

English/ Semester-3/CC-12/ Modern Fiction

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) as a Novelist

About the Author

Chinua Achebe (Albert Chinualumogu Achebe), was born in the Igbo (earlier Ibo) town of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria on November 16, 1930. He was the fifth child of Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet N. Achebe. Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, short story writer, cultural historian and the globally acclaimed scholar. He served as professor at Brown University and critic enjoying his position as the most impactful African writer of his generation depicting social and psychological disorientations.

His father being an instructor in Christian catechism for the Church Missionary Society had stopped practicing their traditional religion. Chinua had a strict Christian upbringing, but most of the people around him lived a traditional life. They performed all of their traditional and ethnic rituals. Although they lived, according to Achebe, in the —crossroads of cultures, where the majority of people had different styles of life, they could get along with each other and live in peace.

Initially Achebe learned his Igbo language and was proud of his culture and his native language (Chua, 1996). Therefore as a young boy Achebe was exposed to a combination of traditionalism as well as Christian influence. He travelled with his mother for thirty-five years to different parts of Igbo land, spreading the gospel.

In 1967, Achebe along with a friend Christopher Okigbo started a publishing company called Citadel Press to promote better quality of African literature available to children. He became a research fellow and later a professor of English at the University of Nigeria in 1976 and held this post till 1981. He spent most of the 1980s travelling, attending conferences and delivering speeches.

His novel *Anthills of the Savannah* published in 1987 was about a military coup in a fictional African land. A tragic car accident in 1990, left him paralyzed. The disability, however, could not demoralize the courageous writer and he became the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College, New York. He became a member of the Brown University faculty as the David and Marianna Fisher University Professor of Africana Studies in 2009.

Influences

In an interview with Donatus Nwoga, Achebe explained his goal as an author:

“I think we might be neglecting our proper function if we take anything for granted instead of thinking what exactly is our society, what are its needs, what can I do, what can I contribute; that is what I was trying to get at, and I think we have a very important function ... this is only one of the roles of the writer, as a teacher (Duerden & Pieterse, 1972: 7)”.

Achebe stated that his fundamental theme as a writer is to show:

“That African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, what they had poetry and, above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must regain. (Killam, 1977: 8)”

Achebe as a Postcolonial Writer

Though born a Christian, Achebe was able to sense the struggle which had taken place between the newly converted Christians and the former pagans. He noticed how those who converted to the new religion did not only reject the old one and adopted another, rather they rejected their culture as a whole, i.e. old traditions and customs. They even became ashamed of them and sought to adopt those imported with the newcomers. Such ungrateful attitude to the mother culture was unacceptable to Achebe who, in spite of his English education and Christian religion, has been known for his love and devotion to his traditional culture and his interest in its revival.

Achebe made use of his multicultural knowledge in responding to what he considers a misrepresentation of his culture and people in colonial masterpieces for he sees himself more qualified than the Europeans. Being originally a native African he strove to provide a more authentic account of the type of life the Africans used to have before the colonizers' arrival. It is important to keep in mind that Achebe did not write such novels just for the European reader who has been misled by the colonial works, he also means it to remind his own people of their past and assert how it was valuable.

Achebe puts it frankly in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher" (1988): *“I would be satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers that their past- with*

all its imperfections- was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them .Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure."

As an African novelist, he took it upon himself to address the unique problems that menace the continent. The writer, according to Achebe has keen sensitivities and an ability to spot inequalities. Therefore, the African writer is aware of the monumental maltreatment which Africans have been forced to undergo. Hereby, Achebe found it as the duty of the writer to re-write the story of Africa highlighting the injustices Africans faced from the Western intrusion of the continent. It is now popular to argue that the post-colonial literatures are primarily concerned with writing back to the centre, by active engagement—in a process of questioning and travesty colonial discourses (McLeod 2000: 25).

According to O'Reilly (2001), the writer is aware of some key issues of the postcolonial text that include: the use of indigenous cultural traditions, the appropriation of English, and the impact (whether cultural, psychological or political) of colonialism and its aftermath .

Apart from this, Achebe's optimistic attitude towards English confronts him to expand his methods of expression, his intention to use literary devices, and his multi-layered themes that can be ingeniously concealed underneath the pages of his text.

Achebe explains his use of English as a type of linguistic advancement. He says,

*"I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (1965)".*The commitment of a postcolonial writer to his art, therefore, involves a certain conscious choice to express a specific point of view and to place enough tactical pressure to persuade the reader to re-examine social realities.

As a postcolonial writer, Achebe therefore intended literature to figure out (and also challenge) the states of realization. The author refers to an experience which had changed the physical realities of life and also internal modes of outlook of the tribal psyche in the essay *The Novelist as Teacher* : “ ...the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races.”Achebe's novels demonstrate the formation of a genre extended as a particular body of imaginative discourse chiefly absorbed with the forms of defying the role of the

western cultural hegemony in determining and endorsing African states of consciousness.

Anthills of the Savannah (1988)

After a long gestation period of 20 years Achebe's fifth novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, a postcolonial fiction, was published in 1988. The title of the novel comes from a proverb *about anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last years bush fires*, underlining the usefulness of the narrative tradition in bearing the seeds from claiming future recharging.

Achebe considers the civil war in Biafra, as a defining moment in the history of Nigeria. This socio-political novel shows all aspects of colonial process from the beginning to the end of colonial contact. Achebe shows the influence of British tradition on the Kangan elite culture and its life. The country's new leaders were the products of the imposed European culture. The triad of friends- Ikem, Chris, Sam and Beatrice all educated in British schools, represent their lives and credence on the European British way of life and after a military coup, unexpectedly find themselves in the positions of president, commissioner of information and editor of the nation's principal newspaper -- and friends no longer.

Both Chris and Ikem return to Kangan after their college education in the U.K., with the hope to build a vibrant democratic nation, but get stuck in the web of corruption and authoritarianism that has been so typical of postcolonial Africa and alienated them from their roots and culture.

Anthills of the Savannah takes place in the imaginary **West African country of Kangan**, where a Sandhurst-trained officer, Sam, known as "His Excellency", has acquired power after a military coup, who thrusts an atmosphere of fear and paranoia. The novel opens with the meeting of the regime's president and his cabinet . Chris acts as a mediator between Ikem and Sam. Chris and Ikem supported Sam to become president even when his military background was inadequate for such an eminent position. Chris and Ikem try to control his ways but find Sam paranoid with the obsession of power. Sam decides to be "president-for-life" but the region of Abazon refuses to participate.

While discussing works of Chinua Achebe **Elaine Showalter** sees Achebe as a furious and spirited reviewer of conspicuous continent's crash of vision and

leadership. The book ends with a non-traditional naming ceremony for Elewa and Ikem's month-old daughter, organized by Beatrice.

Significance of the Savannah

Anthills of the Savannah which is the title of the novel is a powerful symbol that can be found in the novel.

Achebe uses **anthills** or termite mounds which are very common in Africa to symbolise independent selfish colonies. It is a **mound of earth made by ants** as they dig their nest. African despots have used the sweat of the people to build for themselves.

It is also instructive to know that sometimes **Savannah** is used to represent **Africa** particularly **Nigeria**, the country attained independence in 1960. For instance, a breed of wild cat called Savannah Cat and Savannah Monitor (medium sized specie of monitor lizard) have been researched to be native to Africa.

In a newspaper review, a critic says that *Anthills of the Savannah* is “a vision of social change that strikes us with the force of prophecy...” (USA Today). Here, there are clear references to the prophetic deployment of language by Achebe in the novel.

Courtesy : Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam