Achebe, Hegel, and the New Colonialism

Margaret E. Turner

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/6

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Achebe, Hegel, and the New Colonialism

Abstract
In Beautiful Losers Leonard Cohen states: ‘History decrees that there are Losers and Winners. History cares nothing for cases, History cares only whose Tum it is!’1 Whose tum to win, that is, and whose tum to lose. In the Hegelian system there are winners and losers, masters and slaves; in history's movement toward the universal and homogeneous state there are winners and losers as well. Like history, though, Hegel does not appear to care for the cases of individuals. Nor does the historical process of colonization and cultural confrontation and domination. Colonization, in fact, is remarkably similar to J.M. Coetzee's definition of war: compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it.2 In Hegel's thinking the universal and homogeneous state is the peak of historical progress and will signal the end of history. For Hegel, that state arrived with Napoleon. The universal - every place - and homogeneous - equality for every person - state is the desired goal, because it ends the dialectic of the master and slave.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/6
Achebe, Hegel, and the New Colonialism

In *Beautiful Losers* Leonard Cohen states: 'History decrees that there are Losers and Winners. History cares nothing for cases; History cares only whose Turn it is!' Whose turn to win, that is, and whose turn to lose. In the Hegelian system there are winners and losers, masters and slaves; in history's movement toward the universal and homogeneous state there are winners and losers as well. Like history, though, Hegel does not appear to care for the cases of individuals. Nor does the historical process of colonization and cultural confrontation and domination. Colonization, in fact, is remarkably similar to J.M. Coetzee's definition of war: compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it. In Hegel's thinking the universal and homogeneous state is the peak of historical progress and will signal the end of history. For Hegel, that state arrived with Napoleon. The universal - every place - and homogeneous - equality for every person - state is the desired goal, because it ends the dialectic of the master and slave.

The problem with the theory of the universal and homogeneous state, aside from George Grant's objections to it, is that it is refuted by fact: the universal and homogeneous state did not arrive with Napoleon, nor has it yet. When the theory is examined closely in the light of historical events we see that we are more accurately speaking of the process of colonization: cultural domination by a superior power which wishes to extend its realm of influence and increase its wealth. The colonizer exerts power; the colonized falls or is beaten into submission. History has, until recently, favoured the colonizer, whose turn it has been to win; the individual cases of the losers receive little attention. Nonetheless, the position of the colonized casts new light on the universal and homogeneous state. Frantz Fanon puts it this way:

The colonized person, who in this respect is like the men in underdeveloped countries or the disinherited in all parts of the world, perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death. This ever-present death is experienced as endemic famine, unemployment, a high mortality rate, an inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future...
History is on the side of the winner, and since the great age of western European imperialism that winner has been for the most part capitalist, white, and male, although as Fanon says, ‘[I]n France, as in England, humanism claimed to be universal’.\(^5\) Rather than universalizing and homogenizing, the colonial situation creates two separate worlds: one of masters and one of slaves. Or in other words, the old system is perpetuated but in terminology which makes it appear new. The so-called slaves are the people who are forced into this universalizing and homogenizing system – the differences which remain are suffocated by power and violence, both physical and psychological:

On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence.\(^6\)

Chinua Achebe's trilogy, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *No Longer At Ease*, refutes Western standards of literature and Western ideology, in this case Hegel's universal and homogeneous state, by showing that both constitute aspects of the new colonialism. The discussion of the literature of a so-called developing nation – Achebe's Nigeria – poses special problems and involves the Western reader in questions of politics and of critical standards. Achebe has precisely isolated the issue: 'I suggested that the European critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the African world and purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to.'\(^7\) That limited experience of the African world, which has historically provoked the reaction of superiority and arrogance, causes the Western reader to be struck by the strangeness of the world in African literature, a strangeness not only on a realistic level but more significantly in the cultural world view, or what Achebe calls the metaphysical landscape (p. 50). This of course involves the political and ideological considerations which are part of that landscape. The roles of the writer and critic are extremely complicated by the circumstances of an historical accident: the colonization and recent independence of African states. Political and ideological questions are particularly complex for the political thinker and imaginative writer in an independent African state.\(^8\) They are also impossible for Chinua Achebe to ignore.

Achebe is very frank about the purposes of his writing. His anger at white imperialist power is implicit in the three novels discussed here
which depict the historical process of cultural confrontation and domi­
nation, and explicit in his poetry and essays. He complains about critics
who lay 'claim to a deeper knowledge and a more reliable appraisal of
Africa than the educated African writer has shown himself capable of'
(p. 5). His own role as artist is to educate his people, teach their his­
tory, and awaken cultural nationalism: 'I would be quite satisfied if my
novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my
readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one night
of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf de­
ivered them' (p. 45). It is very easy, however, to move from necessary
education to propaganda and parochialism thereby failing the universal­
ity test, another political issue which Achebe indicts: 'I should like to
see the word universal banned altogether from discussions of African lit­
erature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the
narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe...' (p. 9). Not surprisingly,
in Achebe’s words we hear an echo of Fanon’s earlier statement.

Achebe interrogates the neutrality of Western and universal critical
methodology and standards of literature. He also studies the bitter and
ambiguous experience of colonialism and the accelerated change which
has occurred in African nations, criticizing imperialism primarily for re­
ducing an integrated and functioning community to chaos. The facts of
history determined that his people would live out this peculiar tragedy
of colonization, which is very close to the modernist sense of the ab­
surd. He shows that the Africans had to succumb totally to the imper­
ialist power or be destroyed, while the brave like Okonkwo in Things
Fall Apart destroy themselves; the struggle to retain a system of values
and an awareness of the past is a precarious enterprise on both the cul­
tural and personal levels.

Each of Achebe’s novels presents a personal and cultural tragedy, but
not according to the Aristotelian definition. As Bruce F. MacDonald ex­
plains it, the intrusion of the European into the African world made the
basis of tragedy unworkable: because of the conflicting sets of values
no transgression against either can be seen clearly as the cause of an
individual’s fall. Rather than catharsis, a cleansing of the emotions
through the re-establishment of moral order, a vague uneasiness and
dissatisfaction remain after each novel: the time is out of joint for the
protagonists whose values no longer have authority within their society.
The fact that Achebe presents both sides of the colonial situation in bal­
anced fashion guarantees a continued tension. He does not choose be­
tween the two sets of values – neither order is adopted as the right one
– and the potential remains for more tragedies after Okonkwo, Ezeulu,
and Obi. Achebe proposes an alternative definition which is particularly
apt in the context of colonialism: real tragedy is one that goes on
hopelessly forever, in a corner, in an untidy spot. These tragedies represent a humanist concern and in the context of the historical confrontation and the phenomenon of imperial rule, a nationalist theme as well. The novels avoid the charge of propaganda and are highly valued according to 'universal' or Western standards. At the same time they also fulfil very powerfully Achebe's political purposes: in a sense he plays it both ways and wins.

*Things Fall Apart* details the first and crucial step in the process of cultural disintegration in the traditional Igbo society. The process is begun by the arrival of the white colonizers, who have 'put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.' Achebe shows through his protagonist just how the touch of that knife is able to bring the whole world tumbling down. Okonkwo is a respected leader among his people and oriented to achievement, partly to compensate for his father's failure to live up to the clan's standards of material success, which required his son to provide for the family, and his own unclean death and burial in the Evil Forest. Okonkwo is afraid to be like his father Unoka because he does not want to be thought weak or cowardly, and does not understand the contribution his father has made to the oral culture:

> He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. (p. 2)

Unoka is a failure in material terms, but not if his stature is measured on a scale one might think is Achebe's own – ensuring the survival of the culture by recording deeds of past greatness and lessons for continued living.

Unoka's failure to achieve material success is partly attributed to his bad *chi* (p. 13). Okonkwo's success is likewise attributed partially to his *chi*, who agreed when Okonkwo said yes very strongly (p. 19). The notion of the personal god points up the ambivalence of this ethical system: a man controls his own fate, but only as far as his *chi* allows and agrees. Paralleling this ambivalence are the clan laws, which maintain a balance between personal initiative and fate, between individual freedom and responsibility to the clan. The collected wisdom of the clan is expressed in proverbs which show the flexibility of the system, but the existing laws must be inflexibly enforced because the survival of the clan depends on them. The laws are both pragmatic and sacred: a crime against the law is a sin against the clan, the earth, and the past, and re-
quires atonement. Okonkwo lives up to his village's reputation (land of the brave) and obeys the laws of piety — in Igbo society the fulfilment of religious obligations, and respect for parents, homeland, and the elders who represent dead ancestors — which in turn sustain the whole social order of the tribe. Okonkwo is defined according to his social identity; without it, there is no spiritual meaning to his existence.

The questions that are raised for Okonkwo, the clan, and Achebe when Okonkwo's gun explodes and a clansman is killed, requiring Okonkwo's exile, are the questions that prompt Okonkwo's first son's conversion to the white missionaries' religion. Okonkwo is horrified by his son's act, partially for the dishonour it brings on him personally and partially for what it represents: he foresees the threat of annihilation for the whole clan if the worship of the ancestors is abandoned. This would render the universe meaningless and Okonkwo's life unlivable — which is, of course, precisely what happens in the course of the novel. Okonkwo murders one of the white missionaries' messengers, but the clan will not support his act. In a world which will not recognize the values it has taught him, Okonkwo is a tragic anachronism. He ends by committing an abominable act — suicide — which ensures that like his father, he will be buried in the Evil Forest and in all ways outside of the values the clan understands. The white commissioner's response is to make of Okonkwo's suicide 'a reasonable paragraph' in a projected study of the colonial process, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (p. 148).

There is no return to an order of morality at the end of the novel, only to an order of power. No solution speaks to reason or justice; the question of justice remains unresolved here, as it does in the other novels. Neither is there a sense of relief that would accompany a return to order, nor can a part of Okonkwo's personality be designated as the cause of these events: the historical fact of white imperialism shortcircuits these responses. In the conflict between systems of values power wins, and with a winner there must be a loser. Imperialism in *Things Fall Apart* — bringing natives into the modern world, saving their souls, exploiting their resources — transformed an integrated, cohesive community into anarchy. This is surely the working out of some kind of tragedy, but not Aristotle's. Because neither set of values is dominant in Achebe's novel, no act against either is the cause of Okonkwo's fall. His betrayal of the clan makes his death doubly ironic, as it comes from his attempt to assert moral responsibility where the basis of responsible action has been destroyed, and from his perception of the helplessness in which the forces of history have trapped his people. Moral action and insight lead to hopelessness and a pathetic, useless end, a real tragedy according to Achebe's definition. The clan and the
hero are destroyed by a shift of power, not by moral tension;\textsuperscript{15} Okonkwo's end is absurdly inevitable.

The action of \textit{Arrow of God} follows \textit{Things Fall Apart}, but the uneasy co-existence of the white colonial power and the traditional tribal society is intensified by Achebe's concentration on the priest and the question of religious meaning. \textit{Arrow of God} is the central novel in Achebe's work as it describes the relationship between religion and the social order. The loss of spiritual bearings causes the collapse of both the individual and the social order. As in \textit{Things Fall Apart}, there is no return to a moral order at the death of the hero, no sense of justice or tragic inevitability. Another stronger power takes over and claims converts and yams; the people abandon their customs; Ezeulu is alienated from his people and his god.

The issue is also one of power: Ezeulu comes into conflict with his god and his people over power. He is accused of wanting ""to be king, priest, diviner, all"".\textsuperscript{16} His power is refuted when the son he sends into the white man's world to help his clan adjust to the threat of the colonizer is lost to him. The world has been turned upside down by the white man (p. 16), and Ezeulu's actions have far different results than he had anticipated. The clan laws cannot accommodate the change in the world for which there are no precedents. Neither is there hope of escape from the white colonizers and a return to normalcy: ""I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man. He has come. When Suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that"" (p. 84). Ezeulu does not dispute the justice of the white man's position, which is of course patently unjust, but tries to find a way for himself and his clan to live with it. Eventually he is pulled between the old order and the new circumstances of the village until his own and his god's credibility is destroyed. At best Ezeulu is attempting to force the village back to unquestioning belief in the god and the god's priest. At worst he is indulging his own ambition. Achebe allows the ambivalence to remain, and does not in the end say whether Ezeulu convinces himself or is ordered by Ulu not to eat the yams of the moons which passed while he was in the whites' prison. He delays the New Yam Feast and threatens the harvest, not only breaking the bond between faith and function, but running counter to the consensus of his people. The worship of Ulu is abandoned and the white missionaries benefit: 'Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of the son' (p. 230).

Achebe does not resolve the ambiguities which provide the basis of faith and belief. Ezeulu has to find his position in a universe which suddenly resists explanation, and he is cruelly disappointed. His col-
lapse is due to the tension in both maintaining two worlds and attempting to reconcile their conflicting demands: 'Perhaps it was the constant, futile throbbing of these thoughts that finally left a crack in Ezeulu's mind. Or perhaps his implacable assailant having stood over him for a little while stepped on him as on an insect and crushed him under the heel in the dust' (p. 229). Ezeulu is tragic according to the traditional faith, and laughable in the eyes of those who have changed their allegiance. He is negligible in the eyes of the imperial power which is responsible for the crisis which destroys him.

*No Longer At Ease*, the third novel in the chronology, finishes the examination of the process of colonization as the Westernized African protagonist - a 'been-to' - lives out the definition of modern tragedy he provides near the beginning of his story:

'I remember an old man in my village, a Christian convert, who suffered one calamity after another. He said life was like a bowl of wormwood which one sips a little at a time world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy.... Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot...' (pp. 43-4)

Obi loses his determination to reform his country on his return from England as he does not know how or where to start, and he eventually succumbs to the system of corruption to which he was so opposed. His conflict, similar to Okonkwo's in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu's in *Arrow of God*, is with his dual cultures and dual value systems; Achebe underlines that sense of duality with his quotations from Western poetry. At the beginning of *Things Fall Apart* at least, the individual's first obligation was not a question: Okonkwo knows his greatest good comes with the greatest good of the village. Obi, on the other hand, is not so willing to share the good fortune of his civil service job with his clansmen because he is not willing to accept the tribe's claims on him. Nor do his clansmen understand how his attempt to be successful in the new life puts him in direct conflict with their expectations. Obi's lack of any system of value, and of religion - either the ancient beliefs of his ancestors which once gave meaning to the empty rituals his clansmen now perform, or the Christianity of the convert whose story Achebe does not tell - make him vulnerable in both societies. Obi is actually between cosmologies, unattached, and at ease in neither. Achebe describes with humour and understanding the precarious game of balancing that the clansmen must now perform to keep their community of defectors and loyalists stable: "Bless this kola nut so that when we eat it it will be good in our body in the name of Jesu Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end. Amen." Everyone replied Amen and cheered old
Odogwu on his performance' (p. 55). Obi does not participate in either the old or the new dispensation, and accordingly does not belong to the community which is struggling to maintain itself. He is eventually left to sip wormwood in an untidy spot as he presaged early in the novel. Clearly Okonkwo's solution would not be appropriate here, but it is difficult to see what would be. Death would be a release, but not a tragedy. As in the earlier novels, the protagonist is confronted with two orders of morality, neither of which is restored in the end with any sense of moral justice. Nor is there hope that Obi's – or Okonkwo's or Ezeulu's – tragedy will change the process in which their culture is caught.

The discussion of relative standards of literary excellence is off the point in this context, in which the diminishment of all human life is absurd and immoral. The white colonizer shares that diminishment – the colonial system was not adequate for him either:

... [Green] loved Africa, but only Africa of a kind: the Africa of Charles, the messenger, the Africa of his gardenboy and steward boy. He must have come originally with an ideal.... But when he arrived, Africa played him false. Where was his beloved bush full of human sacrifice? There was St George horse and caparisoned, but where was the dragon? (p. 103)

In these terms, all literature is political if morally committed. If the price of becoming 'universal' and politically neutral is forgetting his past and his future, Achebe will not pay:

Take care
then, mother's son, lest you become
a dancer disinherited in mid-dance
hanging a lame foot in air like the hen
in a strange unfamiliar compound. Pray
 protect this patrimony to which
you must return when the song
is finished and the dancers disperse;
remember also your children
for they in their time will want
a place for their feet when
they come of age and the dance
of the future is born
for them

White imperialism forced Nigerian society, and continues to force other third world societies, from a so-called primitive culture into the modern world. In Achebe's trilogy this is done in the space of three generations – an acceleration of history. Achebe demonstrates his belief that the movement into the universal and homogeneous state is not a
natural historical maturation for Okonkwo and his people, but a tearing leap which puts enormous strain on both community and individual. He questions the values of the modernity into which his people have been thrown: power, force, and violence make winners and losers, while issues of morality and justice are not raised. The conflicts and individual tragedies caused by progress toward the universal and homogeneous state are obvious. The problem with that state is that it is defined according to white western capitalist definitions. The division into separate worlds remains: ‘we’ continue to compel ‘them’ into the best of our world. ‘We’ remain the colonizers; ‘they’, the colonized, are denied the right of self-determination.

Achebe’s novels show the damage that the imperial power does to its own and to the colonized people. As Coetzee puts it:

[Our alienation from the cycles of nature] is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.

That compulsion to prolong the era of empire puts enormous pressure on the two groups, the powerful and the powerless. And since the creation by empire of the time of history, we have lived in time as history, making our own values and meaning while believing in our right not to have our freedom limited. But the colonial situation, of course, drastically limits the freedom of both parties and forces them to make choices which they would not otherwise make: the white Commissioner is pathetic in his strictly professional anthropological interest, and Green is similarly so looking for dragons – or windmills – to charge.

Unfortunately the losers in the colonial situation, both colonizers and colonized, cannot live ‘outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects’. They must struggle on with the old and now meaningless story, locked into a historical process which continues to be propelled by its own momentum. Whether the power is imperialism, sexism, racism, or technology, historical time seems to have declared that it is power’s turn to win. The individual cases – in Achebe’s terms imperialists and natives – are all losers. Hegel’s universal and homogeneous state is a variation on the process of colonization that continues to be played out in history. That process ultimately ensures that there are indeed no masters or slaves, simply individuals whose victimization differs in degree. Colonialism denies human rights to human beings whom it has subdued by violence and keeps in a state of misery and ignorance by force. The colonizer, by denying the
humanity of the colonized, is dehumanized. The end of history would seem to be tyranny and catastrophe, hardly the utopian 'fact of being a recognized citizen of a universal and homogeneous State ... of a classless society comprising the whole of humanity'. Empire does not allow the possibility of 'fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages'.

NOTES

3. Grant holds that the universal and homogeneous state is tyranny, perhaps the most complete tyranny imaginable, and opposes the ideology and non-human nature. With only relative standards by which to judge good, evil, or justice, there are no limits to our actions: no appeal to the good will persuade us to limit our freedom to make – or unmake – the world as we choose. See Lament for a Nation (1965); Time As History (1969); Technology and Empire (1969).
6. Ibid., p. 170.
15. Ibid., p. 59.