

# Political Consciousness in the Select Works of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Richard Wright

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## Abstract

*This paper introduces three writers Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Richard Wright to explore the socio political consciousness reflected in their select works. The first two writers come from African countries which have gone through the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism that resulted in common social, political and economic problems. As a result, the literature that emerged from these countries has a unifying theme despite diverse sociological contexts. Richard Wright, with an African origin, is a prominent black writer from America. It is evident from wright's writings that he writes with a political consciousness born out of his understanding of Marxism. These three writer of twentieth century display their creative talents to raise the consciousness of the suppressed people in their own countries and the world over. An effective presentation of the contemporary social as well as political problem has become the primary task of these writers, and the select works taken here serve as evidences.*

**Keywords:** consciousness, commitment, suppression, imperialism, dignity, colonialism, and race

## Introduction

With the dawn of the knowledge and feelings for others, the normal consciousness of people was broadened to embrace the well being of the members of a society. It gave birth to social consciousness. When an individual is awakened to foster things pleasant and avoid things brutal and harsh to others, he is called socially conscious. When a majority or even an effective minority of the population thinks and acts on this line, the social consciousness is converted into political consciousness. With the political consciousness awakened, a man wants to do something meaningful for the world. The political consciousness enters the creative writing as an emotion or as a sensation. When the conscious men see the humanity exposed to suffering, they raise their voices and an interest in public affairs and an interest in other branches of human activities.

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**In the words of Aldous Huxley :**

Normal waking consciousness is necessary utilitarian, and its primary concern is survival and the avoidance of pain. But normal waking consciousness is not the only form of consciousness. There is also the aesthetic consciousness, for which the world is unimaginable beauty. There is also the visionary consciousness, for which the world is fathomlessly strange, enigmatic and unpredictable. And there is the mystical consciousness for which the world is a unity. (VII)

All the above consciousnesses, however are linked together. It is why Marx becomes Shelley and Shelley, Marx. Here, in the works of three writers, political, aesthetic and the visionary consciousnesses are mixed up. The same notion applies to the writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Thiong'o and Richard Wright.

Chinua Achebe, hailing from Nigeria, steadfastly worked for the emancipation and upliftment of the worker communities of his country. As a socially conscious writer, he made an unflinching attempt to make them aware of their social status and the importance of their blood and sweat. David Cook in this regard says, "The socially conscious writer does not set to work in a vacuum, but urges his society from what it is towards what it might be" (3). The western notion that literature and politics should be separated can not be applied to Achebe's writings which have become an instrument in the struggle for freedom and political power. Chakwudi T. Maduka rightly says that, "The African writer can't afford the luxury of withdrawing into the cocoon of creativity in the name of art for art's sake" (7).

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is a serious indictment of military regimes which become leader-centered and eventually develop into life presidencies. The novelist here transforms himself into an ideologue. He is suggesting positive values to replace the old ones. He offers a comprehensive critical statement on the contemporary political situation by explicitly showing that any form of government which is insensitive to the needs of the suffering masses is doomed to fail. The novel offers a critical evaluation of the existing power structure in Nigeria. The text questions the sanction of the authority of the military rulers who come to power through force and not by popular consent. It is opposed to a centre holding reigns of power and controlling the lives of people.

*Anthills of the Savannah* is cast against the background of a small delegation of Abazonians wanting to meet His Excellency to make amends for their hostile stand against him, when he sought to install himself as the President for Life. While the other three provinces

voted in his favor, Abazon was the only province to have opposed His Excellency. The sycophant attorney General's observation in this respect is comic and funny.

The leader of the delegation, an unlettered old man, ridicules the idea of any permanent arrangement or alliance in one's life-time. According to him, even the marital alliance between man and his wife becomes null and void the moment one of the partners dies, let alone divorce and other factors.

Achebe's major preoccupation in *Anthills of the Savannah* appears to be the issue of power and the problem arising out of it. He deals with the phenomenon of power by taking recourse to an Igbo myth :

In the beginning power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty. (102)

Achebe reiterates the idea that power needs to be checked, restrained and resisted lest it tramples and crushes the very principles of liberty, freedom and human dignity. By doing so, he shows the ideological opposition to the existing systems and structures of power. Achebe's peculiarity of art makes us see, make us perceive, makes us feel something which alludes to reality.

Another African writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o from Kenya too writes with a political consciousness. Ngugi had his primary education in a local school in Kenya and had faced the hardships of the freedom movement since he had lived through the period. Though he had gone to Leeds for higher studies, he concentrated on writing about the freedom movement in Kenya and the sufferings of his country men during the emergency. With a greater knowledge of the social indignities that the presents and workers of modern Kenya are subjected to, Ngugi severely criticizes the oppressive elements and shows the Kenyans that social equality lies in not acquiring but giving, not grabbing but sharing.

As a social critic, he condemns the evils perpetrated in independent Kenya, and he realistically portrays the urban black capitalists. He raises voice against the capitalism for its cut-throat competition, inequality and oppression of one group by another. In his works Ngugi tries to uplift the cultural heritage of Africa by explaining the colonial subjugation to the Kenyans, and by presenting before every Kenyan what he was, what he is and where he is being led into. In his non-fictional work

*Homecoming*, he states:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations. Slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. (XV)

Further in his *Homecoming* he propounds his theory of history - the idea of inevitability of the sources of the proletarian revolt against the bourgeoisie. He states, "Our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential has roots in our experience of the past" (39). In other words he views history as a continuum which ties up past, present and future.

Richard Wright began his career as a member of the most oppressed race of the United States. Wright began his writing by depicting the black and white race-relationship in the USA. At that time, racism was the most vital problem for an American black. However, he gradually widened his vistas and without giving up the inquiry into race-relationship, stepped into issues of imperialism and new colonialism. As an author of an injured and insulted people, he developed his writing to the causes of the oppressed.

With his growing political consciousness, Richard became a member of the American communist party in 1932. During his membership period, he actively contributed a number of writings to the journal of the party. Wright shows abundant evidence of his understanding of Marxism, but quite at variance from the official thinking of the doctrine. In his essay 'Blueprint for Negro Literature' published in *New Challenge*, he says:

A Marxist analysis of society presents a meaningful and significant vision of the world and "creates a picture which, when placed squarely before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, and buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world. (12)

In his autobiographical writing *American Hunger* published in 1944, he writes that communism appears to be the only doctrine which understands man in his essential being:

I knew that in no other way could the emotional capacities, the passionate nature of men be so deeply tapped. In no other system yet devised could man so clearly reveal his destiny on earth, a destiny to rise and grapple with the world in which he lies .... (122)

Marxism seemed to Wright an even stronger grip on man's mind than black consciousness. In "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" published in *White Man, Listen!* he speaks of this influence of Marxism :

Out of the relentlessness left in the wake of World War I, Soviet Russia rose and sent out her calls to the oppressed ... Alien ideologies gripped men's minds ... Colour consciousness lost some of its edge and was replaced in a large measure by class consciousness: with the rise of an integral working-class movement, a new sense of identification came to the American Negro. (140-142)

Among the black writers of the thirties, it was Richard Wright who strongly felt the need for combination of the black nationalist cause and the proletarian cause. Wright was also aware of the fact that black nationalism is not an impediment to the black writers' reaching other peoples. In "Blue Print for Negro Literature", he speaks of the likeness of the conditions of all the exploited nations of the world and hopes that black authors will realize it :

They have arrived at something that smacks of truth, humanity, they should test it with others, feel it with others. They should want to feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate to it millions who are groping like themselves. (14)

Wright seems to think that his allegiance to black identity will not jeopardize his communist identity. He was conscious of the exploitation of one race, and at the same time he was honest to vent out in his works protest against the exploitation. It is true that Wright failed as a party man, and later criticized the communists in general, but he never ceased to be Marxist at heart. His attitude to religion and his practical, secular way of thinking make him an author of exploited people. He never worked as a stooge of the capitalist class. It is evident from what he says in an essay "I tried To Be a Communist" which was published in *The God That Failed*:

I had read with awe how the communists had sent phonetic experts into the vast regions of Russia to listen to the stammering dialects of peoples oppressed for centuries by the czars .... I had read how these forgotten folks had been encouraged to keep their own cultures, to see in their ancient customs meanings and satisfactions as deep as those contained in supposedly superior ways of living. (130)

All the three writers, one from America and two from Africa, have proven through their works that the major motive behind their literature is social change. They are concerned about the past and present history of their country and the concern is reflected in their works. Their socio-political consciousness manifested in their works make them the writers of the suppressed and oppressed all over the world.

Whether literature should include or exclude politics as its subject matter is a question over which opinions would differ. But these three writers in their writing aimed at disturbing the equilibrium of the settled societies. The social awareness seen in these writers is not new as in the nineteenth century it had been wide spread and growing, especially among the novelists. Because of the social conditions created in the twentieth century, these writers were converted into the political men; the men conscious that something must be done collectively by all natural men in order that an opportunity may be given to every natural man and woman to develop their natural potentialities in the most natural way.

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