

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventist

**TEACHING THE NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE FROM A
CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

by
Hulda Ameyia Ph.D
University of Eastern Africa, Baraton
Eldoret, Kenya.

**665-09 Institute for Christian Teaching
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Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of literature in Adventist institutions has been a controversial issue. The question of content and authorship has determined the acceptance or rejection of a literary work. This has resulted in the canonization of certain works and the belief that some writers can produce nothing but good and wholesome literature. For a long time, Adventist institutions shunned literature from their syllabi. A Literature teacher at an Adventist Secondary School where she was posted met disappointment after the headmaster made it clear that there was no literature and the only subject she was allowed to teach was English Language. This was disconcerting. However, the headmaster claimed that it was Church policy not to teach Literature. All in all, the teacher finally gave up and taught Language alone. The headmaster's strongest argument was that Ellen G. White condemned Literature. However, Mrs White condemned specific works and gave reasons for her stand. According to Velez-Sapulreda (1993), Mrs White did not condemn all literature; in fact she even recommended the reading of certain literature like Pilgrim's Progress.

PRIOR AND CURRENT CHURCH STAND

The prior stance of the Adventist Church has gradually changed to the current stand where the novels of African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Mariama Ba, and Chinua Achebe can now be taught. This change of heart did not occur overnight. Many Adventist Scholars like Barayuga (1993) and Velez-Sepulreda (1993) have taken

time to write and argue the case for integrating faith and learning through literature. At the core of these arguments is the fact that the Bible is a literary masterpiece that contains arts in the fields of poetry, comedy and tragedy. The Bible has moral aspects of literature through the way in which it affects the readers. The Bible contains dialogue, verse, narratives and is a literary masterpiece.

Currently, the Adventist Church is condoning the teaching of a wide variety of literature including African Literature. There is hope that whoever tackles these works can use an Adventist approach and successfully integrate faith and learning in the course content. For example, the University of Eastern Africa Literature teachers are given opportunity to teach the author and works of their choice with the hope that they will include works of spiritual benefit to the student body.

Literature is of value in the teaching of Christian beliefs. It does not take much effort from the teacher concerned to glean jewels from most literature. With Christian beliefs as the target, it is amazing how much works of Chinua Achebe like Arrow of God (1964) and No Longer at Ease (1960) can serve as texts that explore human frailty in the face of divinity.

WHY AFRICAN LITERATURE?

The teaching of various aspects of literature has been covered by various Adventist Scholars. For example, Delmer Davis in Teaching Literature : A Seventh-day Adventist Approach (2002) delves deeply on ways of teaching literature from an Adventist perspective. Andrea Luxton has also tackled the teaching of literature in A Response to Diversity and Globalisation: Shakespeare in the Christian Classroom

(2003). Both Scholars have convincingly argued on the relevance of literature in Adventist classrooms.

African Literature, on the other hand, has not enjoyed much coverage. Though ignored, the teaching of literature is just as relevant as other areas of study. Chinua Achebe's works are rich in riddles and proverbs. For example, his works like No Longer at Ease, Things Fall Apart, and Arrow of God are full of proverbs and riddles. These proverbs and riddles are meant to be words of wisdom or words of instruction to work as guide posts as one leads their life here on earth. The richness of these works appeals to both casual readers and those who read the works as a requirement in their courses.

Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart makes a significant assertion when he comments that "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (p. 5).

Thus, his works are sprinkled with proverbs. Chinua Achebe's use of proverbs is beyond the scope of this paper but it does serve to show that the works are comparable to the use of proverbs in the teachings of Jesus Christ. This comparison serves to show how handy these novels are in comparing them to Biblical teachings.

African Literature is slowly but surely making inroads in literature as a teaching field. In Kenya, for example, all the government run universities are obliged to offer African Literature as part of the courses in English. This obligation is at times taken for granted but it is one of the ways in which graduates who later join the teaching field learn to appreciate some of the works that are readily available.

Any reader of Achebe's Things Fall Apart cannot help but be intrigued by proverbs like "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing". (p.15) This proverb

serves to show that there is always a reason for strange behaviour. If one wants to know that reason they will probably get the full story from the actor.

CHINUA ACHEBE'S BACKGROUND

This paper focuses on teaching the novels of Chinua Achebe from a Christian perspective. Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 to a missionary society catechist, Isaiah Okafor. He made a pioneering contribution to Africa's literary growth through his early novels, Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964). Achebe was educated at Government College, Umuahia, and University College, Ibadan. He had a stint in radio broadcasting at the Nigeria Broadcasting Service (NBS). By the time he left NBS in 1966, he had risen to the position of Director of External Broadcasting. He has taught at the Universities of Nigeria and Massachusetts (USA) and has been awarded many fellowships; among them being the Fellowship of the Modern Languages Association of America, and the Scottish Arts Council Neil Gunn Fellowship. Currently, he is professor of Literature at Bard College, New York. From a humble Christian background, Achebe does not identify himself as a Christian but more as a teacher. His novel Arrow of God explores the dichotomy of Christianity on one side and traditions on the other. As a reader it soon becomes clear as to where his sympathies lie. However, one is also intrigued by the delicate balance he maintains in dealing with Christianity versus traditional beliefs.

RELIGIOUS OVERTONES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS

Religious overtones exist in Chinua Achebe's novels and this can be seen in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. Things Fall Apart is already a classic of modern writing. Critics in Africa, Europe and America acclaimed it on publication and have continued to do so. According to Wilson (2007) as indicated on the back page, ...The story is the tragedy of Okonkwo, an important man in the Ibo tribe in the days when white men were first appearing on the scene... Mr. Achebe's very simple but excellent novel tells of the series of events by which Okonkwo through his pride and fears becomes exiled from his tribe and returns only to be forced into ignominy in a bid to escape the results of his rash courage against the white man... He handles the macabre with telling restraint and the pathetic without any false embarrassment. In the novel, things fall apart with the coming of the missionaries. Okonkwo's son Nwoye is drawn to Christianity because of the songs they sing and their tolerance of twins who were condemned to death in Ibo tradition. Nwoye, though considered a weakling by his father finds solace in the white man's religion and is able to find answers that the traditional gods do not give.

Arrow of God is a class apart in Achebe's novels. In his preface to the revised edition, Achebe states that "Arrow of God ...is the novel which I am most likely to be caught sitting down to read again. On account of that I have also become aware of certain structural weaknesses in it which I now take the opportunity of a new edition to remove." According to The Times Literary Supplement (1988) as indicated on the back page "Arrow of God is primarily a story of village life, centering on the struggle for authority of Ezeulu, chief priest of Ulu, the traditional god of his Umuaro people against both

rivals in his own tribe and also district officers and Christian missionaries. And through this combination of concentration and authenticity the novel gets its power... Mr, Achebe's evocation of atmosphere... is both fascinating and convincing."

The main conflict in this novel is between Christianity and its introduction and the traditional religion and its attempt to hold together a people who are already divided along religious lines. Even though he is intrigued by Christian education and sends his son Oduche to learn the Western ways, Ezeulu still believes very firmly in traditions and the god Ulu, who chose him as a priest. Ezeulu is arrested and taken into captivity for disobeying the white man. According to him, his people disappointed him by not paying him a visit in prison and demanding his release. To pay back, Ezeulu refuses to eat the final yam that would mark the harvest season of the new yams. His stubbornness leads his followers to turn to the Christian God who demands a payment of 1 yam out of 10. Thus, Ezeulu, the high priest of Ulu, is directly responsible for Ulu's death and the fame of the Christian God. Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche to learn in a Christian institution is viewed by the community as a betrayal. Ezeulu, on his part, sees Oduche as his extra eye in monitoring the Christians. Things fall apart when Oduche imprisoned the royal python in a box. Ezeulu becomes defiant and refuses to satisfy Idemili by offering a sacrifice on behalf of his son. When Ezeulu refused to eat the final yam, the community judged him harshly and condemned him. They felt that he was using his position to punish them for not visiting him in prison.

MORAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM ACHEBE'S NOVELS

Chinua Achebe's novels like No Longer at Ease , A Man of the People , and Anthills of the Savannah all contain moral lessons that can be derived from them.

No Longer at Ease is Achebe's second novel to be published after Things Fall Apart.

The two novels were initially drafted as one story but the draft was ultimately divided into two separate, but related books. The book tells of the story of Obi Okonkwo tragically under pressure from a changing world. Obi Okonkwo, who is the grandson of Okonkwo of Things Fall Apart is introduced as a young man back from studies abroad (U. K) and idealistic enough to turn down a corrupt deal as he arrives in Nigeria from overseas. Due to financial pressure from his family and a desire to live up to the expectation of his peers, he ends up taking a 20 pound bribe and being jailed. Obi was faced with a moral dilemma of whether to accept or refuse the bribe. He is divided and by the time he attempts to rectify the situation it is too late and he is caught red handed. Obi's Christian teachings from his father should have deterred him from accepting bribes.

No Longer at Ease is a befitting title for this novel that portrays a young man who studies abroad, goes back to his own country but is no longer at ease. He faces another moral dilemma when the community, including his parents refuse to accept Clara, his girlfriend, because she is an 'osu.' An osu refers to outcasts who were banned from living within the community and they and their offsprings were not accepted . It was acceptable for the community to condemn Clara but the surprising turn of events is that Isaac Okonkwo, Obi's father who is a church elder also refuses to have Clara as a daughter-in-law. Hannah, Obi's mother, also rejects Clara but her reservation can be excused since she preferred telling her children traditional stories but this was also

banned by Isaac. Obi Okonkwo had dreams of an ideal Nigeria but his dreams are dashed as he is confronted by a changed Nigeria where abortion is done illegally, bribes are taken regularly and justice is rarely given a chance in the law courts. His mental picture of the Nigeria he had left behind is very far from reality. His image of Nigeria is portrayed clearly in the Poem 'Nigeria'.

A Man of the People also contains relevant moral lessons. It was written by Achebe in 1966. The novel is a thought provoking satire on newly- independent African states. Achebe makes a heart-rending surgical examination of the African condition through this incisive tale of the conflict between Odili Samalu and Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P. Odili who was a student of Honourable Nanga is faced with several issues. First, he becomes disillusioned when Nanga ends up in bed with Odili's girlfriend. From then onwards, Odili decides to run for the position of Member of Parliament for the same region as Nanga. As a young man he is shocked by how far Nanga is willing to go to retain his seat. The corrupt ways of the elite in Nigeria is exposed through the dealings of Nanga. He is willing to use thuggery to ensure that he wins the seat. Corruption seems to be the order of the day. Odili aspires to marry Nanga's second wife in waiting and this blows up into a confrontation in the course of which Odili nearly loses his life. The choice to do right or wrong confronts Odili through out the novel. Should Odili follow in the footsteps of his mentor or begin afresh? Unfortunately he follows the footsteps of his mentor and is beaten and hospitalized as a result of his desire to pursue politics.

Anthills of the Savannah is another novel of Achebe's that one can derive moral lessons from. First published in 1987, this book is different from Achebe's other works. The story is told by several witnesses who give their part and narrate their heart -

wrenching experience. The main characters, Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi and Beatrice all narrate their role and relationship with His Excellency. It becomes clear from the beginning that the events of any given day are determined by the mood of his excellency.

. According to The Irish Times (1987) as given in the back page, “Violence takes over a drama of love, friendship and hope under threat. This is present-day Africa revealed in a stunning narrative of lyricism and natural speech. Beautiful, powerful and angry...”

Christopher Oriko is His Excellency’s good friend and yet because of greed and the insecurity that a position of power entails, the president cannot trust him. A gap exists and is widened by Christopher’s attempts to justify the writings of Ikem Osodi. Osodi on the other hand feels obligated as a duty to his people, to expose injustices like killing by the firing squad and the fact that His Excellency has never forgiven a part of his country for voting against him in the last general elections. Thus it is Ikem who faces a difficult moral moment on whether to keep quiet or expose the wrongs. He ultimately decides to expose the president and ends up losing his life. Of course, the president ends up dead during a coup attempt. Like the anthills of the savannah that remain unmoved through seasons of change so does the common man who remains after the powerful are all gone like the grass of the savannah that is swept away by any bush fire. Thus, a common man can survive any regime but the elite, including politicians cannot stand ill luck and they end up dead. The common man like the taxi driver is free because he is unknown and without powerful enemies to pursue and harm him. The politicians are always in the limelight and can be easily traced.

ACHEBE'S NOVELS AND CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

The novels of Achebe expose contemporary experience in Africa. All his novels deal with themes that are close to most Africans' experience. For example, in Things Fall Apart, Achebe deals with the inevitable changes that came up with the arrival of the missionaries. Okonkwo is a man who runs his household with a heavy hand but he becomes helpless when his son Nwoye decides to join the missionaries. His tragedy becomes complete when he also commits suicide after killing one of the messengers from the white man. Another theme from Things Fall Apart is fear. Okonkwo has the fear of being thought of as weak. Because of his fear he ends up killing Ikemefuna, according to the oracles command, even though the boy called him father. Ikemefuna's death resulted in disagreement between Okonkwo and his friend Obierika. Change is inevitable in any society and Okonkwo's experience might have been different if he was a Christian.

Okonkwo's experience can be compared to that of Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible. Both characters were proud. God's handling of Nebuchadnezzar can be compared to Achebe's handling of Okonkwo.

God's redemptive plan for Nebuchadnezzar	Achebe's plan for Okonkwo
Self as sufficient	Self as sufficient
Eating grass (half animal)	Exile for reflection after committing murder
- Pride	- Pride
- Arrogance	- Fear
- Repentance	- Self reasserted
- Used to punish Israelites leaders who ignored God.	- Soldiers on alone
- Ends in a renewal and obedience to God	- Ends in committing suicide
Source: (Chronicles chapter 36)	Source: Things Fall Apart
God created man (specifically Nebuchadnezzar)	Achebe created the character of Okonkwo

The lack of a powerful God in Okonkwo's life leads to disenchantment with the gods he has known throughout his childhood to the present. The plight of Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart is similar to that of Nebuchadnezzar in the bible. The table above shows the contrast of their fates. While God had a redemptive plan for Nebuchadnezzar, the opposite is the case for Okonkwo.

Achebe's other novel; Arrow of God also contains contemporary experience in Africa. The themes vary but one of interest is the fate of a man who denied his god. Ezeulu is Ulu's priest and when he refuses to acknowledge the new year festival by eating a yam; his own people turn against him, thus marking the death of Ulu among the people. This theme shows that a man must know how to survive among his people. The case of Ezeulu is similar to the biblical Jonah who refused to obey God's command and ended up swallowed by a fish then later vomited. Jonah's fate has a happy ending because he is restored, repents and is then forgiven. The case of Ezeulu is final and he ends up losing his source of livelihood.

The main theme in No Longer at Ease is corruption. Obi Okonkwo takes a bribe and his world falls apart. We need to acknowledge that this was not his first bribe and that he was not the only man accepting bribes in Nigeria. It was his misfortune to be caught. In our Christian lives, at times we commit a sin without realizing that it will come back to haunt us. The fact that many people are committing a sin does not licence us to do the same. The issue of corruption is a very sensitive issue in most societies and Obi Okonkwo's crime is not new or surprising. The corruption common in most African countries begin from the top leadership and trickles down to the common man.

The main theme in A man of the people is greed and change. Chief Nanga wants to have it all. Not only does he aspire to be the Member of Parliament in his constituency but he also plans to take a young woman as his second wife infact he has already paid part of the dowry. The issue of polygamy is a current problem in the African Adventist circles. One of the dilemmas is how to treat a woman from a polygamous marriage who is now a widow and would like to join the church. In such a situation, can one declare the woman clean or is she condemned for having been a second, third, fourth or fifth wife? The same dilemma occurs when a second, third or fourth wife who is not a widow desires to join the church. Chief Nanga is unable to accept change as proposed by Odili. In order to win the race, Chief Nanga proposes money but Odili refuses and he is finally beaten until unconscious by Chief Nanga's thugs. Violence is an issue of concern in most African countries and it seems that election time is always accompanied by this occurrence.

Anthills of the Savannah also exposes themes that are relevant to the contemporary African experience. The themes of trust and betrayal runs through the novel. His Excellency was a good friend to Christopher Oriko but that ends with his ascendance to power when he starts mistrusting everybody. He has a strong feeling that Oriko is undermining him and the trust they had as friends during their undergraduate days is eroded. Power has become too sweet and His Excellency can no longer trust those surrounding him. In the current African governments that lack of trust has resulted in civil unrest among the governed. Christopher feels betrayed when His Excellency is

no longer close to him. Beatrice is perceptive enough to notice the falling off between Sam, Chris and Ikem. Even though the three went to the same school, the theme of betrayal still prevails. The three can no longer live and work together and Ikem is the first assassinated because of his writing, followed by Chris who is gunned down as he tries to rescue a school girl from rape. Lastly, Sam, His Excellency is killed during a coup attempt. This paints a very gloomy picture of the African situation, but, unfortunately it is true.

INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING

From a Christian perspective it is clear that the African situation as portrayed by Achebe is universal and similar shortcomings can be noticed among human beings. Themes like selfishness in Things Fall Apart; pride in Arrow of God; corruption in No Longer at Ease; conflict in A Man of the People; and betrayal in Anthills of the Savannah all have connections to the Holy Bible. The Bible contains characters with the above mentioned weaknesses and a direct comparison is warranted.

For example, in the bible, we learn of king Nebuchadnezzar whose pride led to his downfall. He had built his kingdom but became too proud to acknowledge God's hand in his success. Because of his pride, he was made to eat grass like a wild animal for seven years. Ezeulu in Arrow of God on the other hand saw the demise of his god due to pride. He had attempted to use his position to punish those who had ignored him while imprisoned. Thus, his downfall is comparable to that of Nabuchadnezzar.

The corruption in No Longer at Ease brings to mind the role of Judas in betraying Jesus. He betrayed Jesus over 30 pieces of silver which he probably thought would make him a rich man. This however, backfired and he ended up committing suicide. Obi Okonkwo ends up in jail and it is clear that his fate was equally dire. The Bible contains several stories of conflict. For example, David's son Absalom was so power hungry that he wanted to dethrone his own father. He ended up losing his life in the process of fighting his father. The situation of Odili in A Man of the People is similar because he attempts to campaign against Chief Nanga and take over as the new Member of Parliament but he doesn't make it. These conflicts are similar and they also show the struggle between the young and the old.

The story of betrayal in Anthills of the Savannah also has a biblical equivalent. Peter, one of Jesus' beloved disciples betrayed Him three times before the cock crowed. In Achebe's book Sam feels betrayed by both Ikem and Chris. The only difference is that Sam imagined the betrayal while Peter betrayed Jesus in the true sense of the word.

Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart commits an unforgivable sin by taking part in the killing of the boy Ikemefuna, who called him father. He acted with fear and this is similar to the case of Barak who was advised by the prophetess Deborah to face Sisera and God would give him victory. In Judges chapter 4 we are told that Barak was too fearful; thus the victory was taken by Jael who lured and murdered Sisera in cold blood.

From the above examples, it is clear that it is very possible to integrate faith and learning in the teaching of Chinua Achebe's novels. In describing himself as a teacher, Chinua Achebe falls among writers whose duty is to bring about change in society. Though a self-proclaimed traditionalist, Achebe in his works shows that high moral standards are desirable in all societies whether Eastern or Western.

In any classroom setting, the works of Chinua Achebe can be taught from a Christian perspective. The comparison of Chinua Achebe's characters to characters found in the Bible makes the integration of faith and learning viable. During such discussions, the teacher can hold back and encourage the students to identify any similarities that can be derived from both Achebe's work and the Bible.

A mere comparison will not be adequate. Students should be encouraged to come up with a redemptive plan for the main characters created in Achebe's novels like Okonkwo, Obi, Ezeulu, Christopher Okri and Odili. With a little bit of effort from the instructor a literature class can lend itself to the integration of faith and learning.

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