CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Literature from Africa holds great interest and fascination for people all over the world for many reasons. Eustace Palmer in his book, An Introduction to the African Novel tells us, that the continent has lately come to make significant contribution in creative writing and is no more the Conradian Heart of Darkness, or the strange abode of Cannibalic rites and jungle drum. It can rightly boast of the heritage of a rich oral tradition and history extending over centuries, besides the tangible body of works published during the middle of the present century. Infact, the emergence of a very large corpus of African novels both English and French, has been acclaimed generally as one of the most interesting, literary developments of the last thirty years¹.

Non-African writers were creating the literary image of Africa in the past. Some of them were objective and sympathetic in their treatment of the African experience and its historical background. A few used African history as a sand of backdrop, where the white man was able to workout his neuroses in stock patterns; still other non-African writers ruthlessly depicted Africa in primitive patterns which symbolically reflect the colonial rape that the continent itself was
physically undergoing. This literary distortion of African history has come to an end.

Shortly after this, the situation has changed. It is not easy for the European or the American to write about Africa anymore now as the African novelist has appeared on the scene. The African novel is paradoxically both very young and very old; maturity was forced upon it just as African societies were going through the birth pangs of old age of history within a few years after they gained independence. What the western novel became in a leisurely course of three hundred years, the African novel was forced to become, in a mere generation and a half in the path of its history. The works of African intellectuals like Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, James Ngugi, Camare Laye, Lenrie Peters and Ayi Kwei Armah are among those well-known outside as well as inside Africa. Their writings have vigour of language and that language communicates the cultural, social and racial ideas, the nuances of an expanding consciousness with all its sense of excitement and of tragedy and with all its conscious blending of the old and the new history.

In general, the African novel is known for its depiction of various cultural tensions and conflicts arising out of a fight between tradition and modernity, the real and the occult. But it is the conflict between the individual and society and the way in which it is resolved that seems to tend a typical African flavour to the
novel, making it differ from its European counterpart. In an African novel, society, the larger entity emerges triumphant as against the individual who dissociates himself from the society to assert his pride and individuality.

African novelists deal with themes varying from folk culture to self-conscious literary traditional history engendered in the third world. Colonialism disappears and it is replaced by other forms of government, with corruption and struggled by the armed forces, thereby preventing the full achievements of the African’s immediate potential in many fields.

In Africa, the most impressive talent is shown in the novels of Chinua Achebe and the drama of Wole Soyinka. Historical circumstances again account for the English connection of these writers, but not the remarkable quality of the achieved work. The literature of West Africa offers the most passionate expression of the colonial encounter with intensity unique in aesthetic formation of form and feeling, demanding commitment from Chinua Achebe, the writer. He rejects much of European literature as irrelevant and suffering from despair and human condition syndrome, as a consequence of colonialism in return. He even attacks western literature for painting Africa as a metaphysical retreat for all kinds of prejudice.

The spread of Imperialism in Africa has created areas of political influence and domination which naturally produced a far deceiving influence in
the growth of African literature. Literatures of Western world provided models for the African writers. However the native sensibility retained its identity, though layers of foreign influences became a part of African culture. Fight against the colonial power gave rise to the dimensions of social commitment and protest movements in African Literature. Today African Literature presents the conflicts and contradiction written about the African society and it also provides a glimpse of things in future. Political upheavals in the African continent are vividly described in African fiction and poetry.

Achebe’s personal experiences in his life have been ventilated in most of his works. Chinua Achebe, the son of Catechist for the Church Missionary Society, had resettled in his ancestral home, Ogidi. He had his primary education at the Society School and his first lessons were in Ibo. He learnt English quite early and at the age of fourteen, he was selected for the study in the Government college at Umafia which is a distinction.

At eighteen, he matriculated at the New University College at Ibadan to study medicine. But he changed his subject and studied literature. As Arthur Ravens Croft in his book Chinua Achebe has observed “his formal studies in English Literature have been very similar to those of a British undergraduate”. British Education was in a sense, sacred to his generation to send their children to the University. The children themselves, may have been less reverent but
they know well that the University was the sole route to senior ranks of the civil service, which was being reluctantly but assuredly nigerianised, in anticipation of the self rule\textsuperscript{3}. He learnt the Nigerian past during his study period in the British University from 1948-1853.

Chinua was in Biafran Government service during the Nigerian Civil War in 1967-70 and then was a Lecturer in the United States and Nigerian Universities. He had edited Okike, the leading journal of Nigerian new writing since 1971. He also held the post of Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He correlated his sense of literature and his sense of the history of Nigeria and its tradition. He mixed his own life in all his writings and a remarkable change occurred, which was shown in four stories he had written. They were reprinted and included in a larger collection entitled Girls At War and Other Stories.

Tributes were given for the collection of Achebe’s works by Kirpal Singh on the occasion of Achebe’s sixtieth birthday in his poem, “Crossing Over Achebe on his 60”\textsuperscript{4}. It is really a glorious praise for the man who reflects his African life to the readers. Kirpal Singh has used all the titles of Achebe’s creation in showing his respect and adoration to this genius. When history condenses itself into a situation, the vast canvass of the novel gets reduced into an intensely lyrical context. This is the point where drama and lyric meet.
History sketches itself across the pages of Achebe’s novel with epic dimension. It crystallizes into a tense movement of unsurpassed tragic grandeur. Achebe finds the real responsibility of the historic writer as,

“A writer has the same kind of responsibility in all cultures, but the various elements of that responsibility come in different proportions according to the health of the community he’s trying to serve. It is determined by historical predicament. In Nigeria there’s a sense of the loss of initiative in your own history, the loss of responsibility….And, of course the view of the government as alien: in our traditional culture everybody was supposed to participate in the government. Now all that has gone. Within one generation people lose even the memory of what used to be. The writer has a responsibility to remember what it was like before, and to keep talking about it”

Achebe gives importance to the past in his novels – a past which was wiped out by two important incidents – colonialism and the slave trade. Roscoe quoting Achebe observes that “no thinking African can escape the pain of these two incidents as it is the wound in our soul”. Achebe recreates the simplicity, charm and significance of the traditional life of Ibo, the devastating effect of colonialism on this rich culture and the cultural neurosis that set in as a
consequence. What the researcher analyses is the rolling survey of the history of Nigeria from 1850 to the early twentieth century. Achebe’s deep and abiding subject of remote antiquity, and “an accumulation of human achievements, a testimony of the triumph of human ingenuity and will, reach down ancestral roots”. This detribalization, anxiety and the freezing of the old ceremonial order is traced out through Achebe’s three novels, Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964).

Achebe is both explicit in his writing and implicit in his asides and his humour and the way he conducts an argument. One truth is always corrected by another in what Achebe has typically Ibo dualistic mode of thought. Wherever something stands, some thing else will stand beside it. But it is a dualism based on an acknowledgement of interdependence, between man and gods, individual and community. This view of life encourages tolerance, openness and curiosity in a world which can never become a closed system, but it also fosters skepticism of large claims and stoicism in the face of an uncertain reality.

The impact of this view of the world in western readers of Things Fall Apart was due in large part to the way it shattered the stereotype of a monolithic African tribe with powerful chiefs obeying absolute gods. Achebe says in an ironical aside, “the Igbo would consider the statement, I am the truth,
the way and the life to either the blasphemous or absurd”. This is a view of life which is suspicious of general principles or universal truths, preferring a practical morality based on a complex awareness of circumstances. The widespread use of proverbs is a vivid demonstration of this belief in a situational morality. Life cannot be fixed and codified; the very nature of existence is changing and when one thing changes everything changes with it. This is exciting but dangerous, as Achebe admits in an account of his own childhood at the crossroads of culture.

Chinua Achebe’s description of Igbo way of life with its traditions stay in our memory with complete conviction. He makes us believe that this is how his people spoke, thought and viewed their world. To achieve this he has made two major innovations in the novel in English. First of all, he has created a new form of English with an African Colouration. He has successfully done it by a strange reversal, his Igbo characters establish their speech as the norm against which the language of colonialists, the whitemen, seems bizarre and unnatural. The English which represents Igbo has a metaphoric immediacy and yet is clear that the idioms, the proverbs and the images are not those of colloquial English. Achebe tries to indicate the presence of another African language behind English modifying and at of the same time enriching it in accordance with the needs of his characters.
The traditional life is skillfully combined in Achebe’s novels with his role of novelist and anthropologist synthesized in a new kind of fiction. His essential genius lies only here. The difficulties of the task are apparent in his disciples and imitators where passages of human interest and anthropological information exist uneasily side by side. With Achebe in contrast, the reader absorbs the information effortlessly never as detachable generalizations but always as something relevant to the emotional and moral life of individual and community. It is a fact that Achebe introduces many of the conventional resources of the English novel, but he is constantly transforming these in accordance with his Igbo world view.

The inseparability may be suggested by reference to one of his essays where he writes that to bridge the great gulf between being and knowing, between his essence and existence, man has no choice really but to make and believe in some fiction or other. To describe such a commitment he quotes admiringly Coleridge’s phrase namely ‘willing suspension of disbelief’.

In one sense all the traditions, customs and folklore described in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are such rituals which mediate between this world and the world of mystery. The world in which we live, he explains,

“has its double and counterpart in the realm of the spirits. And as in metaphor, these counterparts are both like and unlike held
together without resolution by the suspension of disbelief. But when one reads *Anthills of the Savannah*, one is struck by a new and refreshing quality in the use of language, a quality that is perhaps discernible in *No longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* but not in the same degree of excellence*.

Achebe’s basic philosophy regarding the use of the English language by the African writer has not changed. A clear distinction may be noted between the language of relatively uneducated people like Agnes, Beatrice’s housemaid and Elewa, Ikem Cosodi’s girl friend. They consistently speak Pidgin language, unlike Beatrice, Chris, Ikem and His Excellency, all of whom belong to the educated elite and would normally use standard English. It is evident further that the old man with the beard, who is one of the readers of the Abazon delegation that meets Ikem at Harmony Hotel in chapter – 9 is reminiscent of the likes of Ezeulu, those who represent traditional wisdom and are blessed with the gift of eloquence. His English is meant to be Achebe’s rendering of the Ibo he would have spoken. This is all familiar to the readers of Achebe but there are a few new elements also.

As Achebe has the mastery over the English Language he is able to skillfully combine what sounds like conventional English spoken and written by linguistically talented mother-tongue-speakers with a local educated variety of
the language and the idiom of non-English speaking characters, to produce a style which is almost classical but almost with an underlying informal touch that saves it from being stilted.

The major theme in Achebe's fiction is the primacy of the collective consciousness. He portrays this collective consciousness in all his works and shows “a clan which once thought like one, shared a common awareness and acted like one”. (TFA, p.6). The life of the individuals like Ekonkwo and Ezenlu, and the beliefs, rituals, ceremonies of the community are merged into an order and significance. Though the individuals exist, they are deeply aware of the communal aspect of their very existence and no individual can think of detaching himself from the way of life or religion of his clan, for to do so is to be severed from his roots.

Ekonkwo declares the value of kinship in a proverbial statement: “An animal rubs its stitching flank against a tree, a man asks him kinsmen to scratch him” (TFA, p.151). According to Hume, this close association between members of the family teaches their the value of mutual support, giving them internal satisfaction of the mind and providing them with extended power of labour which culminates in the prosperity of the class. But it is a community that also values individual achievement. The clan judges a man according to his worth, and root him to his father. Ekonkwo at eighteen is declared the greatest
wrestler in the nine villages, the owner of two barns of yam, three wives, two titles and has shown incredible powers in two inter-tribal wars.

But whatever be the individual's achievement even if he is the chief priest, they must accommodate themselves, to communal morality. This point explains how Achebe’s characters while being individuals collectively symbolize a way of life. It is this folk consciousness that allows Achebe to create fiction out of the trivialities of life.

Ezenlu’s remark that “a mass must dance the dance prevalent in his time” (AOG p.189) can be regarded as the basic metaphor as this dance symbolizes the cohesiveness and orchestration of a united communal life. This cohesiveness of the village is maintained through its unwritten laws. Though laws are not written, there is no lawlessness. The Ibo community acts as a unit and purifies itself. For instance the excommunication of Okonkwo is a very significant communal action of the village cleansing itself of the sin Okonkwo commits by spilling the blood of a classman.

Achebe may be called as a social realist as he highlights the different situations in their respective societies quite realistically. He portrays the realism that existed in the traditional Ibo society and describes the transition from a communal to an independent individual existence in his fictions, Things Fall Apart, and Arrow of God.
One of the major indications of Chinua Achebe’s development in the historical consciousness is his vivid portrayal of women. In the earlier novels women are given minor roles and the major roles have been taken by men characters. There is one significant exception of this and that is Clara in No Longer At Ease. While she is a fully developed character, she finds herself acting in a world dominated by men, and while Eli genuinely loves her, he tends to patronize her and is portrayed as her intellectual superior. Beatrice on the other hand, is neither intellectually inferior to Chris nor dominated by him. Their relationship is a natural attraction for each other. While she rejects the Western concept of Woman’s Liberations she is definitely of the opinion that woman is equal to man and a woman can live a complete life without a man.

Chinua Achebe describes vividly in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of god, the depth and inclusiveness of the pre-colonial Ibo society, and shows a tribe who live a rich and rhythmic way of life that gradually becomes frozen. Through the stories of Okonkwo and Ezeulu, Achebe pays a tribute to the dignity of Ibo tribe and their predecessors. Achebe recaptures the vigour of traditional life, where the life of the individual, the beliefs, rituals and ceremonies of the community are merged into an order and significance, presenting a centre that will hold the protagonists who meet only defeat. Okonkwo, in a sense, never changes. The people are in the end as they were in the beginning.
They never give up their ‘sense of life’ though life and society deal hardly with them.

Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* laments the loss of rich and glorious past. Society throws light on a different kind of collective system. Achebe depicts a peaceful, well-knit communal Ibo society. As he comes from the male-dominated society, Achebe casts all his protagonists as men, except for Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The protagonists of Achebe, are not portrayed as productive, since they do not contribute materially as they do in the next phase.

Achebe depicts the crisis of the collective soul thematically. He holds up a gripping plot and a property almost unique which portrays the individual’s struggles against a society which attempts to overpower them. Achebe’s protagonists succumb to the social norms of their society and are unable to flout completely the restraint of the Ibo society on them. Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* is unable to accept the flexibility of his society and commits suicide. Achebe comments:

“the conflict between Okonkwo and the clan arises because Okonkwo remains true to the ideals which gave him heroic stature while the clan changes its loyalties”⁹.
He further adds that Okonkwo decides to remove himself from the scene rather than living like a slave under alien rule.

“Majestically dressed in his war gear, Okonkwo is found behind his compound hanging from a tree even as Shakespeare’s Cleopatra is found dead in queenly splendours. His final protest at fate leaves a lasting impression on his people and there lies his eventual triumph”\(^{10}\).

Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* is also unable to relate his own selfish desires with those of his society-demands and becomes mad in the end.

The seeds of individualism are deeply planted in the first phase. All the protagonists in the three novels are seen striving to assert their own individuality. With Achebe the individuals are seen emerging from a well-knit, harmonious, ordered and disciplined society. Ibo society is at its best in the first phase, but with the intervention of the whitemen, things fall apart and centre can no more hold them together. Gradually as the seeds of individualism sprout here, the clan no longer can think or feel as one, and succumbs to the influence of an alien force.

The socio-cultural richness of the Ibo society is seen deteriorating gradually in the next two phases and the Ibos are no longer at ease as they
were. The individuals are portrayed as heroic, chivalrous and courageous men of deep thought and action, but they emerge as individuals, they grow more corrupt and cowardly and also deteriorate. Okonkwo is cast in a better mould than Ezeulu and Obi Okonkwo are still lesser men than Okonkwo and Ezeulu.

In Achebe’s society the individuals change for the worse, though Achebe believes that change is a must. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, tries to regain his power which he feels has been slowly slipping away from his position. He develops misunderstanding with Winterbottom and he is jailed for more than a month. When Ezeulu returns, it is time for the New Yam festival, and Ezeulu is supposed to announce the yearly cycle. But he refuses to announce it in the land, the whole village makes the sacrifice to the Christian God instead and the old traditional religion loses its vestiges of power almost over night.

Achebe’s novels show how Christian missionaries and the British intervened at the end of the nineteenth century and the Ibo society experienced a transitional phase at the socio-cultural, religious and economic levels. Achebe’s treatment of Christianity is so detached that it has not been possible to judge his attitude towards Christianity. There is no immediate conversion or dramatic confrontation. This new religion enters Africa quietly and touches the week points of their culture.
The early converts were “excrement of the clan the new faith, a mad dog that had come to eat it up” (TFA, 130). Achebe’s world - the Ibo society - is in direct contact with the supernatural through their various rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, myths and legends. Though the religion practised in the Ibo world is primitive, it is sincere and honest. There is hardly any life activity from birth to death that is not intimately punctuated by a religious exercise.

In the structure of the novel Achebe tries to create interest and knowledge of the traditional way of life and the culture of the tribes. The life may be hard and yet it had its virtues as well as defects. It had its religious structure and its social fabric. It had its machinery for economy welfare as well as machinery for justice. But the advent of the Britishers made inroads into every aspect of the culture of the tribes. Achebe has deftly portrayed the confrontation of cultures in the novels.

Achebe is an altruist, in the sense that he believes in the brotherhood of man. The ambiguous politics of Achebe’s works pertains to his known identification with left-wing, anti-capitalist groups and intellectuals in his native Nigeria, and more broadly in Africa, and at the same time this identification has been brought with problems and controversies. Achebe in this sense is very much in the company of other post-colonial writers like Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer and Carlos Fuentes,
whose left identified politics sit very uneasily with the orthodox and its set revolutionary perspectives and objectives.

In Achebe’s historical novels, one sees the Ibos as a people without kings or chiefs, yet they operate highly efficient democratic government. The government functions through the cultural and traditional council of Elders (Ndichie), council of Masquerades (Egwugwu), the Oracles and their chief priests who were the liaison between the people and the gods. The society chooses to reject grand dreams propounded by ambitious individuals, and opts instead for survival, but the way to survival lies through fragmentation of the community and confusion of moral values.

In A Man of the People, the instinct to survive, which leads Umnara to choose life and Christ over starvation and Ulu, produces the self-seeking spirit of Anala and Urua. Things have indeed fallen apart, and the community which was once the source of wisdom and law now apathetically endorses any corruption which will bring it food.

Achebe may at the surface seem to have turned to a new kind of social commitment in A Man of the People, but the novel is closely linked in its essential argument with the earlier ones. Anthills of the Savannah continues the argument, two decades later, in a world where the necessity to identity the right moral behaviour, and to find the courage to see it through, still confronts
the central characters. A Man of the People looks at the possibilities of a right
government and finds deaths of right-minded men to make up such a
government.

These novels examine the fundamental issues relating to political
leadership carefully. They also analyse critically the position of women in
modern African Society. Using Obi as his mouth piece, Achebe gives his views
as the theory of class and its struggle, and questions some of the basic tenants
of Marxism, including the idea of a millennium in which there is no oppression of
one social group by another, after the establishment of communism. He looks at
the Orthodox Marxist position as a simplistic remedy to the problem of
oppression. A socialist and communistic revolution cannot solve all social
problems of a society.

Achebe strongly believes that the only way to reform a corrupt society is
by changing the corrupt leadership. In his novels he offers a kind of solution for
determining the course of Nigerian history. Abala's role as priestess in Things
Fall Apart makes a significant contribution to the novel's examination of
political leadership and sheds light on the ideology of leadership in the novel.

Achebe in his article, “The Trouble with Nigeria”, feels that Nigeria’s
problem is the result of its leaders' inability to rise to the responsibilities and
challenges of leadership. The lack of the hall marks of true leadership, namely
the challenge of personal example, has brought Nigeria to the near disaster. Nigerians are what they are, only because their leaders are not what they should be. Through Ikem, Achebe shows how all social ills stem from its 'leaders'. Addressing the students, he says:

I have desire to belittle your role in putting this nation finally on the road to self redemption. But you cannot do that unless you first set about to purge yourselves, to clean up your act. You must learn for a start to hold your own student leaders to responsible performance; only after you have done that, can you have the moral authority to lecture the national leadership. (Anthills of the Savannah, p.160).

To Achebe, leadership implies responsible performance on the part of the individual. A leader should be able to create the circumstances in which the people begin to act with awareness. Leadership may be a privilege of the elite, but the latter who have been specially trained and educated should use their education to "initiate the upward movement of the people"11. Beatrice interprets Chris's final message in the novel:

This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little Caucus, no matter how talented. (Anthills of the Savannah, p.232).
What Achebe is trying to say in *Anthills of the Savannah* is not democracy but perhaps an “enlightened dictatorship by the elite, an acceptable leadership style to reestablish vital inner links with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of nation’s being. (Anthills of the Savannah, p.141). In his triology, Achebe analyses the part of his society and traces a kind of psychic journey through the characters of Okonkwo, Ezeulu and Obi Okonkwo, a download path from stability to anarchy. It is journey from the inspired and fulfilling rituals of the past to empty parodies of the present, a view which partly resembles, as Jonathan Peters observes in, "Yeats' sphere with its two gyres or vortices as symbol of universal conflict" and partly mirrors T.S. Eliots’ visions of the modern world as a moral and spiritual wasteland. It is… a down-to-earth exposition of the protracted fortunes of black Africa as the shape, size and focus of order have moved from clan to ethnic group and from nation to continent.

Achebe is a social anthropologist because of his interest in the socio-cultural patterns, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies of his clan. His interest stems from his study of the impact of civilization upon another. In tracing the fall of the Ibo civilization through his fictional characters, Achebe succeeds in convincing the reader that, this which had happened to the Ibo clan in the past, is how the historical force works. Civilization is not static. It can collapse from within and be overpowered from without. The new order usually offers all that the old has
overlooked, but even this new order must yield to another in course of time, for power and shift of power in an inevitable element of historical determinism.

The design and execution of Achebe’s novels give a historical overview of the Ibo society from the colonization to post-colonial Africa. Avoiding both the method of indulgence and flagellation, Achebe asserts the objective truth about the past of this tribe. He believes that nostalgia and remonstrance are both necessary, because a people without a history is a people without a future. Achebe in his article “African Literature as Restoration of Celebration” shows how a literary artist can be nostalgic without sacrificing objectivity or realism. As a writer committed to social realism, he illustrates how disintegration of his society stems from the loss of allegiance to the religious and more of clan and ethnic group. He also dwells on the lessons to be learnt from the ironies of human relation and the responsibilities of an individual to ensure a valuable legacy for the progeny.

Achebe reveals a pronounced similarity of purpose in his writings; at the same time they provide rich contrast in their point of view, ideas, characters and representation of reality. Like most of the creative writers, he, too, has used the fictional form with explicit social commitments, yet one perceives a striking dissimilarity in their respective efforts to endow a changing ethical mood with new values. Achebe makes use of his creative genius with great insistence on
the obligation of the African writer to his people, achieving a skillful balance and synthesis of aesthetics and didacticism. He moves further away from the typically traditional, to explore worlds and view outside its limited confines.

Achebe perhaps is more innovative in this aspect and undertakes a bold experimentation in his fiction with an uncommon earnestness and unique vision. His intention is not just to tell one more tale, but to create through ideas, an experience, that can be shared against a reawakening tradition, and its total effect evolves out of an aesthetic merging of characters, situation and episodes. The writer combines an insight into human predicament with a mature vision. These works also mark a steady eventual progression in the image of the emerging history.

It has been fascinating to watch how from a closed, self-contained complacent world emerges a totally transformed being, reshaped and reformed through consistent conflicts and crises. Apart from exploring deep into the intricacies of the human psyche, the effective aesthetic apprehension of a transitional phase in history, compels us to subscribe totally to and reinforce a basic sociological notion that man does not simply react to his environment but responds.

It is understood that the need of the day is socio-cultural cohesion, that is a successful grafting of the two best elements of the past and the present. In
other words, Achebe’s concept of ideal self should be grafted with Achebe’s concepts of the truly meaningful communal living. In every society there are individual creators and the society needs men of such integrity and calibre to redeem it.

Chinua Achebe in “The Nature and Fulfillment of the Individual” observes that a Westerner would be most reluctant to destroy in a page or two her angel and paragon of perfection, the individual hero. And if he has to be destroyed then it has got to be justified by final impressive speeches. Achebe does not have these obligations, because in his scheme and hierarchy the human hero is not near the top. He is subordinate to his community to begin with, even when he is their leader and priest. But even most important is his hero who is subject to non-human forces in the universe. The ideal to be sought in Achebe’s views is the one which grants freedom for the individual and safety for the society. History that represses the individual’s spirit will rapidly degenerate into mediocrity.

“But without history there can be no meaningful individuality to exercise, and no civilization. History needs his fellows for his survival and sanity.”

In other words every culture that truly desires excellence will have to redress the balance between the two realities of present freedom and past
responsibility in accordance with the excesses of its own past practices. Those that have sat too heavily on history will have to restore liberty to him, and those that have denounced ties of past responsibility must learn that without ties there can be no fulfillment in the complex conditions of modern life.

Having effortlessly destroyed the myth of African primitivism in *Things Fall Apart* and established Igbo life as a valid norm, he then traced the effect of two powerful but contradictory cultures upon his hero in *No Longer at Ease*. Now, beneath the hostility of these two cultures Achebe started revealing the common elements and patterns of meaning. He defines their difference in order to assert more clearly that they are alike.

Achebe’s first four novels depicting the Nigerian situation in different eras—pre-colonial (*Things Fall Apart*), Colonial (*Arrow of God*), pre-independence (*No Longer at Ease*) and post-independence (*A Man of the People*) are critiques of colonization and constitute a chronicle of life in Eastern Nigeria. Achebe introduced psychological crisis into Nigerian literature when prose fiction was dominated by Amos Tutuola’s Folklore romance and Cyprian Ekwersis’ stories of city life.

In his novels Achebe wrote about Igbo life plan, as an Igbo, by creating a new kind of fictional reality. His novels are informative, didactic, entertaining and refreshing. They are but a dialetic transformation of experience—a new
way of looking at tradition to create a different order of reality. Exploring the human conditions, his novels attempt a search for roots. It is quite true that Achebe has used many conventional resources of the English novel, but he is constantly changing these in accordance with his Igbo world view. This is something which a non-Igbo reader cannot easily grasp since, as he acknowledges in an essay, this world view can only be seen indirectly:

“Since Igbo people did not construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe and the place of man in it, preferring the metaphor of myth and poetry, any one seeking an insight into their world must seek it along their own way. Some of these ways are folk tales, proverbs, proper names, rituals and festivals”

His novels try to project an exact picture of the archetypal African in his native surroundings before his encounter with the Whitmen’s culture, (Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God) and the effects of culture interaction (No longer At Ease, and A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah) without much exaggeration and excitement.

Achebe’s novels as fictional chronicles of Nigeria in particular and of African in general, are meant to counter the complexes born of years of denigration and self-denigration. Subordinating anthropology to human
condition in Africa and transforming anthropological detail into social in particular Achebe through his Igbo quartet, tries to redeem the African novel from its anthropological cliché’s.

His chief concerns in his works are the two realities of man in the society – his individuality and group identity. He is also concerned about the legacy of colonialism, English as the medium of expression of African experience and the relevance of colonial experience to the present. He speaks of human values and the new nation’s confusion of values and offers his leaders a new set of values, a new frame of reference, a new definition of stranger and enemy. His novels are to be read from the point of view of an insider who is incidentally a man of double nature, hybrid culture with Igbo heritage.

It is a fact that the Africans have been oppressed by the whites for generations together. The result for the writer, the teacher and the intellectual is that he is culturally alienated and adopts the language of the dominant people to convey the essence of his experience.

Chinua Achebe has always admitted that English language has been used for communicating among themselves. He has also asserted that one had to modify English to convey one’s own sensibility rather than let one self be
bought over by language. Achebe observes thus in “The African Writer and the English Language:

“I should say I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him, to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out this message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost”16.

Chinua Achebe is certain about the contradiction of using the colonialist language and the dilemma it poses to the contemporary writer. Though Achebe writes in standard English it is by no means a conventional one. Achebe is clear about the medium he chooses to convey the African experience, in “African Literature as Restoration of Celebration”. His observation runs as follows:

“We chose English not because the English desired it but because having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism has grouped us, we needed its language to transact our business ….. overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time”17.
Achebe makes use of myths, parables, folk tales, proverbs, anecdotes which he has found out in abundance with the oral tradition. The proverbs in his novels show the reader the logic of the culture. They provide guidance and give a cultural context from which the readers can understand the rules and conditions which govern the society. Proverbs are used in conversation quite often; they characterize the mood of the speaker and values of the society one represents. For example Achebe uses proverbs such as:

Like a bushfire in the harmattan

*(Things Fall Apart, p.17)*

First chase away the wild cat, afterwards we blame the hen

*(Arrow of God, p.420)*

Like the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come.

*(No longer At Ease, p.181).*

Proverbs and sayings are used in speech not as an aid to thought or as a means of generalizing a decision but to rationalize and justify a decision and action taken.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo says, “I am not afraid of work” and then goes on to cite the lizard who praised himself. “The lizard that jumped from the
high iroke tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no on else did” (p.31). Later Mwakiebie explains why he has refused to give yams to many young men, and then uses the example of Eneke the bird and tells Okonkwo that he can trust him just by looking at him before he appeals to the saying that “one can tell a ripe corn by its looks”.

Chinua Achebe is a committed writer in the sense that he shows his responsibility to African society. His western training and reading of English fiction stood in good stead in rendering his African experience. Achebe in a way Africanises the English language which denied him an African identity and subverts it to restore ancient African culture to its prime dignity.

To understand the full effect of Achebe’s use of proverbs in the English language or any rhetorical device in his writing it has to be viewed as part of an ordered and unified artistic structure. Critics find that proverbs by themselves have little significance. They are of the opinion that proverbs “are like dormant seeds lying in the dry season under earth waiting for the rain”. In Igbo they serve two purposes: they enable the speaker to give universal status to a special and particular incident and they are used to soften the harshness of words spoken and make them more acceptable\textsuperscript{18}. 
In ‘Things Fall Apart’ Chinua writes, “Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”. (p.6).

The artistic inter-play of form and content in Achebe’s novels contributes to our understanding of the Ibo cultural ethics and aesthetics, creating delight. Achebe thus fulfils the writer’s responsibility which, according to Samuel Johnson, is “to instruct by pleasing”.

The language in Achebe’s novels works consistently as a mode of revelation of characters; it also enacts the erasure of colonial attitude and values. In **Anthills of the Savannah**, pidgin has become the legitimate language of the common people while standard English represents the language of the Nigerian elite.

Achebe has been criticized several times for his style of writing where the non-Nigerian reader many often have to guess what some words and phrases really mean. Achebe has shown how an alien language can be used on the native speakers to confuse or deceive. The Nigerians generally interpret the words the way they are used than grasp the true picture. A language is not only words and grammatical structures but the use of language carries with it prejudices, habits and mannerisms of its native speakers. One important
condition in understanding the writings of Achebe is to place them in their cultural, geographical, historical and ideological contexts.

Achebe has created a new kind of fictional reality in his novels. His novels, though essentially local, limited in scope and artless in western sense, have a universal appeal for their vision of life despite their being tragic in the face of defeat and despair. His characters, with a grasp for situation prevailing in Africa, have exhibited their capacity to endure suffering and triumph over the human predicament. Achebe’s fictional art goes beyond argument and propaganda. He, as a major exponent of the modern African novel with universally acclaimed literary merits in him, is a writer to be reckoned with.

For African writers “Art is not for art’s sake”. It is reflective and representative of native tradition and culture and always at the service of man. African writers have endeavoured to explore the human condition in Africa and tried to highlight the “unique and novel” potentialities of self, the man of Africa. They have attempted to define the world in their own terms based on their aesthetics, culture and philosophical assumption and even to re-evaluate the western aesthetics.

African literature has to be studied and examined by its aesthetics and politics. Beauty and pleasure alone are not the basic things in contemporary African writing. It aims at preserving African cultural identity and African
character unaffected by the outside world and culture. Basically it is about traditional Africa, but with a new civilization emerging from the ‘new’ African culture. Modern African literature is significant not for its historical aspects but for presenting in the more restricted and more immediate sense, the social and cultural situation prevailing in Africa.

In one sense all the traditions, customs and folklore depicted in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are such rituals which mediate between this world and a world of mystery. “The world in which we live, he explains “has its double and counterpart in the realm of the spirits”. And as in metaphor, these counterparts are both like and unlike held together without resolution by the suspension of disbelief”¹⁹.

The cultural and social change provides the novelists with their themes and subject matter. Different stages of cultural and social changes are represented in the novels, from the early contact between the classical, traditional cultural and modern industrial culture to the present time of considerable adjustment and synthesis. Achebe looks at the situation in terms of traditional modern or rural urban differentiation and consequent clash of values. He shows that the behaviour of the characters has been largely conditioned by the social, economic and political environment which in turn has been very much affected by social and cultural change.
Increasingly over the last few years Achebe has been articulating the story’s central importance in his thinking about morality, politics and culture. He is whether responding to Tutuola’s novels or explicating a variety of African myths is not clear. “Through African myths the ancestors are sending us signals from the long history and experience of bygone days about the meaning of life, the qualities we should cultivate and the values that are important20.

Achebe shows this perception of change by dramatizing the tension and conflicts which result from it and which are reflected in the structure of social relationships. He portrays characters, their personal behaviour and idiosyncrasies and predicament, as a reflection of the conflict and the lack of full integration in the changing social scene.

Achebe’s novels demonstrate that it is possible for a writer with his roots firmly planted in the local Africans writing in a foreign language to produce work that is authentic as regards local colour and universal in terms of humanity and the empathy that informs it. His fiction is a rejection of some tradition of fiction, which preceded it and the fulfillment of others.

Achebe has made major innovation in novelistic writing in English. First he has created a new form of English with an African colonization. He has done this so successfully that by a strange reversal, his Igbo characters establish
their speech as the norm against which the language of the colonialists, the white man seems bizarre and unnatural.

Achebe hints in a variety of ways at the presence of another African language behind the English modifications and at the same time enriching it in accordance with the needs of his characters. Yet it does not sound like a translation. The English has taken the African contours without losing its flexibility. It ranges freely from the oracular utterance of the “egwugwa” to the irrelevant asides of the villagers in their form of language which establishes itself as firmly as the traditional way of life it expresses.

The importance of the ‘Chi’ in cosmology is highlighted with the help of some fables. The story of the little bird Nza occurs both in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. It brings home the fact that a man should never provoke his fate. Men’s and women’s stories illustrate male and female values. While Okokwo’s stories exemplify warfare and violence in order to inculcate courage in children (TFA, 53, 37), Ekwefi’s stories of the mosquito (TFA, 53), Obiageli’s unending chain tale (AOG, 65) are meant for entertainment.

Legend is one of the many elements that lend fascination to Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. Several of them concern the origin of Ulu (AOG, 157), the legend of Idemili (AOG, 41) and the legends of Egwugwu (TFA, 63; AOG 199). These are a few of the many legends mentioned. Since market is
important in the Ibo society, market legends are also mentioned. (AOG, 19). The popularity of the legends shows that the traditions of the clan are kept alive.

The elaborate description of the various ceremonies gives us a chance to have a closer look at the well-developed sense of the symbolic view of religion in the ancient societies. They also lend charm to the narrative as do the stars to the night sky. Some interesting ceremonies include the appearance and proceedings of the Egwugwu (TFA, 63, 84; AOG, 199), the first coming of Ulu (AOG, 71), the Idemili festival (AOG, 39), the ceremony of Akwunro (AOG, 94), and the ceremony of Ogbazulubodo (AOG, 23).

The language acquires naturalness despite frequent allusions to African terms mostly because Achebe is adept in integrating the African panorama into English. His use of customs provides an example as seen in the description of the treatment given to a guest. Upon entering a friend’s Obi, a guest is seated either on a goatskin mat or on an earthen stool. Then he is given a piece of chalk with which he draws his emblem on the floor and paints his toe or face. The bond of good will is complete with the passing of the Kola around, and sharing its content (AOG 6`, 94 and 191; TFA 5; NLE, 47).

The use of idioms lends Achebe’s language and style a native flavour and force. Besides giving us a close and convincing picture of a society in transition, this technique helps his characters sound natural while speaking an
alien tongue. A few such idioms deserve one’s attention. Frequent references to Flora and fauna imply the proximity of the Ibos to nature.

“O kokwo drank palm wine from morning till night and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor” (TFA, 44). Achebe emerges as a writer of acclaim for his efficient use of European language to portray the gyres that African life is made to whirl through.

Achebe’ novels question and dismantle the European view of African history and culture. They challenge and provide alternative to many of the assumptions upon which European fiction is based. It is true that Achebe employs many of the conventional resources of the English novel. But he is constantly transforming these in accordance with his own Igbo world view.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


7. Ibid., p.3.


16. Ibid., p.61.


