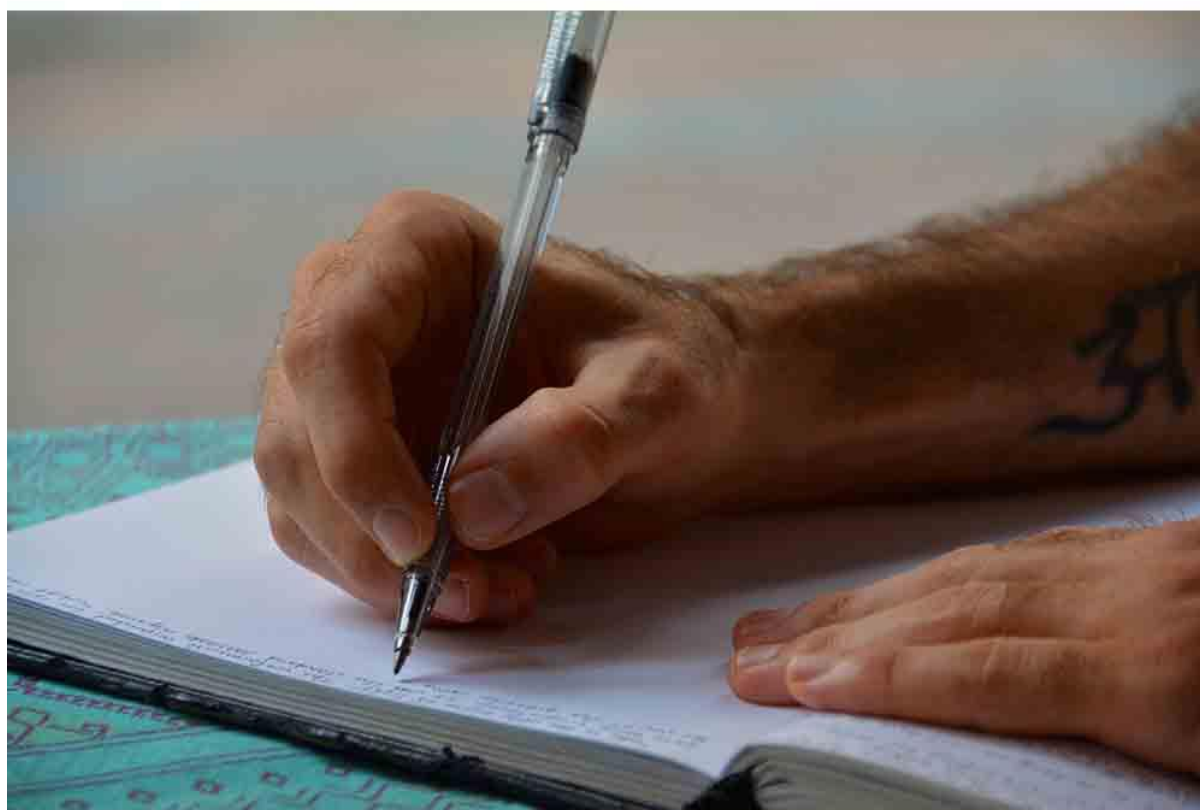


ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

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History and Fiction in the Novels of Chinua Achebe

The novel of colonial consciousness particularly contests the positionality of history as the “master narrative” to demystify and dismantle it is situate the historical in the political, social, cultural and economic life of community “Both history and literature are interested in power” asserts Laurence Lerner. While the novelist is interested in how power is sought and exercised by individuals, the interest of the historian lies in studying the operation of power by groups. This operation of power is examined by both the historian and the novelist through representative figures, though for different reasons. “the historian because he cannot do much with lifeless allegory and needs real people, the novelist because the unrepresentative figure is more interesting and is even better way to breathe life into what is representative” (Lerner, 94). Besides sharing interest in the positionality of power, the historian and the novelist also share the narrative space of textuality. This happens because “history and story: etymologically the two words are the same, and only in English have they separated in this way” Challenging the notion of the fixity of facts, History no more remains a monolithic collection of facts and their hegemonic interpretations.

The idea of the historical as a special case of the fictional is explored in the construction of the orient as Europe’s “Other” by Edward Said in Orientalism. Similarly, the concept of Africa is also viewed as a European construct of the Western discourse as

“Otherness” which has allowed Africa as the ‘privative other’ of Europe to be defined distinctly in negativity. European intervention was justified as the inauguration of history and knowledge in Africa. This myth of the Dark Continent, an ideological construct of the Victorian explorers, missionaries and scientists, was also a desire fulfillment of the European mind which identified Africa with the lost paradise and a hideous nightmare?

The missionary brought the Bible, the merchant, money economy and the soldier, central authority to Africa. Together they plundered the natives of their ancient religion, traditional value system. Communal living and land. The “colonial complex” in the colonized mind became deep rooted; Achebe tells us that a boy who was asked to write a composition on harmattan felt ashamed even about the weather of his country. Now, you wouldn’t have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do” (1977,44). In an interview with D. Nwoga, Achebe states: “The write has the responsibility to teach his audience that there is nothing shameful about the harmattan, that it is not only daffodils that can make a subject for poetry, but the palm tree and so on” (Duerden, 8).

Achebe’s commitment as an artist springs from his faith in the traditional view of art among the Igbos, who regard it as a communal activity and not an individual pursuit. The artist in that society is a person chosen by Ala, the Earth Gooddness, who is also the controller of morality and creativity. Achebe tells us that the artist is ordained by the Goddess herself to prepare the images of Ala and present them at the colourful ceremony called mbari’, a profound affirmation of the people’s belief in the individuality of art and society”. When his assignment is complete, the goes back to his society and takes up his normal duties. He then no more remains a professional artist.

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe realistically portrays the past of his people with artistic detachment. When asked about the authenticity of the life painted in *Things Fall Apart*, he commented in an interview.

It was purely from the experience and of course a bit of imagination. I did not have to do any research as such. The festivals were there the whole attitude, (really it's the attitude of the people), their philosophy of life was still there. I mean, you could see it; and the rest really was using your own imagination to create the details of the story (Duerden, 10).

Novel for him is an instrument of self-discovery through which he finds his historical roots, his identity and that of his people, too. His picture of the Igbo life has its weak as well as strong points. Enumerating the strengths of Igbo life, Kate Turkington writes that it has a homogenous culture, "a total view of life in which nature, gods, people, ancestors are all mystically linked(though).....'egwugwu (16). Achebe's depiction of Igbo life is not idyllic. It has its weaknesses too, such as brutality, inflexibility, too much of materialism, a virtual obsession with success and an arbitrary system of justice, These are highlighted through the arbitrary killing of the white man who came to abame on iron horse (bicycle). Through the image of the 'iron horse' Achebe points out the inability of his ancestors to understand the implications of an inevitable historical change.

Harshness and brutality is also evident in the arbitrary killings of Ikemefuna and Nweka's twins. Ikemefuna lives in Okonkwo's family for three years like his own son, but is killed by Okonkwo because the custom demands it. The strain and tension of the colonized are orchestrated through the character of Okonkwo "the first protagonist in the Black African novel to symbolize the position of the African tragically under pressure in a rapidly changing social situation" (Turkington 45). Through him, Achebe builds a controlled tension between the general and the particular, by maintaining a balance between the two social and individual

perspectives. At the societal level, Okonkwo symbolizes the traditional igbo past which the community wants to preserve. Okonkwo's inflexibility, his insistence on manliness and this rigidity to accept change are as much individual traits as the traits of his culture; I think in (Okonkwo's) time, the strong men were those who did not bend and I think this was a fault of the culture itself (Quoted in Turkington, 23-4). Similarly, Okonkwo's metric so values; a trust in kinship and a belief in human dignity is also the matrix of his society. But the final paragraphs of the novel reveals that this matrix is no longer valid and undergoes a change. Okonkwo refuses to accept the new situation and commits suicide.

Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, on the contrary is not so rigid. By this time, colonialism has come to stay and he sends his son Uduche to be educated at the Mission School to become "his eyes and ears" over there. Moreover, he is an intellectual. He thinks about why things happen of course as a priest he's ready to accept change, intellectually as Achebe informs Serunjan in an interview (Duerden, 16-7). But he too comes to a sort of "Sticky end" mainly because of his pride. The Igbo society, however, accepts the change. Ezeulu's enactment of the cosmogenic act of the "First coming of Ulu" annuls time by projecting the concrete time into the mythical time. "When lizards were still in ones and twos" unfolds a consecrated space and a sacred time (Achebe, 1962, 70).

In *Arrow of God* Achebe creates a realistic picture of the Igbo past and points out its weakness as well while the village community has cohesion and continuity, it lacks dynamic leadership Ezeulu makes his community suffer for the humiliation he believes it has inflicted upon him. Since he cannot do anything against the colonizer who has humiliated him, he behaves like a typical colonized priest by making his religion rigid and formal. Being a king-priest, Ezeulu enjoys power over his people. Considering the "immensity of his power over the year and crops. He wondered if it was real" (3). In fact, through a telling Igbo proverb Achebe comments that "it was no more than the power in the anus of the proud dog who

sought to put out a furnace with his puny fart” The power that he thinks he has over his people proves to be no better than a dog’s fart.

Achebe interprets the African past from within. His novels chronicle the cultural, social, political and historical change among his people. "Each novel is a chapter in the checkered history of Nigeria since the turn of the century, as well as a literary expression of the cultural, traditional and religious practices of the Igbo people", says Madubuike (*Black World*,62). Some critics consider them sociological and historical documents and ignore their literary merit, Achebe had these people in his mind, when he remarked. “Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? (1977,45)

Thus, while *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* chronicle the history of pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* thematize the history of a post-colonial society. *Anthills of the Savannah*, written after 22 years fuses myth, legend and modern styles to write the troubled present of West Africa.

No Longer at Ease (1960) is set in Nigeria of 1958-59 Obi Okonkwo the protagonist is three generations removed from unoka Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Obi thus represents the new elite who have to play a vital role in the history of his nation. Umuofia Progressive Union is a community of people, who hail from the village of Umuofia and work in Lagos, Though they have moved to metropolis, their world view is tribal. They have paid for the education of Obi and expect him to work for them we are happy that we have such an invaluable possession in the person of illustrious son and guest of honour. Obi is also expected to live like a European, following the logic of neo-colonialism. James Booth observes, Obi typifies on the individual level the situation of the Nigerian state as a whole” (95) Like the state, he is divided in his loyalties between tribalism and modern nationalism. Entrapment of Nigeria is the theme of Achebe’s next novel. *A Man of the People* which created history because within less than a month to its publication in January 1966 a coup

detat took place. The harsh reality of party politics marks the history of independent Nigeria. The ever changing political scenario in Africa is so complex that no single resolution of phenomenon can be prescribed. The novel's ending in chaos aptly describes the African scene. Larry Diamond wrote about its causes in 1985. What caused the coup was a staggering corruption and crippling economic management under four years of civilian rule and the undermining of the electoral process through violence and fraud"(138). The situation described by Diamond in 1983 was similar to the one prevailing in 1966, and has been aptly fictionalized by Achebe in *A Man of the People*. Anthills of the Savannah, takes off from where *A Man of the People* leaves. The story told from the points of view of Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, Beatrice Nwanyibuife and the omniscient author narrator in the third person is the most complex narrative of Achebe. Africa of the oil boom EH Carr's definition of history as "an unending dialogue between the present and past" 24 can be applied to this novel, because it locates the present of Kangan to its mythical past. Ikem, the editor of National Gazette in his Hymn to the sun schematizes the national malaise by situating it in the legend which describes the naming of the tiny village of owe as Babson after wiping out its population. And now the time had come round again out of story land because of a similar natural catastrophe of drought and famine. The trees had become hydra headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires. However, the situation now is not as bad as it was in the legend.

Thus, using myths and legends in this novel, Achebe works in the Mythical mode as opposed to the Ethical mode of his earlier novels. In this metaphorical and paradoxical mode of narration, he is "historical in that we find a move towards time *ab origine*" (Priebe, 5), a cyclical movement of time rendering linear history meaningless,

Thus, Achebe moves away from the realist-ethical mode of his earlier novels which record the history of colonialism in Nigeria from 1890s to 1960s to the mythical mode to make possible a dialogue with the immediate past of Africa. Having performed, the avowed 'act of atonement' and the 'ritual return' of the prodigal son is his African trilogy. Achebe re-creates the history of his people in the mythical mode which authenticates the historical experience through the use of the Igbo oral tradition, proverbs, and metaphorical way of thinking. His words are "historical novels' is the Lukalian sense learns of the "poetic awakening of the people who figured in these events" and also because we can "experience the social and human motives(164). Which led to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.

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