

Chinua Achebe's Worldview As Reflected in Some of His Selected Works

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Abstract. The worldview, ideology, vision, belief and ethics of most writers are overtly or covertly reflected in their works. Chinualumogu Achebe is a writer whose belief in the humane function of art is not in doubt. Through his essays, interviews, speeches, novels and writings in general, he unequivocally demonstrates that art, a product of society, is for the service, benefit, deliverance and redemption of man and society. This redemptive vision of art manifests in all his writings. Achebe abhors racism, oppression, prejudice, marginalisation and subjugation of any group of the society just as he contracts relationships with people and fellow writers that are racially-liberated, broad-minded, just and humanely inclined irrespective of clime, creed and colour. This paper is a reflection on Achebe's moral vision of art as enunciated in his selected speeches and works. It argues that Achebe perceives art as a unifying, humanising, refining and redemptive agent of man and society, and concludes that Achebe has no doubt, attained a status of immortality through his art.

Keywords: Worldview, moral vision, humane function, art, Achebe, redemption, man, society.

1. Introduction

Chinualumogu Achebe embodies many things to the world, to Africa and to the literary universe. He is a teacher, moral guide, humanist, critic, poet, essayist, social critic, social crusader, historian and lots more. He passionately loathes racism, oppression and subjugation and constantly sues for unity and fellow feeling among all. Achebe has literary folks across

cultures as he pitches tent with fellow humane writers irrespective of their race and religion. This accounts for his close association with James Baldwin, an American writer whose suitcase the latter's family willed to Achebe on the death of their patriarch. Achebe's worldview which is reflected in his art is clearly enunciated in the address he presented at Baldwin's memorial service at the University of Massachusetts in December 1987 which is published in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988: 121):

As long as injustice exists, whether it be within the American nation itself or between it and its neighbours; as long as a tiny cartel of rich, creditor nations can hold the rest in iron chains of usury, so long as one third or less of mankind eats well and often to excess while two-thirds and more live perpetually with hunger; as long as white people who constitute a mere fraction of the human race consider it natural and even righteous to dominate the rainbow majority whenever and wherever they are thrown together; and - the oldest of them all - the discrimination of men against women, as long as it persists; the words of James Baldwin will be there to bear witness and to inspire and elevate the struggle for human freedom.

From the above long excerpt, Achebe communicates to the world his worldview which is vibrantly represented in his art. He is incontestably the father of the African novel as well as one of the most widely read black writers in the world. Though late, his fame and influence have spread like the harmattan fire across the globe. His memories rest on the fact that he has championed the human cause, with particular reference to Africa through his vision and

craft enunciated in both his fictional and non-fictional works.

In “Chinua Achebe: Writer as Nigerian” (2000: 17), Charles Nnolim describes him as “a good family man, a great nationalist, a true patriot, a world famous intellectual, a writer in the world class-in Igbo parlance, an eagle on iroko”. At the golden jubilee of *Things Fall Apart* in 2008 Achebe was celebrated, honoured and toasted for founding African literature, for telling the African story. At his funeral held at his Ogidi hometown on the twenty-third of May, 2013, the Ghanaian President then, John Dramani Mahama described him as “the teller of truth,” and acclaimed, “I daresay, Achebe can never die!” Achebe can never die, not with his span of influence, or with his ineradicable achievements, or with the indelible mark he has so deeply etched in our consciousness. What Achebe has bequeathed to mankind is a very rich heritage. Many other African writers have come to look up to him on account of his vision and craft.

Achebe’s artistic ideology is humane. He believes that the literary art is given for the service of man and his society. He is a writer among writers. And if “writers” as Remi Raji-Oyelade (2013: 1) has noted, “are at the vanguard of nobility and order in society”, Achebe, no doubt, is in the forefront of that group of conscientious members of society. Spurning the doctrine of Aestheticism and of art for art’s sake, Achebe employs his art for the cause of humanity and rejects the notion that art should exist for itself. In his essay “Africa and Her Writers” (1975), he argues: “I... insist that art is, and was always in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose....Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society (19).

Achebe believes that literature has vast and varied uses one of which is moral and redemptive, in which case literature is used to impact on our values and goals, to shape our judgments and decisions, moving us to accept the good and the admirable in others and to reject the bad and sinister, humanising us and guarding us against moral fall.

2. His Humane Practice of Art

In recognition of the moral function of art, Achebe started penning his annoyance against the denigrating representation of Africans by some of the works of English writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary. In his novels of the past he takes up the

educative tasks of reconciling Africans to their own values and past. He goes all out to fight against racial inferiority foisted on Africans. And as it were, he takes a backward glance at history in order to know “where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us,” all with the intent of seeking to free his people from “the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races”. (“The Novelist as Teacher,”104-105). Achebe’s pioneering literary manifesto is clearly delineated:

Here then 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. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspiration of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul...for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean- Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism....The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all-as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his African Image-the sensitive point of his community. (“The Novelist as Teacher”, 105)

Achebe clearly distances himself from the aesthetic philosophy of art for art’s sake which proffers that art is “selfishly occupied with her perfection only”, and has “no desire to teach.” (Fowler 1990, 2).

Umelo Ojinmah succinctly captures what he conceives to be Achebe’s belief as the role of “the African writer in contemporary society” which he opines should be to “help educate his society, reclaim its traduced past heritage, [and] be its critic and mentor...” (1991, vii). Chinua Achebe is of the view that art must perform the functions of entertainment and education while the writer must be his society’s teacher. Coming from this perspective of aestheticism, Kolawole Ogungbesan (1978) has stated that “it is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writing at the service of a cause, even if it is such a laudable and uncontroversial cause as the education of the people.” (7). Over the years, the practice of African literary aesthetics as espoused by Achebe has proven Ogungbesan and his acolytes wrong. Achebe, like many other African writers, has used his art to make particular responses to particular situations. His art has certainly been applied to the cause of humanity with great success.

Art has been successfully put at the service of varied causes not only by writers of African descent but also

by those of other races. What do we say of literary pieces by some writers acclaimed for their artistic competence, like Conrad and Cary? With all their commitment to aesthetics and with all their technical competence, they have made their art to serve western imperialism by contriving images of Africans to justify western colonial adventure. Writers in Africa, with Achebe at the very forefront, took up writing as an anti racist racism. This goes in line with their conviction that a writer owes a duty to his people and society: a writer, with the perfect example of Achebe, uses his art to fight for his society against an external aggressor.

Consequently, Achebe has been the quintessential artist in this regard. He has particularly contended that Conrad does not deserve a place as a great artist or as a canon on account of his crime of dehumanising the African race. In other words, Conrad is guilty of writing malignant fiction, an act comparable to: "A man who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients". ("An African Image", 9)

Conrad's guilt is better appreciated in the light of Achebe's essay, "The Truth of Fiction", which describes two types of fiction-malignant and beneficent fiction. Achebe rather opts for beneficent fiction, thus: "My theory of the uses of fiction is that beneficent fiction calls into full life our total range of imaginative faculties and gives us a heightened sense of our personal, social and human reality." (113). He projects us into his own practice of the art of fiction when he notes:

The fiction which imaginative literature offers us...does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of orthodoxy or an irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and human conscience." ("The Truth of Fiction", 114)

Obviously, Achebe's literary theory has fashioned and shaped the theory and praxis of African literary aesthetics. No doubt, he has pioneered a kind of revolution in both the African consciousness and her literature. In line with his humane vision and as part of his mission of healing his people's psyche, Achebe has originated and perfected a brand of English which can satisfy his society's need for a tongue capable of preserving both their worldview and unique identity. So in addressing the problem of

conveying authentic African experience through an alien language, Achebe has given us the African English style. His accessible and lucid narrative style adorned with the Igbo speech rhythm, idioms, proverbs and folklores remain his unique literary contribution to the world.

Repulsing the idea of the alienated artist, detached and aloof from his community, Achebe is not only committed to his art but also to his people. He has by and large identified fully with his Igbo society, with Nigeria and Africa as a whole. In all, we see in him a writer and a patriot with a moral responsibility to his people, we see in him a writer functioning as "the sensitive point of his community", as the conscience of his society. It is to his credit that he speaks truth to power. For instance, in December 1995, on the condemnation to death of the soldier-poet Mamman Vatsa over an alleged coup plot, Achebe, Wole Soyinka and J.P Clark went to President Babangida with a plea for clemency. Part of the text of their plea reads: "Judicial blood-letting constitutes an injury on the entire national being, as it locks the nation permanently in a blood cycle. We urge you to act imaginatively to take us out of the vicious circle" (*Straight from the Heart*, 75).

Though Vatsa was eventually executed, Achebe and his literary colleagues had spoken the truth to the powers that be. Again in 2005, he refused to accept a national award from the Obasanjo government for what he saw as the government's collusion in the political injustice in his state. In much of his fiction he explores the theme of leadership failure in his society.

A cursory look at the abusive manner in which power is wielded by the protagonists of his novels brings home the point. Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* doubles as a rigid, high-handed family patriarch and societal rebel. Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* turns himself to a vengeance-seeker against his people when they need his succour and compassion. Obi of *No Longer at Ease* is a hypocrite and insensitive son and lover, Chief Nanga of *A Man of the People* is a corrupt crook and embezzler of public resources. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Mr. Okoh is a wife beater while His Excellency is a despotic tyrant. N.F. Inyama aptly captures this trend when in reference to Achebe's five novels he asserts: "From the earliest novel [*Things Fall Apart*] to the latest [*Anthills of the Savannah*], we observe a gradual evolution of the image of the father/protector figure from a homestead dictator, through an autocratic clan/father-figure, to a national tyrant" (1996, 217).

After *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, his setting shifts to the contemporary post-independence period marked by corruption and misrule. In all his novels he criticises and exposes the social ills of the time. He explores in depth the African cum human condition through a proper sense of history, revealing a tragic vision of leadership. In all his novels, his protagonists namely: Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi Okonkwo, Chief Nanga and His Excellency fail through pursuing their own selfish interest to the detriment of their people. Achebe's humanity is therefore evident in his search for the right leadership for his nation Nigeria in his non-fictional work, *The Trouble with Nigeria*. In this book, Achebe maintains: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership....The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (1).

Against the tragedy of failed leadership, Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) searches for a course to placate his people with an embittered history. He investigates the theme of abuse of power, which gives rise to corruption, exploitation, social injustice and insensitivity of leaders to their subjects. The *Idemili* myth is seen as a symbol of hope, benevolence and relief from the oppressiveness of a masculine social order. Here, the masculine order is a trope for a harsh, draconian, oppressive and vicious social order as opposed to a feminine social form given to morality, tenderness, virtue, benevolence and fellow feeling to the needs of man and society, providing moderation and amelioration in the place of masculine harshness. Importantly, the *Idemili* myth relates to Achebe's moral and humane vision of leadership as evident in the following:

In the beginning power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty.... (Anthills, 102) Neither at the first audience nor at this second does Idemili deign to answer him directly. If she finds him unworthy to carry the authority of ozo she simply sends death to smite him and save her sacred hierarchy from contamination and scandal. If however she approves of him the only sign she condescends to give-grudgingly and by indirection-is that he will still be about after three years. Such is Idemili's contempt for man's unquenchable thirst to sit in authority on his fellows." (Anthills, 104)

Anthills becomes a discourse not only on Achebe's moral political vision but also on the practice of his art. So, speaking through the old man, Achebe places the highest premium on the art of story-telling:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards-each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story....So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason, I think our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters-Recalling-Is-Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we, the story; rather it is the story that owns and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours. (Anthills, 123-124)

Consequently, the art of story-telling towers above all other callings because in the story lies our human essence, our values and unique identity. The story is very important because it is the one thing that captures the totality of human experience in his sojourn on earth. It is only the fool that thinks of the story as all fun and entertainment. Again, the following excerpt couched in Achebe's magical idiom echoes the two faces of imaginative literature envisioned in Horace's *dulce et utile*, meaning the sweet and the useful:

So the arrogant fool who sits astride the story as though it were a bowl of foo-foo set before him by his wife understands little about the world. The story will roll him into a ball, dip him in the soup and swallow him first. I tell you he is like the puppy who swings himself around and farts into a blazing fire with the aim to put it out. Can he? No, the story is everlasting....Like fire, when it is not blazing it is smouldering under its own ashes or sleeping and resting inside its flint-house. (Anthills, 124)

Achebe's worldview cuts across all aspects of humanity. For him, art remains an instrument for the deliverance of mankind. He believes that women who constitute an integral part of the society and their vital roles have been brutally relegated and marginalised especially in the African society. The teacher in him always seeks to correct this societal anomaly towards women and this is decipherable

from his assigning of some sensitive roles to women in some of his novels. Good examples are Chielo and Ezinma in *Things Fall Apart* and Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

In *Things Fall Apart* Mbanta, Okonkwo's maternal village becomes a soothing essence to the embittered and banished hero by his masculine Umuofia society. Nneka, translated "mother is supreme", a phrase copiously deployed in *Anthills*, symbolises Achebe's positive acknowledgement of the vital position and role of women in the African society. It is noteworthy that the milk of tenderness which flows in mothers arouses their love, and tenderness towards their children even when the latter are recalcitrant and rebellious like Okonkwo. Achebe the humane artist detests the African society's patriarchal inclination that makes men hypocritical in their attitude towards women. In an interview with *The Guardian Newspaper* in 1989, he opines:

If I'm going to talk about feminism, it has to be an African feminism which is always there in my books, in my studies of women; their role which is somehow understated, somehow not brought out there in front but in the background; which is the way our people deal with the problem of women. And all the hypocrisies which men have brought to bear on this; the fact that in Igbo society, they praise women by word of mouth [in the name "Nneka"] (mother is supreme) and yet try to put them down when it comes to practical things, these are issues which have been with me from the beginning. These are African as well as universal (12).

Indeed, Achebe does not leave any aspect of the society in his human profession of literary art.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Achebe has revealed his worldview through his art. He has told the story of the land, and by this, has performed the greatest of service to his world and has as a result, risen to the sublime state of deathlessness. He has pioneered the African cause, charted the course of her literature and imbued the black race with confidence and dignity. And much like the story, he remains everlasting for who could imagine what would have become of our world without Achebe? Here is a man who has defined our race, our nation, our literature, our philosophy, culture, history, and our life-our very human essence through the art. Truly, his is a worldview encapsulated in humanity and morality championed through his art.

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