

Alienation and Betrayal: A Comparative Study of Okonkwo and Said Mahran

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Abstract—The study aims at tracing out the analogous creative credo Chinua Achebe and Naguib Mahfouz share and decipher it through their novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The Thief and the Dogs*. The focus is on examining alienation and betrayal as two of the recurring themes in modern novel in general and Third World novel in particular. One of the objectives of the study is to show how social change affects the lives of the protagonists in both novels in two societies that undergo a transition resulting, in varying degrees. These novelists present a painstaking study of the effects of this change on the sensibility of Okonkwo and Said Mahran which shows their understanding of the social forces at work at the time and their skill in using their knowledge of human psychology to develop their central characters Okonkwo and Said. The comparative methodology is used to understand the reaction of both men to the social changes around them in the light of their personalities and their social background.

Index Terms—Achebe, alienation, betrayal, Mahfouz, Okonkwo, Said Mahran

I. INTRODUCTION

Alienation and betrayal are two of the most recurring themes in modern novel in general and Third World novel in particular. The changes that third world countries underwent in the last century socially, politically and culturally were so drastic and sometimes sudden that many individuals felt alienated and disturbed. Naguib Mahfouz and Chinua Achebe are two of the most important third world novelists who traced the changes in their societies for most of the 20th century. They began writing during the colonial period and continued to write after their countries gained independence from British rule. Their novels chronicle the political, social and cultural changes in Nigeria and Egypt during the last century. Change is a central theme in many of their novels and they set novels in transitional periods in the modern history of their nations. Their protagonists have different views on the concept of change and they react to it differently. What is remarkable about Mahfouz and Achebe is their ability to grasp the historical dialectics of their societies in change. In the two novels chosen for this study, Mahfouz and Achebe try to examine the historical evolution of their societies at a transitional period. *Things fall Apart* deals with the rapid change that Igbo society underwent after coming in contact with the western influence while Mahfouz's protagonist in *The Thief and the Dogs* faces the dilemma of confronting the change brought by the 1952 revolution in Egypt, which ended the western rule.

Mahfouz and Achebe are historical novelists fond of choosing themes, plots and settings of their novels from the recent history of their native lands. Mahfouz the Nobel Laureate rooted the setting of *The Thief and the Dogs* in the 1950s in Cairo a city of “streets belaboured by the sun, careening cars, and crowds of people moving or still...” (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 1986, P. 151), where “the wheels of streetcar growl and shriek like abuse.” It includes “great mosques and, beyond them, the Citadel...” (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 153), while Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* finds setting in late 19th century Nigerian village called Umoufia. Both placed their protagonists in direct confrontation with change. They refuse to accept the changing society around them for different reasons. While Okonkwo tries to preserve the traditions and values of his society because he thinks that they do not need western values, Said is not happy with the change brought by 1952 revolution because it is not the change that he fought for. While the first is totally against change, the latter is for a change that he dreamt of. One of the most remarkable features of these two novels is their penetrating psychological insight, delving deep into ethnological psyche of the two protagonists. We are given good insight into the minds of Said and Okonkwo, their thoughts, feelings and emotions. We follow their progress in a path that leads in the end to the inevitable result, death.

II. THE THEME OF ALIENATION AND BETRAYAL IN THE THIEF AND THE DOGS

To understand this novel, one must understand Mahfouz's attitude vis-à-vis the revolution and the Nasser era. El-Enany (1993) tells us that the novels that Mahfouz wrote during the Nasser era can be seen as “a barrage of bitter criticism aimed at a revolution that has abjectly failed to deliver the goods” (*Pursuit*, P. 25). This idea is echoed by Roger Allen (1992) when he says that in the novels of the 1960s, Mahfouz tries to reflect the increasing unease of the middle class with the course of the revolution (Najib Mahfouz). Mahfouz has always maintained that his criticism of the revolution is not a criticism of its ideals, but of the failure to fulfill these ideals. Being a part of the system, for which he worked most of his life, enables him to “navigate inside the system so that he could participate and observe, collaborate and critique” (Mehrez, 1993, 76).

Thief and the Dogs combines the realist and the symbolist elements to express the author's evaluation of the political life in the country. Structurally speaking, it is more complex than its predecessors are and has two time frames, the narrative present and the remembered past. Its language is often rich in imagery, which helps the writer convey his ideas and emotions in an indirect way. Through the use of animal imagery in *The Thief and the Dogs*, Mahfouz manages to enhance our understanding of the post-revolution society and give us good understanding of the psychological make-up of his protagonist. This is a shift from his earlier realistic novels. Mahfouz himself acknowledges the shift in emphasis and style that these novels represent:

When I was preoccupied with life and its significance, the most suitable method for me was the realistic one.... Details of the background, character and plot are important in a technique that sets out to mirror and reflect life as a whole, ideas may proceed as an indirect result. When I was interested in thought and ideas, neither characters, incidents, nor background seemed important in themselves. Character became more or less a symbol or a type. Details of background were discarded and incidents were plotted to contribute to the main idea. (qtd. in Mousa's "Depth of Vision" P.162)

Therefore, after the panoramic, almost photographic descriptions and details of background of the realistic novels, Mahfouz turns to more compressed plots, which are based, to great extent, on the Bergsonian concept of time.

Mehrez(1993) tells us that, "Mahfouz has often remarked that literature should be more revolutionary than revolutions themselves, that writers must find the means to continue to be critical of the negative elements in the socio political reality" (65). Walter Allen has emphasized that "contemporary novels are the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its interface, its nervous system, coursing of its blood, and the unconscious promptings and conflicts, which sway it" (Reading a Novel 18-9). According to Roger Allen, Mahfouz, in his short novels since the 1960s "seems increasingly concerned with the individual, his role in the society in which he lives and his quest for meaning and purpose in life" ("Mirrors" 115). What distinguishes Mahfouz's novel is his preoccupation with Said as an individual, not in isolation but as a social being, a result of a living political and social reality. The situational plot, a distinct feature of his pre-independence novels is replaced by the importance of the central character. The subject matter is mainly the individual's confrontation with the new political and social reality, which tries to suppress him.

Mahfouz thinks that the sickness of his country lies in the lack of individual freedom. His hero is not an ordinary thief but a sensitive intellectual who has lost their inner harmony and as a result experience rootlessness. Le Gassick points out that the characters in the novels of this period "seem to lack any sense of direction or purpose and to act out of fear, frustration and dissatisfaction. They are devoid of idealism, ambition or patriotism and live in a Kafkasque wasteland that has neither security nor meaning" (Introduction 5). It would be wrong, however, to interpret Mahfouz's interest in the inner world of his characters as a lack of commitment or a rejection of the external reality that was his main concern in the previous works. The emphasis is on the inner world of Said Mahran but, as Bonhomme(1974) tells us, "a man's motives, his spirit, his ideas and ideals, what he is and what he values, are unquestionably coloured by the society to which he belongs" (p.2). Therefore it would be better if we say that in this novel Mahfouz is more concerned with the relationship between Said's consciousness and the external reality it confronts. He explores this relationship and puts emphasis on the human dignity and value. He is aware of the gap between the individual consciousness and the hostile outer reality, a gap that creates in Said the feelings of powerlessness, alienation and frustration.

By focusing on the alienation and the chaos in the inner world of his Said, Mahfouz is indirectly criticizing the prevalent social and political reality which is mainly responsible for shattering his self-image. Said embodies the spirit of the age in which he lives and his fragmented personality is the product of the post-revolution reality. The experiences that Said undergoes reflect the essential features of the age with its political and social characteristics. Therefore, even while seeming to be concerned with the inner world of the individual, Mahfouz's focus is on the contemporary socio-political scene and the inability of the leaders to bring about a qualitative change in the political and social levels. His aim is not to give psycho-analytical studies of his characters, but to show how the current political reality affects the individual and his way of thinking. What the novel shows is Mahfouz's increasing awareness of the problems of his country and his growing concern with the need to confront them. What is remarkable about it is the anger, sense of powerlessness, and disillusionment that come from the lived and direct experience of oppression and lack of individual freedom and identity.

Associated with the theme of alienation is the theme of betrayal. Betrayal in the novel is the type that is defined by merriam-webster.com as "to hurt (someone who trusts you, such as a friend or relative) by not giving help or by doing something morally wrong". Said Mahran is the central character of the novel and its central driving force. All the events in the story tie directly to his character, his actions and reactions. It is through the combination of Said's internal monologue and external events other characters in the novel are introduced to us, all of whom play a role in the life of Said. All the novel's elements revolve around Said's thoughts and actions. When we meet him at the beginning of the novel, he has been just released from prison. The first thing that strikes us is his loneliness. After four years in prison, there is nobody to meet him. "no one was waiting for him; nothing but his blue suit and gym shoes" (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 151)

The force that drives him is his boundless determination to seek revenge on his friend Ilish and his ex-wife Nabawiyya who betrayed him and were responsible for his imprisonment. His wish is to see the day "when those who

had betrayed him would despair unto death, when treachery would pay for what it had done" (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 151). This feeling of hate and bitterness is combined with his love for his daughter Sana "as the thought of [Sana] crossed his mind, the heat and the dust, the hatred and pain all disappeared, leaving only love to glow across a soul as clear as a rain-washed sky" (p. 152) But even Sana his little child is made to feel afraid of him and reject him.

Theme of betrayal is shown to us in the relationship of Said and his wife Nabawiyya, his friend Ilish and his guardian Alwan. Said is presented to us as an isolated human being driven by hatred and revenge against those who have betrayed him. His feelings towards them are summed up unambiguously in the expression "I swear I hate you all." (Mahfouz, *Thief* 152) He seems to reserve the worst of his hatred for Nabawiyya describing her as "that woman who sprang from filth, from vermin, from treachery and infidelity." (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 1986, p152) and "one of the secrets of hell!" (Mahfouz, *Thief*, 1986, p 158). Said's attitude towards the crime which put him in prison is quite interesting. We assume that he is the 'thief' of the novel's title, but he denies being a criminal. "It was partly fate and circumstances, partly my sense of duty and decency that drove me to do what I did. And I did it partly for the sake of the little girl." (*Thief*, 1986, p 157). His perception of himself becomes a key feature of the novel.

Said's characterization is given to us through the narrative voices used by Mahfouz. He uses third person point of view and Said's interior monologue. These monologues give us access to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. This enables us to identify with him more closely and feel more sympathetic to him. As the novel progresses, however, our identification with him is shaken by Said's actions which become less acceptable to us. We are made to sympathize with him as he is betrayed by his wife and close friend, rejected by his daughter and is shocked by the change in his mentor's actions and ideas. Rauf used to be Said's mentor as well as his friend in the past. Said at the beginning thinks that "He's still a friend and mentor, a sword of freedom ever drawn, and he'll always be like that..." But when Said revisits Rauf he realizes that he's a completely different person with completely different ideas and behavior. He has changed sides and instead of being an opponent to the regime, Rauf has become a part of the new regime and a defender of it. Said's view of him also changes. "Ilwan's face became cowlike in its fullness, and that despite his apparent friendliness and courtesy, there was something chilly about him, as well as an unfamiliar and rather disturbing suavity, a quality that could only have come from a touch of blue blood..." (The *Thief*, 1986, P. 174) Rauf even declares war on his disciple using his influence and social status to portray him as a criminal. He exposes Said through his paper inciting the public opinion against him and depicting him as a threat to society. Said addresses Rauf "You pushed me into jail, while you leapt free, into that palace of lights and mirrors. You've forgotten your wise sayings..." (The *Thief*, 182) Rauf may represent changes in Egyptian society after 1952, the changes that Said and his creator did not like. This is why Said tries to kill Rauf but fails.

III. ALIENATION AND BETRAYAL IN THINGS FALL APART

Alienation has long been a preoccupation of modern African novels, alienation as resulting primarily from external forces operating upon natives, and to overlook former detachment. What is most fascinating about Achebe is his avowed dealing with the burning contemporary social and national issues, highlighting them perhaps with great didactic purpose to revive past and mirror the present in the unforgettable past background. A dispassionate study of *Things Fall Apart* unfolds meticulously inlaid themes of social morality, cultural conventions, obsolete and obtuse social mores etc; strongly manifesting Igbo society in superb allegorical and fictional form. Achebe focuses on tradition / modernity dichotomy and the conflict between traditional way of life and the modern way brought by the British. He draws attention to the nature of the conventional dichotomy between 'foreign' and 'local'. As we know literature, and the novel in particular, has the ability of recording the characteristics of times including the social manners, customs, how people act and react, what they do, think, like and dislike. As Welles and Warren (1942) rightly argue, literature as a social document can "yield the outlines of social history" (P.103). *Things Fall Apart* provides us with social pictures of whole societies through the story of Okonkwo. The novel derives its strength from the quality of its writers' understanding of the social forces at work at the time and the way he uses his knowledge of human psychology to develop his central characters Okonkwo. Okonkwo's family is affected in one way or another by the foreign presence.

Things Fall Apart dramatizes how conditions are changing around the protagonist especially in the social sphere bringing about many changes in the attitudes of people towards many issues. It also dramatizes the conflict of the new culture with the traditional culture and the consequences of that conflict. Okonkwo's inability to adjust to the new reality created by the white people is partly attributed to fear of change and fear of being his father in "Failure and weakness"

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father--a playmate had told him that his father was agbala--another name for a woman--also a man who had taken no tide.

And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion--to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (*Things Fall Apart* 9-10)

It is his distorted image of manhood that leads him to deal in a rigid way with other people. He even misunderstands his father and his own son. In trying to avoid his father's failure, Okonkwo becomes rigid and inflexible

with no room for feelings and emotions. He classifies things and actions into two categories "womanly" and "manly." For him, as O.Solomon Lyasere tells us, "one is either a man or a woman; there can be no compromise, no composite" (Lyasere, 1979, p104). This distorted view of manhood shapes his attitude toward his son. He laments that Nwoye "has too much of his mother in him". Nwoye is capable of feeling and emotion and his soul is open to compassion and pity. Unlike his father, he is not willing to follow the rigid old values without questioning them". Nwoye is repelled by his father's equation of masculinity with bloodshed and violence. His conversion to Christianity is a proof of his openness to new values and ways of life and a rejection of the shortcomings of his own society. In other words, Nwoye's defection is an act of revolt against his father and the society he represents. Nwoye becomes, "a symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all that Okonkwo accepts and stands for". (Le Gassick, *Critical Perspectives*, 1991, p. 13). Okonkwo's sees his son's revolt as a crime, "To abandon the god's of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination" (*Things Fall Apart*, P.108).

Like Said, Okonkwo has to leave his village and clan for seven years during which many changes take place in the tribe.

Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail, it soon grew another. --Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest rifles in the clan. (*Things Fall Apart*, 121)

He refuses to accept the new culture and decides to fight this powerful force that has enabled his son to revolt against him. Like Said who was rejected by his daughter, Okonkwo feels helpless and unable to control his own son. The difference between them is that Said never lived with his daughter and the image she has about her father is formed by her mother and her new husband Ilish. Just as said failed to change his daughter's view of him, Okonkwo failed to prevent his son from adopting the white man's culture and religion. The missionaries who came to Umoufia did succeed in converting many people to their faith, especially those who were not happy with their social lot. They also succeeded in shaking the private world of the great invincible giant whose word was undisputed in his tribe.

IV. THE UNCHANGING HERO IN A CHANGING WORLD

Both Okonkwo and Said can be described unchanged heroes in a changing world. Their fatal flaw is their inability to accept the change that took place in their societies due to historical forces. They tried to "set things right" and face the force of change but found themselves alone betrayed by those close to them. Said and Okonkwo stand for their respective societies at the moment when the social fabric is being altered. Social change in the two novels is dramatized through the stories of these two characters, their attitude towards change in society, their reaction to the new reality. Despite the fact that one of them is a thief while the other is a leader in his tribe, comparing these two characters, one finds that there are similarities in their behavior. Both are fighting change and both are betrayed by those around them and both are let down by society.

Mahfouz and Achebe believe in change as a fact of life. Achebe is quoted by Bu-Buakei Jabbi (1979), stating that "Life just has to go on, and if you refuse to accept changes, then tragic though it may be, you are swept aside"(p.135). *Things Fall Apart* is a novel of striking contrasts built around the opposition involving before and after the arrival of the white man. Two different worlds, one traditional and the other one is the present reality in which the old values including patriarchy are falling apart. The Igbo society he presents in his novel is at a transitional phase in which there is a conflict between the old and the new values, the former is deeply rooted in mythology and age-long traditions and the latter is developed under the influence of an alien culture. The novel dramatizes the gradual disappearance of Umuofia's customs and traditions. Okonkwo sees the traditional values of his society disintegrating and tries to protect these values by confronting the foreign influence. Okonkwo has to choose between accepting the new order or standing against it. Okonkwo chooses to act against the forces of change though he is aware that he has no hope of succeeding in his mission.

In the last part of the novel, Okonkwo appears a lone man who finds the process of change around him incomprehensible and too quick for him to cope with. When he returns to his village, he is faced with a world "out of joint" and he sees it as his responsibility to "set it right". However, he acts rashly without carefully measuring his steps. "Unable to change himself, he will not accept change in others, in the world around him, in the people of Umulfia" (Lyasere, 1979. p 107). Unoka stands for "the poetry of life" or the human feelings that are essential in man's life. R.S Sharma tells us that in excluding the poetry of life Okonkwo "strikes at the very sources of renewal so that when the crisis finally comes, he finds himself utterly helpless" (41). Okonkwo gradually loses his control over his household and the world around him. Okonkwo wants to lead his tribe against the British intruders but, like Said, he finds himself alone fighting a lost battle.

Both Said and Okonkwo fail to view time as both a negative and positive force moving steadily, bringing about changes that help societies to move forward. Their tragic death is viewed as the result of their inability to understand the irreversibility of changes. They found themselves alienated from their societies and "swept aside" because they are unable to change or accept change.

To fully understand the reaction of the two protagonists to the changes in their societies, one has to understand the

nature of change in both societies. In the case of Egyptian society, the change is rapid and radical because of a revolution. It took place while Said was in prison. This is why he is shocked when he came out and found a different society from the one he knew before being jailed. On the other hand, the encroachment of British civilization destroys the whole social fabric of Umuofia. The new civilization erodes the traditional values. Like Said, change in Umuofia takes Okonkwo by surprise like a nightmare that he has never expected. Through the story of Said and his family, Mahfouz explores the changing norms of Egyptian society and emergence of a new modern morality. For Mahfouz change is a process that affects individuals, families and communities. Like his Nigerian counterpart, Said tries to fight the forces of change; he does not learn how to make concessions and accept changes. He tries to act as the defender of the society. He rather wheels away his solitude reminiscing about the good old days. Said meets Okonkwo's end because he fails to understand the rapid passage of time and realize and accept the fact that society changes.

One of the similarities between the two novels is depiction of the death of the protagonists. Their death symbolizes end of old society and beginning of a new one. While Okonkwo is forced to end his life in utter helplessness, Said keeps fighting until the end. However, their painful end has a cluster of symbolical traits left behind to be pondered over by the readers. Okonkwo's end symbolizes shattering of the native age-old values due to foreign invasion on the cultural sensibility of the respective community while Said's end signal the emergence of new social values created by the 1952 revolution, values that Mahfouz is clearly unhappy with.

V. CONCLUSION

Mahfouz and Achebe are two of the most important Third World writers in the last century. They wrote about the social, historical and cultural development in their countries. They excelled in narrating the story of a nation through the story of the individual. Change, on personal and national levels, is a central theme in many of their novels. They share the view that society has good and bad sides. They focus on the positive and negative social changes that are brought about by internal and external historical forces. Both Mahfouz and Achebe believe that time is both a negative and positive force moving steadily creating changes that help nations to move forward. It is, therefore, natural that a way of life with its age-old traditions falls apart making way for a new world. Okonkwo's rigid stance towards the new culture is the product of his personality, which is in turn the product of Igbo culture, while Said's inflexible attitude is the product of the teaching of Rauf Alwan and his feeling of bitterness and alienation.

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