

Re-evaluation of Afro-postmodernism in Chinua Achebe's and Ben Okri's trilogy novels: An approach to postcolonial and magical realist literature

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Abstract:

Trilogy is a series of three books, plays, etc. written by the same person and together forming an extended, unified work written about the same situation or characters, forming a continuous story. The paper attempts to explore the elements of post modernism, postcolonial and magical realism in Chinua Achebe's The African Trilogy, the book series that comprised of three books i.e. Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God and Ben Okri's trilogy: The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, Infinite Riches. It will review the origin of its traditional literary works and the major readings of the trilogy novels in the light of the concepts associated with oral tradition, belief, realism and culture marked by the overall indeterminacy that captures a society caught between its traditional roots and the demands of a rapidly changing world. The paper will highlight the genres that make up the trilogy novels in its complex and extreme intertextuality, that would alternatively put forward the elements of Afro-postmodernism, Afro-coloniality and the African American narrative strategy. Hence, it will explore the evolution of African writers, rise of African novels consisting of constructive narrative strategy revealing traditional and cultural forms and its relevance with the Postmodern African Literature.

Keywords: Afro-postmodernism, African literature, magic realism, postcolonial, trilogy.

I. Introduction:

In Literature, trilogy is a series of three related works. The word trilogy has originated from the Greek word 'trilogia' which means a series of three tragedies performed together at the Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece, forming a tetralogy with the satyr play. Therefore, trilogy novels are the series or group of three novels that, although individually complete, but closely related in theme, sequence, or the like.

Chinua Achebe was born as Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in Nigeria (16 November 1930 – 21 March 2013). His first novel, *Things Falls Apart*, became a classic of international literature and required reading for

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students worldwide. He also authored four subsequent novels, two short-story collections, and numerous other books. Achebe who titled himself as Igbo chief, focused his novels on the Igbo society and its traditions, the effects of Christian influences and the clash of Western and traditional African values during and after the colonial era. His style relies heavily on the Igbo oral tradition, and combines straightforward narration with representations of folk stories, proverbs, and oratory. He also published a large number of short stories, children's books, and essay collections.

Ben Okri OBE FRSL is a Nigerian poet born in 15 March, 1959. A novelist who is considered as one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions. Okri began his success as a writer at the early age of 21 when he published his first novel *Flowers and Shadows* in 1980. From 1983 to 1986, he served as poetry editor of *West Africa* magazine. Between 1983 and 1985, Okri became a regular contributor to the BBC World Service who continued publishing throughout the period. His novel *The Famished Road* won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1991 which made him the youngest ever winner of the prize at the age of 32. *The Famished Road*, along with *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* makes up a trilogy that follows the life of Azaro, a spirit-child narrator, through the social and political turmoil of an African nation reminiscent of Okri's remembrance of war-torn Nigeria.

II. Objectives:

(i) The paper attempts to explore the elements of post modernism, postcolonial and magical realism in Chinua Achebe's *The African Trilogy*, the book series that comprised of three books i.e. *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God* and Ben Okri's trilogy: *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches*.

(ii) It will review the origin of its traditional literary works and the major readings of the trilogy novels in the light of the concepts associated with oral tradition, belief, realism and culture marked by the overall indeterminacy that captures a society caught between its traditional roots and the demands of a rapidly changing world.

(iii) The paper will highlight the genres that make up the trilogy novels in its complex and extreme intertextuality, that would alternatively put forward the elements of Afro-postmodernism, Afro-coloniality and the African American narrative strategy.

(iv) Hence, it will explore the evolution of African writers, rise of African novels consisting of constructive narrative strategy revealing traditional and cultural forms and its relevance with the Postmodern African Literature.

III. Methodology:

Secondary sources have been generated from textbooks, internet, scholarly journals and articles, and critical studies of the authors' works.

IV. Discussion:

Chinua Achebe's trilogy novels portrays the traditions and culture of the Igbo people where he tries to employ his own literary style to make his work appealing to readers. He resorts to oral literature, culture derived from the Igbo ethnic group to depict the Igbo tradition and culture to the non-initiates. Achebe's trilogy novels portrayed the issues of gender, race, ethnicity, tradition, invasion, pacification and social pattern of Igbo people in Nigeria. He is the writer who "opened the magic casements of African fiction" and considered the father of modern African literature. Achebe may have the universal application of themes in his novels to study his native people, yet the Igbo experience has parallels in native cultures around the world which makes the study socially important as it deals with the problems which are universal.

Achebe's Trilogy—comprised of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), captures a society caught between its traditional roots and the demands of a rapidly changing world. Through these three masterly novels, the writer depicts his imagination of three generation lives of an African community, upended by the forces of colonialism from the first arrival of the British to the waning days of empire. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is his magnum opus which is a set text in English speaking countries all over Africa as it portrays an archetypal situation: the dismantled of old tribal culture and society by the colonists. The novel introduces the character Okonkwo, an important member of the Igbo people, whose clashes with missionaries fails to adjust as his village is colonized by the British. He was coupled with his own tragic pride which led to his fall from grace. In *No Longer at Ease*, the writer introduces Okonkwo's grandson, Obi Okonkwo, a young man, educated in England, returns to a civil-service job in Lagos, who clings to his membership in the ruling elite only to see his eroding moral values. *Arrow of God* tells the story of Ezeulu, the chief priest of several Nigerian villages, and his battle with Christian a missionary who later finds his authority under threat from rivals and colonial functionaries. He is determined to lead his people and believes himself to be untouchable even if it is towards their own destruction. Through these trilogy novels, Achebe sets his personal narratives in the context of moral struggle and tragic drama of colonization.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses narrative proverbs to express the distinctive quality of African fiction to elaborate the strategy for diverse formal, thematic, and aesthetic purposes. This novel consists of nine embedded narratives, of which seven are folktales and mythic stories, one a pseudo-history, and one an anecdote. The embedded narratives construct the total meaning of the novel, with themes, plot, characterization and some insight that clarify the action to enrich the setting and environment. This narrative proverb represents different aspects of the many-sided action of the novel, within it knowledge is attained through analogy, allusion, and metaphoric extension. It defines its epistemological order by making the readers aware that the world of *Things Fall Apart* is traditional that explores the traditional life and communally shared values. Hence, the novel encounters the subject matter that represents the European and African worlds and the beginning of British colonization of Igboland (Nigeria) in the southeastern part.

Achebe's characterization is entirely set in a traditional world-view and value system that have been handed down from great antiquity, subsisting within an oral culture with its intimate face-to-face social configurations. The major constructive strategy is the use of narrative proverbs that expresses the oral traditional impulse in the lives of the characters to define vernacular sensibility in the Trilogy novels. The intrusion of

orality is more than the use of exterior style, which makes Achebe's works a life-like portrayal of the experience of achieving the poetics of verisimilitude.

In Achebe's novels, the reader explores a few decades of Nigerian history where colonization brings an alien culture that led to the destruction and death of the native culture, and paved the way for the regeneration of a new one. The theme of pacification, envision and disruption gives the firm impression of Nigerian novels. Chinua Achebe established the Nigerian tradition in his novels to express national culture. This tradition takes its roots from the Nigerian folk culture and creatively makes use of the native proverbs, legends, folktales, and local myths by capitalizing the indigeneity of both Nigeria and African literature. Through his novels, Achebe deconstructs the Western colonial discourse and reconstructs the history of Africa by depicting total rehabilitation of the image and dignity of the African personality bruised and damaged by the colonial master. He eventually projects the true African experience and the new image of Africa to the world creating a global appeal reaching far beyond the periphery of Africa. Achebe accomplished his success by using the same language i.e. English as a tool which was once used by the colonizers as a means of control.

In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, hybridity is expressed through the hybrid language patterns, and by mixing the oral language of Africa with the written language forms of English. It is a hybrid novel that explores the hybrid forms constructed by Achebe based on the Postcolonial theories of HomiBhabha and Mikhail Bakhtin. It carries the double-consciousness of its characters aiming to show the real-life experience of the Igbo people in the pre and Postcolonial era in Africa. However, from another perspective the novel is a pathological reading of the past depicted by Achebe in order to reflect how in future the Igbo subjects can move toward decolonization by relying on 'hybridity' as a source of strength which can only be possible with regard to the existing potentials to build strong new voices. In this sense *Things Fall Apart* can be taken as a postcolonial discourse drawing on the pre-colonial as well as the colonial Nigeria in an objective manner in order to help the Nigerian readers find how to piece together what once fell apart.

Achebe in his African trilogy shows hybridity as a dynamic process which occurs in every cultural contact; the more cultures interact with each other, the newer hybrid cultures take place and thus, new language varieties and styles will be produced. This means that hybridity can not only appear under the colonial encounters, but it can also appear in any kind of cultural contact. In this sense, hybridity is represented by Chinua Achebe to show the effects of colonialism in one hand, and to exploit these effects to challenge and reject this colonization in the other hand. From a post-colonial perspective and a stylistic approach, as an African writer his novels reflects the uses of oral tradition for rehabilitation of history. As an African writer, Achebe constructs the novels with innovative strategies and methods, by means of the novel as an archaeological instrument for the survival of oral culture within the written one, for making people hear the voice of African oral tradition. He craftily blends to produce a particular "Africanized genre", where different traditions are combined- one that is supposed to be borrowed from the West and another that is rooted in his own cultural environment. He demonstrates the work which studies the interconnectedness of orality and literacy to coin and develop the concept.

Ben Okri's trilogy comprises *The Famished Road (1992) and its sequels Songs of Enchantment (1993) and Infinite Riches (1998)*. For the construction of his narratives, Okri creatively uses elements from an indigenous traditional to demonstrate the oral culture in *The Famished Road*. In the trilogy novels, the writer blends fantasy and reality which addresses the reality of postcolonial Nigeria. Okri uses myth, the Yoruba abiku ("spirit child"), and other fantasy images to shift between pre-independence and post-independence settings. Ben Okri's trilogy is also known as abiku trilogy which refers to the phenomenon of a child who is caught up in an unending cycle of births deaths, and re-births, the term being literally translated as "one who is born, dies". Both the themes of spiritualism and realism has been interlinked in the Abiku trilogy novels i.e the one a dimension of the other, the same narrative mode that African storytellers have been using for centuries. Instead of conventional realism, the writer uses appropriate oral cultural elements and constructive literary narrative to showcase the Nigerian identity expressed through myths and rituals. Since, the novels employs a unique narrative style incorporating the spirit world with the "real" world in what some have classified as Animist Realism. Others have labelled it African Traditional Religion realism, while still others choose simply to call the novel fantasy literature. The book exploits the belief in the coexistence of the spiritual and material worlds that is a defining aspect of traditional African life.

Drenched in traditional African folklore, Okri's abiku novels offer a mixed message on the question of purity and the quest for tap roots and homogeneity. For a constant pursuit to exchange ideas, experience, and material culture, in the best tradition of an avowed cosmopolitan, the writer depicts a Yoruba intellectual climate which was and still is largely characterized by a dialogic ethos. The most obvious disparate elements and divergent practices are made to interact in a small village which becomes the scene of a multifarious cultural traffic and the amphitheatre. Ben Okri have depicted a quest for a more hopeful future, where edges blur between tradition and change, science and myth, old and new and even between the human and the spirit world to create an open-ended postcolonial discourse. He initiates a reconceptualization of his creative practice that redirects him back to his African heritage, where a Yoruba resource-based forms the kernel of this process, his contact with other epistemologies makes his work decidedly hybridic in nature. The comprehensive fields of Postcolonial Studies, Diasporic Criticism and Anthropological Studies, situates Ben Okri's literary oeuvre within a globalised African consciousness that embraces all humanity.

The nature of the trilogy's characters, time, space and the tissue of the plot suggests fields of possibilities beyond "magic" and "realism" that connects the readers to engage in challenges of practising cross-cultural reading between two contradictory codes corresponding to the incompatible logics of capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, which, however conflicting, never fall into an assumed or imposed hierarchy. This crossing of cultural lines results to a discourse which is neither one of a no man's lands nor one that rests on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the comfortable notion of cultural diversity. Rather, it is one that forms the basis of a denunciation of the primordial ideological dogmas celebrated by both the imperialistic logoi and reactionary attitudes to it. The possibility of a new definition of culture is being opened up by such a discourse, which does not need to choose between consecrated versions of metropolitan forms and representations of essentialist alternatives.

The theme of magical realism provides the optimal literary field that respond to the cultural issues and conditions in its narrative style as well as in its cultural environment traverses the contemporary postcolonial

society. For example, the codification in the magical-realist narrative of both colonial and postcolonial discourses, involved in a dialectical struggle, reflects many of the problematic relations existing between colonizer and colonized in postcolonial culture. This leads to the investigation of hybridity as an important trope in the ongoing process of literary and cultural decolonization. Consequently, and in theoretical and political terms, what magical realism tries to do here is replacing the dominant culture and its version of truth by a new mode of perception that opens up various levels of thought and accepts the possibility of many truths to be considered simultaneously and not hierarchically.

V. Conclusion:

Drawing on the traditional Igbo tales of Achebe's youth, *The African Trilogy* is a literary landmark, a mythic and universal tale of modern Africa. As Toni Morrison wrote, "African literature is incomplete and unthinkable without the works of Chinua Achebe.

Ben Okri on late Chinua Achebe: "He was a man who answered the questions of his times, the times in which he found himself, in tough, brief, elegant novels and in doing that actually helped to create a language of literature in which many of us came to write in afterwards. So in a way he is the sweeper of the road ahead, he was one of the three great writers that cleaned the road ahead so that succeeding generations could travel along it."

After the death of the great Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri talks to the BBC's James Menendez about the Nigerian Author's lasting legacy. The inspirational impact of novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, the civil war – "a real *Things Fall Apart*" – and Achebe's role as a true "Africanist" author are discussed in this short clip from BBC Newshour.

Drawing on the traditional Igbo tales of Achebe's youth, *The African Trilogy* is a literary landmark, a mythic and universal tale of modern Africa. As Toni Morrison wrote, "African literature is incomplete and unthinkable without the works of Chinua Achebe.

Achebe through his assertion in his novel's final section, "anyone seeking an insight into [the Igbo] world must seek it along their own way", shows the negligence of the European colonizers to engage with African culture, which led to a palpable failure. He adopted the hybrid narrative in the African Igbo portrayal as a reflection of their real life. Moreover, he shows the changes that the colonizers have brought into the Igbo's community. In this matter, through his hybrid forms, Chinua Achebe changed the European negative views on African people as being primitive and savage. He mocks the African customs in terms of the European conflation of print and the public spheres that can actually make sense through colonizing perspectives. Achebe delineates a "fabricated reality" that suggests the timelessness of oral literature to preserve Igbo speech culture amid the struggle for control of the means of communication. Hence, Achebe broadly uses the African orature, culture and literature more relevantly to build a literary genre through his works.

Okri through his novels, replaces nationalist politics with a more local allegiance to people and to places, their cultures, histories, and their predicaments in the face of larger social and political issues, where he laid emphasis on the resultant transformation of the individual self and action in novels. Hence, Okri expounded

a certain kind of humanism depicting a synergetic association of the individual and the collective in the context of postcolonial societies, through the portrayal of interpersonal relationships in his novels.

Ben Okri's *Abiku Trilogy* explores the function of hybridity showing the destabilization of such spaces as the real and the imaginary, the new and the old, and the self and the other, a third space emerges where irreconcilable perspectives and contradictory properties coexist, although problematically.

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