Identity Salience and Self-Verification Problems in Chinua Achebe’s Fictional Works

Amechi Nicholas Akwanya
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract:
Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart perhaps the most successful African novel and was recognized almost from its very first appearance as a world classic. One masterpiece is undoubtedly a great achievement for a writer; and few are able to produce more than one or two in a lifetime. In Achebe’s case, where the acknowledged masterpiece is the author’s very first work, there have been occasional remarks to the effect that it was a lucky shot, and nothing more. But the fact is that with all the attention mostly on that first work, the others have not been given enough attention to determine their true worth. They certainly deserve serious and individual attention, each being distinctive as a narrative in terms of structure and overall significance and responsive to various different literary theories. Using identity theory, but thinking hermeneutically, this paper will shed new light on the author’s five novels. The functioning of each major character at a critical juncture where the vital exchanges causing changes both in individual life and in his world means that notwithstanding the nature of the sequences in which they attempt to realize themselves, the works all have the seriousness of ‘historical’ novels. With the combination of identity theory and hermeneutics, therefore, we shall be able to see more clearly the ways in which the different characters understand themselves and enact their identities in their different social environments, what roles they have and what these roles mean to them, the nature of the blockages they encounter in their attempts at self-verification and what the defeat of these efforts entails both to them and their life-worlds.

Key words: Activation, character, cultural knowledge, moral identity, person identity, social identity, salience, verification.

Introduction
Two aspects of identity theory are to be put to work as heuristic devices in this paper. They are salience and verification and are involved in all forms of identity enactment. The key issues in this analytic model are concisely presented in the following statement by Stryker and Burke in ‘The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory’:

For Identity Theory, the model is composed of four central components, [namely] the identity standard, or the set of (culturally prescribed) meanings held by the individual defining their role identity in a situation; perceptions by the person of meanings within the situation matched to the dimensions of meaning in the identity standard; the comparator or mechanism that compares the perceived situational meanings with those held in the identity standard; and behavior or activity of the individual, which is a function of the difference between perceptions and standard. Behavior, in this model, is organized to change the situation and hence the perceived self-relevant meanings in order to bring them into agreement with those in the identity standard. Bringing situationally perceived self-relevant meanings into agreement with the identity standard is self-verification, accomplished through altering the present situation or seeking and creating new situations in which perceived self-relevant meanings match those of the identity standard. (9)

Identity theory is designed for the study of real human beings in their interactions in society. For this reason, it is inviting to apply it in studying the novel, which for a long time was discussed almost exclusively as the story of the individual and society. In some novels, the accent is on the individuality of the individual. This is seen in some modernist works like those of D.H. Lawrence, Kafka, Joyce and Camus. Henry James belongs here too, despite a strong sense of group identity, for society here is really a small group constituted by well-worked interactive networks. Novels that place the accent on society itself seem not to engage attention as much as the others. There are some of those in the Nigerian tradition during the 1960s, which tended to receive passing notice as ‘sociological’ novels. Narratives with a strong personal presence tend to display depths of character, which, therefore, have the capacity to spring surprises inexhaustibly like real human beings. Achebe’s works have these kinds of individuals with identity standards that determine their orientations towards the world and often preoccupied with self-
verification. One of them, *No Longer at Ease*, is quite encumbered to stagnation over self-verification, like Hamlet bogged down by indecision.

Salience, on the other hand, is explained in somewhat different ways in social identity theory and identity theory. Stets and Burke draw from Oaks and Stryker writing, respectively, on social identity theory and identity theory in the following:

Social identity theorists originally used the term salience to indicate the activation of an identity in a situation. A salient social identity was “one which is functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behavior”…. In identity theory, salience has been understood as the probability that an identity will be activated in a situation (2000: 229).

As Bremond has taught (see Barthes 1977: 82n), a narrative moment is where a set of possible alternatives is indicated; a sequence emerges when one of these alternatives is followed through; which means that narrative has no way of developing a sequence where identity is not activated or only has a probability of being activated. To function in the study of narratives, therefore, salience presupposes identities that are enacted. In this paper, salience is used with reference to the concrete activation of an identity. Reading may not always be aware of it, but it has much to do with the way we understand and respond to literary characters. The amount of information we get about the identity of the character directly from narration is usually schematic, but the bulk of what we know about him or her is made out by virtue of salience, in the situation where identity is activated. We read in Stryker and Burke, identities are understood as cognitive schema—internally stored information and meanings serving as frameworks for interpreting experience. As such, they are cognitive bases for defining situations, and they make for greater sensitivity and receptivity to certain cues for behavior. With self thus specified, Identity Theory hypothesized that the higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the higher the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity (5).

Reading is a much more complex activity when the matter is literary than an informative text. One is looking at the situation the character must define and the cues he identifies and follows up in action; one must be at the same time aware of the character’s history, the kind of decision he takes, as well as whatever the narrator may have said in the way of enunciation about the character’s social, role, and person identities. Because identity is internal to the character and manifests by the character defining his situation and taking cues of behavior from it, correlation of narrative information and salience is what determines whether the narrator is reliable or not. At the scene of the cutting down of Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart* (19), for instance, the narrator explains Okonkwo’s action as resulting from fear of being thought weak – a negative identity enactment therefore. But analysis of the situation, bearing in mind that Okonkwo has in full view of the elders withdrawn to the rear of the file of elders following Ikemefuna in order to avoid striking out at the boy without fear of being called weak in doing so shows that the narrator’s judgment is questionable. The narrator has clearly performed an interpretive act and in that one act betrayed the fact that it is not a straightforward third person omniscient narrator, but a third person unreliable narrator.

**The Individuality of the Individual**

The protagonist in *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo, whose sense of social identity is quite weak and can hardly find a role for himself beyond being a civil servant, suddenly discovers person identity in his marriage proposal. The young lady is an *osu*, forbidden him by the cultural tradition, but he perceives the situation as demanding that he should go forward with the planned marriage. He is acting now not in line with cultural norms or even his own wishes or perceived best interest, but with what he *had* to do. Whereas the identity theory model prescribes that he ‘change the situation and hence the perceived self-relevant meanings in order to bring them into agreement with those in the identity standard’, Obi seems to demand changes in the identity standard to match his self-relevant meaning, or perhaps to be constructing for himself a new identity standard with new self-relevant meanings. Thus does the individuality of the individual become the issue of tension in this work. His significant attempt at self-verification is by appeal to the Christian tradition which his father is committed to, heart and soul, although he had never thought of it in relation to the *osu* institution. Obi’s commitment to this tradition, however, is at best lukewarm, and he wields it as a weapon to force his father into retreat:

‘The Bible says that in Christ there are no bond or free.’

‘My son,’ said Okonkwo, ‘I understand what you say. But this thing is deeper than you think.’

‘What is this thing? Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man *osu*, a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children’s children for ever. But have we not seen the light of the Gospel?’ Obi used the very words that his father might have used in talking to his heathen kinsmen (120-121).
For the purposes of an argument, Obi is assuming his father’s role identity as a Christian leader. It produces the desired effect. But he has also used up this particular resource and there is nothing to draw from at the next challenge.

It is possible to distinguish among Achebe’s works on the basis of the kinds of identity claimed or assigned, the needs of verification, and the outcomes. Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are associated with strong group and role identities. In Anthills of the Savannah, group identity is weak and role identity is hampered for the most part for lack of channels of verification. Its strength is in person identities. Person identity is similarly strong with respect to each of the antagonists in A Man of the People. Here role identity is also strong, but not the group identity, except as may be assumed by Nanga for personal gain. In No Longer at Ease, strong group or role or person identity is seen with some of the characters that play minor roles in the action, like Mr Green, Obi’s expatriate boss in the office and the leader of Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos. Obi, the protagonist, is rather psychologically dispossessed. What baffles him particularly is that every single person he meets attempts to control him; for identity has a control factor. He resents the colonial expatriates but has to fight off one individual claiming master identity after another on the other flank of him and finds himself hemmed in and ‘constrained by structural expectations’ (Stets and Burke 2000: 229). It is bitterly ironic that he should be hamstrung in this way, despite that he is acknowledged as a lone ‘palm nut’. The metaphor is from his people’s proverbial lore, but the colonial expatriates regard him in much the same way. His conviction for taking a bribe causes no end of consternation among them. The trial judge articulates this in his judgment:

‘I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this’ (2).

Obi’s social identity is strictly undecided. He does not belong with the colonialists, although they count much on his Western education (3), but his identity standard, in terms of ‘the set of (culturally prescribed) meanings held by the individual’ has clearly undergone change.

By contrast, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are traditional novels. On the one hand, the social environment in which they unfold is that of traditional society; on the other, the identity standard which accounts for the formation of the characters’ self-relevant meanings and comprise the framework with which they interpret experience and define their situations are wholly from the cultural tradition. These narratives overlie the encounter between the European colonizers and the formerly isolated traditional peoples. The white man has put in place new institutions like the school, the Christian religion, an administration and a legal system encompassing a vast geographical area and is in the process of imposing his rule throughout this region. But the characters’ perceptions and reactions to these institutions are in terms of the habits of thought controlled by their localized view of a world in which the individual can make a difference. The most their minds can readily comprehend is the clan. They cannot conceptualize a global, expansive system backed by unlimited force, utterly impersonal and capable of rearranging lives and histories beyond all recognition. Okonkwo and Ezeulu, the protagonists of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God respectively have strong person identities and differ in the specific identity standards by which they define their situations and attempt to verify their self-meanings. For Okonkwo, it is social identity; for Ezeulu there is a role identity which is uncontested, but on that basis, he attempts self-salience in social identity.

Ezeulu’s role identity is cultic: he is the priest of Ulu and the chief priest of Umuaro. Okonkwo, on the other hand, is a warrior of the highest standing in Umuofia, but ‘his life had been ruled by a great passion to become one of the lords of the clan’ (Things Fall Apart 43). The path to achieving this is through hard work, accumulating of capital, taking the highest titles in the land, and flaunting a prosperous household with many wives and children. These are recognized by his society as markers of success and therefore consequence. But he also wants to be an intimidating presence before whom less successful men would quail and know how keep their place. We read of an incident in which Okonkwo acts this identity:

Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: ‘This meeting is for men.’ The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man’s spirit. Everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo when Okonkwo called him a woman. The oldest man present said sternly that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble (8).

Much has been said about Okonkwo’s fear of being thought weak. What we see here, however, is the ‘something wrong’ (Murray’s translation of harmtia (2009)) in the man’s character which plays a critical role in the chain of events from the burning of the church through the arrest and humiliation of Okonkwo and other elders in the white man’s prison to Okonkwo’s implacable quest for revenge and having the occasion thrust to him by the court messenger who has come to the village square to convey the colonial Administrator’s order to discontinue the meeting of elders. Okonkwo committing suicide in the aftermath of killing this court messenger is to avoid further humiliation he would certainly have faced if he should submit to the white man’s justice.
Okonkwo is a figure of the Nietzschean ‘bold’ individual, unbounded in spirit and defiant to the last (The Birth of Tragedy 48-49). His self-verification in the passage with Osugo draws a reprimand from the oldest man present and the apology he offers has smoothed over a bumpy moment in the meeting, enabling discourse to resume. But his attitude is not changed in any way. It is to be noted, moreover, that the old man does not censure Okonkwo for his method of self-verification or for the unspoken referentials in it, namely that Osugo had taken no titles and that male identity standard in the stock of cultural knowledge entails more than being of the relevant gender. Okonkwo’s self-verification is therefore successful. There is no need for a change of heart and substituting a new identity standard. To put a name on what is wrong with Okonkwo’s character, it is probably lack of sōphrosunē (‘wisdom’, ‘prudence’, ‘self-knowledge’, ‘moderation’). Such is the tragic factor in The Bacchae, leading to Pentheus’s tragic confrontation with Dionysus.

Similarly, in Arrow of God, Ezeulu helps to poison the atmosphere to his disadvantage by the way in which he verifies his cultic pre-eminence. At the hearing by the District Officer, Captain Winterbottom on the war between Umuaro and Okperi, Ezeulu had ‘witnessed against his own people’, according to Winterbottom (38). The following which is narrated consciousness may never have been spoken to anyone in the harsh and gloating terms of the ending:

Ezeulu often said that the dead fathers of Umuaro looking at the world from Ani-Mmọ must be utterly bewildered by the ways of the new age. At no other time but now could Umuaro have taken war to Okperi in the circumstances in which it did. Who would have imagined that Umuaro would go to war so sorely divided? Who would have thought that they would disregard the warning of the priest of Ulu who originally brought the six villages together and made them what they were? But Umuaro had grown wise and strong in its own conceit and had become like the little bird, nza, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to a single combat. Umuaro challenged the deity which laid the foundation of their villages. And — what did they expect? — he thrashed them, thrashed them enough for today and for tomorrow! (14)

There is already a crisis in self-esteem here, which, in identity theory, boils down to ‘how strongly people identify with the group’ (Hogg 2006: 120). Umuaro is being distanciated in Ezeulu’s consciousness as ‘they’; and the reason is that he has lost the debate on whether or not to go to war with Okperi. It is not only that he despises the leader of the war party, but he believes him to have misrepresented the facts and misled the people into opting for a war over land which, according to him, belongs to that neighbouring town. So he cannot reconcile himself to the majority decision.

But his counsel against the war is remembered against him in terms suggesting that he had not merely given an account of the facts as he knew them, but as someone who had taken the side of Okperi against his own people and quite as if he had been their protagonist. That is the allusion in the final summing up of the narrative:

So in the end only Umuaro and its leaders saw the final outcome. To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors — that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgment against his clan (230). The basis of Ezeulu’s self-esteem is not so much his position as a cultic minister or even as his spokesman in this realm. He wants Ulu to be the final reference point in all things and Ezeulu himself the one who announces his will. He is maneuvering himself to the social stage, where the identity standard is as a guide and the opinion moulder. His contempt for the people is deep on this account, because in the congress of elders where momentous decisions are taken, his presentations are treated as opinio instead of as the deity Ulu’s will, and the right way. Hence he informs his friend,

I can see tomorrow; that is why I can tell Umuaro: come out from this because there is death there or do this because there is profit in it. If they listen to me, o-o; if they refuse to listen, o-o. I have passed the stage of dancing to receive presents (132).

The claim here is that he is satisfied to perform the function of giving guidance, and it does not matter to him personally whichever way the people react. The reality, however, is that he has extreme bitterness of heart because under the instigation of Ezidemili, he has been thwarted and controverted by Ogbuefi Nwaka every turn, while Umuaro first enjoys the exchanges as a spectacle and then falls in line behind Nwaka’s populist banner. Ogbuefi Nwaka, however, has all the recognized markings of salience of social identity — wealth and possessions in profusion, with the highest title in the land and a large and prosperous household. Ezeulu does not have half as much, but seeks self-enhancement in truth and the relationship to Ulu. He is profoundly embittered that his enemies have the ears of the people of Umuaro. This bitterness assails him even in moments of prayer for Umuaro (6).

The priest’s role identity does not seem to be compromised in the disasters that befall him as the narrative reaches its climax. These disasters are seen by the people as their god taking ‘sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest’. He sees them differently of course — he would lose his self-esteem totally if he should go along
with them; for self-esteem is considered to be a major resource for self-support and self-enhancement in identity theory (Burke 1996). But it is as if he is the one who has been thrashed – and thrashed ‘enough for today and for tomorrow’. His sense of the situation, however, is as if some other force had inflicted these, while his deity was not attentive (228). The catastrophe leaves a crack in his mind, but he lives on ‘in the haughty splendour of a demented high priest’. It is his social identity that is utterly ruined.

Social identity ranks very high with Okonkwo; and his effort is continually in the direction of self-enhancement, increasing his self-esteem. Life has no attraction whatever to him once he finds that instead of self-enhancement all he can look ahead to is humiliation and degradation. Ezeulu, on the other hand, who has a secure role identity, and the level of social identity consequent upon that is rather drawn to salience in the social scene, which thrusts him into the field in a struggle for power. With a populist agenda and necessary social self-enhancements, his adversaries have the edge. In the issue of the war with Okperi, for instance, truth-saying seems to have been the most dangerous course to take:

Every time he prayed for Umuaro bitterness rose into his mouth, a great smouldering anger for the division which had come to the six villages and which his enemies tried to lay on his head. And for what reason? Because he had spoken the truth before the white man. But how could a man who held the holy staff of Ulu know that a thing was a lie and speak it? How could he fail to tell the story as he had heard it from his own father? Even the white man, Wintabota, understood, though he came from a land no one knew. He had called Ezeulu the only witness of truth. That was what riled his enemies—that the white man should come from so far to tell them the truth they knew but hated to hear. It was an augury of the world’s ruin (6-7).

Identities can be organized in what Carter calls a ‘salience hierarchy’ (2013: 205), but this does not seem to be the case with Ezeulu. The role identity as priest of Uluis for life and by the god’s election; so it is securely his. As to person identity, he is a truthful person, a strong and able householder, with promising sons and connections – sufficient grounds to think well of himself, believe in himself, and feel generally confident. With regard to social identity, he has wealth and titles – though not the highest one yet; he also has a fairly large and moderately prosperous family, which are acceptable signs of personal achievement and social consequence. Some of his enemies call him ‘ambitious’; others claim that his aim is to become a king. In his own thinking, he is just serving the cause of truth. But there is no doubt that he has given warrant for these accusations by the way in which he uses the public stage, seeking self-verification there. By giving social identity salience over role or even person identity, Ezeulu has put himself at total risk, where failure would have been bad enough without the public opprobrium resulting from the three-month delay in calling the New Yam Festival because of the white man’s inadvertent disruption in the Umuaro calendar and other personal disasters. As Stryker and Burke (2000) have written, it has become something of a commonplace to acknowledge that self-love, self-acceptance and self-approval, are all essential constituents of a person’s health, happiness and mental adjustment. However, unfortunately this is not enough. We also need others to care for us, to approve of us and to ‘believe’ in us in order that our own self-attitudes and feelings may be maintained. Thus, these psychological needs are simultaneously social needs.

Ezeulu’s need for public approval and trust, not by reason of his role performance, but his social salience is directly related to the disastrous change of fortune he experiences. But it arises simultaneously from the psychological and social needs he aspires to. It therefore works into the patterns of necessity Aristotle associates with tragedy.

Visions of Power

Achebe’s first hero to pitch in the field of struggle to gain and maintain powers an end in itself is Chief Nanga of A Man of the People. He is also someone who knows as if by instinct the close link to the need for ‘others to care for us, to approve of us and to ‘believe’ in us’. His credentials are established in the very first movement of the narrative:

Whether you asked in the city or in his home village, Anata, they would tell you he was a man of the people (1). Nanga is a man of the people in sharing their attitudes and mindset; and so he is at home with them and effortlessly strikes the right chord with them. For instance, he knows how to impress them with a display of wealth, the ‘conspicuous consumption’ being ‘another means of rising socially’ (Burke 1992: 67), which his challenger Odili despises to his own cost. He is also not particular about the veracity of what he says to them, as long as the prospects of ready reception are good, and it serves his purpose. We shall see him short in a moment simultaneously of identity enactment and self-verification in a campaign rally, where he has the stage all to himself, unlike Ezeulu who has a social animal of the stature and salience of OgbuefiNwaka to contend with.

The narrator in A Man of the People sounds ironic in identifying Chief Nanga as a ‘man of the people’, but he seems to be more consistent and more determined to present the situation dispassionately, even though from the first person viewpoint of an antagonist. He is also caught up in Chief Nanga’s process of identity enactment and self-verification and becomes a resource of sorts. In terms of structure, this meeting at Nanga’s campaign rally repeats
the first meeting in Anata Grammar School with which the narrative opens. At that meeting, he recognizes and receives Odili "back as a long lost son" (Akunya 2013). In this campaign, he has come disguised, but is again recognized, this time as a treacherous enemy to be denounced, thrashed, and humiliated:

‘Odili the great,’ saluted Chief Nanga. Then he took the microphone and said: ‘My people, this is the boy who wants to take my seat.’ The announcement was greeted by a wild uproar, compounded of disbelief, shock and contemptuous laughter. ‘Come up here,’ said Nanga. ‘They want to see you.’ I was pushed up the steps to the dais…

‘My people,’ said Nanga again. ‘This is the boy who is thrusting his finger into my eye. He came to my house in Bori, ate my food, drank my water and my wine and instead of saying thank you to me he set about plotting how to drive me out and take over my house.’ The crowd roared again….

‘I hear some people asking who is he: I will tell you. He was once my pupil. I taught him ABC and I called him to my house to arrange for him to go to England. Yes, I take the blame; he did not just smell his hand one morning and go to my house — called him. Anyone who wants to may blame me.’ There were louder cries of shock at such an unspeakable betrayal…. Come to the microphone and tell my people why you came; they are listening…’ He thrust the microphone into my face.

‘I came to tell your people that you are a liar and…’ He pulled the microphone away smartly, set it down, walked up to me and slapped my face. Immediately hands seized my arms (139-140).

This is almost a classic case of identity activation, which is ‘the process by which an identity is triggered and subsequently controlled by an individual in a situation’ (Carter 2013: 206).

Nanga here activates his credentials as the man of the people, and Odili concedes them to him as his people. They are just as contemptible to him (138) as the people of Umuaro paying attention to Ogbuefi Nwaka are to Ezulu. Nanga is in control of the proceedings. He has the microphone and wields it to his advantage. Having assured himself of the total loyalty of the crowd, he tries, condemns Odili, and personally initiates his punishment with the crowd’s total approval. This is the same person who had earlier visited Odili and offered him money to step down and not challenge him for this parliamentary seat. By indulging the curiosity to see Chief Nanga at his inaugural campaign rally, Odili has unwittingly handed his adversary a situation for self-enactment on a vast scale. In one fell swoop, Nanga has been able to punish his enemy, incapacitate the challenger to his parliamentary seat, clearing the way to him to be returned unopposed. He has even roused a blood lust in the people and given it a safe outlet; he has further verified his social identity as a man of the people with more than satisfactory results.

Among Nanga’s people, Odili is obviously not esteemed or believed in, nevertheless, he comes away with certain reinforcements to ensure that his own ‘self-attitudes and feelings’ are maintained, resources which Achebe’s other underdog, Obi Okonkwo, does not enjoy. The reference to taking over his house is an allusion to Edna who the chief has started the process of adding to his household as a second wife, but whom Odili has designs on and will eventually marry. She does not only show sympathy towards Odili as he is being savagely beaten by Nanga and his thugs, she actually tries to come between him and Nanga and is roughly pushed aside and knocked down by the chief himself. That situation is also her moment of self-activation in a gender role, which gives Odili a cue for his later behaviour. He comes away with the clear consciousness that he is cared for.

Odili says he does not know what has made him come to this rally, whether to learn some tricks he might use in his own campaign or just ‘naked curiosity’, however,

Whatever it was, I went. But I took great pains to disguise myself first – with a hat and sun-glasses. I thought of taking Boniface and the others, but decided they were likely to attract attention and trouble. So I went alone (136).

In identity terms, this campaign is also his moment. Here he activates his moral identity, which involves courage, thoughtfulness, adventurousness, high motivation, commitment and readiness to pay the price for what he believes in (see Carter 212). Odili’s identity salience is in the aspect of moral identity. In school, his friends had given him his name a playful twist, turning it to ‘Diligent’ (A Man of the People 79), which says much about his perceived attitude towards his tasks. He is also deeply concerned about issues of justice and fairness. What has driven him into confrontation with his would-be mentor, Chief Nanga, is the issue of fairness and selfish gratification on the part of Nanga. The question of justice and right conduct also crops up crucially in the manner in which his party is conducting the campaign, as the ruling party had been trying to buy the opposition off with money:

Later I called Max aside and told him excitedly and in a few words about Chief Nanga’s visit.

‘You should have taken the money from him,’ he replied.

‘What?’ I was thunderstruck.

‘Chief Koko offered me one thousand pounds,’ he continued placidly. ‘I consulted the other boys and we decided to accept. It paid for that minibus…’

‘I don’t understand you, Max. Are you telling me that you have taken money and stepped down for P. O. P.?"
‘I am telling you nothing of the sort. The paper I signed has no legal force whatever and we needed the money...’

‘It had moral force,’ I said, downcast. ‘I am sorry, Max, but I think you have committed a big blunder. I thought we wanted our fight to be clean (126).

The question is not about moral righteousness as such. It is about following a certain norm of conduct, being guided by what one perceives as just, truthful, right, or appropriate. The moral person in this theory is a free-thinking individual, who wants to act responsibly and places a high premium on actions that can be defended ‘as rational, logical and morally legitimate’(Burr 2002: 6). This kind of individual appears to be a misfit in the social space as configured in Achebe’s fiction; and since he is thrust by some kind of necessity on that stage, he inevitably suffers. Considering the processes that account for his appearance on that stage, he suffers not as a victim, but like Paul Ricoeur’s tragic figure, he is both ‘innocent and guilty’ (1974: 296). As someone who also claims moral salience, though not as the primary mode of self-verification, Ezeulu’s suffering has that double orientation as well. That figure or in fact several of them are again seen in Anthills of the Savannah.

The main characters in this narrative have social and person identity meanings in which cultural affiliation and cultural knowledge play a very little role, except for Ikem and Beatrice, who, with Chris, are the characters for whom moral salience is pre-eminent. In Beatrice’s interventions with the key individuals on whose decisions the action of the narrative turns, General Sam, Chris Oriko, and Ikem Osodi, ‘the three green bottles’ (191), her appeal is to good sense and sound judgment, considerateness, fairness, and understanding. Her self-verification is therefore in terms of ‘behaving morally toward others’ (Carter 205). We see an example in her scene with Chris after her futile attempts at the Presidential Retreat to get the Head of State to see the precariousness of his situation:

‘I am not behaving strange. You are! Chris, you are behaving very strange indeed. Listen, let me ask you a simple question, Chris. I am the girl you say you want to marry. Right? OK, I am taken away in strange, very strange circumstances last night. I call you beforehand and tell you. You come over here and all you say to me is: don’t worry, it’s all right.’

‘I never said anything of the sort to you.’

‘Chris, you asked me, the girl you want to marry, to travel forty miles at night to Abichi...’

‘To Abichi? You didn’t say it was Abichi, did you?’

‘That’s not the point. You asked the girl you want to marry to go along and keep all options open. Do you remember that? Well, I’m sorry to inform you I did not take your advice’ (112).

She is questioning Chris’s sense of right judgment, his sensitivity and caring attitude, and his commitment to her as a future spouse. She is also showing displeasure and implicitly demanding a moral response in the way of some action to mollify her.

Chris’s person identify salience is also moral. On this ground his relationship with the Head of State, his boyhood friend, progressively breaks down. The final straw is the instruction to issue a letter of suspension to Mr Osodi from editorship of the National Gazette on trumped up charges of colluding with agitators and helping to thwart the life presidency referendum to which the Commissioner for Information, Chris Oriko responds:

I am sorry Your Excellency but I will not write a letter suspending the Editor of the National Gazette simply because some zealous security officer has come up with a story’ (144).

Previously he and other former friends of the Head of State had been indulgent towards the man’s foibles, but now he has come to the realization that role identity had become everything for him. What now appears is that they had misjudged him all along; for he had left them confused as to how to take him for many years owing to a streak of imitativeness whereby he would follow suggestions or trends exhibited by other people he hero-worshipped as religiously, but without any ‘sense of moral commitment’:

There is something else about Sam which makes him enormously easy to take: his sense of theatre. He is basically an actor and half of the things we are inclined to hold against him are no more than scenes from his repertory to which he may have no sense of moral commitment whatsoever. He was fascinated by the customs of the English, especially their well-to-do classes and enjoyed playing at their foibles. When he told me about his elegant pipe which he had spent a whole morning choosing in a Mayfair shop I could see that he was not taking himself seriously at all. And therefore I had no reason to do so (50).

This copy-cat mentality will lead him into adopting the counsel and methods of old African leaders he sees at the Organization of African Unity meetings who, with no development or governance programmes for their countries, have been able to maintain and entrench themselves in power, and in some cases assigned themselves life presidencies, by manipulating the people and smothering and keeping in check all free-thinkers, who suggest that a leader has responsibilities to the people. From now on his identity standard is that of a ‘strongman’. For salience, in order apparently ‘to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behavior’, Sam seeks to be voted a life presidency in a referendum, and when that fails, to place his image on the nation’s currency.
Only at the point of self-verification do some like Chris Oriokin the cabinet begin to notice. IkemOsodi, however, knowing him not to be morally strong nor intellectually bright (46), misreads these events as evidence that he is being ill-advised by the people closest to him, especially Chris. He continues to regard him in moral terms, looking out for moral salience from the Head of State, believing ‘that basically he does want to do the right thing’ (46). On the issue of the currency, for instance, his comment reveals that he still does not seem to believe what he is seeing: Yes I heard of it like everybody else. Whether there is such a plan or not I don’t know. All I can say is I hope the rumour is unfounded. My position is quite straightforward especially now that I don’t have to worry about being Editor of the Gazette. My view is that any serving President foolish enough to lay his head on a coin should know he is inciting people to take it off; the head I mean’ (162).

The Head of State seizes on this remark by Ikem as he then escalates to extrajudicial killing as self-verification of the strongman identity. IkemOsodi himself is his first victim.

**Conclusion**

In Achebe’s first four novels, the social system is definable largely because of the identity standards which determine the characters’ self-awareness, their behavior and interactive patterns, their view of the world and their perceptions of meaning in their situations. But in all four the accent is on the individual. This is also the case in the fifth work, *Anthills of the Savannah*, where the identity standards differ with almost each of the major characters. The perceived situational meanings are however similar for three of the four major characters who share a broadly similar moral standard. Identity theory is not only helpful in studying the individual and accessing the characters to their depths, it also brings out in Achebe’s works the salient features by which the characters are often unable to be representative figures. Rather they are usually strong individuals with high moral salience, though not in the sense of virtuousness. This is especially the case with the later novels. Identity theory enables us to see his corpus as a movement from social salience to person and moral salience. Social salience, as we see in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* leads to struggle for power, while moral salience brings the theatre of struggle to the individual soul, even when the conflict has a political aspect, as in *A Man of the People*. In this work, Chief Nanga may have been fighting for his political life, but Odili is in the struggle in pursuit of what had to be done.

This study suggests that the concerns that give rise to the creative act in Achebe are profoundly human concerns. Philosophically, the orientation is towards values – the ones that confront the individual in his specific situation, towards which he or she exercises a moral commitment. Thus we have constructions which not only give the sense of real human beings in action, but also, simultaneously, individuals with markings that recall figures from the literary tradition, such as in heroic narratives where action is often driven by the characters’ perceptions of what had to be done.

**References**


