

# Chinua Achebe's *Chike* And The River As A Vector Of The Igbo World Vision

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**Abstract:** *The art of storytelling is a major pastime among Africans, especially among the Igbo of Nigeria. In the pre-colonial, pristine world of the Igbo, folklore, in form of tales, fables, myths and legends, etc. constitute the oral pedagogical corpus for the education of the young. The eruption of the West on the African soil gradually sounded the death knell of this veritable form of initiation. The desecration of the rural environment, the introduction of the church and school all helped to undermine the traditional values of colonized peoples. However, thanks to the introduction of writing, most of the last vestiges of Africa's oral patrimony are systematically perpetuated. Chinua Achebe, in writing *Chike and the river* has left a legacy for young adults as the book reminds them of the impact of change in a world in perpetual mutation. In this article, an attempt is made to 'uncover' the Igbo vision of the world, and the place of initiation in the itinerary of the Igbo Child.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Children literature or juvenile literature as labeled by some scholars includes stories, books, magazines and poems that are enjoyed by children". This definition does not preclude songs and oral traditions that adults share with children. Children literatures generally are universally didactic in nature. It often contains moral lessons for children. It is also educating while entertaining; Africa with its very strong oral narrative style employs the use of proverbs, folktales, riddles handed down from one generation to another. Stories told during moonlight activities are often employed in teaching the general culture, history, politics, and economics of the people.

Some children literatures that come to mind include: *The Drummer Boy* and *Burning Grass* by Cyprian Ekwensi, *Eze Goes to School* by Onuora Nzekwe, *The Buried Treasure* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Ajapa the Tortoise* by Margaret Baumann, *Mayowa and the Masquerade* by Lola Shoneyin, *Birds of our Land* by Virginia W. Dike, *Aliyyah Learns a New Dance* by Fatima Akilu and of course *Chike and the River* by Chinua Achebe. These literatures that have continued to serve at the primary and secondary school levels have also motivated emerging writers who have sustained the tradition of children literature in Nigeria. This is an attempt at taking a

swipe at Chinua Achebe's *chike and the river* as a vector of the Igbo world vision.

## ACHEBE'S *CHIKE AND THE RIVER* – GUIDE FOR THE IGBO CHILD

Chinua Achebe is one of the greatest storytellers the African continent has produced. His literary sojourn spanned over a period of fifty years during which time he published novels, short stories, folktales, essays, as well as scholarly articles in learned journals. Through his writings, he deconstructed western epistemology and logocentrism.

*Chike and the River* (1966) is one of Achebe's books for children published by Heinemann Educational Books, Nigeria, in 1966. *Chike and the River* which forms the corpus of our critical investigation is a book for children whose publication was influenced by Christopher Okigbo. In his critical work titled *Chinua Achebe, The Author of Things Fall Apart*, Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2000) informs us that:

Christopher Okigbo, still working for Cambridge University Press, visited Achebe on several occasions and on one of those visits, in 1965, said to Achebe in his irrepressible manner: 'Chinua, you must write for us. We want a children's book from you.' That request coincided with Achebe's own

inclination at that time, especially with his uneasiness at the kind of books available for his growing children to read P.1

The story book was thus conceived and written at a critical historical conjuncture. The books available to children in those days were highly Eurocentric, and had a strong disregard for anything African. And Chinua Achebe who had already presented a paper at Leeds, entitled "The Novelist as a Teacher" posited that his role as a novelist was to "help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement"<sup>2</sup>

In the light of the above assertion, Chinua Achebe's book for children (*Chike and the river*) is an attempt at preparing children for the task ahead. The book's story line is consistent with the folkloric tradition of story-telling. It is therefore not only a book for African children, but one written in a language and form that appeal to the inner sensibilities of the African child. Because Achebe's aim is to prepare the child, one finds in the book certain axiomatic contents which remind the reader of the Igbo way of life.

*Chike and the River* is the adventurous narrative of a typical Igbo child who leaves his village Umuofia with mixed feelings. He hears of Onitsha, a town where one can get water within the confines of the compound without having to trek long distances to fetch it from streams; where people live in block or burnt- brick houses roofed with corrugated iron sheets, and not mud and thatched ones. Is Chike going to abandon his sisters, kith and kin to join strangers? His mother says "Onitsha is a big city, full of dangerous people and kidnappers. Therefore do not wonder about the city..."<sup>3</sup> The 72- page book sees Chike of Umuofia in Onitsha, his encounter with different people, and his reward of good fortune.

#### THE HERO'S TRAJECTORY: SEMANTIC SPACES IN *CHIKE AND THE RIVER*

Space plays a fundamental role in any narrative. Through space the narrative action unfolds, and the evolution of characters is made possible by the instrumentation of various spaces which form the plot of the story.

#### UMUOFIA

Umuofia is Chike's village. It is situated in the Eastern part of Nigeria, and the reader observes that the village is not very far from the big city. Only forty miles separates this rustic village from Onitsha. It is in this village that the boy Chike cut his milk teeth. We find that Chike is already eleven years old at the time of leaving Umuofia. Thus, one can comfortably infer that Chike has completed his first cycle of initiation in Umuofia before leaving it. Here, initiation is to be considered as the sum total of what he has learnt from elders, especially his mother whose task it is to bring him up properly so that he does not soil the name of the family, nay the community.

The perceptive reader is quick to observe that Chike's mother, in the absence of the *pater familias*, "worked very hard to feed and clothe her three children and to send them to school" (p.1). By her industry in a rural setting such as Umuofia, she has already inculcated in the young lad the spirit

of hard work and honesty. We are told that this matriarch "grew most of the food they ate- yams, cassava, maize, beans, plantains and many green vegetables. She also traded in dry fish, palm-oil, kerosene and matches" (p.1)

Having observed his mother, he also listened to her warnings which should provide the much needed safety which he requires as he moves into the larger society. And as we have already noted, Chike's mother warns of the dangers that lurk in the city; a city of robbers, kidnappers, and dangerous people. But above all, his mother also warned him about the dangers of going close to the river Niger. It can also be said that Umuofia provides the child with the much needed traditional pedagogy which guides the individual in his trajectory through the vagaries of life.

#### ONITSHA

Onitsha is the big city; it is cosmopolitan, industrial, as well as the commercial nerve centre of the East. In *Chike and the river*, Onitsha is presented as the binary opposite of Umuofia. Onitsha is a strange city which inspires the awe of young Chike, the newcomer. The narrator tells us that Chike:

Could not say who was a thief or kidnapper and who was not. In Umuofia every thief was known, but here even people who lived under the same roof were strangers to one another. Chike was told by his uncle's servant that sometimes a man died in one room and his neighbor in the next room would be playing his gramophone (p.4)

From the narrator's assessment of Onitsha the reader understands why Chike needs to be armed with advice from his mother. The big city is a no-man's land, and surviving in it requires a lot of wit and cleverness. The collectivity of Umuofia is sharply contrasted with the pervasive individuality of Onitsha. In such a city, one's safety cannot be totally guaranteed.

But it must be stated however that the city is not entirely monstrous; it is a commercial hub where people do business and make a lot of money. And because the Igbo have an entrepreneurial spirit as argued by Okeke( 2015), "Whoever has visited Nnewi or Aba and seen the untapped ingenuity displayed by our indigenous technicians would concur with this belief that our people, if encouraged by respective governments in power would make Igboland the China of Africa" (p.17)

They respond to the pull of any place. So, the city is expected to be inhabited by people from all walks of life who do not share the same beliefs, ethic, and ideals. For this reason, people tend to swindle others out of their possession. The survival of the fittest is paramount here. In Onitsha, just as in every big city, negative peer influence can lead a novice astray.

Thus, we find Chike in company of Samuel, a classmate of about the same age who taught Chike how to lie. When Chike tells Samuel that he has no sixpence to make the crossing across the river Niger, Samuel says to him "a big boy like you has no six pence. Don't let people hear it. "It is too shameful" (p.5). And so in order to live up to Samuel's expectation, he tells a lie. He says his uncle keeps his money (p.5). It was Samuel who introduced Chike to Professor Chandus, the magician and money-doubler. In his bid to make

the crossing to the other side of the river Niger, he gave three pence to the magician who swindled him in the end.

To put it more succinctly, Onitsha is a city of contrasts; a metropolitan space associated with big time business and at the same time a haven for all manner of people of questionable character. Chike's passage through this city was for him a baptism of fire in the sense that it is here that his character is put to the test. He throws caution to the wind and ignores his mother's advice by crossing the great river.

#### THE RIVER NIGER

The River Niger as a semantic space plays a major role in Achebe's text. It is not to be seen as a mere river, but rather as an obstacle placed deliberately to test Chike's will and resolve to succeed. It is this river which Chike must cross in order to complete a cycle of initiation in the journey of life. Crossing the river for the young Chike is thus a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. Chike needs to be armed with such virtues as courage and perseverance; qualities found among the Igbo stock.

The river Niger is at once presented as the link between two worlds; the world of the known and that of the unknown. The percipient reader finds correspondences between this river and the mythological Greek river Styx which Perseus must cross in order to conquer the underworld gorgon, Medusa.

#### ASABA

Asaba is the Midwest City on the other side of the river Niger. And so Asaba, just like Onitsha is a littoral town. After crossing the river Niger, Chike arrives in Asaba. Here, he finds himself in trouble as he comes nearly to being harmed by some robbers after the last boat to Onitsha left him. The city of Asaba presents itself as a place for sober reflections. He reminisces over his mother's advice and realizes that he has broken a moral code. But again, he also needs to act like a man in order to get himself out of harm's way.

Chike meets good fortune in Asaba; he smashes a gang of thieves who robbed a shop at night. His testimony led to the arrest of the thieves including Peter Nwana, the rich and miserly man who is his neighbour in Onitsha; Peter Nwana led the gang. For his act of bravery, he wins a scholarship from the shop owner whose shop was robbed.

One could say that the role of space cannot be overlooked in the textual architecture of any narrative. Space, just like other pillars of a text (description, time, characterization, etc.) helps to determine the movement of characters through time. And the passage of characters through the various spaces imbues them with maturity and knowledge.

#### CHIKE AND THE RIVER: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE IGBO WELTANSCHAUUNG

The Igbo are a stock found in the eastern part of what is today known as Nigeria. Several theories have been put forward to suggest their origin, but this has remained at the level of conjecture. What interests us here is that the Igbo are found in Nigeria. This is supported by Ichie Ezikeojiaku (2008) when he avers that:

Apart from the glimpse of proof from the Igbo-Ukwu finds by Shaw, and the linguistic evidence adduced by Armstrong in 1976, the origin of the Igbo still remains uncertain, though the dominant view is that *ndi Igbo* are of Nigerian origin. This theory is supported by the linguistic evidence that the Igbo are of the Niger Congo group of languages which separated from this group about 6000 BC. (P.5)

The Igbo weltanschauung is based on a set of belief systems which form the core of their cosmology. The Igbo pantheon is made up of gods and deities who regulate the world around them. Some of these gods are lesser or personal gods charged with the responsibility of protecting the individual in his journey through life. Each individual has a personal god or *chi*. The Igbo believe so much in the cult of the right arm or *Ikenga*. That is to say that as Afigbo puts it, "the hand with which (an Igbo) man hacks his way through the jungle of sweet and bitter experiences known as life"<sup>6</sup> Thus, we find Chike's trajectory as symbolic of the Igbo's adventurous spirit.

Chike's spirit of adventure and his quest for the discovery of new horizons compel him to leave the safety of Umuofia and venture into an unknown world strewn with vicissitudes; a world which he is compelled to grapple with. That world is the city of Onitsha, an urban conurbation created by the British colonialists.

Thus, one observes that the young Chike decides to take his destiny in his own hands. Ndi Igbo have a saying that when one agrees, his *chi* also agrees. Chike agrees and therefore his *chi* or personal god has no choice but to agree with him. Although the Igbo also say that a man cannot rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. This may appear contradictory. But again, one can control their *chi* by dint of hard work and perseverance. Clearly, Chike's *chi* was made for greatness. His *chi* is strong; it brings him fame and greatness in the end.

#### II. CONCLUSION

*Chike and the river*, though tagged "a book for boys" is to be seen as an initiation tale. As we have pointed out earlier, the book was written at a time when Nigerian children were saddled with a plethora of texts coming from outside. Perhaps Chinua Achebe's little book is a counter-discourse to the dominant colonialist narrative of the time whose primary aim was to perpetuate the conquest of the African.

We find in *Chike and the river* subtle "cultural codes" by way of embedded narratives, proverbs and idiom which project the Igbo vision of the world. The story of the little book is a guide for the Igbo child who must first learn his cultural milieu before making contact with the outside world. The world of the village, however rustic is presented as a counterweight to the unknown world of uncertainty and danger. Umuofia is safe, warm and affectionate with the collective ethos as a guiding principle; the big city is unsafe, cold, and individualistic.

But beyond the story which is *Chike and the river*, it is the African that is reminded of his roots in an ever-evolving world other. Thus, the African must tread with caution in his quest for a new beginning.

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