CHAPTER - IV
ACHEBE'S FICTIONAL ART

Achebe’s concern is not so much on the plight of African elite exposed to 'spiritual void and mental stresses' in his novels as to acknowledge the fact that the educated African lives at the cross roads of culture which gives a new meaning, quality and atmosphere in the Nigerian society. Achebe’s vision of mutation in African character is more philosophical than historical. He is more concerned with the nature of cultural change than the specific changes due to cultural interaction during and after the colonial rule. He, in his own way, contributes specially in his three novels No Longer at Ease, A man of the people, and Anthills of the Savannah exploring the effects of colonialism resulting in neo-colonialism in independent Nigeria, to the new awakening of African.

Achebe has presented in the first two novels, as in his first and the third novels, a tragic universe in which individuals are routed by the stranger socio-cultural forces. For this he has chosen the tragic medium to document the events in a particular order of social disintegration of modern Nigerian society in particular in No Longer at Ease and A man of the people. Though the form
is western, Achebe has put 'things' African to present the
human predicament and cultural conflict and the cultural
cringe in the Nigerian society, using some of the western
conventional techniques of narration.

Achebe is a serious and dedicated artist and says
about the task of the African writer that "the writer's duty
is not to beat this morning's headlines in topicality; it is
to explore the depth of the human condition". Achebe's
novels are not to be viewed as mere explication of the
Nigerian scene. Instead, they are a study of the legacy of
colonial rule where the protagonists are conceived in tragic
terms involved in an uncertain world of violence and
violation. As a true moralist, Achebe judges his
individuals on the basis of their moral responses to the
milieu and his works collectively constitute a vision of
life and society.

African art-literature, like other living world
literatures, is basically a cultural expression defining
it's indentity, but more functional and dynamic as a
manifestation of African spirit through African aesthetics
and philosophical assumptions. The social function of
African art-literature mirrors the society and its individuals in living reaction to their social surroundings and is opposed to western aesthetics. African novels are mostly socio-anthropological, to be read in historical and cultural context, and modern writing which is contemporaneous is greatly concerned with the human condition in Africa. Achebe has suggested in his essay 'The Novelist as Teacher' that what he writes is applied art with 'didactic leanings' as distinct from pure art. To him, art is important but it should suggestively educate the reader; for art and education are both usually inclusive. Art for Achebe, is but a dialectic transformation of experience, a new way of looking at tradition to create a different order of reality through imagination. Achebe does not dwell on imaginative fantasy; his approach to art like Soyinka's is objective and realistic.

Achebe, as an African artist, is free of the dilemma in which he has to chose between a culturally elite art unsullied by popular concerns or an art that aims at a wider audience and address issues more specific than the inevitable pain of the human condition. Achebe created his art in close communion with his people as described in his
essay "The writer and his community." Today Achebe’s art speaks not only to and for Africa but also to and for the rest of the ‘third world’, not least through its successful challenge of "first world" centricity.²

Story telling, the fundamental aspect of the novel is a favourite from of African oral tradition. Achebe carefully maintains the balance between realistic portrayal of the human condition and values, and a definite structure of the fable. The fable of his novels appeals to our curiosity. His stories present a conflict such as one between tradition and modernity, between the social and the occult or within the clan, between the community and the individual. In No Longer at Ease Achebe uses a different pattern using flash back, the cinematic device. The novel opens with Obi’s trial scene in a court of law. The novel is not just about Obi’s crime, but about the reasons behind it. The structure of the novel invites the reader to analyse their motives and examines every event responsible for Obi’s fall. The moral decline of Obi under the influence of the West is rather sudden. The novel speaks of Obi’s confusion of values, of confusion not only between ‘good’ tradition and blind, superstitious tradition, but also
between new 'advance' and new corruptions continued in modern Nigeria as neo-colonialism.

A man of the people presents the new contemporary African nation, less at the mercy of the whiteman. There is little about colonialism but much about its legacy as neo-colonialism. The novel is narrated from the fastidious point of view of Odili Smalu, a school teacher who intends to justify his own actions and values as he maligns the motives of Nanga. In this novel Achebe portrays on a grand scale the infectious nature of corruption in Nigeria - in politics, in the army, in civilian life, and in the whole environment-rural and urban as well. There is a general breakdown of morality, and prevalence of delusion, superficiality, and an over indulgence in greed. Achebe seems to be cynical about his new Nigerian society. The contemporary situation has defeated intellectualism and the narrator is granted neither ambiguous success nor the heroic failure of the protagonists in the earlier novels. Achebe is satirizing life and many of the situations of the mid 1960s -political corruption, the means of communication etc.

While No Longer at Ease records the unavoidable circumstances that forced Obi Okonkwo to face serious
financial crises, to fall victim to corruption leading to his pathetic end, *A man of the people* narrates Odili’s idealism, his betrayal and disillusionment, his personal rivalry with Nanga, his affiliation with the new political party but resulting in loss of Edna and his physical loss. Odili Samalu in *A man of the people* perhaps symbolizes the Nigerian spirit who has survived the sacrifice at the ‘new shrine’, as one who anticipated the emergence of the new generation to look for a better future shaped by the wisdom of the past as well as of the present. Nanga represents one end of the political spectrum, where the sole aim is survival. Like Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, Odili too is portrayed in *A man of the people* as anti-hero, an unimpressive figure.

Achebe employed flash back, a cinematic device to place events and actions in significant order in his novels. *No Longer at Ease* becomes but a long retrospect of Obi’s career. The novel reveals in its flashback how Obi got involved in disgrace and in a court trial. Achebe has demonstrated the dilemma of Obi who is precariously poised between his loyalty to tribal norms and his involvement in the new order as scholarship secretary. Obi has failed to
resist the temptations of the 'heady atmosphere' of Lagos and the powerful intervention of 'new forces' in his personal affairs though he has, because of English education his proud sense of integrity. In A man of the people too, Odili the narrator, has defoiled in a flash back how he hates and has opted out of politics. The publications of the novel within a month of a Nigerian coup d’e tat made the reviewers suspect that Achebe had prophesied the military action at the end of the novel. Perhaps Achebe within the context of the novel itself might have indicated the common revolution for such situations in Nigeria. And Achebe was perhaps inspired by the electoral campaign of October-December 1996 and its serious consequences, making Nigerian life miserable and corrupt. His response to political malaise establishes the novel’s relationship to historical events and its purpose. Achebe has intentionally made contemporaneity a significant feature of the novel in the specific Nigerian context and has widened its purpose to become a 'parable for Africa'. No Longer at Ease too prophetically draws a dismal picture of the neo-colonial situation prevailing in the country after its formal independence. And Obi representative of the educated class
of the new Nigeria, symbolises the eroded morality that brought the nation to crisis in the 1960s.

Achebe disclaiming the notion of individualist art, tries to define that art is both functional and communal and therefore has to meet the needs and demands of the people. His latest novel, *Anthills of the savannah*, published in 1987, is his most explicit comment on the place and function of literature in the modern Nigerian context. In the novel various types of literature ranging autobiographical accounts, folk tales, lectures and cryptic sign-writing on buses, narrate the social predicament in Kangan (a fictional military state in Africa that closely resembles modern Nigeria) telling various stories. Story telling in African literature is not a mere exercise in creativity, but an active expression of the daily struggle to 'survive'. Both Odili (*A man of the people*) and Obi (*No Longer at Ease*) belong to the 'hybrid class' of intellectuals, functioning as intermediaries between the politicians and the people. There developed a 'general anti-intellectual feeling' charging intellectuals for having aligned themselves with the group in power and for having neglected the largely illiterate masses who pined their
hope on them as their future leaders. Similar contempt for "these half-backed professors" is expressed in *Anthills of the Savannah*. President Sam, a young Army commander with virtually no experience is supported by a cabinet of equally ineffective members divorced from the "outside".

The three main characters, Sam, Chris and Ikem, intelligent and successful as Beatrice has observed incredibly conceited: "The story of this country, as far as you are concerned is the story of the three of you". They themselves have admitted in the beginning of the narrative "we are all connected, you cannot tell the story of any of us without implicating the others". And their linkage is asserted not through solidarity but through competition and resentment. The novel traces the last few days of their lives. Sam is the one who from the beginning assimilated himself most readily to the existing power structure. Chris is less sanguine, more involved in the rise of Sam to power, Witnessing at first hand "the remarkable metamorphosis of His Excellency", and justifying his friends policies. As admitted by Chris himself he is 'neither as bright as Ikem and not such a social success as Sam. Ikem Osodi is the editor of the National gazette, poet, novelist, play writer,
and the member of the trimamvirate given the most extensive treatment. As subordinate to Chris in his official role, Ikem rashly writing crusading editorials against the abuses of government, ridiculing and parodying them. He spelled both an alternative political creed 'a new radicalism' in defiance of the president and mythic account of what is happening to Kangan. But it is around Beatrice Okoh, senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance and the fourth major character in the novel that Achebe's new thinking crystallises.

Achebe's Art of story-telling is clear in his novel about leadership in Anthills of the Savannah. He responds:

"Yes. the very nature of the story is one of the key issues in this novel ... How does the role of the story as the escort of the people compare with other factors in their lives? You have the story, you have the story teller..."

Achebe himself foregrounds 'telling a story'. The elder from Abazon says:
"Recall in - is - Greatest. why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior .... 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". 4

Achebe narrates the situations of high tragic potential characterised by emotional intensity and historical authenticity during the crucial phase of transition through the character of Ezeulu in Arrow of God. Faith would not die nor would it surrender to pressure even if it cracks under the impact. It crushes the individual in the process of change and Ezeulu's character exposes the fiction between the emotional need to adhere to one's traditional faith and practical compulsion to yield to the winds of change.

In Achebe's view tragedy is about ignorance and about failures in self-knowledge. He is describing his own experience of writing tragedy, as well as his understanding of how the spiritual view of destiny we all possess, in Anthills of the Savannah when Beatrice Okoh describes her
sense of how we can only see fragments of the history we are living. Achebe's work also has the touches of comedy in the scene where the Honourable Simon Koko believes he's been imprisoned, is hilarious caricature. The minister's imported coffee having run out, the cook had used a locally processed variety, had brought our home-made stuff.

"Chief Koko ...... proceeded to take a loud and long sip..... then he practically dropped the cup and saucer..... and jumped up as though a scorpion had stund him".....

But humour gives way to sombreness when we are told of the campaign mounted by the same government ministers, urging people to consume local products in the national interest.

Achebe's reaction to the use of European languages in African literature (pidgin-cross-culture literature) is as follows:

"The linguistic situation is quite complex in Africa. In Nigeria you could not talk about Nigeria one minute longer as the country is today if you were to remove the English Language". 
Achebe prescribed that English be used in Nigeria for 'national' literature and the regional languages for 'ethnic' literature only. Achebe goes on to say: whether you are writing in one languages or another, these are not really basic issues, they are important but your soul as an artist cannot be something which you are tinkering with along the way".7

Achebe's narrative art, committed as it is to the socio-cultural reality of the Igbo world, contributes to the 'rehabilitation of the novel as a borrowed art form in Africa'.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL VISION:

As a writer Achebe participated in the political transformation by intervening in and contesting the hegemonic misrepresentations of Africa in colonial/imperial discourses, and by setting up alternative images of Africa. Achebe's A Man of the People narrates the effect of political power and wealth through Nanga that 'though Nanga dons the mantle of nationalism and adopts its rhetoric' to acquire power and position as Minister of Culture, his real power and wealth are underwritten by British Amalgamated.
Achebe is an artist, not a metaphysician or theorist. His politics, in the tradition of poets and novelists such as whiteman, Ekliot and Yeats, is the politics of vision, a vision which, though idealistic and utopian, is at the same time authentically African in its open-hearted generosity, warmth and humanity. Achebe is an imitator and agent of social transformation he is both someone especially gifted—a leader and a teacher of the people—and empowered to show his people the way to a better, more promising future. By exposing the current politics and politicians he appears to have denounced them and warned his people about the grave consequences. For Achebe, the vision of post-colonial Nigeria is not entirely bleak and pessimistic and hence he eagerly points out that the situation is not hopeless:

"If you were convinced that it was absolutely hopeless, then you would just drink and wait for your death. But the fact that you are talking about it implies some optimism that somebody may listen, that there is still a possibility for change...."8

Achebe's comments get to the heart of the problems the American writer faces while attempting to restore
dignity and self-respect to his people and while doing so he resisted some attempts at renewed cultural imperialism. Achebe, in his 1972 interview with Ernest and Pat Emenyonu, accounts for the shift in emphasis from his three early works *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* commenting that

"The post-independence period in Africa is bound to create in the writer a new approach....... A man of people shows quite clearly this new preoccupation with the reality of post-independent Africa".9

Achebe's assessment of post-independence rulers of Nigeria in *A man of the people* and *Arrow of God*:

"In fighting for independence, some of the African intelligentsia only wanted that which was forbidden to them, or rather they saw the struggle in terms of their immediate needs, nurtured by the social position they had attained under the colonial system, whose fulfilment was however frustrated by the racism inherent in the system... After independence, the racial barrier to their needs was broken".10
A Man of the People is not just an expose of what his young nation has become and of the people who are responsible for the tragic state of affairs but also is informed by a "higher responsibility". Arrow of God is tentative blue print of what must be done - and what more importantly, identifies who will do it. To that extent Arrow of God both offers a critique and shows the way to remoulding society. Arrow of God is about "issues of leadership" specifically about who has the responsibility for getting us (Nigerians) out of this bad patch.

The burden of leadership rests with a small group of people who, one way or the other, find themselves in positions of leadership. Achebe indentifies Ikem, the editor
of National Gazette as one such leader who initiates the action to correct the situation.

Ikem's principal method of "correction is to expose", crusading editorials, essays in overkill that in Chris's judgement are futile and unproductive. Obviously Ikem thinks otherwise: "But the real irony of the situation is that my own method is more successful even on Chris's own terms. Ikem proceeds on the belief that he can bring about change. It is hard not to see Ikem as a stand-in for Achebe and his views about the role of leadership.

As Austin Shelton opines African writer is inherently communally oriented and is opposed to "any
consideration of African literature as individualistic 'art for arts' sake" and the new African writing has reasserted the traditional African altitude to art as 'socially functional rather than merely aesthetically pleasing'.
REFERENCES:


3. Ibid., P. 28


10. Ibid., p. 22.