From Ethnicity to Nationalism: a Reading of Chinua Achebe's Selected Novels

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Abstract: *The idea of a nation-state was completely new for the African people when it was introduced to them by the European colonial rulers. Before the colonial incursion, Africa was divided into small ethnic and tribal groups which were run by indigenous administrative order. The scramble of Africa into different nations irrespective of ethnic identities compelled the African people to come under a structure called the nation. While they failed to grasp an entirely new system of administration, they preferred to stick to their respective ethnic identities even after years of its introduction. The ethnic factor remained prominent even after independence of African countries. This persistence of ethnic factor resulted in numerous ethnic conflicts in the continent. Chinua Achebe catches this very aspect of Africa in his novels. Achebe is concentrated in his own country Nigeria which is itself an ethnically diverse country. His three novels under consideration reflect the journey from ethnicity to nationalism emphasizing the need of securing the rights and lives of all ethnic groups of the country.*

Key words: *Africa, colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism, Nigeria.*

I. Introduction

An ethnic group can be defined as a group of people who are connected by kinship, history, culture and geography. "Ethnic community ideologies, however, generally claim that members of the "we-group" share their entire culture, ancestry, language, history and are rooted in a specific territory." (Miller 313) These people share a sense of belonging and they shape their ethnic identity together. Thus Ethnicity means a person's ethnic identity which is not a very simple term as a person's ethnicity might come from his local or village identity or it may be connected to a broader area i.e. the district. "Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction." (Eriksen 12) Therefore, ethnicity is a basis of one's identity and of asserting one's sense of existence.

Nationalism, on the other hand, is a concept or a political ideology that involves an individual's loyalty, attachment and sense of belonging to the nation. It implies an individual's acceptance of and allegiance to the primary interest of the nation. Virtually, every nation-state is more or less ethnically divided but these nations are not based on any common ethnic identity as nationalism promotes the coming together of all ethnic groups to one single platform: "Ethnic ideologies are at odds with dominant nationalist ideologies, since the latter tend to promote cultural similarity and wide-ranging integration of all the inhabitants of the nation-state, regardless of their ethnic membership." (Eriksen 263) Within a nation-state, all members are citizens who contribute to the existence and well being of other citizens whom they might not know personally. It is an imagined community of people who perceive themselves as a part of the entity called 'nation' where "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 6) This community of people goes beyond their cultural and ethnic differences and unites as a nation.

II. Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa/Nigeria

The pre colonial Africa was a region of innumerable ethnic groups that used to live according to their own community norms. They maintained their own geographical boundaries and administrative rules. During colonization, Africa was divided among the European colonial powers who did not give any thought to the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of the continent. This division known as the 'Scramble of Africa' was accomplished by dividing the region into different nations. This concept of nation was a European construct which the colonizers introduced as one of their numerous strategies. Moreover, while the introduction of the idea of 'nation' was prerequisite to make Africa progressive and modern, it also made different ethnic communities accommodate a concept which was totally unknown to them.

Africa prior to the European intrusion was, in the large, a continent of tribal peoples, and the colonial rulers only unintentionally and marginally brought the tribes within a modern national mold. For the bulk of the people of Africa, with very substantial variations in degree from area to area, it is presumably still correct to

say that their social-political identification is with their tribe and with their immediate locality rather than with any hypothetical nation or with the state which has taken over from the colonial regime. (Emerson 195)

So people who are accustomed with their own ethnic boundaries find it difficult to accept the idea of an extended political entity called 'nation'. As a result, people who are compelled to be the citizens of a nation are unable to feel themselves as a part of it that still remains an alien institution for them. This inability to feel the sense of belonging gives rise to ethnic rivalries and ethnic tensions in most of the African nations during and after the end of colonial rule.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country. Like any other African country, Nigeria is known for its high diversity; it consists of many different ethnic and cultural groups. It is a conglomeration of about 250 ethnolinguistic groups.

Of these distinct groups, the three largest and dominant ones are the Hausa/Fulani of the north, the Yoruba of the southwest, and the Igbo of the southeast. Apart from the Yoruba and the Igbo in the south which, have traditionally played an important role in Nigerian politics, some of the medium-size groups in the region include the Ibibio, Ijaw, Efik, and Uhrobo. (Miller 54)

While these numerous ethnic groups give the country a highly diverse nature, the same diversity prevents the people to emerge as a nation. In fact, ethnicity has been a major issue of Nigeria from the pre independence period. In the post-independence period, Nigeria witnesses the increasing rivalries between different ethnic groups which stand as a challenge in the process of nation-building. Though the struggle for independence brings all the ethnic groups together to stand against colonial rule, the post-independence scenario marked by the failure of development projects, the unequal economic growth, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor etc. fuel the deeply grounded ethnic loyalties to come into surface. As the ruling political parties fail to address the problems of various ethnic groups and economic benefit remains confined within dominant political classes, ethnic tensions start appearing.

As a result of this quick reining in of nationalism's popular thrust within the bureaucratic structures of essentially artificial post-colonial states, ethnic or regional movements rooted in the colonial era had fresh life breathed into them and came to be seen as attractive alternatives to the dominant political parties with their demands for uncomplaining obedience from the governed. (Vail 2)

Each major or minor ethnic group desires to have a representative among the ruling elite so that each can enjoy the fruit of development. Thus, political leaders succeed in gaining unquestioned loyalties from their respective ethnic groups. As ethnic consciousness predominates, ethnic politics becomes the chief hurdle to achieve Nigerian nationalism.

III.   Ethnicity and Nationalism in Chinua Achebe's Novels.

Chinua Achebe, one of the most remarkable African writers, belongs to Nigeria. As an author and also as a citizen of the ethnically disturbed country, Achebe has given serious treatment to the issue of ethnicity and nationalism in his writings. Three of his selected novels *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (987) deal with these particular issues. While the first novel is set in pre-independence Nigeria, the second is set in the post-independence period. The third novel has the backdrop of Nigeria in the 1980s. Achebe's observation of the political, cultural and social lives of Nigeria during the three different eras shows how the country has been ethnically divided and what route it should take to bring all the people together to form a nation.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe portrays a historic time when the country is going to be independent but its people are unable to see themselves as the members of one nation. Achebe projects this dilemma of the time in the character of the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo. Obi, a western educated young man, belongs to an Ibo village called Umuofia. He has come back from England after completing his study there. Returning his motherland, Obi dreams of a country where all ethnic or linguistic differences would be forgotten. He imagines a community of people who would perceive themselves as a part of the entity called 'nation'. But Obi's dream and the reality of Nigeria appear to be contradictory to each other. While he wants to represent his country as a whole and arouse a national consciousness among the people, he finds that the country is divided among different ethnic and language groups out of which the attainment of nationhood appears difficult.

Achebe shows this lack of national consciousness mainly through the members of Umuofia Progressive Union, an organization that sponsors Obi in his study in England. The members of Umuofia Progressive Union "who leave their home town to find work in towns all over Nigeria regard themselves as sojourners" (No Longer 5. Italics mine). So they confine themselves within the boundary of their community beyond which their sentiment does not reach up to the national level. Tejumola Olaniyan observes: "Beyond the basic utilitarian demands of earning a living, they refuse to structurally engage the city where they live, or even the new larger national entity in which they have been incorporated. (52)

This lack of national consciousness is again seen when the Chairman of the Union asks Obi: "Have they given you a job yet?" Obi realizes that "In Nigeria the government was "they". It had nothing to do with

you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble." (*No Longer* 37) Because of this inability to reach beyond the community level, they do not see Obi's corrupt practice as harmful to the economy of the country. In providing the loan, they expect to enjoy the benefits of the education. For them, it is "an investment which must yield heavy dividends." (36) Regarding this, James Booth observes: "The Umuofia Progressive Union, unaware of the wider problems of economics and still seeing the world entirely in terms of local and immediate needs, conceives of Obi as an investment which must be made to pay off. (96) Therefore, when he comes to the Welcome Ceremony wearing an ordinary dress, while all others are dressed in agbada or European suit, they cannot take it easily. They expect that his European status would enhance their own prestige as they want to compete with other towns which have "four or five or even ten of their sons in European posts in this city." (7) That is why, later on, when Obi steps out of his pleasure car in one of the monthly meetings of the UPU, they feel extremely happy and express it by clapping, cheering and dancing.

So Obi who is determined to build the nation by keeping himself away from the rampant corruption ultimately falls into the trap of corrupt forces as he does not get a moral foundation in his people. Thus Achebe projects the inability of the people belonging to a specific ethnic group in coping with the new political situation forced upon them by the colonial rulers. While the novel ends without providing any solution to the problem, Achebe's next novel *A Man of the People* shows the same issue with more intensity and depth. Though, here, Achebe's main concern is with the prevalent corruption of the country, he makes it clear that people's lack of national consciousness has also contributed in the growth of corruption and lawlessness.

A Man of the People portrays the scenario of an independent country resembling Nigeria. Achebe introduces Chief Nanga as the corrupt and unscrupulous minister who robs the country of its treasures. He along with other ministers of the ruling party takes undue advantage of the development projects and loots the country's coffer. Chief Nanga has full support from the people of his village who have no objection at his corrupt practices. Nanga is a political leader who aims at retaining his office by using ethnic factors; he deceives people by arousing ethnic sentiments "raising fears and tensions of the threat that would be posed to their ethnic group if other groups should gain political ascendancy." (Oluwole 10) Therefore, in *A Man of the People*, the question is – who are the 'people'? and whom is Chief Nanga actually representing? – his community or the people of the nation? Through the novel, Achebe demonstrates the actual non-existence of a 'people' in the newly formed nation.

Achebe shows that Chief Nanga keeps his people satisfied by using various tactics. In the welcome ceremony at Anata Grammar School, Nanga succeeds in pleasing everyone. He calls himself the servant and his people the master whom he is bound to serve. He appears extremely approachable only to show his fake concern for the people and to deceive them about his selfish motives. The lack of national consciousness among the people makes it easy for Nanga to loot the nation's coffer as people "assess their representative in his own terms, by the amount of loot he brings back to the constituency." (Carroll 278) For them the country is an eatable item of which they want their share through their representative. Nanga says "our people must press for their fair share of the national cake." (*A Man* 12) Nation's wealth is thus considered an item that must be devoured. "The readers cannot help but notice that no one talks about baking the cake, only about eating it." (Okechukwu, 112) The novel provides sufficient evidence that people only want to loot the treasure of the nation, no one is concerned about how to protect it or increase it. Even though they know about Nanga's corrupt practices, they do not have any objection because they are under the impression that if the minister is well fed, they would also get their share. When they are asked to protest and raise their voice against the misdeeds of ministers, they offer a cynical answer: "Let them eat, after all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide? . . . Besides, if you survive, who knows? it may be your turn to eat tomorrow. Your son may bring home your share." (145)

Thus Achebe, in A Man of the People, successfully portrays the failure of the people of the independent country in coming together bounded by national sentiment. This failure in raising a voice against corruption results in the continuation of underdevelopment in the country. Consequently, the rich people become richer and the poor become poorer. In the subsequent years, the ruling class starts keeping themselves away from the common people. Instead of addressing the problems of the country, the political leaders and ministers get busy in increasing their wealth and upgrading their own standard of living. Achebe deals with this very phase of Nigerian politics in his last novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. This novel portrays a moment of crisis in the social and political spheres of Nigeria that faces a catastrophic point when a solution is most urgent. Achebe shows that Nigeria can be saved from the crisis only when its people would come together as a nation by breaking the boundaries of ethnicity, culture, language and religion.

Anthills of the Savannah is set in an imaginary country called Kangan resembling Nigeria of the 1980s when the country's political life has been devastated by a series of coups and counter-coups. One military rule after another fails to restore order and stability to the country. Achebe shows that, be it Republican government or military, Nigeria's burning problems have never been properly addressed and solved. Therefore, he, through

the novel, visualizes a future where a strong leadership would emerge and all the citizens, inspired by true national consciousness, would come together to form a nation. Achebe hopes that a strong leadership and the emergence of the people as a nation can only solve the problems that have been plaguing the country from years.

Achebe presents three males Sam, Chris and Ikem and one female Beatrice as the leading characters of the novel. His main concern is to find out the ideal leader among them, a leader who can bear the responsibility to lead the country and its people towards progress and development. The three males are childhood friends but now follow different routes. Sam is the President of a military regime in Kangan. He is the self-proclaimed leader who wants to govern the country using force and violence. Chris is the Commissioner of Information of Kangan and Ikem is the editor of a government owned newspaper National Gazette. Beatrice is the Senior Assistant Secretary to the Minister of Finance in the Kangan Government.

The lives of these four characters revolve around the political twists and turns of the country. While they have different roles to play, they also hold different viewpoints regarding the political life of Kangan. Sam is a power hungry dictator who keeps himself away from the people and from the grave problems that the country is facing; Chris, at first, is a mute observer of Sam's activities and later on, though late, assumes a responsibility towards the country; Ikem is fierce critic of the government's corrupt practices and unscrupulousness. Achebe completely dismisses Sam as a leader as he has placed himself above the common people and has turned a deaf ear towards their problems. Chris also falls short as a leader as, at first, he remains indifferent towards the activities of Sam. His realization comes rather late, just before his death when he actually feels motivated to do something good for the country. Achebe also deprives Ikem from leadership as the latter, in spite of his connection to the common people, fails to break the boundary of gender. Ikem shows a discriminating attitude towards women.

So, while the three men fail to come up to the mark, it is only Beatrice who displays the qualities of a responsible leader. Achebe portrays Beatrice as a modern, educated, progressive woman who maintains a fair balance between tradition and modernity. Though she occupies a high profile post in the Kangan government, she succeeds in realizing the miseries of the common people. Though she is Chris' fiancée, she is not subordinate to him; she has independent views. Beatrice understands that the problems of the country can be solved only collectively, not singlehandedly. After losing Chris, Beatrice assumes the role of the leader of a group of people who gather in her flat to celebrate the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter. This group consists of people from different backgrounds with different religion, culture and language but they are connected to one another. Beatrice leads this group where a Muslim and a Christian dance together, where traditional rituals are observed along with the modern formalities, where the old generation gets a place among the young one.

Beatrice also succeeds in breaking the boundary of gender by christening the baby girl with a male name and thus attributing both male and female qualities in a human. Therefore, the group led by Beatrice signifies a future where all the cultural, religious and linguistic differences will be forgotten; it also stands for a nation where collectivity does not mean diversity but the ultimate unity. The group also represents a unified nation where the "gathering constitutes an image of a diverse yet interrelated community. This heterogeneous congregation suggests an alternative image of nationhood in Kangan." (McLeod 134) The interrelatedness of the members of the group signifies how the fate of a nation is related to all its citizens, how one's fate determines the fate of another and how collectively they determine the fate and future of a nation. Thus, with old boundaries broken, Amachina becomes the daughter of "All of us." (*Anthills* 208-209) The step towards the future of renewal and rebirth is a collective step.

IV.   Conclusion

Thus, in the last novel, Achebe shows the path towards the attainment of nationhood. While the preceding two novels raise the question of ethnicity, the last novel advocates the unified aim of a nation. With the reality of Nigeria in the background, Achebe shows the importance of national consciousness for a country to move on in the path of progress and a hopeful future. Though ethnic tension in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is a colonial legacy, Achebe hints that African people should move forward with a unified aim. Thus Achebe projects a journey from ethnicity to nationalism through his three novels. This article is concluded with the note that Achebe, who has always emphasised on availing the benefits of colonialism, once again says that, though the idea of a nation is a western construct, the African people must adopt it as it can ensure progress and development. He inspires his fellow people to go beyond the ethnic and cultural differences and come together as a nation.

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