

Significance of Songs in Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War*

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of songs in selected Chinua Achebe's short stories in the collection, *Girls at War*. In the paper, the selected stories "Vengeful Creditor," "Chike's School Days" and "The Voter" are analyzed qualitatively with a view to ascertaining their type, content, meaning and general significance in their contexts towards illustrating the themes of the stories. The sociological theory is adopted as the theoretical frame work to guide the analysis of the texts. The paper finds that Achebe deploys songs as therapy, satire and protest to drive home his points in his renditions.

Keywords: Song, *Girls at War*, satire, protest, therapy

Introduction

The length of the short story is limited to a few pages, its scope often quite small and the characters extremely few. A good short story, therefore, strives to attain brevity by cutting out all irrelevant materials. It is, therefore, little or no wonder then that only a few short story writers are able to accommodate songs in their narratives. One of such short story writers able to accommodate songs in his artistic renditions is Chinua Achebe. He deploys song, not because he does not have enough to write, but ironically because he has too much to write. His art, therefore, consists of using songs to say so much, far more than mere words can convey. In fact, songs help Achebe to achieve brevity in the stories where he deploys the musicality of song. According to Griffie (1992):

A song is a piece of musical composition of words, verse, or poem which is sung or uttered with modulation of the voice which expresses thought and feeling. Song is powerful. Many people can be moved to tears or other strong emotions by music, and song can acquire strong emotional associations with people, events, and places. Song has personal quality that makes the listener react as if the songs were being sung for the listener personally. Songs have elements in common with speech and poetry, they are a unique form. Both songs and speech are vocally produced, are linguistically meaningful and have melody. Both songs and poetry use words to convey meaning, both are usually written down before publication, both can be put to music and both can be listened to. (p. 32)

On the purpose of songs, Zakiya (2002: 14) identifies four distinct uses of song - communication of emotions, happiness, creativity, and therapy. He writes thus: The ability to communicate emotions was precisely what made music persist after the development of language. A study by psychologists at the University of London showed, for example, that even when listening to a short piece of music, an individual is more likely to interpret sadness or happiness in his or her interlocutor, even if the subject maintains a neutral facial expression. Science has also found an explanation for a more instinctive function of music-to make us feel good and help creativity. A

study published recently by the journal *Nature* and led by Daniel Levitin, neuroscientist and author of the book, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, indicates that it acts in the brain in a manner similar to drugs, sex or food. Songs activate the frontal lobe, produce dopamine and act on the cerebellum, which is able to “synchronize itself” to the rhythm of the music, which causes pleasure. Music also stimulates creativity.

Research from the University of Oxford indicates that music at a moderate level enhances abstract processing power, which favours creativity when it comes to performing activities or solving problems. Of all the functions of music, perhaps the most mysterious corresponds to its possible therapeutic use. British neurologist, Oliver Sacks, reported in his books cases of patients with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s whose symptoms improved when they listened to songs. Other investigations mention patients with strokes who showed better visual attention upon listening to classical music. According to pianist Robert Jourdain in the book, *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*, the brain overcomes the symptoms because it “relaxes the cerebral flow, while stimulating and coordinating the activities of the brain. For him, this “magic” happens to everybody. Music lifts us from our frozen mental habits and makes our minds move in ways they ordinarily cannot” (p.14).

From the excerpt above, the effect of music on the brain is that it relaxes the cerebral flow as well as stimulates and coordinates the activities of the brain. Simply put, music plays a sobering and coordinating function on the brain so that the mind moves freely. Besides this, the excerpt says that music is therapeutic.

This study adopts the sociological theory in its theoretical framework with a firm conviction that songs form a very visible part of the society. Songs dominate the bedrock of socialization in the African society as they can be heard on the lips of individuals, artistes, cults and pastors, congregations and priests. Besides that, they are commentaries on the goings-on in the society or of past events, all put together to colour the moment and time of rendition. The sociological theory is applied to works that tend to reflect the reality of the society in their content. In this case, Literature is a mirror reflection of society. According to Arum Murlidhar Jadhav (2014):

This mirror image approach has a long and distinguished history. The first and the most common approach to the relation of literature and society is “the study of works of literature as social documents, as assumed pictures of social reality” (Wellek & Warren: 102). As a social document, literature can be made to yield the outlines of social history... The several critics and scholars from Plato down to the present have discussed the different theories of sociological approach to literature. They believed in the simple conviction that literature is a social product, and thoughts and feelings found in literature are conditioned and shaped by the cultural life created by the society... The early critics did not doubt the reciprocal relationship between literature and society. Plato, who started the discussion of the relationship between literature and society, raised some questions about social implications of literature... He further points out that the literary work is shaped by the dominant cultural values of the age. In fact, literature is the result of social action and in turn, gives rise to social actions (p. 658).

The excerpt above explicates the relationship between literature and society. Studies of this type are therefore, best conducted under this theoretical framework as the selected stories are artistic

comments on the society by Achebe. This paper finds that song in the selected stories: Achebe's "Vengeful Creditor," "Chike's School Days" and "The Voter" are deployed as therapy, protest and satire.

Review of Related Literature

Isidore Okpebho a specialist in the oral tradition, a genre that has influenced modern African writing espouses on music in Okpebho (1979) thus:

Music has meant all kinds of things to all manner of peoples at different stages of their cultural history. To some...it represented 'an act of poetry and a primary concern...to sing hymns to the gods...to the others... music was one of the areas traditionally employed by society in habituating its youth to forms and strains of virtue...To yet others, it is an indispensable element in man's desire to activate his vital forces (p. 58).

In a related study on songs and aesthetics of the Igbo people, (Ikediugwu: 121) states that "Song is an important oral tradition which the Igbo people use to communicate information. The Igbo sing on various occasions to reflect their feelings and situations. Other peoples of the world also sing for various purposes." In like manner, Oguzie (2001: 14) says that "it has been asserted by scholars that Africans sing at various occasions to express their mood and emotions... Bad human behavior and conduct, human weakness and social vices have often been exposed in traditional songs." This statement supports Ikediugwu's position above that the Igbos have songs for every situation. Both statements are in tandem with Ojaide (2003: 50) on the use of songs in the society that "One can reconstruct history, culture and society from songs. The songs address good and evil and other moral and ethical issues in society". Clark (1965: 83) wraps up the use and value of song in the society when he says that "the whole system of values, the entire social structure with its beliefs and practices stands revealed with skill in...songs". To him, songs are a reservoir of the entire history and culture of a people.

Okpebho, Ikediugwu, Oguzie, Ojaide and Clark underscore the relevance of song in the society. This is perhaps, why Achebe, with his commendable commitment to capturing the sociological face of society cannot but incorporate them into his short renditions.

Objective of the Study

The major objective of this study is to examine the content, context and purpose of songs in the selected short stories with a view to discovering their overall significance in the narratives.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and textual. The songs in the stories constitute the data which are collated and analyzed with a mindset for meaning-austere and embellished-in the context that they have been used. Attention is paid to the meanings of the lyrics, the character and incidence and the theme being illustrated by the writer with a view to obtaining the significance of the song in the narrative.

Analysis of Songs and Discussion of Findings

The analysis of songs and discussion of findings are as follows:

(a) Song as Therapy and Protest

The song "little noisy motor car" in the "Vengeful Creditor" is composed by Vero, the house-girl who is anxious to start school as part of the promise the Emenikes made before recruiting her from

the village to assist with domestic chores in their home in the city. She draws her inspiration from the delay in fulfilling this promise. Her creative ingenuity is sharpened by the dire need to comfort herself. It therefore stands as a therapeutic composition meant to soothe her hurting soul. The four-line song which she hastens to compose runs thus:

Little noisy motor car
If you are going to the school
Please carry me
Pee—pee—pee!—pooh—pooh—pooh! (Achebe, p.68)

The song comes into existence in the morning, just after the departure of children to school. Feeling left alone by his housemates, Goddy, who is Mr. and Mrs. Emenike's baby begins to cry while he is fastened by wrapper to the back of the house-girl. Though brief, this song performs three functions in the context of the story—as lullaby, sarcasm and protest. It is a lullaby that sets out to silence and perhaps, lull the baby to sleep. It is also a subtle protest in which Vero reminds the Emenikes, especially Mrs. Emenike, whose schedule it is to take the children to school to include her as a passenger and school girl in the daily trips in her “little noisy motor car.” She openly presents her prayer when she says “please carry me.” She reminds them of a broken promise and seeks their action. In her protest, she does not spare her Madam. She sarcastically describes her car as a little noisy car. Her madam replies when she says “So you make fun of my car, naughty girl” (Achebe 1977: 63). This comment hits home as it starts up a conversation between husband and wife about buying madam a new car. But the big picture which must not be lost on the reader is that the song, though a rendition in the voice of Goddy is actually speaking the mind of Vero, the house-girl.

It will be on target to state that this song, “Little motor” car is the first song of deviance or protest to be sung in the home of the Emenikes. The writer informs us that before the composition of the song, “Baa Baa Black Sheep” and “Simple Simon” where the songs that the children were used to and often sang in the house. These can safely be termed songs of innocence as they carry no meanings beyond the surface. They are mere rhymes conveying delight through the melody of end rhymes associated with colonial education, signifying nothing of relevance to the cultural milieu of the African environment and the colonised pupil. The rhymes are mainly for the purpose of entertainment. In contrast, therefore, Vero's composition is a song that is created to suit the social and domestic realities of her time. The writer creates the contrast between foreign songs colonially fostered on the African child with the creative force of the African who observes the environment to produce meaningful songs that serve various purposes beyond the mere rhyming packages of unfathomable nursery lines taught the African child in colonial schools. Her song thrills and entertains both the children and the Emenikes. Mr. Emenike, we are told simply says ‘the girl is a genius. And she hasn't been to school’ (p. 62). Mr. Emenike expects that she would perform better when she goes to school, but this may affect her creative ingenuity as she would be physically and mentally beaten to conform to the colonial syllabus.

Vero's next song in the same story is a protest. But she is not protesting before her persecutors, but to an innocent baby-Goddy. Although her direct tormentors may not hear the song, it however, also serves as therapeutic to Vero as she uses the song to assure herself that she is not just dead to her condition, but voicing her frustration. She has refused to submit to the helplessness of the situation and believes that in singing about it, her plight is not forgotten. She is convinced that unless Goddy grows up, she may never be registered in a school as a student. She, therefore, thinks

that the baby, if possible should be made to grow up faster than he is currently doing. As if on purpose, Goddy has grown used to being strapped to Vero's back. He keeps asking Vero to "cayi me." Vero is frustrated by this and intuitively makes a song out of her plight thus:

Carry you! Carry you!
Every time I carry you!
If you no wan grow again
I must leave you and go school
Because Vero e don tire!
Tire, tire e don tire! (p. 63)

Her composition above shows a frustrated girl who gives a condition to an infant child that if he refuses to grow bigger, she would leave him and go to school. Vero is emotionally charged and ready to rebel because 'she don tire.'

After this song, Vero does not sing again. This song of rebellion propels her to take action, the kind of action she thinks will give her freedom and get her into school. As an uninformed young girl, the deep recesses of her mind yearn for education and she reckons that Goddy is the obstacle, who once out of the way, her going to school would be certain. This last song of hers gives strength to her action, a most condemnable action, to poison Goddy with red ink so she could liberate herself. The last two lines of her short song '*Because Vero e don tire! Tire, tire e don tire!*' is a reflection of her mind and also the motivator of her unreasonable action.

(b) Song as Satire

The three songs in "Chike's School Days" are a critique of the defective learning system in colonially established schools. What school teachers and administrators were interested in the days of Colonialism was the ability to produce a semblance of the original in whatever form. The songs that were taught to school children were not fully captured by these infant learners, but the colonial teachers were satisfied that the pupils were able to ape the Whiteman's knowledge. The Song 'Ten Green Bottles' is rendered by the pupils thus:

Ten grinbotrangin on dar war,
Ten grinbotrangin on dar war,
Hmhmhmhmhm
Hmhmhmhmhmhm
An Ten grin botrangin on dar war (p. 39)

This song is a reflection of the poor educational hand-out of the colonial system to the African child. It is defective in the three Rs which was the mandate of colonial administration. The three Rs include Arithmetic, Reading and Writing. Arithmetically, this song was meant to teach simple subtraction techniques, with ten being a pack that constitutes a unit. With the subtraction of one bottle, each time, there is a drop in the total number of bottles left. In that manner, it is meant to help pupils master counting from one to ten and an easy count down. But what we have here is that the pupils omit entirely the figures and thus make mockery of the entire enterprise arithmetically. It also fails to deliver the skills of reading as the pupils are unable to read the words properly. They, therefore, rely on homonymous sounds to fill the spaces. If they could read, they would have known that their deliveries are quite meaningless. Achebe writes that 'they had been taught the words but they only remembered the first and the last lines. The middle was hummed and hie-ed and mumbled' (p. 39). The teaching spoken of here is defective. It is the rote learning

system where pupils do not understand the message, but are forced to regurgitate forced memorizations of unfamiliar matter. One can safely say that Achebe uses the song to satirize the rote learning technique of the Nigerian school system.

In like manner, the phonetic presentation of the children speaks volumes of the gross inadequacies of pupils learning English as a second language. The pronunciation of almost all the words casts aspersions on themselves and their teachers who either are comfortable with their performance or are in fact responsible for their poor performance in pronunciation. This song in itself is a curious variant as the general version states that the bottles are standing and not “anging” on the wall.

Another area of defective teaching is in the subject of catechism. The teaching of Catechism and the responses of the pupils also shows a major fault in the acquisition of knowledge in Africa. Achebe’s portrayal of this defect is shown thus:

Being so young, Chike was sent to what was called the ‘religious class’ where they sang and sometimes danced the catechism. He loved the sound of words and he loved rhythm. During the catechism lesson the class formed a ring to dance the teacher’s questions. ‘Who was Caesar?’ he might ask, and the song would burst forth with much stamping of feet:

Sizabueze Rome

Onye nachi enu uwa dum.

It did not matter to their dancing that in the twentieth century Caesar was no longer the ruler of the whole world.’ (Achebe, 38-39)

What Achebe does here is to humorously satirize the out-dated content and technique of the educational system in the society. Whatever is handed out to the students is constant, unchanging and stale. Beyond being stale, the knowledge passed has become false information. The catechism teacher, in his school days must have been taught that Augustus Caesar, the Roman Emperor was so powerful that he ruled the whole world. He holds on to this knowledge for decades and continues to pass it to infants. This is quite common in our schools where the teacher’s notes are a direct reproduction of their notes written many years earlier when they were students.

Furthermore, Achebe, through songs reveals the technique used to discourage pupils from enrolling into school to acquire Western education. There was high level suspicion by the African of the Colonial master’s offering by Western education. Thus circumspect, there was mass refusal to send children to school as the tradition of the people had to be protected from the onslaught of the preying Western civilization. Songs were composed to scare parents and pupils from patronizing schools. Achebe captures this disgust for Western education through a song composed to send fear into the hearts of people. The refrain of the song tells it all, thus: ‘*Onye nkuzi ewelu itali piagbuzie umuaka.*’ Translated, it means “the teacher whipped the pupil to death.” Achebe says that though exaggeration plays a big role in the laying of emphasis in Ibo, it cannot be denied that there was some flogging, but not necessarily unto death. He writes that “One of the ways emphasis is laid in Ibo is by exaggeration, so that the teacher in the refrain might not actually have flogged the children to death. But there was no doubt he did flog them. And Chike thought very much about it” (p. 38). This exaggerated incident, no doubt, causes parents to have a second thought on sending their children to school, where they could meet an untimely death in the hands of cane-wielding teachers hunting for youthful buttocks to flog. The song, therefore, serves as a restraint on parents and pupils to shun the White man’s school. Achebe uses the song further to

demonstrate the use of traditional propaganda to achieve societal cohesion and uniformity to enhance compliance with jointly shared fears and decisions. The deployment of exaggeration is therefore, a device to drum home support for the societal rejection of early Western Education.

Conclusion

Achebe's renditions in the selected stories are greatly enriched by the songs in them. The writer of repute deploys the stories to comment on issues that confront mankind and to extend the frontiers of the genre by accommodating more in the plot through extrinsic improvisations with songs in their ability to satirize, heal and protest. Achebe has successfully dramatized the possibility of engaging song in the short story, a rarity among African writers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there is the need to inject objects and events from the local environment into the early school curriculum as against the forceful memorization of foreign knowledge by the African pupil. Many of the subjects taught the students are alien and have no local equivalents or interpretations as revealed in the songs. There is also the need to send teachers to refresher courses to update their knowledge, as some of the songs lack currency but proudly display falsehood in ignorance.

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