

## Symbolic Presentation of the Disease as Colonial Evil in Chinua Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg"

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### Abstract

This paper critically examines Chinua Achebe's short story "The sacrificial egg" to expose how the writer uses the disease smallpox symbolically as the evils of colonialism employing postcolonial perspective. It claims that symbolically presenting the example of the degradation caused by the disease in a small coastal market Umuru, the writer sheds light on the devastating consequences of colonialism in the African continent as a whole. As the context was not appropriate to raise voice against colonialism directly, the writer did so by using literary device of symbolism. Following qualitative research design, this paper uses critical, analytical and interpretative methods and justifies its main claim. In the act of the critical analysis of the primary text, the theoretical ideas of post-colonial theorist like Edward Said are applied. Critical scrutiny of the text brings out the evidences that show the resemblances between the evil impact of colonialism and the contamination of smallpox. Both have destroyed the existing beauty and peace; and contaminated the society. Greed guided mentality of the people plays a vital role in both cases. Umuru is the microcosm of the African continent. Essentiality of eradicating the disease from Umuru for peace and prosperity in the story shows the essentiality of freedom of the whole Africa from colonialism for peace and prosperity. Symbolically the message of the importance of freedom is imparted through the story.

**Keywords:** Colonial evil, material greed, post-colonialism, symbol

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### Introduction

Chinua Achebe's "The sacrificial egg" embodies suffering caused by smallpox. The disease kills many people, leads to the total closing of the Umuru market and hinders social interaction. The source of the contagion can be traced to the outsiders and the cause, the greed of people to earn more. This greed leads to the violation of tradition and expansion of the market inviting contagious diseases like smallpox. The trouble faced by the people in the story resembles the agony enforced by colonialism in African society. Exploitation of resources, encroachment of cultural rituals and practices and enslavement of people both economically and culturally are the evils imposed by it. The westerners not only kill people but also infect social relationship with doubt and fear. They create different false discourses to show that the tribal people are weaker and need colonizer's help. More than this, they

hide their evil motive of exploitation under the mask of civilizing mission. In the pretension of the name of civilization, they enslave people culturally and rule them.

In the story, smallpox totally stops the movement of the people and contaminates the Umuru market. The main cause of the disease is the colonizer's encroachment and their greed. Symbolically the disease stands for colonial evil that affects the African continent. Without mentioning the term 'colonization', the writer realistically presents its evils in this fictional work. Therefore, the disease smallpox can be interpreted as a symbolic presentation of colonialism that affects the traditional society of Umuru.

### Literature Review

As a prominent writer from Nigeria, who is well-established in the western academia, Chinua Achebe has

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attracted various critics through his writings. His short story selected for the present study "The sacrificial egg" has received some reviews. Lewis (2015) praises Achebe as an interpreter of the African past from within. He has fulfilled two responsibilities: one of writing in foreign language and another being faithful to tribal people. He deserves respect for, "The interpretation of the African past from within. He has solved the problem of interpreting this past in a foreign language and the responsibilities and obligations of the writer to his own people" (p. 62). He became the one who speaks for Africa as an African. He defies the trend of Europeans writing about Africa and presenting African experiences in totally mediated form.

Respecting Achebe as a writer who is successful to give memorable expression regarding the issues of modern human and African concern Boehmer (2014) writes, "An important and lasting quality in Achebe's work - his ability to give memorable, if also inevitably controversial expression to the core concern of modern human and African condition" (p. 237). Despite Achebe's controversial expressions, Boehmer praises his ability to represent the true condition of modern people as well as Africa. Samatar (1998) highlights the aspect of disintegration in "The sacrificial egg" rather than hybridity. He notes, "It is a story of disintegration rather than hybridization" (p. 62). The story presents the chaotic condition of Umuru because of the disintegration of the people. As a result of such division, they belong to nowhere. Outwardly, it is suffering from disease but actually, the situation is the outcome of disintegration.

Extending his interpretation to eco concern of Achebe, Chang(2022) states, " However, in addition to his personal and cultural conflict typical of many postcolonial writing, "The Sacrificial Egg" also features Achebe's ecological concern, though his green thinking is often implicitly represented"(p. 1). Chang analyzes the story from an eco critical perspective based on Achebe's presentation of polluted and crowded ports to show the ugly outcome of human encroachment. This interpretation has added the value of the story relating to ecological concern.

From the available reviews on the primary text, it can be surmised that the aspect of symbolic representation of the disease smallpox as a colonial evil has not been researched yet. This is the research gap this paper aims to fulfil.

### Methods and Materials

This research work follows the qualitative research design accessing data from both primary and

secondary sources. Selected primary text "The Sacrificial egg" by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe is the primary date under scrutiny. Including this text, other books, academic journals and different internet sources are utilized to obtain the data to support the claim. Critical, analytical and interpretative methods are used for analyzing textual data using critical insight of postcolonialism.

### Theoretical Modality

Nigeria is an African country that suffered much from colonialism. The British came to Nigeria in the late nineteenth century with the purpose of their trade expansion, which later resulted in the exploitation of natural resources as well as the people. Previously there were tribal people like Hausa Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo living in their own ways following their cultures and traditions. However, the arrival of British colonizers totally disturbed the existing peaceful lifestyle of people. Colonizer's main aim was exploitation of natural resources so they confiscated people's land. In this regard, Boehmer (2005) asserts, "Colonialism is the settlement of territory, exploitation of natural resources and an attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied land often by force" (p. 2). It was not limited to political domination but actually exploitation of the natural resources. They forcefully snatched their land and compelled the tribal people to be their slaves.

Colonizers used extreme force up on the tribal people. They killed those who refused giving their land and disobeyed them. They imposed restrictions on the performance of traditional cultural practices and rituals. Daniel (1986) exposes the evil of colonialism as, "The phenomena associated with colonialism include monopolistic seizure of territory, enslavement of indigenous population, racism and militarism" (p. 27). Colonialism was political and economic in nature but it took cultural and religious ways to justify colonizers' inhuman economic and political activities. They tried to hide their exploitation mission under civilization mission. Highlighting the connection between economics and politics, Appadurai (2013) writes, "Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the form of functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, constructed broadly" (p. 9). Actually material benefit is the true purpose of colonial mission expressed in whatever form.

Challenging the colonial way of dealing with colonized people and their understanding, Postcolonialism appears

in academia. This movement first criticizes the colonial mission and tries its best to show the need of freedom. Said's *Orientalism* (1979) is the crucial work that clarifies the true nature of colonialism and the discourse created by it. With the term, Orientalism Said critiques the discursive way the westerners have embraced to dominate and rule the easterners. As he mentions by him, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it. In short, Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient" (p. 3). Through such discourses, westerners have justified their domination and exploitation over the easterners. Said shows the need of defying such false myths created by colonizers to defeat them.

Highlighting the value of postcolonialism, Mcleod (2015) asserts, "Postcolonialism, as we have seen, in part involves the *challenge* to colonial ways of knowing, 'writing back' in opposition to such views" (p. 32). It provides us the critical lens to interpret the evils and devastations caused by colonialism upon non-western societies. Killing people, snatching natural resources and invasion of traditional cultural practices are the prominent issues the postcolonial scholars deal with. They aim to exploit natural resources of the traditional societies and make the place their market. For that, they invade in the foreign territory, market and the cultural aspects. With full awareness of the best way to enslave the tribal people is to destroy their culture, the colonizers attack on these aspects. Only by cultural invasion, they can fulfil their aim. Postcolonial outlook reveals all such evils so as to aware people.

Achebe's story can be analyzed properly with the light of above discussed ideas related to postcolonialism to expose the evil intentions of westerners to enter in Africa. Only the critical scrutiny of the text using these insights can reveal the symbolic meaning of Achebe's story showing the value of freedom.

### Results and Discussion

The story, "The sacrificial egg" begins with the depiction of the stagnant situation caused by smallpox. The 'sleeping gatekeeper', 'snoring boss', 'no customer through the gate for weeks' and only 'the movement of flies' indicate that the market is closed for a number of days. This represents the situation of difficulties faced by local people. No mobility appears there but just deadly passivity. Julius overlooking the great market remembers the changes that have infected the market. This market,

like all Ibo markets, had been held on one of the four days of the week but with the coming of white man and growth of Umuru into 'a big palm oil port' it has become a daily market. "This market, though still called Nwko, had long spelled over into Eke, Oye, and Afo with the coming of civilization" (Achebe, 1955, p. 5). This exemplifies how colonial encroachment has affected the traditional practices and ways of life. Then the writer reflects upon the vibrant market and trade system with total involvement of indigenous people that has gone. Now the trade is polluted with the motive of monopoly. No fair trade, no vibrancy of traders. There is the use of the metaphor of 'canoe' for this passage of traditional life into memory, fading into a distance.

Replacing the traditional way of life and trade by bustling market, crowd and noise the writer asserts the change the market has faced. Such an indication emphasizes the change in negative direction. The outsiders' influence has made the city Umuru 'busy, sprawling, crowded, and dirty' whereas previously it "had been a little village, swept and kept clean by age-grade on Nkwo day". This represents the basic shift in economic priorities that took place in many parts of Africa. "The strangers who came to Umuru came for trade and money, not in search of duties to perform" (Achebe, 1995, p. 6). This is the serious problem faced by colonized societies. The strangers represent colonizers who only focus on money and disregard other duties and responsibilities. That is why these societies face so many problems later on. No longer market days and trading, limited to individuals and tribes for subsistence but export becomes the goal. The very worldview of the people has been altered as can be seen by Julius' observation that only the arrival of a large number of people to be able to fill the market day after day can lead to bigger business. This indicates the changed belief system of people in search of a place in the global market. The spirituality and belief systems of the characters in the story are dramatically changed leading to the end of different traditions. "The young sons and daughters of Umuru soil encouraged by schools and churches were behaving no better than strangers. They neglected all their old tasks; and kept only the revelries" (Achebe, 1955, p. 6). Schools and churches especially play a role in installing western values in youth of the place leading to neglect their traditions. This is how colonizers rule up on colonies for a longer time. Their encroachment proves so dangerous to indigenous people that their history, culture, tradition, rituals etc. developed taking thousands of years encounter severe crises. "Entire indigenous population disappeared, civilization and culture were destroyed, people who had enjoyed freedom became slaves" (Ryan, 2007, p. 196). The slavery is both

economic and cultural.

Achebe repeatedly refers to the conflict between traditional spiritualism and European religion. Churches and missionary schools are there to brainwash people still they are in dilemma of the selection. The market no longer needs the blessing of spirit, the characters Julius and Ma are also victims of the new influence. Ma is a devoted Christian but still she has not become able to forget the traditional practices. "Ma was a very devout Christian convert. (. . .) had explained to him very gently that he should no longer go to see them" (Achebe, 1955, p. 7). It means, even being Christian, Ma believes in spirit and warns Julius not to go to see it due to fear. Julius is an educated man and thinks he should not be afraid of spirit but actually fears it. Both of these characters represent a fundamental collision of cultures as both characters attempt to adopt and live in their new reality but fail to abandon the old ones.

The disease smallpox leads to the total closing of the market and stops social activities. People are cut off from their relationship and villages are separated if touched by the contagion. Its main cause is nothing but a greed-guided mentality to earn more money. Achebe's narrative presents the trouble and emptiness in Umuru caused by smallpox. Symbolically these defects stand for the political message of evil caused by colonialism. In Capec's *White plague* (1937), the writer criticizes the evil intentions of warmonger political leaders and gives political messages through disease. To fulfil their ambitions, they never hesitate to put the life and property of people at risk. Capec also emphasizes the value of disease to compel the rulers to realize the importance of peace and universal goodwill. Marshal, in the play, has never withdrawn the declared war if not touched by the disease called white plague. Achebe is indirect or symbolic whereas Capec is direct in imparting political message through contagious disease.

The idea of emptiness comes repeatedly throughout Achebe's story. One can see emptiness everywhere due to smallpox. Empty basket, market, days and villages are the indications of pervading desolation in the text. The description of the past is lively and active but the description of the present is minimalistic without any vibrancy. The concept of emptiness is very strong in the final lines of the story. "This emptiness deepened with every passing day. On this side of it stood Julius and on the other Ma and Janet whom the dread artist decorated" (Achebe, 1955, p. 8). On one side of the road, Julius mourns with the feeling of loneliness and on the other side the dead bodies of Ma and Janet are mocking him. This emptiness is terrible. As colonialism destroys all the

traditional practices psychologically associated with tribal people and brings total emptiness among them, the disease does it in Julius's life. The lonely Julius again becomes lonely in this indifferent world. Regarding this issue Nayyar (2019) in his book *Postcolonial literature: An introduction* designates, "Colonialism is not only political control of Europeans but also the distortion of culture and modification of knowledge and its destruction of the discipline, it is done by making translations, commentaries and academic studies" (p. 6). Colonialism is a project of cultural enslavement that attacks the traditional cultural practices employing different strategies.

The events of the 'sacrificial egg' and 'fleet footed mask' are equally important in the story. Being educated in missionary school, Julius never has full faith in the traditional cultural practices. Therefore, he is not afraid of 'fleet footed mask' and disregards 'the sacrificed egg'. Both of them are part of traditional rituals to keep away from the misfortune of diseases like smallpox. They have their own values: psychological and physical. However, missionary education has prepared him to disregard them as superstition. "Being educated he was not afraid of whom he might meet, so went to the bank of the river and just walked up and down" (Achebe, 1955, p. 7). However, his certainty yields to an overwhelming sense of horror when he steps on a sacrificial egg. Fear throws his outer mask and disbelief vanishes. "He saw all over. The sound came bearing down on him, almost pressing his face into the moist earth" (Achebe, 1955, p. 7). This situation of attaching nowhere makes weaker. His previous confidence disappears and fear collapses him. The cultural ideas rooted in his blood and unconscious defeat the outer cover of western thought. The mimicry of west cannot take him to the final stage but to an accident. Then he realizes there is something in cultural practice.

At the end of the story, Julius is in the same position as that of the beginning. He is at the office watching the market. Despite the unbelievably crowded market that he memorizes at the beginning, he is witnessing an emptiness. Julius is on one side and his fiancée and her Christian mother on the other side. Janet and her Ma are infected, or decorated by the "dread artist". The European education of Julius and the Christian belief of his fiancée's family have only opened a gap between them: "It was barely a week ago but already it seemed like another life, separated from the present by a vast emptiness" (Achebe, 1955, p. 8). The alienation of the characters is not just the result of the disease; symbolically it is the outcome of the colonial evil.

### Conclusion

Achebe's narrative unfolds the terrible situation caused by the contagious disease called smallpox. Depiction of the total emptiness caused by the disease is horrible. Death is everywhere; financial activities are closed and social interactions are stopped. The writer does not use the term colonialism but artistically exhibits its evil influence presenting the pain and suffering caused by the disease. Therefore, the disease appears here symbolically to expose the evil impact of colonialism that leads to the disturbance of the traditional cultural practices and total emptiness in traditional societies like Umuru. The story clarifies that for bringing previous beauty and calmness to Umuru the disease must be eradicated. That means only the freedom of Africa from colonial ruling can bring it out of the evils and lead the continent to the positive direction. In such a symbolic way, the writer brings forth his anti-colonial ideas.

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