Disease And Social Dislocation In Chinua Achebe’s Girls At War

Abstract
Africa is generally agreed to be the home of disease owing to the high level of poverty on the continent. Interestingly, the society associates disease with only the physical pain and discomfort it inflicts on the sufferer. A study of Achebe’s short stories in Girls At War, reveals that beyond physical pain, disease causes dislocation of personal life, family and the general society where it exists. This essay identifies different types of diseases available in the short stories and examines their effect on the various segments of the society as created by Achebe in his fictional world. The three short stories studied from aspects of their themes and how they are rendered are “The Madman,” “Akueke” and “The Sacrificial Egg.”

I. Introduction
The short story draws its strength from its conciseness, its ability to explore the human predicament in a singular incident through its peculiar art. In Chinua Achebe’s short stories in Girls At War, three stories stand out clearly in their examination of man’s experiences with disease, a dreaded human condition which causes disorder in his personal, family and social life. In these three short stories which include: “The Madman,” “Akueke” and “The Sacrificial Egg”, Achebe employs his craft to explore the effect of disease on man and society.

The Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary defines disease as:
A disorder with a specific cause and recognizable signs and symptoms; any bodily abnormality or failure to function properly, except that resulting directly from physical injury (the latter however may open the way for disease)."

Also, The Webster’s Medical Dictionary defines disease as:
“An impairment of the functioning of a system of the body, or an organ or part thereof.”

From both definitions of disease above, it is clear that its relationship with man yields negative results as it is an abnormality. Achebe passes this message artistically in these stories. Whether at the individual, family or societal levels, in the three short stories which are examined in this essay, disease is studied as a cause of social dislocation. By social dislocation in this study, we mean the distortion or the change in normal relationships among members of a society or community.

Short stories, including Achebe’s have drawn few critical comments, far less than expected from the observers of the genre. As Onuora Ossie Enekwe says,

Critics tend to pay little attention to short stories, because short fiction is often wrongly considered to be a pastime of novelists. And yet, the fact is that short fiction is one of the most taxing and difficult literary forms. It demands utmost control and economy. It is the most discriminatory form, one that does not tolerate superfluity and capriciousness”. (38)

Enekwe’s observation here is correct. Yet we must add that the scanty attention critics devote to short story study and criticism is due to the peculiar nature of the form, which many critics do not find comfortable to deal with. A good short story demands the kind of attention that a critic may give to the study of a good poem or a bad novel, for instance. But the critic must be clever enough to avoid superfluous and capricious statements and comments which are not intolerable in a study of a novel or of poetry. In fact, good short stories such as Achebe’s are too dense to be studied without necessary devotion due them, and which they rightly deserve from their themes to how their themes are realized. In the same essay of Enekwe referred to above, he further undertakes a survey of Achebe’s short stories, commenting on their themes and concludes that in Achebe’s short stories, “many of the teething problems of the Nigerian society are discussed with great understanding”. (39)

Egwuda-Ugbeda has also made some critical comments on the short stories of Achebe. In his essay, Egwuda-Ugbeda attempts to give an adequate explanation to each of the twelve stories in the
collection and concludes that:

Chinua Achebe, the archivist of Africa has done so much through his novels, short stories, poetry and children’s story books that generations yet unborn will ever echo him as the heartstring of African Creative Writing. (146)

Another foremost critic, G.D. Killam comments on “The Madman”, the first story in the collection and locates it within the group of stories that have to do with pride and ambition. In the same essay by Egwuda-Ugbeda, Killam contends that the story “Girls at War” “is all about blood and sweat and tears and meaning and useless death”(146). From available critical reviews, it is obvious that Achebe’s Girls at War has not received critical comments in line with the subject of the present essay. In other words, it is clear that critics have not looked at disease in this great writer’s short stories. This essay, therefore examines disease as a cause of social dislocation of the individual, family and community in Achebe’s Girls at War; and it is our claim that this is the first study to do so.

II. Disease and Dislocation of the Individual

Achebe’s ingenious creation of “The Madman” to illustrate the destructive powers of disease to an erstwhile respected man of means who was on the verge of acquiring a chieftaincy title is quite effective. The perceived affliction of Nwibe, the protagonist in “The Madman” by madness which is the result of mental disease socially dislocates this man of means and forever makes him socially irrelevant.

To achieve its acclaimed success, Achebe presents a simple plot, beginning with a vivid portrait of the madman which undoubtedly locates him as a mad character. He is imbued with all the qualities of madness beginning with his preference for well attended markets:

He was drawn to markets and straight roads. Not any tiny neighbourhood market where a handful of garrulous women might gather at sunset to gossip and buy ogili for the evening’s soup, but a huge, engulfing bazaar beckoning people familiar and strange from far and near. (1)

The essence of the above text is to convince the reader that the character of the madman is beyond all doubts established as a mentally diseased person. We are further told that he holds conversations with the road as he embarks on his endless trips between one major market and the other.

In contrast, Achebe soon after introduces the character of Nwibe. He has just proposed to the men of title his intention of obtaining the ozo title. He has received their blessing and is making ready for the ceremony before his encounter with the madman which leads to his social dislocation. Before this conflict, Nwibe enjoys high regard from the men of title as Achebe says of him: “But in this instance the caution of the elders was no more than a formality for Nwibe was such a sensible man that no one could think of him beginning something he was not sure to finish” (3).

Here Achebe begins to unveil a character who enjoyed societal respect and recognition. Nwibe is seen as a wise man on the threshold of becoming an ozo title holder. As the plot progresses, Nwibe is further shown as a capable family head who is able to administer his polygamous family.

The contrast between the madman and Nwibe serves as a take off point for the master story teller to show what mental disease does to its victim in the society. The stigma of madness on Nwibe cannot be cleansed forever following his impulsive pursuit of the madman into the marketplace socially. This therefore dislocates him in all the lands of Olu and Igbo. Achebe reverses the roles of both characters in that moment of impulsive flight from the stream into the market. As the race into the market progresses, the madman ties Nwibe’s cloth around his waist, thus covering his nudity while Nwibe, the “sane” one pursues him in stark nudity. This reversal of roles and the responses from the onlookers who are distraught with Nwibe’s madness as he willingly surrenders himself into the market
Afeiku and Adekunle: Disease and Social Dislocation in Chinua Achebe’s G"

place effectively shows the effect of mental disease on the individual in the society. The reversal of roles which in effect is nothing short of a poignant dramatic irony elicits from the reader and the onlookers in the story alike, high level or high grade sympathy for Nwibe, the ozo title aspirant whose aspiration is now forever diseased and can no longer be realized, for in the consciousness of his people and by their convention- he is now “marked for ever”:

It is all right’ said one of the men in the tone of a father to a crying child… one man whispered to another that it was the worst kind of madness, deep and tongue tied. May it end ill for him who did this, prayed the other. (10)

From the above passage, Nwibe’s madness is established. The common belief that any mad person who has set foot in the marketplace may never be cured drives the notable village doctors into the conclusion that Nwibe’s madness is incurable. This confirmation of Nwibe’s mentally diseased state serves as a prelude to his social dislocation thereafter as he receives unkind treatment fit for a madman.

The statement “May it end ill for him who did this, prayed the other” in the above passage indicates that Nwibe’s madness is unnatural. It indicates that someone in his community must have caused his madness with a spell cast on him. This inference is not out of place and is not at all an attempt to give a stamp of superstition to the story. In fact, the quoted statement must be interpreted from this perspective as we believe that Achebe himself is of this opinion. If not, why did he place it there? It is pertinent to our understanding of the predicament of Nwibe.

Although Nwibe is cured of his disease, we are told that since periodically the traits of madness reoccur, he is never again accepted as a sane person in the society;

Even so, it remains true that madness may indeed sometimes depart but never with all his clamorous train. Some of these always remain —the trailers of madness you might call them —to haunt the door way of the eyes. For how could a man be the same again… such a man is marked for ever. (10)

By running into the market place stark naked, Nwibe has confirmed his mentally diseased state and that could never be taken away from him. Consequently:

Nwibe became a quiet, withdrawn man avoiding whenever he could the boisterous side of the life of his people. Two years later, before another initiation season, he made a new inquiry about joining the community of titled men in his town. Had they received him perhaps he might have become at least partially restored, but those ozo men dignified and polite as ever, deftly steered the conversation away to other matters. (10)

From the foregoing text, we discern that the once respected, wisdom displaying and ozo title applicant, Nwibe is irredeemably socially dislocated. And in order regularly to show that he is sane, Nwibe becomes withdrawn for fear of saying the wrong word which could lead to further doubts as regards his sanity. The ozo title holders believe firmly that their group should not admit characters who possess unstable mental states and as such Nwibe never gets admitted into a group he had almost joined before the incident. His social life is ruined and he is never the same again.

Such is the devastating place of disease in the individual’s life in “The Madman.” Disease destabilizes and dislocates the individual by reducing his self worth, stunts his growth and aspiration and condemns him to the common societal dustbin whose contents are taken for granted. For according to E.U. Egwuda-Ugbeda, “as a madman, one’s social place in the society is sealed”. (134) But Nwibe’s predicament is also that of his family members as well, as all his family members will equally share in his dislocation. But this aspect of the dislocation is more pertinent in the short story, “Akueke” in which dislocation in the family is very clearly illustrated.
III. Disease and Dislocation in the Family

In “Akueke”, Achebe illustrates dislocation in the family through the unfriendly embrace of disease. In this case, it is the swelling disease which dislocates an entire family, turning brothers against sister on the one hand and then turns grandfather against grand children on the other hand. “Akueke” is a short story masterfully told with the aid of four major narrative devices — dream, foreshadowing, surprise and suspense. Achebe masterfully deploys these devices in his work to achieve a fully rounded short story which demonstrates the human response to disease and its consequences.

As told in a simple plot, Akueke, a former village beauty repeatedly turns down marital proposals from various men. She is bedridden, stricken by the dreaded swelling disease as punishment from the gods for her brashness. Her brothers, for fear of allowing her die in the house, and thus, incurring the wrath of Ani, take her to the bad bush for the death that was certain. The brothers visit the bush in the morning and to their dismay, Akueke is missing. Here Achebe deploys the narrative device of surprise to sustain the reader’s interest in the plot. He follows this up closely with suspense as the reader wonders what has happened to Akueke. Two or three moons later, Akueke’s grandfather sends for his grandsons (Akueke’s brothers) and, feigning ignorance, asks them of the whereabouts of Akueke. Akueke’s earlier dream of purification and return of her beauty on her sick bed becomes a reality as she emerges from her grandfather’s room looking radiant to the surprise of all. But even then, the swelling disease alters the expected cordiality in the family as love ceases to exist amongst the members. Akueke together with her grandfather refuses to forgive the erring boys. In “Akueke”, the expected cordiality in a family is lost to the swelling disease. Akueke’s distended stomach, which has announced the swelling disease, pits her six brothers against her. It is an ominous sign that she could die any moment, but must not be allowed to die in the house. Her brothers’ efforts at bringing relief and cure to her diseased state, fail and the closeness and harmony expected of brothers and sister is ruined. The brothers feel there is no option but the painful disposal of their once beautiful sister into the bad bush to be devoured by beasts. The judgment of their grandfather who is irked by their utter disregard for him as well as their heartless treatment of their sister further dislocates relationships within the family.

To heighten the level of dislocation within the family, their grandfather pronounces his decisions and actions which result in the renaming of Akueke as Matefi, her conversion from Umuofia citizenship to Ezi and the payment of her bride price to her grandfather as against her brothers:

The old man then said in very few words that he had called them together to tell them that from that day, Akueke was to become his daughter and her name would become Matefi. She was no longer a daughter of Umuofia but of Ezi. They stared before them in silence. When she marries, the old man concluded, ‘her bride-price will be mine not yours. As for your purification rites, you may carry on because Akueke is truly dead in Umuofia’.” (34)

These pronouncements by their grandfather completely alter the personality of Akueke. She now wears a new identity. She is declared dead in Umuofia and therefore has ceased existing as Akueke of Umuofia. In her place now exists Matefi of Ezi. The family is affected by disease and as such dislocated as things are never the same again within this household. Here again Achebe shows that disease is capable of dislocating the family. But very significantly, the story contains the people’s belief in the power of the gods who could cause different diseases and pains to the guilty. Yet in the Akueke example, the superstition of the people is called to question. It is in fact the disease that has caused the dislocation in the once close knit family. The story is very effective in the manner Achebe releases this clearly subtly, deep irony which is its hallmark. Ignorance which led the brothers to treat Akueke the way they did is the real disease affecting the community which Akueke
and her brothers are a part of. But Achebe rescues this pre-literate Igbo community through the eyes and mind of the sagacious grandfather who is from the community of Ezi and not from the Umuofia community. However, the theme of disease and dislocation in the community is best treated in the short story, “The Sacrificial Egg.”

IV. Disease and Dislocation in the Community

At the community level, Achebe shows the devastating effect of disease on social relationships with the story entitled “The sacrificial Egg.” In this story, Achebe illustrates social dislocation at the community level with the dreaded ‘Kitikpa’ (small pox). He describes Kitikpa by personifying it to paint a grotesque image of a rampaging terror:

He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity and boasted of it. Lest he be offended, those he killed were not killed but decorated and no one dared weep for them. He put an end to the coming and going between neighbours and between villages. They said ‘kitikpa was in that village’ and immediately it was cut off by its neighbours. (45)

Such is the awesome power of this disease that it hampers social relationships not only between villages but within the village: You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it. She lowered her voice even more and pointed surreptitiously at the house across the road whose doorway was barred with a yellow palm frond. He has decorated one of them already and the rest were moved away today in a big government lorry. (45)

A community experiencing this kind of dread cannot function normally. Interpersonal social relationships are affected, thus rendering the community socially dislocated. Julius Obi, for instance, is denied the opportunity of seeing Janet, his fiance as “kitikpa” is currently wreaking havoc on her village. He yearns for her but cannot see her as a result of the disease. Sadly enough, he never gets to see her again as she is claimed by the disease.

In addition to the denial of interpersonal relationship, commercial activities are totally grounded in the community. The erstwhile busy market at Umuru which drew traders from far and wide had been reduced to a graveyard as a result of the ravaging disease of “kitikpa”

Who would have believed that the great boisterous market could ever be quenched like this? But such was the strength of kitikpa, the incarnate power of small pox. Only he could drive away all those people and leave the market to the flies. (43)

Members of the community have been dislocated and commercial activities disrupted by disease. Here Achebe highlights disease as one of the many confrontations faced by man as he pursues his goals on earth. “Kitikpa” as a natural disaster dislocates social relationships at the communal level. By effectively deploying the device of flashback and a detailed descriptive approach, Achebe successfully illustrates social dislocation in a community ravaged by the “kitikpa” disease. Unlike the two earlier cited and discussed short stories, “The Sacrificial Egg” is effectively concerned with the plight of man in a world bereft of modern amenities to tackle the scourge of natural disasters. The question of ignorance which results from superstition contained, in varying degrees, in the earlier stories is very glaring in “The Sacrificial Egg.” In other words, “The Sarificial Egg” is as famous as a story that is in the realm of superstition in a deteriorating African post-colonial community. Achebe’s wry humour in this story is devastating for “The Sacrificial Egg” mocks the misunderstanding of disease by the natives who see smallpox as a punishment from the gods.

V. Conclusion

By a careful choice of diseases, namely mental disease, the swelling disease and “kitikpa” (small pox), Achebe has effectively illustrated the ravaging effect of disease on the individual, family and community.
At the individual level, Nwibe’s impulsiveness sharpened by greed, sets him pursuing a certified mad man into the market place as the mad man has his piece of cloth. The belief that he must have been mad to pursue a mad man stark naked into the market place, establishes the fact that Nwibe is surely inflicted by insanity, a disease difficult to cure since he has voluntarily submitted himself to the call of the market place. He henceforth, begins a bountiful harvest of his action which results in his indignity and loss of a respectable status in the society thereafter.

At the level of the individual, Nwibe suffers social dislocation, arising from his infirm action which qualifies him to be interpreted as a mad man. But the belief that Nwibe’s problem is unnatural is never lost sight of by the reader. So also is Achebe’s artistic rendition of the story, which thrives essentially and effectively on Achebe’s use of poignant dramatic irony to underscore Nwibe’s fate.

Achebe’s illustration of dislocation in the family as a result of disease is effected by the short story “Akueke.” Here disease turns family members into feuding characters, who disrupt the expected harmony and cordial relationship expected of a family. Unlike the mental disease, Achebe illustrates family dislocation as a result of disease with a physically challenging disease—the swelling disease. Achebe’s artistic treatment of this societal scourge is quite interesting. He employs four narrative devices to show how disease can cause dislocation within the family. But it is worthy of note that superstition plays a major role in the decimation of the family. Achebe’s ironic treatment of this subject is remarkable.

Finally, the dreaded disease-small pox is chosen by Achebe to illustrate social dislocation in the society by disease. The globally acclaimed story teller personifies “kitikpa” and portrays him roaming wild in the community and distorting normal relationships among lovers, friends, families and commercial activities. All in all, the various themes discussed above overlap and are contained, in varying degrees, in each story under focus. And Achebe’s respective artistic rendering of the stories endears them to the reader in such a manner that cannot but enable him or her to laud the short story teller as an icon, a true icon in the business and art of short story writing. Achebe’s concern in all ramifications in the short stories also enables us to make the point that short story criticism is a noble enterprise worth engaging in as we have done here.

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