

Confronting Racism and Hegemony in World Literature: Extending Achebe's Critique of Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

The interest of this paper is to examine racial issue and historical references, as well as the imperial discourse that Achebe has succinctly appropriated as thematic material and out of which his fiction emerged. The concern extends to Achebe's theoretical directions and the important debates about racial politics and hegemony in fiction. The essay serves as a reminder that the prevailing condition of what critics refer to as post colonial culture emerged from the historical phenomenon of colonialism, with its wide range of material practices and effects such as slavery, displacement, emigration and racial as well as cultural discrimination. These material conditions and their relationship to question of ideology are the heart of the most vigorous debates in Achebe's works. Since the colonial space is an antagonistic one, the paper reviews the divergent opinions of participants in the imperial discourse and locates the neutralizing influence of Achebe's literature in the colonial world.

Key words: African Literature, ideology, colonialism, racial discrimination, culture

Chinua Achebe and the 'African Fiction'

Historically, colonialism represents the fundamental factor that shapes the concern of African literature. The heart of literary writing in the continent could not have acquired its present identity and function without the painful encounter between Africa and Europe. Colonialism in its radical remodeling of Africa societies remains one of the major predicaments which creative artists and literary historians have had to deal with. The literature that even emerged after political independence has been driven by the same imperative. The focus of this paper is to examine the effect of the colonial history in the writings of Chinua Achebe and account for how he confronts racism and hegemony in western literature.

A critical reading of Achebe's fictions should perhaps start with a question like why has colonialism remain a central issue in his creative sensibilities. Again, why has colonialism constitute a fundamental component of Achebe's preoccupation? The answer to these questions is that African literature could not avoid the trauma and denigration that accompanied the imposition of colonial rule. Achebe's essay "The Empire Fights Back" (2000. 37) gives an account of Captain John Lok's voyage to West Africa in 1561. The treatise provides an early model of what would become a powerful and enduring tradition. According to Achebe (2000):

One of his men had described the Negroes as a people of beastly living, without a God, laws, religion. Three hundred and fifty years later, we find that this model like the energiser burner is still running strong, beating away on its tin drum. Unhuman was how Joyce Cary, in the early part of our century saw his African dancers. One generation before him, Joseph Conrad had created a memorable actor/narrator who could be greatly troubled by the mere thought of his Africans being human like himself. P.37

From the early eighteenth century, notable writers of African descent in Europe, especially, Olaudah Equino, had built dominant literary conventions to oppose slave trade and to establish an African identity. Chinua Achebe followed the same pattern of literary tradition by producing an African literature intended to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of the African in the age of post colonialism. The concern that Achebe constantly expresses in literature needs to be located within the tradition that the decolonized subject opposes foreign domination and racial superiority and asserts African's cultural sovereignty. The dominant theme of racism and hegemony in world literature is aptly illustrated by Lamming (1997. 12) when he remarks succinctly that "This is a seed of colonization which has been subtly and richly infused with myths. We can change laws overnight; we may reshape images of our feeling. But this myth is most difficult to dislodge."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Achebe's fiction like most writings of other pioneer African writers such as Caseley Hayford's *Ethiopian unbound* and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* has identified with colonial culture and its institutions. African writings collectively oppose the destructive practices of imperial rule and agitate for African cultural freedom. The process of colonial resistance in African literature became an unprecedented artist movement that subsequently engendered monumental literary works. African writers came to realize that culture and knowledge are instruments of control and the process of colonialism produced new cultural formations and configurations. Thus, Achebe has persistently used literature to agitate for the restoration of Nigeria's and Africa's place in world history. He believes strongly that as a writer, he should be sensitive to the 'burning issues' that ravage the

continent of Africa. He thus perceives his works as a product of historical force, although Amuta accuses him of being insensitive to the driving power of economics in shaping the image of Africa (Kehinde 2003. 183).

Things Fall Apart is a text that established Achebe as a writer of an anti-imperialist movement. The novel is a counter discourse of Europe's literary intervention in Africa. The Hegelian imagination of the imperial generation remains alive into the post-imperial era. But it was through Europe's colonial writers, especially Joseph Conrad, that such distorted images were made available to the European elites of subsequent generations. Through his various essays and interviews, Achebe never hides his passionate determination and commitment to settle score with Conrad. This confrontation arises from Conrad's literary mis-invention of Africa. According to Mboukou (1988 .15) black African literature emerged as an explanatory work of fiction. Its objective is to re-introduce the Africa to the west. The goal is predicated upon the western assumption that Africans were animals and beast of burden for centuries, living only to serve the white society. Black people were assumed to be unknown so that writers were needed to explain them to the western world.

The circumstances of colonialism have created a flood of topics that has immeasurably expanded African literature; especially the need for defence and rehabilitation of the black, of the African personality, black dignity and claims on the lost rights and freedom. Thus, Achebe's anti-imperialist discourse goes beyond a peripheral literary narration but fortified with a compelling ideology of cultural nationalist ideas, convictions and ideals about Africa. Achebe believes that available European records about African have horribly violated, offended and denigrated Africans. Western literature had precipitated a form of racist convictions that badly affected the sensibilities of an African man. According to Ekpo (2007 .217) "It was such in an ideological context that Achebe configured the historic mission of his literary interventions as an imperative to defend Africa against past denigrations and to protect them from further imperialist psycho-cultural aggressions." Achebe thus confronted the repugnant racism that manifests odiously in the writing of Conrad. He challenged Conrad's uncharitable image of the black race. His concern for the health of African culture was indeed grounded in a firm Afrocentric ideological commitment. He stated clearly that his mission is not only to undertake a corrective anthropology of Africa but to also reform post-imperial African sensibilities. This is what Ekpo (2007 .219) means when states further that: "this pedagogical role consists precisely in the literary reconstruction of the mangled past by reclaiming from the ruins of colonial cultural vandalisms, the remaining subject forming values, including race, pride, cultural dignity, and native moral authority".

The ideological struggles for emancipation took place at the period of cultural nationalism. This was an era when the ideological ferment occasioned by a global anti-imperialism mingled with an intense Afrocentric ideological movement. The basis of Achebe's argument is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, and that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this they must regain (Achebe 2000 .8). The post colonial critics assert that imperialism and its manifestation persist even though not necessarily in the same form. The practice of post colonialism moves in two interrelated directions; firstly, it interrogates imperial texts to expose the founding ideologies of imperialism and secondly it accounts for the text of those postcolonial subjects in order to recognize the

numerous voices of those affected by empire and thereby to resituate the former. Thus, a kind of rationality between the two discourses is put into play. (Parckh 1988 . x) Achebe's literature becomes critically committed to the task of responding to the challenges of the European presence in Africa. For instance Conrad's novel is a central text in any discussion of literature and racial discourse in Africa. In *Ironies of Progress: Joseph Conrad and imperialism in Africa*, Goonetilleke (1991 .75) posits that:

Conrad's novel is the dominant image of Africa in the western imagination. Conrad's Africa is the dark continent of the European imagination, an extreme stereotype. Conrad exploits the stereotype to the full. He is using Africa as a symbol, a backcloth into which his characters can project their inner doubts, their sense of alienation. The landscape is mythic, the scenery surreal, the circumstances grotesque.

Part of Achebe's charge echoed by various postcolonial critics is that Conrad's work contributes to the on going and active history of Eurocentricity and racial discrimination. Achebe contends that the age long attitude embodied in *Heart of Darkness* and its use of Africa as undifferentiated back drop has fostered the dehumanization of African and Africans. As a writer, Achebe thus considers his responsibility as a teacher who needs to teach the ignorant public about the potency and dynamism of African culture. He rejects the modern idea of the artist as an alienated individual whose literature should be insulated from social reality. To him, the artist is an integral part of society. Every work of art must have functional value and relevance to the community. As far as Achebe is concerned, art and political concerns are not mutually exclusive. Thus, his objective in writing is to pursue a kind psycho-social rehabilitation through cultural literacy. According to Nelson (2004 .22) "A modern classic, *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's calculated response to the imperialist versions of the colonial encounter. Here, he offers a consistory rearticulating of history that is explicitly designed to destabilize European discursive construction of Africa's past".

Achebe's preoccupation is coming to terms with the problematic historical inheritance and forging an authentic and liberating sense of personal and cultural wholeness. He pursues this mission through a revision of African history. In the words of Nelson, it is precisely this vital and fundamental nexus between establishing a valid connection with the past and achieving a wholesome sense of self that prompts the postcolonial writer to engage in constant dialogue with history. Achebe's literature, thus, establishes a framework that foregrounds an Afro centric tradition. His novels are essentially crafted to counter the repugnant notions of African culture as perceived by the western readers of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Kehinde (2003 .185) citing Niyi Osundare explains that "Conrad's novel exemplifies a complex series of evasions, open eyed blindness, willful forgetfulness, lacunae, egoisms and the like, against African and his people". Kehinde (2003 .166) further remarks that the constant repetitions of such words as inscrutable, incomprehensible and blanks in Conrad's novel constitutes an indication of his subjective portrayal of African culture and people. This argument is pushed further by Echeruo (1973) in *Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa*

In effect, the continent is being written about and explored so as to yield a meaning or a significance of interest to the foreign (that is the European) imagination. The mind it studied was really European mind; the imagination it finally understood (or delineated) was inevitably the European imagination. But the occasion was conveniently Africa and the various myths of Africa provided the terms of argument

and demonstration. If there is anything true of such novels. It is not essentially (or properly) in its setting or in its depiction of character and personality, but in the accuracy of its reflection of the imaginative temper of the author's culture. Heart of Darkness, ultimately reveals the mind of an imperial Europe at its day's end. It reveals nothing about the character of African itself. P.5

Conrad's novel manifests to a large extent a typical European's perception of African. To understand Achebe's concern, the European attitude to African must be kept in view. Again, it is in keeping faith with this challenge that Achebe's reaction to Conrad pays attention to the gaps, omissions, silences and absences perceived in the colonial texts which also include Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. (Kehinde 2003 .166).

Chinua Achebe's Novel as a Postcolonial text of Blackness

Things Fall Apart provides contemporary readers of African literature a divergent perception of Africa and Africans in a way that negates what European writers described. This master piece of literature documents the tribal lives, indigenous values, mores, cultures and traditions. These indigenous cultural settings were severely upset by colonial establishment. For instance, the first Portuguese navigators who visited West Africa had free commercial interests in mind, but soon afterward, the interest degenerated into slave raid and trade. The Europeans thought that the Africans, who the navigators branded primitives and savages, could be Christianized, sent missionaries to save the benighted African souls. On arrival, the missionaries found fault with African traditional religion, which they made little or no effort to understand. Instead, they condemned unconditionally all aspects of those religions and made great efforts to convert the people to Christianity.

To counter this notion, Achebe presents an African society that is fortified with its own cultures. The rejection of darkness as the defining quality of African experience is a relegation of the power of intuition, the emotionalism and the insane laughter in which Marlow heard the thrill of primordial appetites. *Things Fall Apart* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ultimately hold each other in a battle of social and racial dialogue. The two antagonistic novels provide a platform for a counter discourse on racism and imperial hegemony. Achebe cited in Kolawale (1979) expresses this sentiment clearly thus:

At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how well intentioned. Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book *Things Fall Apart* was an act of atonement with my past, ritual return and homage of a prodigal son. P. iv

By and large, the focus is on the fiction of Achebe against the backdrop of intellectual tradition of postcolonial discourse as it has emerged over a period in history. The essay specifically shows the extent that Achebe fulfils the mission of cultural emancipation of the Africans as a creative artist. He wrote extensively on the richness of the African literary landscape. He developed creative consciousness from the historical circumstances of colonial and postcolonial traditions. Despite the historical Nile valley civilization and the thriving of the great empires in Africa, European philosophers still considered the continent and its inhabitants

as no historical part of the world. For this reason, Achebe clearly defines his preoccupation with African literature in one of the essays titled “The Empire Fights Back” contains in his popular book *Home and Exile* (2000). Achebe begins with a question thus

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What did I do with my experience of classroom rebellion over Mister Johnson? Anyone familiar with the gossip in African literature may have heard that it was that book that made me decide to write What Mister Johnson did do for me was not to change my course in life and turn me from something else into a writer: I was born that way. But it did open my eyes to the fact that my home was under attack and that my home was not merely a house or a town but more importantly an awakening story in whose ambience my own experience had first begun to assemble its fragment into a coherence and meaning.P.38

As noted by Achebe, colonial socialization affected African civilization, history, religion and knowledge systems. For instance, Kalu (1999 .xvii) makes it clear that:

Things Fall Apart has much to say about culture conflicts between the Igbos (indeed Nigerians) and the European of Achebe’s own time as about the nineteenth century of his Igbo ancestors. Such conflicts are rooted in British colonial history, the people’s traditional religion, educational system, rituals and ceremonies, worldview and beliefs, social institutions, social control and values as well as political authority. P. xvii

African societies were ab initio dismissed as uneducated; the religions condemned as heathen, the culture and education systems dubbed primitive. Given this degrading notion of Africa, Achebe emerged in the 1950s as a writer with a defined mission of Pan-Africanism. For instance in an interview with Nicholas in 1998 at the African literature conference held at Richmond university, USA, Achebe (1998) reiterates his commitment to the health of African history and culture when he remarks that:

One of the major issues of African literature is the image of Africa, the issue of race. And so what I’ve tried to do – and it’s not new, it has been with me for a very long time – is trying to explain, or trying to fathom the reason for the negative image Africa has acquired in the west: how it came about and what we’re going to do about it; what needs to be done to get rid of it and get back to normal human relations, normal human evaluations, cooperation and that kind of thing. It’s really a question of what we need to do to get back on a comfortable level of communication between peoples. p.13

To fulfill this mission, Achebe’s works were majorly written against the harsh realities of colonialism. He wrote to defend the integrity of traditional culture and made a reassessment of the past relationship with Europe and the many political and social institutions, which the white man imposed. Achebe, like some African intellectuals, did not internalize a culture of self hatred and a pathetic contempt for Africa. The spirit of Pan Africanism that he championed reflected in the writings of the African nationalists and writers such as Amiclar Cabral, Angela Davis, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Franz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o etc. Achebe maintains that the

Nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that Africans too might have a story to tell. Prior to the termination of the colonial adventure, Africans seemed to accept that they were the objects of someone else's story, indeed someone else's history. It was exactly the preoccupation of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to resist and reject this assumption by telling the colonized to retrieve their history. Achebe asserts:

Well, I think if you know what happened to you in the past, how it came about, then it's easy to begin to deal with it. And here we now know that this image was deliberately invented; it was invented to serve a specific purpose, the purpose of the slave trade and the purpose of colonization. Now we can put this purpose behind us but we have to recognize what happened. (Achebe 2000. 72)

In revealing all aspects and ramifications of the conflict, Achebe maintains a historical approach and perspectives in the belief that an awareness of the weaknesses of the past can help the Africans to avoid such weaknesses in the future, provided they have the will and determination to change. This paper thus proceeds to examine Chinua Achebe's fiction as a post colonial text of cultural signification.

The Post Colonial Discourse and Ideological Signification

Harrison (2003 .8) posits that postcolonial studies in general may be characterized broadly and simply in terms of an attention to the history of colonialism/imperialism and its aftermath, and may in many instances be distinguished from traditional historical or political attention that is paid to the role within that history of representation or discourse.

The issues to which postcolonial critics have turned their attention to according to Harrison (2003 .9) include power relations and patterns of mutual influence between colonizer and colonized; the questions of subjective and political agency; nationhood, nationalism and anti-colonial resistance; Eurocentricism, universalism and relativism, racism or ethnicity, gender and identity and several others. For the purpose of this paper, postcolonial studies relate broadly to an attention to the history of colonialism/imperialism and its aftermath. It does not claim to cover all aspects of the discourse. The brief exposition of colonial discourse in this essay merely offered a theoretical reaction which a text like *Heart of Darkness* had generated in African literature.

Many postcolonial theorists and critics have been sensitive to the notion of 'post'. To consider a nation or culture as postcolonial carries misleading implications. This problem is compounded by the fact that, in postcolonial studies, what is discussed is often, necessarily not only the period after a given country gained its independence, but the entire period of contact between the countries or cultures in question from the pre-colonial era through to the present. Magubane (2006) makes it clear that:

The idea that colonialism and its destructive legacies are somehow 'over' or 'post' is sure to raise the hackles of anyone even vaguely familiar with the everyday machinations of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US State Department. In the age of neo-liberal globalization, the multi-lateral agreement on investment, and the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, the idea that 'post' in any way equal 'past' has little to defend it. Defenders of postcolonialism have, therefore, offered a different reading of the 'post' that seeks to

underplay its strictly temporal meanings, while highlighting its epistemological dimension. P.3

The postcolonial theory in its simplest form, therefore, relates to the body of works that emerged in the postcolonial period. This is not to say that the word ‘post’ is a straight forward a matter as it is defined. Writers and theorists such as the authors of the theorized account of postcolonialism , Bill Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* have taken the first writings from settler colonies of the seventeenth century to mark the most important aspect of the postcolonial discourse. According to Walder (2003 .8) postcolonialism implies a shift of perspective on the part of writers and readers. It is a shift which the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, has very clearly identified. It is appropriate, therefore to consider all the writings which emerged since colonization began as postcolonial literature.

The European’s perception of Africans had a serious implication in the emergence of racial discourse in African literature. G.W.F. Hegel was one of the earliest and most influential philosophical proponents of the idea that Africa was initially a space of a historicity that would only come to contain multiple histories and temporalities after being subject to colonization. By this notion, Africans were not only perceived as culturally alien people who inhabited a different geographical space but were also denizens a different time. Africa was the land of childhood removed from the light of self-conscious history. Hegel continues as cited in Magubane (2003 .56)

Hegel, the African is without a universal conception of law or God and therefore without a conception of justice or morality that transcends immediate individual sensuous need. Hegel’s philosophy of history sees the African stands in for Hobbe’s theoretical characterization of man in the state of nature, that is, he remains in a condition that precedes the development of culture.

From this notion came the ideologies of the white man’s burden and the civilizing mission. This particular instance marked the invention of tradition that became a spectacular example of how colonial rule stratified indigenous societies by manipulating culture and tradition and the persistence of colonialism’s effects into the present. Achebe wonders why the same pattern of stereotyping would hold sway for all time. His response was that abuse is not sanctified by its duration or abundance; it must remain susceptible to question and challenge, and no matter how long it takes. He says “the nemesis for this particular abuse came in our time, and we are lucky for that privilege” (2000 .38). Achebe’s position agrees closely with that of Joseph Bristow as cited in Harrison (2003 .35). He argues that:

Heart of Darkness depicts a world in which rational acquisition becomes irrational hoarding, economic routine becomes ritual, indirect violence becomes overt barbarism and the ‘idea’ therefore, has no rationale. It simply exists for itself. For Bristow, the figure of Kurtz serves precisely to reveal that imperialism has no ethnical basis.

The dehumanizing portrait of the African was what Achebe struggled to address throughout his career. He abhors an inaccurate and unjust representation of an African trapped in primordial barbarity. *Things Fall Apart* serves Achebe’s aim in a manner that remains exemplary among African fictions of the last fifty years. The novel is crafted in a manner that describes the

protagonist as a man who is larger than life, who exemplifies virtues that the community admired. Okonkwo is a man of action, a man of war (p.17). His fame among his people rests on solid personal achievements (p. 3) foremost of which are his exploits as the greatest wrestler and most accomplished warrior of the nine villages. He is a man renowned and respected for having brought fame to his community. *Things Fall Apart* thus celebrates an epic standard of achievement and dignity found among several characters of western literature. This exposition is given credence by Killam cited in Umelo (2002 .15). Killiam insists that:

Okonkwo was one the greatest men of his time, the embodiment of Ibo values, the man who better than most symbolized his race ... (and) the premium which is placed on wealth, courage and valour among the Ibo people. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things but he had earned his reputation, as a wrestler (he brought fame to himself and his village); as a warrior (he had taken the approved symbols of his prowess, the heads of five victims by the time he was twenty-one years old); as a man who had achieved personal wealth symbolized by his two barns full of yams, his three wives and of great importance the two titles he had taken, titles which can only be acquired when wealth has been achieved and quality proven.

Palmer also cited in Umelo (2002 .15) equally buttresses the views expressed by Killam. Palmer maintains that:

Okonkwo is what his society has made him, for his most conspicuous qualities are a response to the demands of his society. If he is plagued by fear of failure and of weakness it is because his society puts such premium on success; if he is obsessed with status it is because his society is preoccupied with rank and prestige; if he is always itching to demonstrate his prowess in war it is because his society reverses bravery and courage and measures success by the number of human heads a man has won; if he is contemptuous of weaker man it is because his society has conditioned him into despising cowards. Okonkwo is the personification of his society's values, and is determined to succeed in this rat-race.

Innes (1992 .17) posits that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with its reference to yeast's concept of vast historical cycle, implies a challenge to a whole vision of history, a set of values and a particular ordering of society and literature. The novel presents two important things in the mind of readers. It portrays Okonkwo and his psychology. It also reveals the social, political and religious life of Umuofia. On reading Achebe's novel after *Mister Johnson*, one becomes aware of a number of specific ways in which Achebe's version of African society radically contrast with Cary's. For Achebe, colonialism represents a period when African and European civilization confront each other in a decisive struggle. The exemplary significant of *Things Fall Apart* lies entirely in revealing the tragic conflict and why it was that the confrontation favoured modernization. Achebe captures a struggle around the turn of the century in the Ibo heartland of West Africa between protestant missionaries supported by British imperial power and the inhabitants of several Ibo villages. The novel pays attention to underlying ethical confrontation between two civilizations that eventually destroyed the traditional Ibo way of life.

For Achebe, the tragic confrontation does not terminate with the death of Okonkwo but rather persists to affect the character and direction of the future development of Nigerian society.

In *No Longer at East*, for example, Achebe offers a picture of the tragic confrontation of *Things Fall Apart* but in a mediated and modernized form. And the same tragic conflict of modern European and traditional African ways of life also proves to be the historical source of postcolonial chaos that engulfs Kangan – a fictionalized version of postcolonial Nigeria in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. This argument is buttressed by Emmanuel (2004 .23). He posits that *Things Fall Apart* is concerned with debilitating impact of colonialism on the individual as well as on the national psyche. But in *No Longer at Ease* the theme of cultural dislocation which is a recurrent theme in postcolonial writing in general is particularized even more poignantly. The focus is not a community in disarray but on the private dilemmas of an individual postcolonial.

Irele in *The Cambridge Companion to African Novel* (2008 .6) observes that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) came to assume an innovative significance as regards theme and reference as well as narrative idiom, almost immediately upon its publication in 1958. Irele reveals further that:

Much has been made of the character of Achebe's novel as a response to the fictions of empire. But the exemplary value of the work resides less in its polemical thrust than in the assured mode of its narrative projection of African life, carried through by a craftsmanship that introduced a new level of competence in the making of African fiction. It expanded the human perspective of the early novels in English, which has begun to take a measure of the drastic re-ordering of African lives by western cultural imposition... The novel registers the broader political implications of European presence and proposes the vision of a new integration of the African self.

One observes that Achebe presents a structurally weak traditional society that gave way almost easily to colonialism. Unlike Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1999) which shows fierce resistance to colonial adventure, Achebe presents a weak society that crumbled with the advent of European capitalism and religion. Perhaps, this is why some critics have observed that Okonkwo's heroism is merely an ideological apology for despotism, violence, cruelty and oppression. This assertion comes dangerously close to Hegel's philosophy of history which insists that the African possesses no conception of law, justice or morality. While Achebe pursues the mission of cultural redemption his fiction carries within it elements of ambiguity. Nyamndi (2006 .8) reminds us that whether Africans heard of culture for the first time from Europeans or not is really not important. The essential thing is that was this African culture able to stem the wave of colonialism? Achebe's fiction obviates the fact that African lost to Europeans because the traditional culture was weak. Another important weakness inherent in African tradition as presented by Achebe is the practice of abandoning twins in the evil forest and ransom children suffer ritual killing. Taken in isolation, these practices speak poorly of the culture that upholds them. In fact, Achebe does not subject the practices to any moral questioning. He presents them as normal acts of daily life in an African society susceptible to condemnation. This provocative dimension of African customs and practice is echoed by Marshall (2013 12):

Perhaps the features of Igbo culture most alien and problematic for contemporary western sensibilities are certain of its religious rituals and conventions. The corpses of Ogbanje – evil children who are believed repeatedly to die and return to their

mother's womb to be reborn without ever-reaching adulthood – are ritually mutilated and disposed of in the evil forest. Twins, illegitimate children and those stricken with certain diseases are also left to die in the Evil forest. Most disturbing is the practice of religiously sanctioned human sacrifice. The oracle of the Hill and the caves calls for the ritual execution of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's adopted son, just as the oracle of Abame requires the sacrifice of a white stranger who appears among the clan riding a bicycle.

All these practices pose a grave concern to the readers of Achebe's novel in Western Europe and America who look to African writers to supply a corrective to what they understand to be the evils of western civilization. Achebe does not necessarily approve of all traditional practices nor does he feel that it would be correct for contemporary African writers to uncritically celebrate them. Achebe draws attention precisely to those aspects of the society most troublesome for the majority of his contemporary readers, aspects quite incompatible with modern standards of justice and morality. He does not conceal many aspects of Igbo life that are profoundly unsavoury. Although he does not dwell on the custom in any detail, he reveals the practice of slavery in the nine villages of Umuofia. He gives copious illustrations to the caste system known as 'Osu', individuals dedicated to a god, and therefore taboo. They and their siblings are segregated in the communities, prohibited from marrying the freeborn and from attending any assembly of free citizens, forbidden all the titles of the clan, and destined to be buried in the evil forest.

In defending these negative aspects of African conventions and practices, Achebe strikes a balance when he states that any serious African writer who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God's advocate, he must also do duty for the devil. (Nyamndi. 13). By and large, Achebe novel develops the spirit of cultural nationalism. It shows how communal values were developed into a more sophisticated portrayal of local culture. It is definitely in Achebe's work that the African experience is given a defined dimension and assumed its wholly human and narrative scope in the modern novel. Irele (2006 .12) affirms that Achebe's re-definition of the concept of fictional representation of Africa institutionalized the novel as a modern narrative genre on the Africa continent, indeed as an independent mode of imaginative life in Africa. He states further that:

Achebe's grasp of Igbo ethos of communal living and individual awareness that underlines and legitimizes his imaginative expression has given powerful impulse to the effort by other writers to convey the sense of a specific location in the world that his work envisions. His influence in this regard has been evident in the works of the cluster of Igbo novelists who may be said to constitute a school spawned by his example.

Things Fall Apart is pre-occupied with an issue of racial pride, showing that Africans have usable historical past. As a text of cultural nationalism, it aims at defending the dignity and value to African culture. Achebe shows that the African tradition dubbed primitive was a deliberate creation of modernizing colonial elites. The express goal of postcolonial scholarship championed by Achebe has been the repudiation of colonial project. This conviction perhaps explains why Amuta cited in Marshall (2013 .18) affirms that:

African literature is predicated on the challenge posed by the imperialist assault on Africa and the reality of neo-colonialism. Awareness of the impact of colonialism and the contradiction of neo-colonialism and commitment to their negation has informed the utterance of key African nationalist and men of culture over the years.

This concept is what Amuta terms dialectical approach to the criticism of African literature as poetics of the oppressed. He thus observes that a truly decolonized and anti-imperialist theory of African literature can only be derived from an anti-imperialist ideological framework and not from a perennial feeling of nostalgia about forgotten past and romantic re-creation of village life. In conclusion Achebe seemed fulfilled having succeeded to a large extent to represent the cultural history of Africa. He confirms this assumption in his one of his submissions. Achebe (2000 .9) asserts that:

Everywhere, new ways to write about Africa have appeared, reinvesting the continent and its people with humanity, free at last from those stock situations and stock characters never completely 'human' that had dominated European writing about Africa for hundred of years. The new literature that erupted so dramatically and so abundantly in the 1950s and 1960s showed great variety in subject matter, in style of presentation and let's face it, in levels of skill and accomplishment .

There is one fundamental issue that Achebe reiterates. He believes that Africa has always existed. The blacks have their civilization, though multiple and multiform. But these civilizations have been assaulted by western vandalism from which they can recover only if the African decides to return to the source. This return is essentially the starting point of the great literary movement of negritude, a simple and natural conception of a life equally simple and natural but which has experienced diverse interpretations by western critics. From the discussion so far, it is quite obvious that African literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century was a disheartening creative endeavour. In the opinion of Nnolim (2008 .1) "African literature was lachrymal. It was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism". In essence, African literature is an art of defeated people. Having lost pride through slavery and colonialism, African writers developed a literary expression from the ashes of the inglorious past experience. It became a literature of loss heritage, dignity and indigenous civilization. The experiences of slavery amounted to a loss of culture, tradition and the very humanity of the blacks.

The titles of the various African literary texts such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child*, Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country?* Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and several others are symbolical illustrations of these losses. And protest over apartheid further irrigated Africa's tear because of man's inhumanity to a people tagged the wretched of the earth. African literature thus represents a backward glance to the inglorious era of slavery. It was a weeping reaction to colonial experience. "Modern African literature (its written version) arose after the psychic trauma of slavery and colonialism had made literature one with a running sore, a stigmata that forced her writers to dissipate their energies in a dogged fight to re-establish the African personality" (Nnolim 2006 . 2)

The abysmal psycho-social condition of the blacks in the early part of the twentieth century made it inevitable for African literature to start by blaming the white man for everything

that went wrong with the continent. It condemns the white for exploiting and abusing its humanity. In an interview with Bernth Linfors cited in Umelo (2002 .7) Achebe declares that:

Yes, I think by recording what had gone on before, they (the African writers) were in a way helping to set tone of what was going to happen. And this is important because at this stage it seems to me that the writer's role is more in determining than merely reporting. In other words, his role is not to act rather to react... let us map out what we are going to be tomorrow; I think our most meaningful job today should be to determine what kind of society we want, how we are going to get there, what values we can take from the past, if we can, as we move along.

In a series of ideological commitment to reposition the cultural identity of the blacks, the literature of negritude was born. The philosophy of negritude became firmly enthroned in African fiction with a focus on restoring the dignity of man. Negritude became a trajectory movement with overbearing influence from the Harlem Renaissance through the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica and indigenism in Haiti. Africans seemed to gain its equilibrium through negritude ideology. "Achebe's approach sharply contrasts to the negritude writers of the same period such as Senghor, Laye and others whose artistic works merely idealized Africa. Achebe does not idealize Africa. He shows that African society has its own contradictions and spiritual crisis before the intrusion of colonialism. (Nyamndi 2006. 7).

For many years, African literature suffered set back as a result of narrow canvass. Writers were busy weeping over the losses inflicted by colonial masters, preoccupied with blaming the political class for postcolonial crisis and in the process compromising a more forward looking vision. Thus, African literature suffered from imaginative timidity. However, in the contemporary period, Africa literature is embracing new challenges, especially with the epoch of globalization. Literature is now projecting a forward looking utopia for Africa. The rehabilitation of our humanity is now being accompanied with an ideological ferment that holds promise for a truly independent African state.

Conclusion

Achebe's literature bears testimony to his commitment. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was set to illustrate the African cultural past. He confronted racism by re-constructing the history from the point of view of the marginalized entity. In view of the misrepresentation of the blacks in Conrad's text, Achebe strives to re-visit history and present the cultural identity of the African in complete opposition to the European's writings. Achebe plays a great role in straightening the patterns of social change in African. His literature does not merely healing the psychic wounds; it also mounts aggressive campaign against social rot of the post-colonial period. As historian of his society's past and critic of its present state, the African writer, Achebe affirms should not be a passive observer and recorder but should help form a vision of the future direction. Achebe's accomplishment as a prominent African writer is firmly established. Throughout his career, he ensured that he kept pace with the times by responding to the changing preoccupation of his society. When he wrote his first novel at the end of colonial era, he was a re-constructionist, dedicated to creating a dignified image of African past; today he is an angry reformer campaigning against the immorality and injustices of the African presents. His works do not only unveiled a century of Nigerian history but also depicted the dominant African intellectual concerns of the past several decades.

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