

## Acculturative Stress in *The African Trilogy* by Chinua Achebe

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### **Abstract:**

Acculturative stress refers to the consequences that the people of a particular community face as a result of the influence of a different culture. The theory indicates the psychological and physical impacts upon the people after the two cultures merge in. Chinua Achebe's *The African Trilogy* represents this aspect of the Igbo people. *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* are the three novels comprising *The African Trilogy* reflect the psychological impact resulting from the adaptation of a new culture. Okonkwo and his next generations come across the colonial culture and confront both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. This paper reflects upon the acculturative stress of the protagonists and other minor characters of *The African Trilogy*.

**Key Words:** Conflict, stress, adaptation.

Acculturation, in simple words, refers to the adaptation of a different culture by a community or an individual. Usually in the process of acculturation, the dominant culture is assimilated by the people of the less prevailing culture. People embrace the traditions and customs of the other culture resulting in acculturation. Thus, comes the perspective of acculturative stress. Acculturative stress denotes the impact of acculturation process. Acculturation may have impact upon both physical and mental health of the people taking part in the process. Such a group of people may suffer from serious health issues. Mental stress can also be another aspect of acculturative outcomes. Acculturative stress can affect the individual or a group of people in a variety of way. It can manifest as anxiety, conflict, depression, substance abuse etc. This paper attempts to focus on Chinua Achebe's treatment of acculturative stress in *The African Trilogy*. Here is an attempt to deal with the psychological trauma of the protagonists and a few minor characters resulting from their adjustment, compromise and learning of the British culture.

Chinua Achebe's *The African Trilogy* is a compilation of three novels portraying the journey of three generations of people experiencing the cultural changes after the arrival of the Britishers in the land. *The African Trilogy* begins with *Things Fall Apart* followed by *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. *Things Fall Apart* centers around the life of the protagonist Okonkwo. The novel traces the life-style of Okonkwo in the pre-colonial as well as in the era of colonialism. Okonkwo at the beginning of the novel is an Ibo man in its true sense endorsing all the traditional African values. Okonkwo is the epitome of the ideologies of African society. Okonkwo earns the name, "cat man", a name symbolizing the status of masculinity in African tradition, proving himself to be a man of Umuofia. But the protagonist of the novel comes across challenges to maintain the African ideology that he has been acquainted with from childhood. The White men interfere the traditions and all belief systems of Umuofia resulting in rebel from the locale. But Okonkwo got disheartened knowing the waned spirit of the people of Umuofia. After a tremendous mental conflict and anxiety Okonkwo commits suicide. Acculturation in case of Okonkwo was always resisted vehemently. But at the end he submits to the colonial culture dismissing the African sense of masculinity. He was a wrestler and a warrior achieving the title of a "cat man". Perpetual mental agony and stress leads to

Okonkwo's submission to the manipulative culture. Okonkwo's response to the dominant culture brings in his acculturative stress.

*Things Fall Apart* is followed by *No Longer at Ease*, which centers around the protagonist Obi Okonkwo. Whereas Okonkwo's is much of a resistance to acculturation but a final submission, in case of Obi Okonkwo the process of acculturation is responded with conflicts and anxiety. Throughout the novel, Obi is torned apart by moral dilemma. The mother of the protagonist dies and he is undecided whether to attend the funeral or not. Following words from the text shows the same:

“When the period of guilt was over Obi felt like metal that has passed through fire. Or, as he himself put it in one of his spasmodic entries in his diary: 'I wonder why I am feeling like a brand-new snake just emerged from its slough.' The picture of his poor mother returning from the stream, her washing undone and her palm bleeding where his rusty blade had cut into it, vanished. Or rather it took a secondary place. He now remembered her as the woman who got things done.” (Achebe, p.98)

This is what Obi felt after he skipped mother's funeral. Obi suffered from a turmoil of emotions. Obi was convicted with guilt that he redeemed with the passing of the funeral.

Last novel in the series of *The African Trilogy*, i. e, *Arrows of God* again captures the dilemma of the villagers and the protagonist Ezeulu. is the village priest. The White men ask the priest to embrace Christianity and to be one of the officers of the colonial power. But he refuses. Not only the protagonist but also the villagers got divided on the basis of their faith in traditional culture or in newly imported culture of the Britishers. Here is a quote from the book showing the dualism of Ezeulu :

“I did not send you so that you forget your duty in household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people who asked you to go to Okperi. Your people should know the custom of his land, if they don’t they must. Do you hear me?” (Achebe, p.78)

Here although Ezeulu stresses on the customs of his land, he is sending his son to Okperi to learn something about the culture of the white people. After utter confusions, he had to learn the colonial culture. Ezeulu asks his son to know the other culture but not to follow that.

With the advent of the colonial culture, the definition of masculinity along with other ideas concerning an African life changes. Britishers bring in the idea of capitalism and money became a necessary indulgence for the locale. It is for this reason Obi is sent to England to endorse a Western life. But this protagonist comes back to his land to experience a metamorphosed African society. Following quotes highlight the same:

“With the Westernization of Nigeria by the British rulers, this attitude suffered a huge setback and a sea change took place. ‘Learning book’, the symbol of the White man’s wisdom, has become a thing of pride. Thus, education at England and a Government job became the highest titles.” (Achebe, p.49)

Here, it is stated that invading cultural harassed the natives bringing in attitudinal change. Such a change is radical resulting in the angst and psychological trauma. Hence is the mention of the word suffering in the above-mentioned paragraph.

Same sentiment is evoked by the characters in the book, *Arrow of Book*. All the traditional beliefs are invariably challenged that is focused in the following lines:

“Today greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune. We are the first in the nine villages to send our son to the white man’s land.” (Achebe, p. 40)

Thus, the change in the African society is the change in ideologies bringing in upheavals. Such interference to internalization did bring in mental anxiety and confusions, which the characters of the three novels in *The African Trilogy* come across. Okonkwo, Obi Okonkwo and Ezeulu, all three are victims of such a change in society. In this way, the three novels reflect the acculturative stress inflicted in the protagonists and in other minor characters. From the generation of Okonkwo to that of Obi Okonkwo, from a commoner like Okonkwo to a student like Obi and a religious person like Ezeulu, everyone has confronted the stress resulting from an imposed culture. Every strata of the society is a part and victim of acculturative stress respectively. *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* are three representing texts by Chinua Achebe voicing the aftermath of colonialism.

## References

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