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**Denigration and Self-Denigration: An Exposure of Horrible Experiences in Achebe's The Novelist as Teacher**

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**Abstract:** Achebe is one of the most remarkable novelists and essayists of present-day Africa. His essay focuses mainly on the problems faced by the African writer as he regards it his bounden duty to guide his countrymen. He explores the age-old question of whether the man of letters should entertain or educate. He raises question, what is true art? Achebe says that the novelist is first and foremost a teacher. This role is necessary at a time when a society is wrenched from its ancient moorings and set adrift. The writer is a beacon, guiding those who are torn between the old and the new.

**Keywords:** Westernization, African society, African tradition, African culture, African nationhood, African civilization



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## Introduction

Chinua Achebe is one of the most remarkable novelists of present-day Africa. He was born in 1930 of Christian parents. His father was a sincere churchman. He was in-charge of both the village church and the village school. He reminds readers of the village parson and the village schoolteacher depicted by Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village*. Achebe had his education in the Government College of Unnuahia and the University College of Ibadan. In 1954, he joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. Currently, he is the Director of External Broadcasting. His extensive travelling in Britain, America and other foreign countries has sharpened his insight into the deficiencies of African culture. His most acclaimed works are *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *Things Fall Apart* and *Chike and the River*.

Achebe's pamphlet *The Novelist as Teacher* is a noteworthy attempt by the author to defend his career as a writer as a noble profession. His essay ranks with a long line of creative writers valiantly defending their creative art. Sidney's *An Apologies for Poetry*, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, *Tradition and Individual Talent* by Eliot and D.H. Lawrence's *Why the Novel Matters* are some great examples of creative artists voicing their views of their art. Achebe's *The Novelist as Teacher* belongs to this category.

Achebe is of the view that indiscriminate Westernization has led Africans to denigrate their own African culture. For example, an African student thinks it demeaning to speak of the palm-tree and the dirty wind of Africa called the harmattan. Achebe says that these typical African scenes also have a beauty of their own. Africans should not lose sight of it. To orient Africans towards the glories of their own culture, Achebe initiated many pro-African movements which are clubbed together and called 'negritude'. African democracy, African socialism, African personality—these are some of the movements spearheaded by Achebe to bring about an African renaissance. Usually, a writer expects society to cater to his needs. But Achebe thinks differently who says that an author should undertake to execute the needs of the society to which he belongs. In other words, he should serve society. "The Africans have been educated by the Europeans in terms of the common relationship between writer and society, he shows that the European's view has been injected into the African mind" (literatureworms, 2015).

What he does for his country is much more important than what his country does for him. “But I am not interested now in what writers expect of society; that is generally contained in their books; or should be. What is not so well documented is what society expects of its writers.” (Achebe 41) “Achebe recognises his audience at once as his brothers, fellow sufferers in search of where the rains started beating them. He as an artist has known where the rains started and it is mandatory on him to show them the place.” (Arunji)

Achebe says that most of his readers are students studying in schools or colleges. Once, a student by name Mafindi wrote to Achebe, saying that he liked his novels because they gave advice to the younger generation. Such overt message-giving novels are dismissed as inartistic and impure in our age. Whittaker says that “Achebe’s vision of the role of the African writer in a number of important ways, with a younger generation of writers often displaying very different literary sensibilities and perspectives” (107). In our age a novelist is expected merely to present both sides of the coin, and leave it at that, without driving home a point. “Your novels serve as advice to us young.” (Achebe 41)

Once, a young lady teacher fiercely criticized Achebe for not marrying off the protagonist in *No Longer at Ease*. In the book the hero succumbs to parental pressure and marries the girl of their choice. This story realistically reflects the pathetic condition of young men and women in Africa. The lady teacher does not want such realistic portrayals. She wants the writer to practise ‘poetic justice’ and show an ideal world where the wishes of people are satisfied and nobody suffers. “I could have served these people well if I had shown that it was possible to find one man with enough guts to go against custom” (Achebe 42). “The historical process, protest-dependent, that has evolved the African nationhood and is still struggling to fully realize this nationhood, modern African literature has the temptation to succumb to burning socio-political and cultural needs.” (Arunji)

Values keep changing. A pop-singer glorified dirt. He said that he was not going to wash for a week. This was a revolt against the earlier philosophy which preached that cleanliness was next to godliness, Achebe also opposes this facile equation of hygiene with god. “.... his particular offices would not be required in my society because we did not commit the sin of turning hygiene into a god.” (Achebe 43) Achebe says that Westerners have made the Africans feel that they are inferior to the Westerners and that the African civilization is far below the technologically advanced Western civilization.” Achebe speaks as if Africans let their beliefs serve as a shadow cast upon them in the high technology modern world that they are looking to find.

Achebe wants to build a confidence in his people that makes them as proud of their culture as any other.” (theme) Achebe says indignantly that if he were God, he would wipe out the Africans resigning themselves to the idea that they are inferior to the Westerners. His feeling is that Africans are not just equal to but better than the Westerners. “If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance for whatever reason—of racial inferiority.” (Achebe 43)

Achebe says that not all changes are good. Some changes are positively harmful. Westernization has made Africans ashamed of their own culture. This is an evil. Once a schoolboy wrote about winter when he actually had to write about the harmattan, the cold, dusty wind of Africa. When asked about it, he said that he was ashamed of writing about the harmattan and so wrote about the Western phenomenon, namely, winter. Achebe says that the harmattan and the palm-tree are fit subjects for poetry. “.... there is nothing disgraceful about African weather that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry.” (Achebe 44)

Chinua Achebe says that Westernization has led Africans to denigrate their own culture. The African soul has been wounded. Many counter-movements have been launched to resist this denigration and self-denigration. “Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet.” (Achebe 44)

The African personality, democracy, socialism, negritude – these are some contemporary movements calculated to revamp African culture. Chinua Achebe says that “But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism.” (Achebe 45)

## International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

Achebe says that the past of Africa, is not ‘one long night of savagery’ and Europeans are not God’s agents delivering them from this darkness. Even if his writings sound preachy or what in the modern age is called impure, he does not worry about this criticism: “.... Their past. was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf them.” (Achebe 45)



Achebe's chosen goal is to prove that Africans are not just equal to the Westerners but superior to them. This sort of vehement tub-thumping may be dismissed as impure and inartistic propaganda by some critics. But Achebe does not care for such adverse criticism. Achebe holds that art and propaganda are not incompatible. "Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind.... the two need not be mutually exclusive" (Achebe 45). "Achebe, who troubled attitude towards African's self-perception and its history with Europe, Achebe's views are inevitably colored with a sometimes direct, sometimes indirect call for change. He strives to present the world a different image than the self-conscious one he assumes exists persistently" (Sule).

Achebe is very optimistic. He is sure that the sons and daughters of Africa will live happily, as envisioned in Hausa folk tales. Achebe says that his vigorous campaign in favour of the revival of African culture is not an anti-climax at all. It is the dire need of the hour. "As I said elsewhere, if you consider this ending a naïve anti-climax then you cannot know very much about Africa." (Achebe 46) According to Achebe there is a lot of variation between his African counterpart and the European writer. His beard and peculiar dress, tries to catch the concentration of his audience through his outer world. Whittaker says that:

This notion of the African writer as an integral part of a community and culture –which are also the principal subject of that writer's work – is an important one for Achebe. He rejects the assumption that African writers were writing for a European and American readership, pointing to the fact that the sales of the cheap paperback editions of his first two novels were twenty times higher in Nigeria than in Britain in the previous year. Unlike the European literary out-sider, Achebe argues that the African writer must seek to maintain an important social position and responsibility within his own society (Achebe 107-108).

Achebe takes part in only a significant role. He concerns are entirely different. Moreover, Achebe says that the society imposes to fulfil the tasks of an author's accountability.

Achebe then highlights the importance of addressing the issue of racial inferiority and how it has affected Africa's self-image. He admits that Africans must take responsibility for their own mistakes, but also point out the damage that has been done by the colonization and subjection of Africa by foreign powers. He argues that African writers have a duty to challenge these negative views and promote a positive self-image for their people. (Hari 570)

An author is not a scrounger; he is living on the society around him. The author should be a teacher, directing people who are floundering in the dark.

### Conclusion

Achebe urges African writers to commit themselves to the task of reclaiming themselves as a people, reshaping their literary and cultural institutions and helping to affirm their pride and dignity and human value. He has to recreate the world of African past and present, its dignity and integrity and create a new sense of awareness through his novels.

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