UNIT 8: CHINUA ACHEBE: "A MOTHER IN A REFUGEE CAMP"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain an insight into the life and works of the poet Chinua Achebe
- explain both the content and context of the poem
- explore the relevant themes pertaining to the text
- grasp the style and language employed in the poem
- discuss the poem in the light of its context and significance

8.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit will introduce you to the African writer Chinua Achebe who is also considered as the father of modern African literature for his outstanding literary works. Achebe was a prolific poet and writer who received much acclaim for both his literary and intellectual contributions. The selected poem titled "A Mother in a Refugee Camp" will enable you to explore and

appreciate the significance of the poet. Let us then, begin with a brief study on the life and works of Chinua Achebe.

8.3 CHINUA ACHEBE: THE POET

Albert Chinuamulogu Achebe better known as Chinua Achebe was a writer, poet and critic of Nigerian origin. Let us gain an insight into the life and works of Chinua Achebe, before going on to explore his poem.

8.3.1 His Life

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was born in a religious Christian family to Isaiah Achebe and Janet A. Illoegbunam and had three brothers and two sisters. His village home was situated in the Nigerian forest of Ogidi which is home to one of the major African tribes known as 'Igbo' (pronounced as 'Ibo'). The Igbo people are hard-working people with a rich cultural heritage. Other famous writers and poets like Paul Robeson, Aime Cesaire and Edward Blyden were of Igbo descent as well. As a child, Achebe attended St. Philips' Central School and Central School in Nekede. He was an intelligent student and qualified for both the Dennis Memorial Grammar School and Government College at the same time, decided to attend the latter. His Christian upbringing, his early love for books and inclination towards exploring traditional religious cultures had left a life-long impression on his mind. It was out of sheer compulsion that Achebe had learnt to speak English at Government College where native African languages were not allowed. He pursued his higher studies at the University of Ibadan earning a financial scholarship of merit to study medicine in 1948 but later opted to study English Literature, History and Theology instead. Although, he had eventually completed his graduation with a second class degree from the university, it was here that Achebe's talent for writing had begun to flower with the first publication of his writings. Following his graduation, he decided to take up teaching at the Merchants of Light School for a brief period and then joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) at Lagos in the year 1954. He began to write and publish a series of literary works, thereby experimenting with African Fiction.

8.3.2 His Works

Some of his best known novels were *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of Savannah* (1987). His best poetical anthologies include *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971), *Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo* (1978), *Another Africa* (1998), and *Collected Poems* (2005). Achebe also wrote children's literature and short stories compiled as *Marriage is a Private Affair* (1952), *Dead Men's Path* (1953) and *Contemporary African Short Stories* (1992) to name a few. Achebe was also the general editor of *The African Writers Series* and wrote critical essays such as *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (1975) later included in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988) along with other non-fiction works such as *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012).

On the personal front, he was married to Christiana Chinwe Okoli with whom he had two children. Achebe had first met Christiana at NBS as a colleague before they began a love relationship and settled down into marriage. Later, having received the prestigious Rockefeller Fellowship, Achebe found the opportunity to travel across the African continent and gain first-hand knowledge of the wider African socio-political and socio-cultural issues. Yet, another Fellowship for Creative Artists gave him the opportunity of travelling to the United States. In 1962, he attended the conference of African writers in English held at Makarere University College, Kampala which provided him a platform to interact with writers like Langston Hughes, Wole Soyinka and Kofi Awonoor. He shared a close friendship with the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo with whom he had set up the Citadel Press. This was before the 1967 Nigeria-Biafra War in which Achebe had lost his childhood friend, a saddening experience that is recorded in his poem "A Wake for Okigbo".

Achebe took up two new publications, worked at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and later joined the University of Nigeria. He had also served at the Bard College, New York and the David and Marianna

Fisher University. Achebe was also the first to be honoured with the Nigerian National Merit Award (1979) for his academic work and he continued to write and publish throughout life. Apart from earning more than thirty honorary degrees and several fellowships, he was also awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, the Man Booker International Prize (2007) among others. His health had gradually declined and owing to illness, Achebe breathed his last on March, 2013 in Boston and was buried in Ogidi, Nigeria.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few words on the African poet and writer Chinua Achebe.

Q2. Where did Chinua Achebe pursue his higher studies?

Q3. Name some of the best known novels by Chinua Achebe.

Q4. Name the Nigerian poet with whom Achebe shared a close friendship.

8.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

"A Mother in a Refugee Camp"

No Madonna and Child could touch
Her tenderness for a son
She soon would have to forget. . . .
The air was heavy with odors of **diarrhea**,
Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs
And dried-up bottoms **waddling** in labored steps
Behind blown-empty bellies. Other mothers there
Had long ceased to care, but not this one:
She held a ghost-smile between her teeth,
And in her eyes the memory
Of a mother's pride. . . . She had bathed him
And rubbed him down with bare palms.
She took from their bundle of possessions
A broken comb and combed
The **rust**-colored hair left on his skull



Diarrhea: a condition also referred to as loose motions
Waddling: walking with short steps and clumsy motions
Rust: reddish orange colour



Humming: to hum is to produce a sound often with a melody

Grave: a place of burial

And then—**humming** in her eyes—began carefully to part it.
In their former life this was perhaps
A little daily act of no consequence
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it
Like putting flowers on a tiny **grave**.

8.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

The poem begins with the representation of a mother's love and sacrifice through the figure of Mother Mary and her son Jesus Christ. The opening lines spell the mood of the poem, capturing the pain and suffering of a mother. Here, a mother with a son in tow is but a ghost of her once-happy self when she held her child with hope in her eyes. Now, fate seemed to have shattered that self-image and the vibrant sense of optimism owing to the rage of war. She like many other women was a victim of the war and her story is captured in the poem "A Mother in a Refugee Camp"

The description of the refugee camp itself speaks of the sufferings met by the children and the women alike. The atmosphere in the camp was gloomy, the air heavy with the odours of diarrhea, of children suffering from malnutrition and of unwashed bodies. You can well imagine the condition of babies and little children with under-nourished bodies, protruded bellies, prominently visible ribs, feeble steps and cries of hunger. The conditions of the refugee camp were so horrifying that mothers ceased to care and surrendered to their fate except this one woman who held on despite the diminished sense of hope. This woman was only a fragment of who she must have been once, trying hard to smile through her loss and suffering.

She seemed to cling on to the vestiges of her memories, the memories of a mother's pride that she had once cherished. She remembered all the little things that were special to her as a mother. But everything was lost in an instant. All that remained was a bundle of possessions, from which she took out a broken comb to comb her son's rust-coloured hair. She bathed her child and wiped his body with her bare hands. Perhaps, this takes her back to both their happier days when she did the same things with a mother's

joy. She may have never realised how special these little moments were until they were all lost. With the uncertainty of their future hanging over her, the unfortunate mother does all that there is to do with the dying hope of her little son's survival.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Give a brief description of the refugee camp in Biafra.

Q6. What did the mother remember in the time of her suffering?

8.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the major themes that emerge from the poem are as discussed below:

The Consequences of War

War and its trailing consequences leave individual lives shattered and paralyses the life of a nation. In the poem, we find the reflection of a tragic condition in a refugee camp which is universally true in most of the refugee camps after civil or national wars. The learner may have read or heard about how refugee camps are set up in the hours of human crises, in order to accommodate and provide human relief or aid to those who suffer during communal or ethnic clashes, natural calamities or disasters. The refugee camp described in the poem is one such temporary shelter or settlement provided to those who are displaced from their homes during the civil war. The context of the present poem is the Nigerian civil war which took place from July 1967 to January 1970 for almost three years costing millions of civil life. This civil war also known as the 'Biafran war' was an internal war fought in the home soil between Nigerian forces and the newly formed Republic of Biafra. Biafra was home to majority of the Igbo people and their assertion of an independent state, carved out from the Nigerian map had fuelled the civil war. Achebe supported Biafra and recorded the history of the war in his last work titled *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). At the end of the civil war, the Nigerian forces weakened the

strength of the Igbo people on the Biafran side. This particular period had witnessed widespread sickness and starvation, death and suffering, a fragment of which is mirrored and captured in the poem.

Motherhood

The relationship of a mother with her children is always special which is also universally true. One of the most amazing moments in a woman's life is motherhood. The poem reflects a mother's fortitude even during a time of great loss or crisis. When her happy world shatters into fragments, she is left in utter shock and disbelief with the turn of fate. Yet, unlike the other women in the refugee camp who surrender to their fate much as they want their children to survive, this strong woman continues to fulfill her duties towards her son, even as she fears that she would lose him very soon. The Biblical image of Mother Mary with infant Jesus who was nailed on the cross for the salvation of mankind, expresses the kind of pain that a mother goes through and the tremendous sacrifices a mother has to sometimes make for her children.

Given the circumstances of disease and suffering in the refugee camp, the mother fears that her child may not survive the hardships for too long. In her thoughts, she cherishes the special moments that she had spent with her son before her world was pulled apart, much similar to that of countless mothers. This also reminds one of the heart breaking cries of mothers who lose their sons in the war. Thus, the mother in the poem is in a similar position who senses the looming danger or threat to her son's life but does her best to take care of him. There are times when we take the little everyday moments for granted, and realise how special they are when wish to re-live them once again. The same happens to this unfortunate mother who cannot wish her son's sufferings away even if she wants to and is almost at the edge of losing hope of finding a new lease of the life that they had once known together.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. What is the context of the present poem?

Q8. Name the volume in which Achebe had recorded the history of the Biafrian war.

8.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The poetry of Chinua Achebe much like his other writings bear special reference to historical, political and socio-cultural contexts as also reflected in poems like "A Mother in a Refugee Camp" and "Christmas in Biafra". Achebe provides an insight into the African socio-cultural traditions, indigenous cultures and indigenous ways of life through most of his writings. The present poem is a fragment of wartime in Nigeria and it reflects how war can completely shatter innocent lives. There are many whose lives are paralysed during and after war as reflected in the lives of the children and women lodged in the confines of a refugee camp, totally displaced from the comfort of their home.

The poem opens with the first image of Mother Mary and the infant Jesus which is a universal representation of mother and child as also represented in the famous paintings of the classical masters. The central figure in the poem is that of the mother who represents the sacrifices of motherhood and the extent of suffering as a refugee during wartime. Some of the vivid images that remain with us long after we finish reading the poem are that of the mother's "ghost-smile", of children with "washed-out ribs" and "blown empty bellies". Also, the images of the once-happy mother getting her son ready for school and the same mother uncertain if her son would live long to go to school again, to dream of a new future, compel the reader to imagine what is it to lose a happy life to political crisis and emergencies. Her eyes speak volumes as the poet captures how she holds her happy memories "in her eyes", that are now stilled with her traumatic experience. The happy songs that she once hummed in her happier days were silenced leaving only a lingering tune of their memory.

The transition from her former life to the present is captured simultaneously in the poem. At the end of the poem we confront the image of 'a grave' with tributary flowers and through the use of the closing 'simile,' the poet conveys a mother's dying hope. Thus, Chinua Achebe strongly expresses his poetical sensibility towards a mother's traumatic experience. His use of language is simple yet powerful and the poem is a testimony of the suffering confronted by innocent people during war time.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q9. Who is the central figure in the poem "A Mother in a Refugee Camp"? Explain why.

Q10. What is the image that you find at the end of the poem?



8.7 LET US SUM UP

After a thorough study of the unit, you will be able to discuss the life and works of the African poet and writer, Chinua Achebe. The text of the poem "A Mother in a Refugee Camp" captures the ground reality of wartime conditions and the sufferings of the afflicted. The major themes emerging from the poem have been elaborated and the analyses on the poetic techniques have been provided for detailed study. Also, the unit will enable the learner to grasp the core message of the poem as reflected through vivid use of images.



8.8 FURTHER READING

1) www.britannica.com/biography/ChinuaAchebe

2) www.biography.com/people/chinua-achebe-20617665



8.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Albert Chinuamulogu Achebe better known as Chinua Achebe (1930-3013) was a writer, poet and critic of Nigerian origin. He was born in a religious Christian family to Isaiah Achebe and Janet A. Illoegbunam and had three brothers and two sisters. His village home was situated in the Nigerian forest of Ogidi which is home to one of the major African tribes known as 'Igbo'.

Ans to Q No 2: Chinua Achebe pursued his higher studies at University of Ibadan earning a financial scholarship of merit to study medicine in 1948 but later opted to study English Literature, History and Theology instead.

Ans to Q No 3: Some of the best known novels by Chinua Achebe are *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of Savannah* (1987). His best poetical anthologies include *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971), *Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo* (1978), *Another Africa* (1998), and *Collected Poems* (2005).

Ans to Q No 4: Chinua Achebe shared a close friendship with the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo with whom he had set up the Citadel Press.

Ans to Q No 5: The description of the refugee camp itself speaks of the sufferings met by the children and the women alike. There is a gloomy atmosphere in the camp with the heavy odours of diarrhea, of children suffering from malnutrition and of unwashed bodies. The condition of babies and little children with under-nourished bodies, protruded bellies, prominently visible ribs, feeble steps and cries of hunger is portrayed in the poem.

Ans to Q No 6: The mother remembered all the little things that were special to her as a mother. But everything was lost in an instant.

Ans to Q No 7: The context of the present poem is the Nigerian civil war which had taken place from July 1967 to January 1970 for almost three years costing millions of civil lives.

Ans to Q No 8: Achebe supported Biafra and recorded the history of the war in his last work titled *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012).

Ans to Q No 9: The central figure in the poem is that of the mother who represents the sacrifices of motherhood and the extent of suffering as a refugee during wartime.

Ans to Q No 10: At the end of the poem we confront the image of 'a grave' with tributary flowers and through the use of the closing 'simile,' the poet conveys a mother's dying hope.



8.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the life and works of Chinua Achebe.

Q.2. Explain the content of the poem in your own words.

Q.3. Discuss some of the relevant themes that emerge from the poem.

Q.4. Analyse the style and language in the poem "A Mother in a Refugee Camp"

Q.5. Explain with reference to context:

a) "No Madonna and Child could touch
Her tenderness for a son
She soon would have to forget. . . ."

b) "In their former life this was perhaps
A little daily act of no consequence
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave."

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3) www.poemhunter.com/keki-daruwalla/biography
4) www.britannica.com/biography/ChinuaAchebe
5) www.biography.com/people/chinua-achebe-20617665

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