manner in which he shows all aspects of Ibo culture and not only the desirable aspect of the culture. With the use of English language, Achebe is successful in fully detailing the life of Okonkwo who at the beginning of the novel is a very famous young man in all the nine villages of Umofia.

Conclusion

The wisdom and philosophy, the poetry and beauty of traditional Africa are impressively portrayed in the language of Achebe's fiction. Achebe emerges as a writer of acclaim for his efficient use of English language. His use of language is a major component of his artistic strategy. It not only enriches the English language but gives the reader the experience of a whole culture. Achebe's novels allow us to have a close and real picture of the past and present African life with all their peculiarities, pleasures and puzzles.

As a result, Achebe achieves two major purposes of a writer by discharging his obligations and responsibilities as a writer to his society and by using English as a language of national and international importance.

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