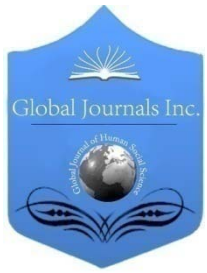
Volume 16 Issue 6
Originally issued as C2



Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 16 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2016
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Culture as the Bedrock of a People's Identity: An Exploration of Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Fearless*

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GJHSS-C Classification : FOR Code: 200299



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Culture as the Bedrock of a People's Identity: An Exploration of Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Fearless*

Chris K. Ukande

Abstract- The colonial process which brought the coloniser and the colonised into a long period of co-existence and cohabitation which led to a master-servant relationship was not without major effects on the colonised up to the post independence era. As a way of curbing these effects on the colonised mentality, African writers, Nigerian inclusive have resorted to writing of works that would incorporate the use of cultural artifacts so as to depict their image and true identity. Through the lens of post-colonialism this herculean task of looking inwards and making use of that which is African, is made possible. Post-colonial theory is used to examine the ramifications of colonisation for both the coloniser and the colonised, as portrayed in the novel, *Fearless* of Ifeoma Chinwuba. The paper therefore, concludes that it is only when the colonised people begin to look inwards and appreciate the things that make them who they are culturally, that the recuperation of African culture as against western ideologies can positively be achieved. The textual analysis is specially based on the post-colonial discourse elements of hybridity, appropriation, abrogation, untranslated words and affiliation.

I. Introduction

The colonial process that has been for centuries, has brought about an interaction and a co-existence between the colonised and the coloniser that the former is permanently subjected to a continuous subjugation, oppression, repression and suppression of their culture and identity, even though the formal process of colonialism is brought to an end. Many African nations, Nigeria inclusive, have fervently been devising means and ways of being on their own, and not totally depending on the West, who first and foremost, masterminded the colonial process and system on the African continent.

It is quite glaring to note that this dependency that these African nations have cultivated is not only noticed in their socio-economic and political spheres of life, but also in their literary endeavours. Thus, in order to get out of this gridlock, writers all over Africa have consciously or unconsciously been doing the best they can, especially as it concerns the projection of a truly African culture and identity in their artistic works that make such works quite distinct from for instance the westernised works. Nigerian writers too, particularly those of them who write from a post-colonial standpoint, are involved in this task of a resonance of their culture and identity in their various literary works. Nigerian post-colonial writers have no doubt, taken the bold step of incorporating into their artistic works discourse elements that are hinged on the indigenous languages and cultural trappings of the Nigerian people, in order that they can be seen as truly being crusaders and custodians of the Nigerian people's identity. This in effect, has heralded a new dawn for the people of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular.

Suffice it to say that Chinua Achebe is recognised as one of the first Nigerian writers who have demonstrated the ability to register a true sense of cultural identity and nationalism on the one hand, and the liberation of the Nigerian/African from colonial mentality on the other hand. This sort of attitude was first noticed in his *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Regarding Achebe's reconstruction of the West's misrepresentation of Nigeria/Africa's image, Charles Nnolim States, thus:

> Achebe is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the Nigerian novel – that tradition which is concerned with cultural assertion or cultural nationalism which stresses and promotes the innate dignity of the blackman and makes creative use of our myths, legends, rituals, festivals, ceremonies and folklore. (197)

Thus, from the days of Achebe to the present, the Nigerian novel in particular and short stories in general, have had a strong tradition of showcasing the cultural traits of the Nigerian people. Many Nigerian writers who can be regarded as taking after Achebe, Chinwuba inclusive, have characteristically included in their literary productions, words and phrases that are from the language of their origin. This form of expression includes the use of pidgin English. This is systematically done in order to create an English grammatical structure that helps in distorting the use of Queen's English so as to produce a true sense of Nigerian flavor.

II. The Perspective from which Ifeoma Chinwuba Writes

Post-colonialism is the hallmark that forms the corpus of Chinwuba's writing. Post-colonialism as a theory is described variously by different exponents. One of such exponents is Chris Rohmann. In discussing the theory of post-colonialism, he corroborates that it is a

> Movement in social and literary criticism that presents responses to the effects of European IMPERIALISM on colonized peoples. Post-colonialism offers a "counter narrative", related by and on behalf of formerly colonized

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> peoples, to the ETHNOCENTRIC assumptions of Western culture. The term "postcolonial" thus implies not only "after the colonial era" but also a critical approach that arises from and contests the premises of, colonialism. (309)

The above gives a clear indication that post-colonial literatures are those works that are written in total rejection of the Western, canonical European literature. The simple reason to this is that the colonial project was made possible mainly through the use of literature to do so. Especially, the British were known for aggressive literary washout of indigenous literatures and cultures, which led them to replacing them with the then canonical, British literature in standard English. Post-colonial literature therefore, provides a "counter narrative", related by and on behalf of formerly colonized peoples" (309), so as to reclaim that African aesthetics and culture which of course, make the literature of the African, a utilitarian kind.

On his part, Terhemba Shija states that

> ---[p]ost-colonialist interpretation can be suited in the deliberate deprivation of citizens of basic amenities of life by a minority ruling class which seeks to perpetuate the subjugation of the masses. It also questions the concept of globalization which dubiously claims to reduce the world into a global village with all citizens of the world actively and spontaneously participating in business and other activities. (7)

The above scenario is indicative of the fact that post-colonialism is one theory that investigates the activities of the ruling class, in a capitalist society, that are quite exploitative and suffocating, and then creates a voice for a people who have been made voiceless beginning from the days of colonialism to the present era of globalization. It also chronicles the fact that the problems of the Third World Countries are such that solutions to them can be gotten within as a means of striving to achieve an identity and a way of solving problem that would be devoid of Westernise influence and control.

Che Guevera emphasises the intrinsic value of post-colonialism in the following words:

> [i]t deals with cultural identity in colonized societies; the dilemmas of developing a national identity after colonial rule; the ways which writers articulate and celebrate that identity (often reclaiming it from and maintaining strong connections with the colonized); the ways in which the knowledge of the colonized (subordinate) people has been generated and used to serve the colonizer's interest; and the ways in which the colonizers literature has justified colonialism via images of colonized as perpetually inferior people, society and culture. (2)

Post-colonial writers, the likes of Ifeoma Chinwuba, attach much importance to the question of cultural identity, because when a people's culture is looked upon with disdain or as being inferior, or treated with prejudice, the need to rectify the dented reputation of such culture results in a re-awakening and re-affirmation. Che Guevera's position on self-identity as a core concern of post-colonialism is endorsed by Kirsti Bohata who postulates that the theory

> [o]ffers a structure within which the past can be interrogated with the aim of reconstructing the present. It is a strategic methodology, a self-conscious act of cultural and historical imagination and, as such, is rich with possibilities for peoples whose stories and histories have been suppressed, neglected, untaught. (15)

Discussing post-colonialism, Homi Bhabha affirms that

> The wider significance of the post (colonial) condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological limits of these ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices …, the colonized, minority groups. For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narrative of cultural and political Diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. (18)

The aforementioned scenario explicates a basic phenomenon which centres on a mission of self-recovery by the colonised. A recovery of the lost identities that was occasioned by the incursion of colonialism, therefore, becomes the hallmark of the once colonised people. Thus, the question of identity traverses post-colonialist thinking from the days of Senghor's negritude movement to the days of Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Ashcroft et al's who are some of the exponents of post-colonialism. Being that the colonial power had fundamentally had a disruption and distortion of indigenous cultures and identities in the past, it is quite remarkable to agree then that as Bhabha's quote above suggests, post-colonial migrant groups or the aboriginal people could be seen as returning the compliment in somewhat modest and more subtle manner or fashion.

a) Post-Colonial Discourse Elements

For the purpose of analysing Ifgeoma Chinwuba's *Fearless,* the following post-colonial discourse elements of appropriation, abrogation, hybridity, untranslated words and affiliation will be used as the basis for a proper discourse of the text, and what each of this means will be explained.

b) Appropriation

Being that English Language has had a hegemonic influence over the indigenous languages from the days of colonialism to the present, writers all over Africa, having had a history of colonialism, felt the need to free themselves from this sort of cultural gridlock by resorting to the principle of appropriation. In the words of Ashcroft et al, appropriation means "the process by which the English language is taken to bear

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the burden of one's own cultural experiences; or … to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (38). In subscribing to the above view, Chinua Achebe writes, "I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of the African experiences, it had to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings" (23).

c) Abrogation

The process of abrogation is one that is quite different from appropriation, the main concern of which is the seizure of English language. In discussing what abrogation translates into, Ngugi wa Thiong'o defends it in the following words, "the most obvious problem is one of language. The fact that you are writing in a foreign language means that you are operating in a foreign cultural framework. This often leads African writers standing as referees between the common man and elite" (34). What this means is that the grammatical structure of English language is distorted, bringing into being a grammatical structure that is unique and of African origin only.

d) Untranslated Words: Cultural Nationalism

The whole essence of the use of indigenous words without having to gloss over them, is done to create cultural independence. Most African writers use this as a systematic way of keeping the Western world at bay in their literary productions. It is in this connection that Ashcroft states that "the technique of the selection of lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness" (64).

e) Hybridity

This is a process whereby two phenomena are brought into one environment to make a whole single identity. Kristi Bohata writes that "hybridity arises from cultural contact and interchange. While for the individual this may be a painfully divisive experience, in terms of cultural production the hybrid luminal space becomes an exciting and fertile area of cultural production" (25).

f) Affiliation

Affiliation is a sort of strategy that allows the coloniser's identification with indigenous socio-political value system. In literary criticism therefore, it allows the independent reading of texts, that is, without having to fish out or bring out parallel trends with, or, measure them against, western "classics", with little or no respect for their cultural milieu.

Bill Ashcroft speaks further of this notion in the following words

> While filiation suggests a utopian domain of texts connected serially, homogously and seamlessly with other texts, affiliation is that which enables a text to maintain itself as a text, …affiliation sends the critical gaze beyond the narrow confines of the European and canonical literary into [the] cultural texture [of] the status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of contextually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on. (105)

The above scenario is indicative of a shift from filiative to affiliative status of literary works in Africa, which in essence, brings about a showcasing of the exploration of Africa's rich cultural heritage in literary texts that are of African origin. Ashcroft elaborates further as he says: "By thus stressing the affiliations of texts, its origins in cultural and social reality rather than its filiative connections with English literature and canonical criteria, the critic can uncover cultural and political implications that may seem only fleetingly addressed in the text itself". (Key Concepts 56).

g) Synopsis of the Novel

This is a 256-page novel. It chronicles the story of Ralph, a white boy, who often falls sick while in London, and as a way out of this predicament, his father decides to take a job in a Mission School in Nigeria as Education Supervisor. He attributes his child's illness to the weather condition of London and so, feels that the only thing that can be done in order to ameliorate this health anomaly, is to take him to an African environment where the weather condition would serve as a remedy.

The novel is divided into three parts. Part 1 gives an account of Ralph's arrival in Umudo with his father, Matt. It leads us into Matt's activities in Umudo and his son's initiation ceremony into the world of adults. Part 2 discusses the various initiation activities that boy's of Ralph's age, Ralph inclusive, go through on Snake Island. From this discussion, we are meant to understand that they have all had a successful initiation ceremony. Part 3 introduces the arrival of the initiates from Snake Island and Ralph's journey back to London in order to administer African herbs on his sick mother who had been sick before his departure to Africa.

h) Polemic Analysis of the Text

In order to pursue a cultural stance, Chinwuba tries as much as possible to depict instances in the text that would be devoid of western characteristics. One of the ways of doing this is the use of appropriation in her *Fearless*. The first instance that the use of appropriation is noticed is when she discusses the initiation ceremony. Being that Ralph the white boy has to undergo this ceremony, Udego, Ralph's friend educates Ralph on the ways of the people of Umudo. The essence of this is to get him acquainted with the cultural traits of his new environment before his day of initiation. His indoctrination is done in these words:

> We learn more dances, wrestling, hunting, music, and the history of our land. Finally is the circumcision. And the tribal mark. It is the main thing. After that, we are given a few days rest, for the wound to heal. Then we return to

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merriment and feasting, wrestling and dancing. And the harvest. (61)

The author in the above, succeeds in using the English Language in expressing a true African tradition and experience that allow the teenagers the opportunity to be initiated into the adult world. Once children receive Ralph's sort of education, which also affords them the opportunity of knowing their people's history and that which makes them distinct from other people, such children seize to be children as their mother would wish at the point of departure for the initiation ceremony, "may you go well as a boy and return safely, a man. May you bear the pains like a man and not cry out in disgrace" (183).

In discussing the costume that gives the prospective initiates distinct appearance from other children, Chinwuba narrates that, "they watched as in the square, young lads of similar heights to the lad, clad in raffia skirts and headgear, danced towards the new boy. Their bare chest and legs were sprinkled with a red liquid, interspersed with white chalk" (13). This portrayal aside, the kids are usually given an indoctrination which prepares them for the great day of initiation, in order to be stoical as they journey into maturity. Chinwuba similarly employs appropriation showing how valuable kola nut is to the African and how the pouring of libation among Africans shows reference to their ancestors. As can be seen in the following quotation, the pouring of libation, links the living and the dead, and the kola nut is itself a source of life to Africans:

> He had witnessed the pouring of libation by the local chief, and the breaking of something called kola nut by the elders. Was this real; was he really in Africa, in Umudo, about to head – primary school across the path? As he listened to one welcome address after the other, some via interpreters, his mind voluntarily went back to London, a few weeks ago. (14)

Chinwuba demonstrates how efficacious African herbs can be, hence, the determination of Phoebe, Ralph's mother, to be cured by African herbs, since her ailment defies orthodox treatment. In her strong belief in African herbs, she calls her son and says to him, "There are many great medicine men in Africa. They may have the herb already for this disease without our knowing it. If so, find it, son" (29). Consequently, Ralph on getting to Africa, and through his friend's father Ofokansi, the great medicine man, he gets the herbs for his mother's cure. He returns to London to administer the herbs on her.

He washed the other leaves. He brought a clean glass and one by one, squeezed their liquid into it. It did not amount to much. Hardly a third of the glass. He approached his mother's bed, glass in hand. There was no way he could make the patient down this. Then an idea occurred to him. He cut a tiny slit in the plastic intra-nevous bag and poured the thick dark concoction into it. It turned green. (249)

Apart from the use of appropriation, Chinwuba also makes use of abrogation in her *Fearless.* This is done through the use of one of the characters in the text. Uwa who happens to be the cook and house help for Matt, the white man, communicates all through in pidgin English. The use of pidgin in this work gives it a special form of communication which W. D. Ashcroft writes about in the following expression.

Syntactic (and orthographic) fusion can signify differences in a number of ways, but as the index of a cultural gap it is the difference which distances rather than which identifies. The fascinating thing here, of course, is that difference is constructed in reference to another learned language, pidgin bears not a culture, but an historical and political reference to difference. (7)

Thus, what distinguishes Chinwuba from Achebe for instance, is that Chinwuba's use of pidgin brings to limelight the fact that the variety is an association to a range of socio-economic statuses covering urban workers and the commoners of the society rather than a projection or a depiction of blacks working for the whites. This then follows that the use of pidgin English in her work does not indicate a bestardised version of Queen's English as a result of colonial contact and subjugation, but a resource that results from the urban and rural working classes alike, thus, making it a language of national expression in generally accepted and recognised social contexts within the Nigerian polity.

Some examples in the text suffice the foregoing discussion: "He going to bathe in the stream. You want follow him?" (57) (He wants to go and bathe in the stream. Do you want to follow him?), "Oyibo pepper, if you eati pepper, you will yellow more, more" (60) (A song that says if a white person eats pepper, he or she will become whiter), "Junior go late for school, get cane for back" (64) (Junior has gone late to school, and had a cane on his back for being late), "I think you want eat for white man house. Eat, let us see" (88) (I think you want to eat in a white man's house. Eat, let us see), "Thank your gods that it is rice that Uwa cook today" (89) (Thank your gods that it is rice that Uwa has cooked today), "Small master no go school?" (116) (Has small master not gone to school?) and "Master tell Uwa, sweep yard, fetch water, wash cloth, cook food. He no tell Uwa what for do if small master body hot. O-o Uwa, what kind trouble be this?). (Master tells Uwa to sweep th yard, fetch water, wash cloth, cook food. He did not tell Uwa what to do when mster is sick).

In handling culture in a manner that makes it a signpost of a people's identity, Chinwuba still weaves her narration around the initiation ceremony again. In this way, she writes: "No one had warned him in London about this aspect of a boy's life in Africa. What was more baffling was the ease with which Ralph had accepted this alien custom, had yearned for it, had embraced it, had become engulfed in it" (183). Two different cultures

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from two different geographical terrains are presented in the above. We see that in Africa, for one to fully become a man, one must undergo an initiation ceremony that has been enshrined in a people's custom and, therefore, has become part and parcel of such a people's way of life. In the western world, this is not so. Therefore, Ralph's strong desire to be part of a custom his father considers alien and barbaric, avails the young man an experience in hybridity.

Also, Chinwuba makes use of hybridity in terms of how Ralph gets cured by the African weather condition, as she presents the African weather as being medicinal on the skin of Ralph. "Was this the sickly boy who had spent countless days in his London bed, who missed school on account of one illness or the other? Who had occupied several hospital beds in his short life time? This change was remarkable. Drastic"(183). Indeed, Matt is surprised at his son's recovery in an African community and wonders why his son whose life story in London has been characterised by much sickness, suddenly becomes strong and healthy in Africa. This shows how Ralph adapts to the African weather more positively and quickly than expected.

In terms of the use of untranslated words/expressions, Chinwuba has not made much use of this, but she however, touches on this in her work slightly. In the text, the following are noticed: "Omenma" (58) (Doer of good), "Okepa" (59) (Big foot), "usu" (78) (Bat), "Obi" (49) (An area in a man's house meant for receiving visitors), "Ogbuagu" (50) (Killer of lion), "Okwe" (79) (A game of seeds), "Bia" (81) (Come), "Nmiri" (81) (water), "Ogene" (105) (A musical instrument in form of a gong), "Iba" (118) (Malaria), "Dibia" (medicine man), "Ndo" (219) (Sorry), "Daalu" (246) (Thank you) and "Ise" (245) (Amen).

In her use of affiliation, Chinwuba shows how dance is part and parcel of a people's cultural life. As such, the music that facilitates dance in every occasion, embodies the people's socio-cultural and historical deeds that have been associated with great heroes in the past. Dance is therefore, one of the phenomena that gives a particular people their true identity that makes them distinguishable from other people. By way of affiliation, Chinwuba portrays the socio-cultural value system of the people of Umudo, during the reception of Matt, the new supervisor of Mission School in the following words

> The musicians had come early. Hours before noon they had assembled their instruments and were now beating the whole village to a frenzy. The sound of the drum and the gong could be heard from far away. The flute was not as loud. Together, the result was rhythmic tune. People sat patiently, their bodies involuntarily moving to the beat of the music. Some tapped their feet, others twisted their bodies this way and that …(6)

Again, just the way dance is considered an important aspect of a people's culture in the physical realm amongst humans, so also it is amongst masquerades in the spiritual. In the Snake Island, Chinwuba consciously presents a scenario of masquerade dance.

The other masquerades also mixed with the initiates. They danced some complicated steps, all the while howling fiendishly. One stood on one foot, and somersaulted. Dance steps mixed with different types of acrobatics. His mask was the skill of a crocodile. It exuded thick smoke. Evil-Smoke without Fire, he was called. There were so many spirits dancing about and raising dust. (200)

Characteristically, the Igbos are known for eating a particular food recipe that is popularly known as 'fufu' in a very stylish manner, that distinguishes them from other people. As Ralph the white boy and his friends are about to eat in Amandi's house, Chinwuba depicts the children's eating habit, as she writes: "each cut out a bit of fufu, rolled it into a ball, dipped it into the soup plate and swallowed" (54), and Ralph who watches this with a lot of surprise, does same as Chinwuba express that "Ralph took a handful of fufu and made to put it directly into his mouth, but the others stopped him. Dip it into the soup first. Then swallow. He tried it and was overtaken by a bout of coughing" (55), therefore, food, especially 'fufu' which is an important aspect of the culture of the Igbos, is brought to bear on Chinwuba's narration, and as such, giving it national and international recognition and identity.

Proverbs too, are part of the things that constitute the lives of Africans, and as such, they are highly cherished and valued as cultural artifact. In the recognition of this all important role of proverbs in the socio-political and cultural lives of the African people in general and Nigerian people in particular, Chinwuba weaves into her narration some of the proverbial sayings that make living more meaningful to Africans in the following

> Usu, the bat, is neither a bird of the air, nor animal of the ground. He says he knows how ugly he is; that is why he goes out only in the dark. Let the eagle perch and let the hawk perch; the one that says no to the other, may its wing break. The frog does not hop in the day time unless something is after its life. Whatever is begotten of the snake, must resemble a snake. (78)

III. Conclusion

From the foregone, the paper has successfully shown that Ifeoma Chinwuba writes from a post-colonial perspective, especially as she uses her work to appropriate the coloniser's language and adapt it to 'bear' the burden of the African/Nigerian people. To give the work a truly Nigerian touch, Chinwuba makes sure that it bears in it that which can be classified as the cultural identity of the Nigerian people of Igbo extraction. Again, the paper has revealed through the work of Chinwuba that Nigerians after all, have their own culture,

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and as such, such culture can better be appreciated if we begin to look inwards, and then reduce to a considerable measure the influence of the westernised world on the one hand, and that even though we recognise the culture of the western world, we should not totally undermine our culture as a people, on the other hand. This goes to say that no matter the amount of the influence of western cultural traits on our reasoning, we should make it a point of duty to always consciously be aware of that which gives us our identity as a people and makes us who we really are. It is by doing this, that we can be seen celebrating and grappling with the things that are truly ours as a people. Suffice it to say that as a cultural crusader, Chinwuba depicts that she is socially committed to the task of a promotion of the culture of the Nigerian people in general and that of the Igbo people in particular.

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