

## **Cultural Strands of Africa in the Works of Selected African Novelists**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between literature and culture is a well-established notion. Culture is manifested through literature, and literature thrives on or derives its sustenance from culture to a large extent. The history of literature, in general, stands a witness to the fact that the impulse of expressing cultural attributes wrapped in nativity has produced glorious pieces of literature. Not only that, some brilliant pieces of literature have come up as a result of a protest against the refusal to give vent to one's cultural identity and patriotic feelings. The emergence of African literature in English is a case to this point. This research paper aims at exploring all those cultural strands in African life, the hunt of which has produced widely acclaimed literary pieces by Chinua Achebe, Alex La Guma, Gracy Ukala, and the likes. Moreover, this paper attempts to measure the degree of disillusionment with the imposed belief system on mankind and its reflection in the contents of a literary work.

### **KEYWORDS**

African Literature; Novelists; Cultural identity.

The evolution of African novels is the very evolution of the voices of protest and dissent manifesting itself in a medium that assumed the shape of a literary form, corresponding to the most realized and intensely felt predicament, Africanity. The imperialistic tendencies, the colonial hangover, the intent to dominate the troubled psyche of a battling race humbled into submission coupled with the refusal of space for social and political rehabilitation represented through Ibo finally discovered a medium to break away from the imposed

shackles of the alien rule in all its complexities.

The contemporary culture rooted in a voice of liberation found an outlet in the convergence of the likes of Chinua Achebe, Alan Paton, Gracy Ukala, Osman Semberne, Ngugi Wa Thiongio, Tsisti Dangerambga, Ayi Kwi Armah, Alex La Guma, and Ben Okri, who took the collision course to usher in an era fraught with a realistic possibility to force a socio-political transition. African novels or the fiction of apartheid came about at a time when the world was pushed

deep into the throes of a political crisis. The major political powers of the world ganged up to subdue the flame of protest emanating from the trauma of alienation, humiliation, rootlessness, and the disintegration of the much-trumpeted Africanity. Let us see the observation made by Chinua Achebe regarding the transition from oral to written communication. He says:

Short stories gave us a convenient bridge from oral to written literature. Amos Tutola's episodic novels attest this as does the fact that Cyprian Ekwensi preceded his novel with short fiction in traditional settings. But short stories are not choosy about who writes or how. They are versatile and will consort all manner of people especially with those caught in tight and nervous conditions and undesiring to unburden themselves. (*Jussawalla* 32)

The above observations do suggest what the writers thought of as a medium to express the ire and angst and aspirations of the common people engaged seriously in the exploration of what constitutes the idea of nativity and Africanity. Further, we can also examine an important statement to establish the intensity and the willingness to engage the attention of the world and what it perceives of a race badly bruised by the imperial designs of the imperial powers. Chinua Achebe says in an interview with Bernth Lindfors:

I would be perfectly satisfied if my work particularly when I speak of the past, was to teach my readers at least my compatriots - that their past, with all its imperfections, was not a long dark night for society from which the Europeans delivered them, where savages lived in a permanent state of anarchy until the white men came bringing peace, law and order,

religion and a higher form of civilization. (*Lindfors* 47)

Achebe showed how Africans led decent normal lives in well-regulated societies that placed strict legal and religious constraints on human behaviour. Indeed, according to Achebe, things did not fall apart in Africa until Europe intruded and set everything off balance by introducing alien codes with which Africans were then told to live. Europe did not bring light and peace to the Dark Continent; it brought chaos and confusion.

The African backdrop was murky and blurred further by the repressive white civilization. Literature reflects the urge to break away from the shackles imposed by the order of the day. Extending this tradition, a cluster of writers joined hands driven by the love of the land and the desire to be raised to human dignity. The emergence of African nationalism led to the discovery of Africanity which by implication meant a conscious assertion of the right to self-determination and the ambition to be free from the abuse of imposed authorities.

To go into the elements of what builds Africanity, we can fall back upon some textual support to substantiate the meaning of Africanity concerning African nationalism; a political movement for the unification of Africa. African nationalism has its roots among the educated elite (mainly returned Americans of African descent and freed slaves or their descendants) in West Africa in the 19th century. Christian mission-educated many people challenged overseas mission control and founded independent churches. These were often involved in anti-colonial rebellions, for example, in Natal (1906) and Nyasaland (1915). The Kitwala (watch-over movement) and Kimbanguist churches provided strong support for the nationalist cause in the 1950s.

Early African political organizations include the Aborigines Rights Protection

Society in Gold Coast 1897, the African National Congress in South Africa 1912, and the National Congress of West Africa 1920. After the First World War, the nationalists fostered moves for self-determination. The fourteen points encouraged such demands in Tunisia, and the delegates to London in 1919 from the native National Congress in South Africa stressed the contribution to the war effort by the South African native labour corps. Most nationalist groups functioned within the territorial boundaries of the single colony, for example, the Tanganyika African Association and the Rhodesian Bantu Voters Association, one or two groups, including the National Congress of British West Africa which had wider pan-African visions. The first Pan-African Congress was held in London in 1900, and others followed after 1919.

The pan-African sentiments in Africa and America were intensified with the Italian invasions of Ethiopia in 1935. By 1939, African nationalist groups existed in nearly every territory of the continent. Africa's direct involvement in World War II, the weakening of the principal colonial powers, the increasing anti-colonialism from America (The Atlantic Charter 1941 encouraged self-government), and the Soviet criticism of imperialism inspired African nationalists. This brief history suggests the gradual evolution of Africanity and the rise of nationalist sentiments. It also points out the eagerness to be a constituent of the ruling impulse that permeated the whole of Africa. To remain unaffected in such a volatile situation was like keeping eyes off the developments. The African novelists launched themselves by expressing their aversion to such rules and finding ways to enunciate a method of struggle to realize the political goals and keep the flame of protest burning. The first novelist to dally in such fanciful writing was Alex La Guma who found the medium of fiction as a

legitimate weapon to attack the usurpers of land and the intruders of culture.

Now let us turn to the evaluation of the term Ibo and determine its cultural significance in the context of Africanity. Ibo or IGBO members of the West African Ibo culture group occupy Nigeria. Primarily, cultivators, they inhabit the richly forested tableland, bounded by the river Niger to the west and the river Cross to the east. They are divided into five main groups and their languages belong to Kwa branch of the Niger - Congo family. By definition, IBO does signify a cultural and linguistic identity widely explored and exploited by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. As a celebrated African novelist, Achebe seems entirely preoccupied with the idea of the Ibo as it assumes special significance in his writings. He clung to the belief that Ibo not only establishes the ethnic cultural identity but also remains firmly entrenched in African imagination. Consider the lines:

I remember coming with my father to this very place to cut to grass for our thatches - said Akukalia. It is a thing of surprise to me that my mother's people are claiming it today. It's all due to the white man who says, like an elder to two fighting children, you will not fight while I am around. And so, the younger and weaker of the two begins to swell himself up and to boast. (*Arrow of God* 19)

These lines from *Arrow of God* point to a serious situation as Akukalia seems lost and condemns the loss of the native values and refers to the white man for the sorry spectacle. Achebe here again highlights the dilemma and the predicament of a native character who laments the loss of nativity which is simultaneously Africanity. Further, this concern that time and again appears in his writings for the immediate association with the blurred present keeps on haunting him. It is interesting to examine further the locale and topography against the suppressed Africanity that

finds it hard to be released from an imagination serving insubordination:

I cannot dispute any of the things you say. We did many things wrong in the past, but we should not therefore go on doing the same today. We know what we did wrong, so we can put it right again. We know where this rain began to fall on us. (*Arrow of God* 132)

Again, we find the resolution being made and the query to self is a confirmation of the fact that together with the white they have travelled quite a distance. It was a mistake to have any interface with the white man as they know exactly when it began. Almost every page in the novel is a supporting fear that they are responsible for fiddling with the idea of Africanity. Achebe does not create images to communicate his agenda rather he is fierce and direct. And again, look at this fury:

Who is to say when the land of Umauro has been desecrated, you or I. Ezeula's mouth was shaped with haughty indifference. As for being alone, do you not think that it should be as familiar to me now as are dead bodies to the earth. My friend, don't make me laugh. (*Arrow of God* 134)

The sense of remorse is all evident and the two seem engaged in the evaluation of how things are going wrong for them. It also implies a sense of resignation to the situation. Achebe's concern is primarily to highlight the plight of the Africans in general and Ibo in particular. This celebrated African novelist seems to be so badly obsessed with the idea of protecting the native culture from foreign exposure that Ibo assumes particular significance in his writings. Perhaps he induced the flame of dissent by the celebration of possibilities and by challenging the status quo. He relied upon his imaginative resources on the one hand, and the broken and bruised consciousness

on the other, to find the Africanity facing threats from colonial agencies. It might have been written as a document of protest against the repressive mechanism of misrule and anarchy and can well also be seen as a surrogate word for liberation. What strikes me most is the selection of the title *Things Fall Apart*. It is not only this novel that suggests the impact of the modern literature and sensibility upon him, as another novel *No longer At Ease* is also evidence of the modern borrowings and suggestive of a conscious effort to respond to the spectacle of chaos caused by colonialism which for him and other writers bore resemblance to the horror and the nightmare of history that modernist writers in Europe and America were writing about.

Another important dimension of Achebe's writing is the relationship between him and the Ibos as an ethnic group and the relationship between the Ibos and Nigerians. He is a Nigerian novelist, who not only exhorts the Ibo but the multi-tribal Nigeria is duly represented. The significant point is the universality of appeal made by Chinua Achebe about clan custom, which he feels threatened by contact with other cultures and societies whether from Europe or other societies. One of the most appalling events in the life of the African people was the European aggression and occupation of Africa and the aftermath of the colonial anarchy and misrule. All the novels of Achebe vibrate with the rhythm of Africanity and rejoice in the resurgence of Africa. Achebe's portrayal of Africa is realistic but disturbing also. The depiction of the clan culture, the association between the fallen and resurgent Africa, and the desire to make it a utopian land make him the most read and widely applauded African novelist.

The thematic impulses that we have so far seen seem to be rehashed tales dominating the psychology of modern literature. Saul Bellow examined the

individual disorder and the existentialist adventure through the *Dangling Man* and *Herzog*, John Steinbeck exposed the bourgeoisie design by attacking the monopoly capital, and Doss Passos advocated a radical rupture from the obsolete ideological system while fighting for the restoration of the lost human dignity. African novels investigate the lost landscape also; the intrusion of imported dreams and the racial abuse committed by those holding Africa hostage. Much of the African fiction focuses on the stream of broken and fragmented consciousness, the imposed sense of inferiority, and the anarchic perception of governance having scant respect for uniform social order gone awry at the altar of the invasion of the native tribal culture.

Nigeria seems to be the most productive land conducive to the growth of protest literature. Garcy Ukala's *Dizzy Angel* went on to discuss in detail the human tirade against the imperfect and corrupt political order indulging in the destruction of the local colour. He is a naturalist prose writer whose docility lies in discovering the disturbing face of Africa and Africanity but does its bit in creating a sense of impending doom for the natives if the colonial spell goes unabated. Unlike Achebe, he does not have the power and the emotional resources to leave any disturbing impact on the reading world but it does seem to hold the uncompromising Africanity together. Ben Okri's *Famished Road* is a brilliant saga of corruption, starvation, and vices of many generations that constitute a compassionate vision of modern Africa and the magical heritage of its myths.

A major voice of African fiction Okri does not revel in fantasy, paints Africa in its grotesque image and apocalyptic vision while capturing the intimidating scenes of violence. *Famished Road* remains an unsurpassed road, a moving human tale that incorporates no dogma. In this novel of rare insight, we find a relationship

between history and contemporary social and political threads mired in the confusing perception of realising the self and the nation. The all-pervading Africanity binds the diverse threads together. It will be quite unfair to discuss the Africanity and the cultural ethnicity without discussing Alex La Guma, the man who walked the initial roads of dissent and is one of the pioneers of protest literature. He took to novel writing to expose not only the shams and cant and the damnations of the age but also to find a suitable method of responding to a turbulent situation. In *The Fog of Season's End*, he illustrates this point further and negotiates the rough stretches through a drive to retain the native land and purge it of the alien moorings. The cultural roots are regained through a realistic characterization, and the stamp of the dissent written all over seeks a route to overthrow the White men who were vilifying the natural odour of the land. His novels embody a concern that was duly and admirably adopted by the writers who followed him. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that he cast the first stone toward the liberation of Africanity. In *The Fog of Season's End*, he goads and guides Africans to rise and recognize their ethnicity and cultural identity.

Some other novels of prominence written during the 1950s and 60s sharing the concern for Africanity, holding on to the ethnic identity and the crisis of culture manifested through African myths are: Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*, Ousmene Sembene's *Xala*, Ngugi Wa Thingio's *A Grain of Wheat*, Thomas Motolo's *Chaka*, Tsisti Dangerambga's *Nervous Conditions*, Mia Couto's *Terra Sonumbula*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are yet to be Born*, Ama Atta Aidoo's *Our Sister Kill Joys*, Nadime Godimer's *Burgers Daughter*, Jamal Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherland*. These novels are singular in theme and consistent

in treatment as they do not look beyond the redemption of Africanity plagued by umpteen ills and seek solutions through literature. Much of the African fiction of the 1950s reminds us of the American fiction of the 1920s where the concern was again to find a dignified life for the individuals of the society while the African fiction of the 1950 and 60 stay connected to the most cherished goal of freedom apart from a life of grace and glamour without the intrusion of outside agencies.

In all the novels cited above, the notion of Africanity that thoroughly recurs may be enunciated as the blind love, the anguished and burning soul within an African body that tends to wrestle the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Though it is difficult to pen an article reasonably comprehensive and all-encompassing while portraying a vast canvas as is the case here, it gives ample inklings of the path trodden by African literature that realized its fruition in casting off the veneer of exoticism in its entirety.

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