

Cultural Expression and Achebean Language

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ABSTRACT

The study of language in the works of Achebe reveals how it can be used as a tool of social stratification and how the imposition of a foreign tongue on a community can lead them to internalizing the notion of their indigenous language[s] being inferior. The Achebean African characters conversing in English berate the fellow Africans using Nigerian Pidgin and Igbo, for they view them as being illiterate and uncivilized, a notion embedded in their psyche as a result of the British colonial regime's suppression and the concept of self – hate that they propagated amongst the African natives. Achebe, however, skillfully 'colonizes' the colonizer's language to display, simultaneously, the civil aspect of the Igbo tribal and counters the false narratives propelled by them in relation to the 'uncivility' of the tribal. His effective and innovative use of language to demonstrate the African culture is reflected through the fact that he uses it to display the rich African oral culture, folktales and the rich proverbial bank of the African Igbo culture. Analyzing Achebe's language also reveals as to how it projects biculturalism, the collision between the African and British ideologies in his novels. Achebe's language aptly captures the constant tussle faced by the characters in between the two cultures. This paper seeks to showcase how language can act as a conveyor of multiple notions and help one in developing a better understanding of the world.

Keywords: language, culture, gender, oral culture, post colonialism, folktales.

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as the repository of culture. Both language and culture are inextricably linked. Bakhtin frames the relationship between language and culture as such, "all words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (293).

Language solely is not a medium of communication, rather an accumulation of socially ingrained practices; thus, words are socially responsible entities. Language acts as a mediator for any social interaction that has to occur and so we can deduce that quite similarly social interactions too live linguistically responsible lives. "According to Kramsch culture is represented by language since

culture is interpreted, mediated and recorded by means of a language” (Kavakli, 89. Culture is essential for the sustainability of a language and vice – versa. Without the effective cooperation of both none will exist. “According to Nasir and Hand culture is regarded as a repertoire of shared beliefs, experiences, practices and values that are used by a group of people in order to understand the world around them” (Kavakli 89). The relationship amidst language and culture is deeply rooted and is homologous in nature. Language is responsible for the maintenance of culture and cultural ties. Different notions originate from differing language use within one’s culture and the whole intertwining of these things starts from an individual’s birth.

In order to forge a better understanding of a culture and its people, it’s essential to have knowledge of their language. It acts as a vehicle of expression for the cultural beliefs and practices that regulate the life of a society. An interesting deviation is that as resulting from the studies of Emmitt and Pollock is that individuals brought up under analogous behavioral milieu or cultural environment but however converse in different languages, their worldviews would be contradictory. Different thoughts are enabled by the different use of languages. Language and culture developed simultaneously, affecting the lives of people just as much as one another. A look back at the history of language and culture reveals certain parallels here and there. The evolution of language directly influences the development of culture and vice- versa. This indicates that the more advanced our language is the more cultured we are. Language and culture are integral to one another. According to Wardhaugh “the culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do” (220). Thus, language is a resource that allows one to communicate their culture and thus retain their beliefs and ethics.

Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

In *Things Fall Apart*, an arresting parable of a proud man Okonkwo, first published in 1958, Chinua Achebe harnesses language, exclusively proverbial, to characterize the civilized Igbo culture. All the proverbs employed in the novel originate from the Igbo culture. The proverbial language used by the Igbo people in the novel is eminent enough to display that they possess a sturdy heritage and history which is symbolic of civilized culture. The language of the Igbos within the text is abundant in both these aspects and therefore acts as a signifier of their strong and civilized culture not the mere culture of barbarians, a notion propagated by the Westerners. Proverbs are often associated with eternal wisdom and hence the proverbial language reveals the intellectual side of a culture. Whenever Achebe wants to portray the wisdom embedded in the Igbo culture, he puts strong proverbial language in the mouths of his characters. The novel is abundant with the examples of the usage of proverbial language. When Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel visits Nwakibie, the most affluent man in the village of Umuofia, to ask for Yam seeds, he says “A man who pays respects to the great paves the way for his own greatness” (Achebe 19). This showcases how the Igbo culture revered the accomplished and paying respect to them was reckoned as carving a path for one’s own greatness. He also says “The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did” (Achebe 16). Through this Okonkwo explains his capacity for hard work ahead of Nwakibie, his sons and neighbors. It also suggests how Umofian people like Okonkwo had a sense of true pride instilled in them, unlike the whites who derived their false pride by belittling the African culture. The proverbial language represents the strong

morals and culture of the Igbo society. In the novel, Achebe writes, “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (8), referring to Okonkwo, who had ‘washed his hands’ of his bad reputation that came because of his father Unoka, a lazy and improvident man and his bad lifestyle, by scaling the ranks in Umuofia and becoming a titled man through his hard work and determination. The aforementioned proverb showcases how their culture stresses on being thankful for everything that they have and that has been bestowed on them by the benevolence of the spirits. Achebe goes on to write in *Things Fall Apart* that, “When a person says yes, his chi (personal God) also says yes” (27). This implies that the Igbo natives believed that if you are demure and devote yourself to your God, he will not say no to you. This also portrays the deeply embedded concept of humility within the Igbo culture. Achebe’s use of the proverbial language shows how wise and immensely intellectual the Igbo culture is. Another proverb that Achebe uses is that, “A man who makes trouble for others also makes trouble for himself” (27), this being similar to the Christian Golden Rule that the British were quite aware and familiar with. Another proverb that is of utmost significance and shows the greatness of the Igbo culture is, “As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others” (Achebe 125). This proverb is used when Okonkwo is exiled due to him killing a fellow clansman and suggests the high rationale the Igbos possessed, for keeping an offender and violator amidst them would corrupt the others as well so it was better to exile him. These proverbs exactly portray that the 37 Igbo culture is a highly moral and civilized one and debunks the claims of the English who classified them as backward and barbaric, ignoring the fact that the themselves were uncivilized in colonizing the African nations. Through the proverbial language of the Igbos Achebe aims to resolve the misconception of the white people regarding Africa, attack their bastardization of the natives and portray the Igbos as a dignified community. While the Europeans in *Things Fall Apart* are displayed as intolerant and full of mockery for the Igbo culture and religion, questioning the existence of the Igbo gods, Igbos on the contrary are a community tolerant of other cultures as a whole. For instance, Uchendu is able to observe “what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (Achebe 129). The second volume of Chinua Achebe’s African trilogy, published in 1965, *Arrow of God* is a continuation of the epic saga of the Igbo community. In this novel too Achebe sustains the usage of proverbial language to represent the rich culture of the Igbos. Proverbial language is used in abundance to explain Igbo ideals, cultural norms and to capture the Igbo traditional setting. Commenting on the importance of the usage of proverbial language amongst his people he says, “among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (122). Highly prized in the African traditional society, “proverbs are the repository of native intelligence, code of moral laws and philosophy of both life and social justice” (Alimi 122). 38 Through the proverbial language that they communicate with, the characters of Achebe’s *Arrow of God* serve as the mouthpieces for the Igbo cultural values and wisdom. The novel is rife with the instances of the usage of proverbial language, especially during the crucial moments within the text. “Unless the wind blows, we do not see the fowl’s rump” (Achebe 59). It showcases people’s resentment towards Ezeulu for allowing his son to embrace the religion and culture of the white man and puts at display the conflict the between the Igbo cultural beliefs and Christianity. The proverb showcases the wisdom of the Igbos and their culture, for by the proverb they mean that through the course of time a person’s true personality is revealed through their actions. Seldom do any elder characters in the novel speak without the usage of proverbial expressions when counselling or advising for they are the flagbearers of the wit and intelligence present in the Igbo culture. Egeonwanne advises his people to be cautious in their interactions with

the Okperi people and present themselves as emissaries of peace, a quality they are known for, and to not act otherwise for that would lead the Okperi people into choosing war. This also shows how social problems and personal difficulties can be settled by the usage of appropriate proverbs. Alimi says that proverbs are “kernel which contain wisdom of the traditional people and they are also philosophical. They are moral 39 expositions shrunk to a few words because it is didactic” (122). The proverbial language in the text carries the undertones of Igbo ethics and morality. In the *Arrow of God* Achebe writes, “The inquisitive monkey gets a bullet in the face” (44). This means that if you are extremely nosy, your nosiness will be met with physical violence and might eventually lead to death. This showcases that Igbo culture considers it highly unethical and immoral to meddle in the affairs of others and suggests to refrain from it, for it might prove to be fatal for the one meddling. Another proverbial expression used in the text is, “Have you not heard that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest” (Achebe 131). This expression suggests that when family falls apart no member of the family ends up benefitting from this outcome. It showcases that the Igbo culture emphasizes on strengthening familial ties and suggests to refrain from clashing and fighting with the members of one’s own family for it would lead to an outsider taking undue advantage of the situation. The proverb, “So leave them to me because when a man of cunning dies a man of cunning buries him” (Achebe 20). This means that someone whose cunning can only be outsmarted by someone who is also cunning. The Igbos believe that to in order to counter a shrewd person the other needs to think shrewdly too. Ezeulu had gone against his people by getting close to the white man and now that he was being ‘invited’ he felt threatened. The Igbos believe that one should expect the natural consequences of his / her actions. It also serves as a warning that one should not indulge in activities that might muster trouble for them in the future. Since the Igbos are a 40 tribal community, their proverbial expressions constitute the elements of nature, thus showcasing how their culture values nature and is embedded in it, with the proverbial expressions serving as a means of delineating the Igbo cultural values.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Achebe’s language in his famed tetralogy describes his desire to provide a raw and authentic portrayal of Africa. He labors to build a rich narrative structure that strangles the Western perception of Africa being a residence of the barbarians. Achebe says, “In my view it is a gross crime for anyone to impose himself on another, to seize his land and identity, and then to compound this by making out that the victim is some kind of ward or minor requiring protection” (7). He structures the language in a way that it caters to depicting the African and Nigerian reality. Although Achebe writes a majority of his famed tetralogy [*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*] in the Standard British English to make the African voice heard on a global scale, by ‘nativizing’ it to showcase Africanity, he does not compromise from using his mother tongue Igbo in his works and does not sacrifice the Igbo lexicon for a foreign tongue.

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