

## Hegemony in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies' "Apollo"

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### Abstract

This paper tries to examine the operation and influence of hegemony in Adichie's "Apollo". Hegemony is closely linked with oppression of any kind. In "Apollo" the influence of hegemony is notable as the characters are affected by it invisibly and the characters are unaware of their oppressed/influenced state. As the characters are from Nigeria, a former colony, the aspects of colonialism and neo-colonialism are linked in the analysis of hegemony in this novel. The modes through which hegemony affects the characters are also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Hegemony, Colonialism, Neo-colonialism, Education, Media

### 1. Introduction

The basis for the theory of Hegemony lies in Marx's idea, that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." Illuminated by this idea of Marx from the "Communist Manifesto" Antonio Gramsci, an Italian communist leader, framed the theory of hegemony, while in prison. In simple words, hegemony is the imposing of the ideas

of the ruling/dominant class upon the working/weaker class. These ideas may be social, political, cultural, moral and economic. Thereby, the ideas of the dominant class become dominant ideas and then are made to become popular ideas.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer, known for her works such as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *We should all be feminists* and *Purple Hibiscus*. She is famous for her works in the area of feminism, especially black feminism. She exudes her female and African identity in all her works. Though subtle, it is evident that her works, which depict the Nigerian present which is far removed from its past, are criticisms against hegemony and cultural and ideological oppressions. Adichie's short story "Apollo" was released in *The New Yorker* in April 2015. "Apollo" could be considered as the story of a "whitewashed" Nigerian family. The story begins when the parents of the family are in their 80's. The whole story is the reminiscence of Okenwa, the son, of his past. In the past, the parents have tried to rear Okenwa without any exposure to the real Africa. But the boy develops an unlikely friendship with one of his houseboys, Raphael. Later when Raphael tries to distance himself from Okenwa, because of the uncommon nature of the friendship and the difficulties it brings, Okenwa feels cheated. So, he cunningly sends Raphael out of the house, by accusing him of hurting him. Later when he visits his parents he comes to know that Raphael has become a robber. Though the main themes of the story are the relationship between parents and son and friendship, the operation of hegemony and its influence upon the lives of the characters, of this story, is very significant.

## 2. Hegemony and neo-colonialism

Hegemony is closely linked with colonialism and other forms of dominations. Because in colonialism people were subdued not only physically but also ideologically. As soon as the people were demographically subdued, to check the retaliation hegemony was

used by the colonisers to brainwash the colonised. “Whiteman’s Burden” is such an idea of hegemony. This idea was inflicted in the minds of the colonised by the colonisers, to trick them into believing that the colonisers are actually working for their betterment, selflessly. Through hegemony, people were also silently made to accept that they are inferior. In turn, they were forced to revere the oppressors, who posed themselves as superiors. This hegemony could also be called as ideological colonisation.

Even after the abolition of colonisation, hegemony helped in the successful colonisation of people’s intellect. So colonialism did not cease its existence in any colony with the proclamation of independence and the retreat of the British force. Thomas R. Bates says, “The basic premise of the theory of hegemony is one with which few would disagree: that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas.” Unseen to the visible eyes, colonisers still continue to exert their influence upon their former colonies’ culture, economy and politics. This is called as neo-colonialism. This intangible influence is aided by hegemony. This, in turn, has caused the extinction of the culture of many nations and populations. The real victory of hegemony lies in the fact that the natives of those cultures were made to celebrate this extinction as the abolition of something uncivil.

In Adichie’s “Apollo”, the setting is a Nigerian family. The family has a mother and a father, who are both professors. Through Okenwa’s narration of the past, the lifestyle of his parents is revealed. Their lifestyle is very much removed from that of their country’s. The following is the description of the parents by Okenwa:

—and spent their lives in an intense and intimate competition over who published more, who won at badminton, who had the last word in an argument. They often read aloud to each other in the evening, from journals or newspapers, standing rather than sitting in the parlor, sometimes pacing, as though about to spring at a new idea. They

drank Mateus rosé—that dark, shapely bottle always seemed to be resting on a table near them—and left behind glasses faint with reddish dregs.(Adichie np)

This description portrays the image of a western family into mind rather than that of a Nigerian family. Playing Badminton, Mateus rosé wine and staff clubs are not native to Nigeria. Though the presence of these could be justified as the symbol of civilisation and globalisation, the destruction of native culture through it is undeniable. Their admiration towards these western habits and cultures reflects in the upbringing of their son as well. He is brought up to match with his parent's western social skills, though he dislikes it, and is guarded against any native contact. Okenwa says,

I read books only enough to satisfy them, and to answer the kinds of unexpected questions that might come in the middle of a meal—What did I think of Pip? Had Ezeulu done the right thing? I sometimes felt like an interloper in our house... Going to the staff club with them was an ordeal: I found badminton boring, the shuttlecock seemed to me an unfinished thing, as though whoever had invented the game had stopped halfway.

### 3. Hegemony and education

As the parents in this story are professors they belong to the intellectual and educated lot of their country. Hegemony operates well through this kind of intellectual lot. Though hegemony has played a larger role in the oppression of nations and societies, fortunately, it has brought in some desirable changes in the society such as, the spread of education and the prohibition of superstitious beliefs, such as the ones that are narrated by the mother in “Apollo”. This argument helps efficiently in the persuasion of the intellectual lot. The educated people become the target of hegemony, as they are influential amongst a community. In influencing the intellectual lot education plays a major role. After the end of

colonialism, the west continued to exert its influence upon the colonies through the education system. Because the education system that is followed by the colonies was framed by the colonisers. Even after the departure of the colonisers, the colonies got stuck with their former education system. This western education teaches the natives to look down upon anything that is native and push it aside as uncivil. Meanwhile, anything that comes from the “masters” is glorified. So the educated lot, who are supposed to work towards the uplift of their society, tend to look down on their society. This holds true in the case of the parents in “Apollo” as well. To explicate their views on Nigerian culture their son says the following words about them. “My mother, a professor of political science, would have said “Nonsense” in her crisp manner, and my father, a professor of education, would merely have snorted, the stories not worth the effort of speech.” Through this kind of intellectuals neo-colonialism operates well.

#### 4. Hegemony through media

Apart from education, another powerful weapon used by hegemony in “Apollo” is media. In today’s world hegemony through media plays a larger role in the lives of people. Though this weapon is comparatively new its influence is greater. The greater influence results from the wider reach of media amongst people. In many colonies, though education is unavailable in some parts, media is available to them. It influences the young and the old, and the civilised and uncivilised alike. In “Apollo” Okenwa is doubly affected by hegemony. He is affected by the hegemony through education as well as the hegemony through media. His parents who are fascinated by the western culture force him to follow it. But the media is more powerful. So that Okenwa who hates his parents’ compulsive upbringing gets infatuated by the media and develops a passion towards Kung Fu, which is a South Asian martial art. Okenwa in “Apollo” says,

What I loved was kung Fu. I watched “Enter the Dragon” so often that I knew all the lines, and I longed to wake up and be Bruce Lee. I would kick and strike at the air, at imaginary enemies who had killed my imaginary family. I would pull my mattress onto the floor, stand on two thick books—usually hardcover copies of “Black Beauty” and “The Water-Babies”—and leap onto the mattress, screaming “Haaa!” like Bruce Lee.

These lines show the impact of media on him. All this prevent him from tasting the true African culture and tradition.

An evidence for the wider reach of hegemony through media is the passion of Raphael towards Kung Fu. Through the movies, both the master and the house boy are influenced. Both of them who could have had nothing in common because of their social status come closer because of this. Only this influence, leads to a friendship between them. Okenwa who has had many house boys before Raphael has never developed a friendship with them. “All the houseboys treated me with the contemptuous care of people who disliked my mother.”- this line shows the kind of relationship he shared with his other house boys. But with Raphael, secretly, he develops a friendship ignoring his parents’ dislike and warnings. “It was after school (when they practice Kung Fu), with Raphael, that my real life began”-this line shows the extent of Okenwa’s friendship with Raphael and his passion for Kung Fu. So the friendship of Okenwa with Raphael, the house boy, could be taken as an example for the reach of hegemony through media.

## 5. Conclusion

The operation and the influence of hegemony that is discussed through “Apollo” in this paper, proves the importance of non-physical ideas and cultures. All through the ages, ideas were the powerful weapons used by any population. But after colonisation, this fact has

gained importance. In “Apollo”, the powerful west seems to continue its influence upon Nigeria, though it is politically free from the western rule. The popular Kung Fu culture transcends borders and influences people across classes. From this it could be inferred that oppressions will no more come through weapons but through ideas and culture.

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