

CHINUA ACHEBE'S APPROPRIATION OF DU BOIS'S *OF THE COMING OF JOHN*

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Abstract: This paper examines the African critic and novelist Chinua Achebe's reworking and recycling W.E.B. Du Bois's short story "Of The Coming Of John" (1903). Achebe's "Dead Men's Path" (1953) represents the return of the protagonist Michael Obi from his academic journey towards his home of origin Nigeria. He goes back to fulfill a mission of ruling a secondary school that suffers backwardness. To some extent, Achebe by doing so, is appropriating and adapting W.E.B. Du Bois's short story "Of The Coming of John" (1903) that exposes the dilemma of double consciousness in USA as well as the issues of race, ethnicity and discrimination. In Du Bois's work there are two characters possessing the same name of John, but they are completely different in term of social class and skin color. Thus, this research is both analytic and comparative; relying on a close reading of the two works to distinguish both the similarities and the differences between them. Also, it aims at shedding lights on how Achebe recreates the American atmosphere and the problem of north-south in the United States and molds it in Nigeria's decolonization mood, as well as, the debate between modernism and tradition.

Keywords: African Literature ; Chinua Achebe ; Afro-American Literature ; Appropriation ; W.E.B. Du Bois.

L'APPROPRIATION PAR CHINUA ACHEBE DE DE BOIS DE LA VENUE DE JOHN

Résumé : Cet article examine le remaniement et le recyclage par le critique et romancier africain Chinua Achebe de la nouvelle de W.E.B. DU Bois « De la venue de John » (1903). " *Le Chemin des Hommes Morts* " (1953) d'Achebe représente le retour du protagoniste Michael Obi de son voyage académique vers son pays d'origine, le Nigeria. Il y retourne pour remplir la mission de diriger une école secondaire en retard. Dans une certaine mesure, Achebe s'approprie et adapte ainsi la nouvelle de W.E.B. DU Bois " *De La Venue De John* " (1903) qui expose le dilemme de la double conscience aux États-Unis ainsi que les questions de race, d'origine ethnique et de discrimination. Dans l'œuvre de Du Bois, il y a deux personnages portant le même nom de John, mais ils sont complètement différents en termes de classe sociale et de couleur de peau. Ainsi, cette recherche est à la fois analytique et comparative ; s'appuyer sur une lecture attentive des deux ouvrages pour distinguer à la fois les similitudes et les différences entre eux. En outre, il vise à mettre en lumière la façon dont Achebe recrée l'atmosphère américaine et le problème nord-sud aux États-Unis et l'adapte à l'ambiance de décolonisation du Nigeria, ainsi qu'au débat entre modernisme et tradition.

Mots-clés : Littérature africaine ; Chinua Achebe ; Littérature afro-américaine ; Appropriation ; W.E.B. DU Bois.

Introduction

This research sheds light on Chinua Achebe's appropriation of De bois. It focuses on adaptation and appropriation of two different works for other two different writers in totally different contexts. This paper examines the concept of appropriation coined first by Julia Sanders and its relation to the concept of inter-textuality coined by Julia Kristeva. Thus, comparing and contrasting both works within the lenses of appropriation. In this respect, Sanders (2006) argues that adaptation is a part from inter-textuality in the sense that a former artistic work or a former literary production creates and recreates themselves. She suggests that a certain text is life and the process of adapting it again is like giving it a new life and that results afterlife and a new structure (p.1). Also, she argues that in adaptation there are both surface and profound allusions that attach the source and the target texts; She suggests, for instance, titles, characters names or events (p.35). Also, she proceeds to the point where profound references are exposed; thus, appropriation is the creation of a totally unprecedented work in both different culture and scope keeping again allusion (p.36). The same Goes for Seri (2014) in which she contends that intertextuality is a matter of copying phrases and sentences from one text and inserted into another (p.90) Chinua Achebe is a prominent critic and novelist of modern African literature. He was born in Igbo town in Nigeria. His masterpiece *things fall apart* gains a huge interest among western scholars. Hence, this novel was a starting point for his universal career. In the other hand, W.E.B. DU Bois is a literary figure in African American literature. He is well known of his commitment to the cause of Racism, and he is one of the pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement in USA. In his famous book *The Souls Of Black Folk* (1903) tackles to some extent the encounter between the binaries that took place in USA at that time; the problem of Racism as well as the confusion between the northern and southern sides of the United states . This book in particular is compartmentalized into fourteen chapters and

essays, but only the thirteenth chapter is a fictional essay that narrates the short story of John Jones and John Henderson. Thus, this paper is about Achebe's short story *Dead Men's Path* (1953) to shed light on how, perfectly, Achebe depicts the conflict between tradition and modernism during the period of decolonization in Nigeria. It also focuses on how Achebe appropriates and adapts W.E.B. DU Bois's short story *of the coming of john* (1903). Though both works are completely different in terms of the context but they share a lot of characteristics and common concerns. Thus, Sanders (2006) argues that in appropriation the titles of both texts has no relation but inside the texts we find embedded links just like the case between Michael Obi and John Jones (p.36) Achebe's *Dead Men's Path* (1953) is narrated from third person point of view, the protagonist Michael Obi is a hybrid persona who returns to his home of origin to fulfill a mission of ruling a backward secondary school. He faces many problems and by the end of the short story he could not save these troubles. So, Achebe's embodiment of his double lives protagonist as a result of hybridity by giving him opportunity to find a path between two worlds. Actually, he tends to raise the question of tradition and modernism through the notion of third space. In this respect, Jago (2018) in *Tradition and Modernity in Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy*, argues that Achebe's efforts are centered in exploring the cultural encounter of both sides (p.16)

Consequently, Michael Obi's story concentrates on the third phase of his career unlike John's career. In other words, DU Bois depicts his protagonist's life from the very beginning when he was at his homeland Altamaha, then his journey towards the north for the sake of knowledge, and finally his return holding his academic diploma. Yet, Achebe relies on the third phase of W.E.B. DU Bois's protagonist John to make it the starting point for Michael Obi. Respectively, Achebe's short story *Dead Men's Path* (1953) is an appropriation and adaptation of E.B. DU Bois's *of the coming of john* (1903). In this sense, Julia Sander said: "Appropriation frequently affect a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (p.26). By saying so, Julia opens and enlarges the process of rewriting excessively from the original work and provides new perspectives that fit the context of the newborn rather than the old one. Furthermore, Vandal-Sirois and Bastin (2012) believe that for theorists and practitioners the process of regenerating new texts for new readers has been always debatable just like the disputation of approaches whether to be domesticated or foreignized (p.21)

Generally speaking, both works are about the drama of return and about the burden of academic profession. Both Obi and John Jones experienced the encounter of the urban world. Michael Obi starts as an appointed headmaster in secondary school vis-a-vis, John he could not be even a teacher at the beginning and he is rejected by the father of the white John. This is clear to the audience when the narrator said that "it was several days later that John walked up to the judge's house to ask for the privilege of teaching the Negro school" (p. 162) this is John's intention but it is directly opposed by the judge and he said "now I like the colored people, and I sympathize with all their reasonable aspiration; but you and I both know, John, that in this country the Negro must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be equal to white men" (p.162). Par contre, Michael Obi is the successful version of John because later is excluded in his first years at school then he decides vigorously to work hard and prove the dean his efficiency, capability and responsibility. In this sense, the narrator declares the dean promised John faithfully and John from his part shouldered his little trunk, giving neither word nor look to the giggling boys, and walked down the street, "with sober eyes and a set and serious face" (p.156).

Importantly speaking, by taking the third phase of DU Bois's work, Achebe reshaped it in a completely newly mold and it is quite clear at the very beginning of Achebe's *Dead Men's Path* when the narrator said "Michael Obi's hopes were fulfilled much earlier than he had expected" (p.1). Hence, Obi's appointment is unexpected and at the same time astonishing decision from the white administrators, So, Achebe through this is putting emphasis on how the hybrid natives who are educated in the west yield to the colonizer's order though it is done by purpose and for a purpose. In other word, this is one way of the western strategies work to manipulate the indigenou through the intellectuals. In this sense, Achebe (1974) once argued that: "To deal with this phenomenal presumption the colonialist devised two contradictory arguments. He created the 'man of two worlds' theory to prove that no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them" (p.58) Respectively, in Du Bois's work "*Of The Coming Of John*" the short story discusses the problem of doubleness and duality. Basically, two main characters have the same name of John but they are completely different in terms of skin color and social class. However, Du Bois gives more interest to the black John who is from the south of America that shares some characteristics of Achebe's protagonist Michael Obi of being both educated by the white community. Du bois uses this duality to criticize the white community of their racial segregation and discrimination against Afro-Americans. And this is quite clear in Du Bois's work when John wants to go north for his academic studies, he finds rejection from the white folk and they hegemonically stated that:

The white folk of Altamaha voted John a good boy_ fine plough_ hand, good in the rice_ field, handy everywhere, and always good_ natured and respectful. But they shook their heads when his mother wanted to send him off to school. "It'll spoil him,—ruin him," they said (p.154)

Thus, Achebe appropriates John's double consciousness to posit the problem of tradition and modernism through hybridity. In this sense, Jago (2018) argued "the colonial encounter is figured almost entirely in terms of an unequal battle between "Africa and the West, tradition and modernity, the old and the new in which the ascendance and supremacy of the latter is always inevitable" (p.125). Also, he explains what Achebe does in *Dead Men's Path* and, he argues that, by doing so, Achebe is making a bridge between the Igbo peoples and the westerners as a kind of a dialogue for negotiation (p.16) Michael Obi states that when he was talking to his wife Nancy, he said: "'We shall do our best," she replied."We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just modern and delightful . . ." (p.1). Also, Nancy is a hybrid character and she supports him to fulfill his supposedly ambitions or more accurately white men's ambitions. The narrator said:"In their two years of married life she had become completely infected by his passion for "modern methods" (p.1). Again, through recycling and giving chance to be responsible for ruling a school is a step forward towards what so-called neo-colonization. However, in Du Bois's work the focus is about his whole life; starting from being a worker in rice field then his education in the north then his return holding his academic diploma and finally committing suicide as a revolution against the Klu Klux Klan lynching behavior in the USA. In this respect, Ziglar said:"Lynching was used as a method of keeping the blacks subordinate during and after Reconstruction" (Ziglar, 1988, p.14). Again, Achebe appropriates Du Bois's protagonist John to continue his dream of ruling a school through giving Michael Obi the chance to be a headmaster to achieve what John fails at. In addition, the reader have to

put in mind that John after gaining his professional diploma followed by his return to his home of origin, he faces two main problems, in the one hand, the white man rejection and disapproval of having a private school. In the other hand, his native villagers refuse the fact of being educated. The narrator stated: "The Negroes were rent into factions for and against him, the parents were careless, the children irregular and dirty, and books, pencils, and slates largely missing" (p.164). However, in Achebe's work the protagonist Michael Obi encounters only with his ancestor's disapproval of modernizing and changing the entourage of the school as well as the dead men's path, metaphorically, used in which this path is considered to be the link between the temporary peoples and their predecessors. Consequently, this notion of modernizing is quite clear even in the name of the protagonist himself because Michael Obi who is supposedly a hybrid character; Michael represents the western society/ culture and Obi represents the third world culture or, specifically, African culture. Thus, the name is a construct of a contradictory notion of tradition and modernism. In this context, Madubulke (1976) claims that peoples can be identifiable only through their names, he added that "Onomatologists have discovered that studying names of a given people will reveal a body of knowledge about them that other sciences may not reveal" (p.40). Also, Jerome and Jacoby (1996) claims that names are equal to reminder, in which names are used to preserve history (p.687). Besides, the priest of Ani strongly represents the African tradition and completely opposes the process of civilizing the primitive, the barbaric and the savages. He declares when he was talking to Michael Obi: Look here, my son," said the priest bringing down his walking stick, "this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born . . ." (p.3) Noteworthy that, both Michael Obi and John shares the physical appearances of the African men that make them distinguishable and strong. Physiologically speaking, in *Dead Men's Path* Michael Obi is represented as enthusiastic and active: "He was stoop shouldered and looked frail But he sometimes surprised people with sudden bursts of physical energy. In his present posture, however, all his bodily strength seemed to have retired behind his deep-set eyes, giving them an extraordinary power of penetration" (p.2)

Similarly, John is energetic naturally first, then because of the nature of the activities he has been doing in his village Altamaha: "A long, straggling fellow he is, brown and hard-haired, who seems to be growing straight out of his clothes, and walks with a half-apologetic roll" (p.154). Vis-a vis, his working hard in the fields of agriculture and specially in rice field makes his arms much bigger: "So the train came, and he pinched his little sister lovingly, and put his great arms about his mother's neck" (p.154). So, the indictment of his arms as being great are connotations that he is full of energy and young and also as a result of being working for a long time regardless of his age. In addition, in "*Dead Men's Path*" the protagonist Obi comes for a task to be completed bringing the notion of transforming what is conventional into a newly shape under the name of modernity. Likewise, in "*Of The Coming Of John*" the protagonist black John after his return from the north he declares his intention of bringing new ideas to his home of origin just like Obi:

"The people moved uneasily in their seats as John rose to reply. He spoke slowly and methodically. The age, he said, demanded new ideas; we were far different from those men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,—with broader ideas of human brotherhood and destiny" (p.161)

However, the pivotal distinction between Obi and John is that the later positively becomes aware of his position in society as well as his inferiority towards whites. In other words, John after being in direct contact with the new world reveals the pure nature of white men and how his people were misled and deceived: "He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erst while seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh" (p.157). Respectively, Said (1994) in his book *The Representation of the Intellectual* argues that the intellectual should go against the law and speak truth to power (p.4). Yet, John uses his academic efficiencies to rebel against the persecution imposed against his people, and then he tries to transcend his ethnic group: "He had come to save his people" (p.162). Note with standing that, the encounter of both protagonists with the elders figures appears in the one hand when Michael Obi wants to put an end to the path that connects the villagers with school and yet, facing rejection from elders: "What you say may be true," replied the priest, "but we follow the practices of our fathers. If you reopen the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch." He rose to go (p.3). John in the other hand encounters the elders in the church and they also reject him because he speaks strange tongue, the narrator declared:

Finally he urged unity, and deprecated especially religious and denominational bickering. "To-day," he said, with a smile, "the world cares little whether a man be Baptist or Methodist, or indeed a churchman at all, so long as he is good and true (p.161)

Moreover, the two characters refer to the elder's behaviors and beliefs as a backwardness and lowness. John himself said "Let's leave all that littleness, and look higher" (p.161). Vis-avis, the narrator Declares that Obi listened very well with a satisfactory smile then said finally, "is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is be just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas (p.3) Succinctly, rewriting the encounter of John with the elders of the village about the dominance of the church into Obi's encounter with elders about the path and the process of modernizing is clearly one way to criticize the church through the wisdom of elders, that is why the narrator said "the priest"; because the intervening of elders for Obi is a mistake due to their false believe. To put it differently, Achebe's appropriation of Du Bois's work, as this research argues, is not only to depict the encounter of Obi with the priest but to make sure that , even though, the elders are Christianized but they keep their false belief as a patrimony. Also, it is for the sake of criticizing European missionaries towards Africa claiming civilization, spreading the laws of God and urbanizing the savages. Yet, Gikandi (1992) believes that, by doing so Achebe is offering an image of pre-colonial past through fictional work as a process of counter narration to restore the cultural dignity and authenticity. He adds that, through transformational violence of the cultural system Africa gains its modern image (p.242) In fact, both ends are different, the two protagonist fails to achieve what is supposedly proposed; we know that John's mother Peggy urges him for study, Vis-a-vis, the white administrator urges Obi to seek modernity. Regardless, john committed suicide and Obi falls in troubles with his people of origin, and it is stated by the white supervisor "triba-war situation developing between the school and

the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster." (p. 3) However, John's death is more sarcastic, John Jones kills John Henderson because he raped his sister Jennie, then he committed suicide as a consequence of killing John Henderson. In this respect, many critics interpreted this particular end, Williams (2009) claims that the end is a kind of renunciation because the black John is aware enough of the determinism of lynching, so that he committed suicide in a very passive way (p.62). Also, said "John's death: "in his final moments black John perfectly captures what Schopenhauer termed resignation" (p.62). Nevertheless, this research argues that, John by doing so is telling the reader that death is for all whether being black or white, but the causes differs from one to another, because when we link it to the title of the short story "*Of The Coming of John*", it is strongly contradictory since by the end, they both died; this may suggest the hidden message of the short story. In this respect, another interpretation that may support the claim of this research, the discussion of Achebe's appropriation, is that, John committed suicide because he faithfully preserves cause unlike Obi's end, it is rejecting any kind of reconciliation between tradition and modernism; in Achebe's work, tradition overcomes modernity i.e. elders overcomes Obi. So, when we speak of the title *Dead men's path* is a former hint or a foreshadowing to the resolution of the short story, unlike "*Of the Coming of John*", Du Bois is sarcastic in his depiction of the end that contradicts the central core of the short story. His intention is to say that, no matter is your journey in life or your social position in society; death is something not questioned, unlike equality and freedom that any human being must question and fight to get it.

Conclusion

Achebe perfectly appropriates Du Bois's fictional work. Yet, He tries to test the colonial discourse in Nigeria's atmosphere during decolonization process while Du Bois tries to tackle the racial discourse during reconstruction in USA. To This end, Appropriation as Julia Sander argued: "a wholesale rethinking" (p.28), Achebe, wholesale, rewrites John's career through Michael Obi to propose all the possibilities of reconciliation between modernity (the west) and tradition (Africa); by focusing on the mature Obi who has a wife that stands with him and helps him during westernization process that affects him, unlike, Du Bois's John whose the urban world led him to suicide. In other words, John when he encounters the white world, felt of his inferiority "he declared:" This is the World" (p.157), that results his failure and , thus, could not resist the white man's oppression towards his ethnic group.

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