

Reconciliation of Cross cultural Tension in Chinua Achebe's *Marriage is a Private Affair*

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Abstract

Cross cultural tension is one of the major themes in Chinua's Achebe's novels and short stories. The writer projects the same theme in his story - Marriage is a Private Affair in the context of Nigerian, African culture and tradition. This paper explores the generation gap between old and new owing to the effect of globalization, and its subsequent resolution and reconciliation. Cultural tension or conflict arises in a family or a society when new generation ruptures the old prevalent traditions. This article centers on how the Main Protagonist of the story Nnemeka, being influenced with modern culture, establishes the cultural bridge through inter-caste or inter-racial marriage, thereby challenging the old Nigerian, African tradition. Marriage is a social custom and it often occurs on the conventions of society in which people are brought up. When a person breaks the convention, it generates the conflict or tension in family and society. However, reconciliation is inevitable in the ultimate state as there is no way out. The paper conceptualizes the theoretical concept of cultural studies adopted by Stuart Hall in the light of fictional dramatization. His theory of Cultural construction refers to the elements of social and cultural characteristics as mere constructs invented by society This research attempts to answer : how does the growing globalization affect cultural taboos and rituals on Nigerian, African marital culture ? The growing trend of globalization even interferes marriage custom as depicted in the Story- Marriage is a Private Affair.

Keywords : reconciliation, tension, taboos, globalization cross culturalism.

As a Nigerian novelist, poet, short story writer and professor, Chinua Achebe became fascinated with world religions and traditional African cultures, and began writing stories as a university student and critic. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), often considered his masterpiece, is the most widely read book in modern African literature.

Culture means the system marking out the space of systematic reflection about the process by which people create themselves. The values, norms, institution, customs, structures, and modes of thinking bear primary significance in a culture. Greeze says: "It is a kind of historically created system of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point and direction to our lives"(Geertz). As culture comes to be associated with the matter of nation or the state or even community, there comes the issue of identity. So it becomes the source of identity. It is our culture that shapes our identity. We follow it as a part of social phenomena. For Edward Tylor, "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic

sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”(1). Cross-refers to the meeting point of cultures from where one brings forth his/her possibility to make a turn at any direction. In the sense of cross culture, there comes the problem of belongingness. Cross – culturalism is distinct from multiculturalism. It is concerned with exchange beyond the boundaries of the nation or cultural group. Hall Writes:

The cross culture experience... is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of Identity which lives and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Cross-culture identities are those which are constantly producing are reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (119-20)

The process of globalization is responsible for the interfusion of cultural identities which can be termed as the cross cultural and hybridity of cultural identities. Cross-cultural ethos celebrate differences between the cultures, race caste, rituals and in other social activities like marriage. A person moves to the city areas from rural settlement to pursue the study or grab the job opportunity. Since the city becomes the bowl of diverse cultures emanating from different areas, a person, due to the effect of globalization, follows modern culture forgetting the old traditional culture of his/her origin. Hence, cross cultural tussle outbursts automatically in traditional society as the old generations do not tolerate the breach of their culture from the new generations.

Clash of Culture

The story is based on the themes of cross cultural ethos and individual freedom for choice. Other striking themes include modernity, tradition, control, conflict, stubbornness, gender roles, independence, change and remorse. The story is about the interracial marriage between two young people, Nnaemeka and NeNe from different cultures, and its resultant conflict. Nnaemeka comes to Lagos, a city of Nigeria from his village for study. He falls in love with Nene from another tribe. They fall in love with each other, but because they are from different tribes that have entirely different cultures, a conflict is created, especially in terms of the clash in belief systems of the older and younger generations. He marries her without the consent of his father. He feels hesitant to break the very news of their marriage with his father as he thinks that it will shock his father. He remains silent even if his wife Nene requests him to break the news:

‘Have you written to your dad yet ?’ asked Nene one afternoon as she sat with Nnaemeka in her room at 16 Kasanga street, Lagos. ‘No, I’ve been thinking about it. I think it is better to tell him when I get home on leave !’ ‘But why ? Your leave is such a long way off yet – six whole weeks. He should be let into our happiness now.’ Nnaemeka was silent for a while, and then began very slowly as if he groped for his words : ‘ I wish I were sure it would be happiness to him.’ (Achebe,151)

Nene does not know about the tradition of Ibo culture in which Nnaemeka was brought up since she is from Atang culture . She has also no knowledge about how his father Okeke responds after hearing about their marriage. She remarks: “But anyway, as your father is so

fond of you, I am sure he will forgive you soon enough. Come on, then be a good boy and send him a nice lovely letter” (152). Nnaemeka’s father believes that there is no place for love in deciding one’s marriage partner and that his son must marry as per the traditions of his tribe. He understands his father’s nature very well rather than Nene does. So, he wants to break the news of their marriage not through letters but hospitable meeting with him. When he meets Okeke and breaks the news, he gets very furious and even warns him: “ I owe it to you , my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong . Whoever put this idea into your head might as well have cut your throat. It is Sata’s wok. He waved his son away” (154).

If anything there is a sense of conflict between both father and son. With Nnaemeka following a more modern path to marriage and rather than having a wife chosen for him by his father prefers instead to choose who he is to marry. Something that is lost on Okeke who prefers to follow the traditional values that are held by those in the village. There is also a sense that Nnaemeka wishes to control his own life (and destiny) rather than follow the traditions that his father abides to. Something that Okeke does not understand or seems to refuse to understand such is the depth of his adherence to tradition. It may also be significant that some of the other men in the village suggest that Nnaemeka should see one of the native doctors as this would also further play on the theme of tradition: “ What is he then ? The boy’s mind is diseased and only a good herbalist can bring him back to his right senses. The medicine he requires is Amalile, the same that women apply with success to recapture their husbands’ straying affection”(155) .

Throughout the story Okeke also shows signs of being stubborn. Refusing to even acknowledge Nene either before or after she marries Nnaemeka. So deep is his dislike for Nene that he returns the wedding photo sent to him by Nnaemeka with Nene’s image removed from the photograph. Symbolically this may be important as it suggests that Okeke does not give any recognition to Nene. As far as he is concerned she does not exist and is not Nnaemeka’s wife. Which would further highlight to the reader just how important tradition is to Okeke. Rather than seeing his son happy he remains rooted to tradition. The fact that the women of the village (who live in Lagos) are overly polite to Nene may also be important as it suggests they are deliberately alienating Nene and if anything it would suggest that the women believe that Nene is not one of them. Their tension reaches its climax when he returns their photo :

It amazes me that you could be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either. (156)

In essence the women of the village are silent. The only woman in the story who has an independent voice is Nene and she does not live in the village. Achebe suggests that just as Okeke wants to control who Nnaemeka marries likewise the women who live in the village are also being controlled by the men in the village. No equality may exist between male and female within the village. The reality being that life in the village may revolve around traditional gender roles with the male being dominant. Whereas in Lagos Nene as mentioned

has her own voice and is not hindered by Nnaemeka. She is allowed to express herself. Something that becomes clearer to the reader through Nene's letter writing to Okeke.

. . Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I find it impossible to tell them that you will not see them. I implore you to allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time during his leave next month. I shall remain here in Lagos . .(157)

When Okeke discovers that he has two grandchildren, his view of Nnaemeka and Nene's marriage changes dramatically. No longer is he against the marriage and it is noticeable that Okeke begins to fear that his isolation of Nene has resulted in him also shutting out his grandchildren from his life. It may also be symbolically significant that it is raining when Okeke begins to change his opinion on Nnaemeka and Nene's marriage. Quite often in literature a writer will use the rain as symbolism for change or renewal and this seems to be very much the case in the story. The fact that Achebe mentions in the final line of the story that Okeke feels remorse may also be important as it suggests that not only has Okeke's opinion of Nnaemeka and Nene's marriage changed but Okeke may also be conscious that he has been wrong : " That night he hardly slept, from remorse – and a vague fear that he might die without naming it put to them" (157). That his own stubbornness and traditional view on marriage has resulted in him alienating his son, Nene and his two grandchildren.

At the end of the story there is a sense that not only has Okeke changed his views on Nnaemeka and Nene's marriage but he may also have changed as a person. The denouement of the story imbues with dramatic resolution of cross cultural tension. Unexpected turn of the story really amazes the readers when Okeke gets emotionally transformed preparing to approve the inter racial marriage of Nnaemeka and Nene. The clash between Father and Son, old traditional values and modern values is reconciled projecting new message for the forthcoming generation.

Conclusion

The whole world is a global village. The effect of globalization is rampant in the whole world. Such effect can be observed in urban areas faster than in rural areas where people are still under the grip of poverty, illiteracy, backwardness and superstitions. Many societies of African countries, as in some societies of Nigeria, are not an exception. Educated people like Nnaemeka and Nene, who get married though they are from different tribes, appear responsive to change whereas an uneducated people like Okeke, who remains stubborn and strictly adheres to his old tradition, does not embrace change very conveniently. The tension between Father and son is reconciled through Nene's letter which stimulates the emotional attachment of Okeke towards his children.

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