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For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika

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Abstract
To write a critical tribute to any writer at the present time calls for a special kind of political criticism. This is perhaps even more daunting when that writer happens to be Chinua Achebe who, beyond the fact of his being one of contemporary literature's most widely read and internationally prominent authors, has always figured as a complex, ambiguous presence in the post-colonial politics of identity and ideological affiliation. Perhaps nothing better expresses this ambiguity than the fact that much as Achebe's works have been invoked as powerful, exemplary texts of nationalist contestation of colonialist myths and distortions of Africa and Africans, it is also the case that these texts have only been minimally concerned, at least at the thematic level, to depict or explore resistance to colonialism; rather, they have been particularly imbued with a melancholic sense of the falling apart of things with the collapse of pre-colonial societies and cultures. Another distinct, but related expression of the ambiguous politics of Achebe's works pertains to his known identification with left-wing, anti-capitalist groups and intellectuals in his native Nigeria, and more broadly in Africa, at the same time that this identification has been fraught with problems and controversies. Achebe is, in this sense, very much in the company of other post-colonial writers like Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer and Carlos Fuentes whose left-identified politics sit very uneasily with the orthodox Left and its set revolutionary perspectives and objectives.
For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika

In one sense then [there is] a travelling away from its old self towards a cosmopolitan, modern identity while in another sense [there is] a journeying back to regain a threatened past and selfhood. To coax from it such unparalleled inventiveness requires the archaic energy, the perspective and temperament of creation myths and symbolism.

Chinua Achebe

So important have... stories been to mankind that they are not restricted to accounts of initial creation but will be found following human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organizations, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs, even their prejudices. At... critical moments new versions of old stories or entirely fresh ones tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to consecrate opportunistic defections into more honourable rites of passage.

Chinua Achebe

ANTINOMIES OF POST-COLONIALITY

To write a critical tribute to any writer at the present time calls for a special kind of political criticism. This is perhaps even more daunting when that writer happens to be Chinua Achebe who, beyond the fact of his being one of contemporary literature’s most widely read and internationally prominent authors, has always figured as a complex, ambiguous presence in the post-colonial politics of identity and ideological affiliation. Perhaps nothing better expresses this ambiguity than the fact that much as Achebe’s works have been invoked as powerful, exemplary texts of nationalist contestation of colonialist myths and distortions of Africa and Africans, it is also the case that these texts have only been minimally concerned, at least at the thematic level, to depict or explore resistance to colonialism; rather, they have been particularly imbued with a melancholic sense of the falling apart of things with the
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But this essay is not about ‘literary fellow-travellers’, a designation which always said as much about the Party’s claims of privileged access to superior truths as it did about the writer’s putative ambiguous, wavering political and moral affiliations.⁴ What I wish to explore in this short critical tribute is how a profoundly but subtly emancipatory politics figures in Achebe’s work, especially his first novel, Things Fall Apart,⁵ as a sustained project of demythologization of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial myths of legitimation and delegitimation: legitimation of forces of reification and dehumanizing violence; delegitimation of oppositional constructions of community and ethical rationalism. Inevitably, this takes us to the over-determined space of post-coloniality. A few observations might serve both to illustrate this point and to contextualize its ramifications beyond Achebe’s own work, the focus of this tribute.

Most of the recent books and essays in the field have argued persuasively that the post-colonial in literature and critical discourse essentially consists of the cultural representation of the destabilization of the fixities and bounded structures of the age of empire and colony under British and European world hegemony: the bounded colonial territory as an exclusive ‘sphere of influence’ of one metropolitan country under the regime of nationally administered capitalism; the crystallized identity of the ‘native’ and the formation of subjectivities like the ‘evolve’ or ‘assimile’ within the generalized ‘native’ identity; the emergence of a nationalist anti-colonial challenge to foreign domination and external usurpation of sovereignty. If all this marks the world of coloniality, post-coloniality comes with the epoch in which hegemonic American (and later Japanese) multi-national, ‘late’ capitalism replaced the world domination of old-style European imperialism. This is the age that one writer has characterized as ‘imperialism without colonies’.⁶ It is with respect to this dismantling of bounded enclaves and subjectivities that to be post-colonial is to be more than merely and adventitiously ‘ex-colonial’.

Within this general pattern two distinct antinomic conceptions and articulations of post-coloniality have been forming, and are being in-
scribed as textual practices and discursive, rhetorical strategies. It is pertinent to our purposes in this essay to briefly indicate the broad outlines of these divergent, conflicting articulations of the post-colonial.

There is, first, the post-coloniality of what I would call normativity and proleptic designation in which the writer or critic speaks to, or for, or in the name of the post-independence nation-state, the regional or continental community, the pan-ethnic, racial or cultural agglomeration of homelands and diasporas. In this post-coloniality of the nation, of the regional community, or of a far-flung 'Black World', 'Arab World' or 'Latin America', one finds a Ngugi writing to and for a Kenya that is and the Kenya that is to come; one finds Mahfouz identifying himself as both an Egyptian writer and a voice from the Arab World and its literary traditions; one finds also Octavio Paz, in his appropriately titled book, *One Earth, Four of Five Worlds*, enunciating the dynamics of Latin American modernity by assailing what he identifies as 'anti-modern' currents in the culture of the South American regional community. If normativity in this conception of the post-colonial usually entails what Cabral has called 'return to the source', a reassertion or reinvention of traditions which colonialism, not without considerable success, had sought to destroy or devalue, there are also varying degrees of critical vigilance against the inscription of cultural norms and traditions as comforting but enervating myths of pure origins, and as uncontaminated matrices of the self. 8

This is the dominant, more pervasive literary and theoretical elaboration of post-coloniality. It is by no means a monolithic or homogeneous formation and this is perceptible if one compares the positions and perspectives of its most influential theorists and pundits like Fernandez Retamar of Cuba, 9 Paik Nak-Chung of South Korea, 10 Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya 11 and Andre Brink of South Africa. 12 This is also the tradition of post-coloniality within which Achebe has elaborated the powerful novelistic and essayistic project of demythologization which is the subject of this essay.

It is no easy task to take a measure of the other crystallized literary and theoretical formation of post-coloniality, a formation which, for want of a better term I shall call interstitial or liminal. The interstice or liminality here defines an ambivalent mode of self-fashioning of the writer or critic which is neither First World nor Third World, neither securely and smugly metropolitan, nor assertively and combatively Third Worldist. The very terms which express the orientation of this school of post-colonial self-representation are revealing: diasporic, exilic, hybrid, in-between, cosmopolitan. 13 Not only does the writer, theorist or critic refuse to speak on behalf of, or primarily to, the developing world, but more crucially, he typically calls into question the com-
peting, polarized claims of centre and margin, metropole and periphery, Western and non-Western. It is perhaps on account of this dual movement that V.S. Naipaul does not belong in this post-coloniality of disavowal, even though he has made disavowals the abiding thematic centre of his work: the trajectory of this work bears the trace of a one-way path leading away from the island nation to ‘an enigma of arrival’ at the metropolitan suburbia.

Like the more dominant, more pervasive post-coloniality of reassertion and reinvention of identity and community of developing nations and their writers and critics, the post-coloniality of interstitiality and transnationality does not come as a monolith. This, neither in its literary expressions – as between its perhaps most paradigmatic figure, Salman Rushdie, and diverse other writers like Derek Walcott, J.M. Coetzee, and the late Dambudzo Marechera – nor in its theoretical, critical elaborations in such divergent texts as Trinh T. Minh-ha’s Woman, Native, Other,14 Homi Bhabha’s Nation and Narration,15 Gayatri Spivak’s The Post-colonial Critic,16 and Anthony Appiah’s essay ‘Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism’.17 For this reason, these conflicting, contradictory formations of post-colonial discourses and representations will not be explored here. What needs to be done is, I believe, to weave the salience of this categorical, antinomic divide of post-coloniality into the elaboration of the subject of this essay: Achebe’s demythologizing literary aesthetics. The salience of this divide can only be summatively presented here.

To my mind three essential points express the salience of this categorical antinomy. First, the writers and theorists of the second formation – cosmopolitan, hybrid, exilic, diasporic, interstitial post-coloniality – enjoy far greater visibility and acclaim in the academies, journals and media of the metropolitan First World countries than the post-coloniality of the more nationalistic, counter-hegemonic expression. This is due not only to the fact that most of the writers and theorists of the former are physically and institutionally located in the metropole, though this is indeed not without its own significance. Rather, the visibility and acclaim derive from a second salient point: the intersection of this post-coloniality with the most ‘advanced’, fashionable artistic and intellectual currents of Europe and America, especially post-modernism and High Theory. Thirdly, and this seems to me to be the most important issue, except for a few prominent cases which we shall briefly explore hereafter, these two formations of post-coloniality have had very little to say to each other that is productive. The burden of this critical tribute to Achebe is to argue that his work belongs to these few exemplary cases.
THE REPRESENTATION OF IMPERIALISM, THE IMPERIALISM OF REPRESENTATION

The general celebration of *Things Fall Apart* as a work of great realistic fiction which more or less inaugurated the novelistic exploration by African authors of pre-colonial and colonial Africa has often, quite appropriately, acknowledged the superb irony of the novel's last page as a rhetorical trope, a narrative tactic of great power and cogency.\(^\text{18}\) This issue requires a closer, more nuanced scrutiny, with regard to some perspectives of contemporary critical theory and in relation to the subject of this critical tribute. For what is figured in this last page of *Things Fall Apart* in this short, narratological and rhetorical space, goes to the heart of the politics of representation as a central concern of post-colonial fiction and critical discourse.

The details can be quickly, summatively recalled. Obierika, leading the party of the colonial District Commissioner – a figure of great *political* authority in the colonial context – to the dangling body of Okonkwo who has hanged himself, asks the great man to have the corpse brought down by one of his men. Then we are told: 'The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs' (p. 147). A dialogue then ensues in which the Commissioner, now become an inquiring cognitive subject, questions Okonkwo's people about the customs and ritual practices which forbade them to touch Okonkwo's body, thus requiring the assistance of strangers to do the simple, humane service. A few paragraphs later, the 'student of primitive customs' having received 'data' from his native informants, is transformed into a figure, not merely of political, administrative power, but also of *narrative, discursive, epistemic* authority, as the following ruminations from that much quoted, much admired final paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* reveal:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (pp. 147-48)
Much critical commentary has been made on the ironic juxtaposition of the Commissioner’s projected ‘reasonable paragraph’ on the tragedy of Okonkwo with the entire narrative space of *Things Fall Apart* of which it is indeed a part: the last paragraph of a whole narrative sets itself up in an authoritarian fashion as the only significant detail in the narrative; far more tellingly, for the District Commissioner, the banished, excluded substantive narrative, as a version of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized, simply doesn’t exist. In other words, already in 1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe had in this short, condensed narratological moment of the text, prefigured the post-modern scepticism toward the *grands récits* of the transcendent cognitive (European) subject, the grand, totalizing meta-narratives of the bourgeois-imperial imagination of European culture, especially in its encounter with ‘native’ peoples and cultures.¹⁹ This is a point that Edward Said, among other contemporary critics and theorists, makes in relation to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* which, according to him, works so effectively precisely because its aesthetics and politics ... are imperialist; and that, by the time Conrad wrote, seemed an attitude that was inevitable and for which there could be no alternative. For if we cannot truly understand someone else’s experience and if, as a result, we must depend simply upon the assertive authority of the sort of power Kurtz wields in the jungle or that Marlow possesses as narrator, there is no use looking for non-imperialist alternatives in a system that has simply eliminated, made unthinkable, all other alternatives to it. The circularity of the whole thing is unassailable.²⁰

Achebe’s famous, and must discussed (and much controverted) essay on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is thus only one further instance, one further elaboration of Achebe’s novelistic and essayistic engagement not only of the representation of empire and imperialism – in the light of images, distortions, myths and stereotypes of ‘native’ peoples and cultures – but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the imperialism of representation which, in this historic case, excludes, or simply ignores (alter)-native versions and constructions ‘from below’.²¹ This battle over representation has continued as a central problematic of post-colonial discourse, as we shall see later in the concluding section of this essay. Meanwhile, it is important to note here that part of this battle over representation involves the trench war of preferred versions: A V.S. Naipaul being more preferred than say a Mahasweta Devi as a ‘witness’ to the agony and contradictions of post-colonial India, or an Isak Dinesen being more beloved than an Ngugi wa Thiong’o on Africans in East Africa caught in the dilemmas and antinomies of the cultural representation of the colonial encounter.²²
Achebe looms large then in post-colonial discourse on account of the quality, wit and intelligence of his engagement of this war over representation which pits the post-coloniality of the developing world and its writers, theorists and critics against residual metropolitan colonialist preferences and predilections. What is more important, however, is that this engagement goes much deeper, for his purview has also taken into account the same totalizing, exclusionary and reifying representational logic within the cultural and signifying ensembles of the colonized: Okonkwo, in the multiple ironic articulations of the narrative which constructs him, also prefigures the ‘assertive sovereign inclusiveness’ which Said identifies in Marlowe and Conrad, and which we find so brilliantly encoded in the District Commissioner’s projected ‘reasonable paragraph’ on our tragic protagonist. This is a perspective, a narratological ‘alienation effect’ which we obtain through Obierika, Okonkwo’s great friend and alter ego.

HISTORY, DOXA, PARADOX(A), DIALECTIC

Concerning Obierika the character and his author, Chinua Achebe, the following excerpt from a long interview I once had with the author is an appropriate frame for the reflections in this critical tribute on the post-colonial politics of identity and (self)-representation:

Jeyifo: If I may ask a question which I’ve always wanted to ask you but which is . . . I know it’s always a little too bold to see a writer in terms of his fictional characters . . . However, I have always wanted to ask if there is something of Achebe in Obierika in Things Fall Apart?

Achebe: Yes, that is very bold indeed! Well, the answer is yes, in the sense that at the crucial moment when things are happening, he represents this other alternative. This is a society in Things Fall Apart that believes in strength and manliness and the masculine ideals. Okonkwo accepts them in a rather literal sense . . . [and] the culture ‘betrays’ him. He is ‘betrayed’ because he’s doing exactly what the culture preaches. But you see, the culture is devious and flexible, because if it wasn’t it wouldn’t survive. The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength the culture says, no, hold it! The culture has to be ambivalent, so it immediately raises the virtues of the women, of love, of tenderness . . . and holds up abominations: You cannot do this, even though the cultural norms say you must do it . . . Obierika is therefore more subtle and more in tune with the danger, the impending betrayal by the culture, and he’s not likely to be crushed because he holds something in reserve.
It is widely recognised that in Achebe's texts names and naming convey layers of cultural codes and information. We need to stress the analytic extensions of this principle, for it is within this that the name Obierika achieves its tremendous resonance. Two sets of terms are linked in the name: 'obi', heart, soul or mind; and 'rika', great, fulsome, capacious. There is also a sense in which 'obi', with a proper tonal inflection, is the hut, or the homestead, in its more social, affective connotation. From these aspects of the etymology of the name we may project several linked or associative meanings: great-heartedness, generosity of spirit; capacity for fellow-feeling; the mind/soul/heart of an individual, a group, a people is infinite in its potentialities. It should be added that the name does imply in all of these possible significations, an ethical, rationalist cast of mind or disposition: 'greatness' here is not an ethically neutral capaciousness, even if it does not exclude an imaginative or reflective awareness of the 'banality of evil', in Hannah Arrendt's famous words.

Even the most cursory textual scrutiny of Things Fall Apart would reveal that Obierika 'lives his name', so to speak; in other words, the significations encoded in the name inhabit the character's experience of intersubjective sociality. He is astute in discerning the small, barely tangible but socially cementing velleities of personality and character; he is deeply humane and sensitive; he is imbued with a sagacious but unflaunted moral imagination. He is also of a generous, tolerant disposition and where his friend is a man of few or no words, much of the information about, and reflection on the realities and consequences of the invading colonial capitalism is given by Obierika. And he is not only Okonkwo's 'greatest friend', his is that loyalty in friendship that is deeply informed by a balanced sense of the friend's strengths, weaknesses and even neurotic susceptibilities.

While a moral and psychological portrait would find abundant textual details to cast Obierika as his friend's alter ego, the upshot of our interest here points away from such moralism and psychologism. For the crucial factor here is that Obierika is a device in the text of Things Fall Apart; he is a nexus of significations which allows us considerable purchase on a perception of culture as a necessary but expendable medium through which identity is negotiated between the self and others. It is this heuristic structure which subtends the textually pervasive inscription of both characters as fundamentally discrepant cultural avatars: Okonkwo as the culture hero who is doomed because of his rigid, superficial understanding – really misrecognition – of his culture; Obierika as a sceptical, dissenting and prescient observer of the culture's encounter with the self and the colonizing Other. The problem with most critical commentaries on these aspects of Things Fall Apart is
to have almost completely missed out on the demythologization of identity and culture within the pre-colonial social order while fastening one-sidedly on the novel's ironic deflations of the binarisms and polarities of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized.

Thus, it is Obierika who registers the falling apart of things; it is Obierika who records the collapse of the most vital identity-forming connections of the culture: kinship, community, ritual and ceremonial institutions. And it is significant that Obierika has to insist on this tragic insight – tragic because he is utterly helpless before its historic, and not merely metaphysical inevitability – against the wilful refusal of Okonkwo to see the cracks in the culture’s fortifications:

‘Perhaps I have been away too long,’ Okonkwo said, almost to himself. ‘But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?’

‘Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?’ asked Obierika.

‘I have heard,’ said Okonkwo. ‘But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land.’

‘It is already too late,’ said Obierika sadly. ‘Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame.’ He paused for a long time and then said: ‘I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto.’

‘What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?’ asked Okonkwo.

The white man’s court has decided that it should belong to Nnama’s family, who had given much money to the white man’s messengers and interpreter.’

‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’

‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’ (pp. 124-25)

But Obierika’s melancholy bears a janus face: he registers the myths and distortions of the colonizer about the ‘natives’ which both justify and inscribe the violent usurpation that is the regime of colonialism; at the same time his discomfited gaze had taken in the negating, destructive myths and hypostatizations in the central, identity-giving
institutions and practices of his culture. It is indeed not over-extending the significations embedded in the text to read in Obierika a divided, alienated subjectivity long before the avalanche of colonizing reifications of the 'native' culture arrives on the scene and initiates a new epoch. 'If the Oracle said that my son should be killed,' Obierika had spat out his condemnation of Okonkwo's participation in the killing of the youth, Ikemefuna, 'I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it.' This split is more poignantly and powerfully rendered when Obierika had to, by the force of cultural compulsion, enact, with others, the despoliation of his friend's homestead:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezendu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Obierika was a man who thought about these things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led to greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? (p. 87)

It is important to recognize that Obierika's scepticism toward his culture achieves its tremendous force precisely because he bears deep, positive currents of values, predispositions, identity from the very same culture. A case in point is his notion of abomination which astutely plays upon, and somewhat secularizes its normative, sacral connotations. Another affecting instantiation of this point comes across in the following exchange in which the discussion turns on customary prohibitions and exclusions of the titled 'ozo' holders from some mundane activities of the work-a-day world:

'Sometimes, I wish I had not taken the ozo title,' said Obierika. 'It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping.'

'It is so indeed,' Okonkwo agreed. 'But the law of the land must be obeyed.'

'I don't know how we got that law,' said Obierika. 'In many clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall tree but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting dogmeat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth.' (p. 48)
In the very idiom of his critical disquisitions on his culture, Obierika draws from the culture’s common stock of imagery, rhetoric and humour.

There is thus at work in the mesh of significations in the construction of Obierika as a complex heuristic device a dialectic of, on the one hand, cultural affirmation and on the other hand cultural critique and deflation. One pole, the pole of affirmation, may be said to coalesce around doxa: belief, opinion, or custom perceived in terms of elementary structures of ordered meanings, and centred, cohering values. Things Fall Apart may be regarded in this respect as a vast doxological compendium of Igbo culture before the advent of colonialism. Indeed, it has been so critically examined by several scholars. At the opposite pole from doxa we have of course the pole of para-dox(a), or irony and dialectic. This is the pole of cultural demystification of which Things Fall Apart, like Achebe’s third novel, Arrow of God, is also an exemplary textual articulation. If Things Fall Apart bears a special significance for post-colonial discourse it is to the extent that these two contradictory, dialectic poles of cultural affirmation and cultural demystification find balanced textual inscription in the novel. For one pole is freighted with the discourse of the post-coloniality of nationalist assertion against colonial and imperial cultural subjugation, displacement or depersonalization; the other pole is infused with the discourse of the critique of nationalism such as we find, in different but apposite demythologizing registers, in Cabral’s notion of a necessarily critical ‘return to the source’, or Fanon’s famous exhortations on the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’. In moving to the concluding sections of this essay, I would like to briefly explore the ideological assumptions and the narrative machinery through, and by which Achebe is able to consummate this double articulation.

To Leopold von Ranke is credited an expression which, I believe, superbly captures the spirit of Achebe’s narrativisation of nationalist self-assertion in Things Fall Apart: all ages are equally immediate to God. This bears a striking homology to a Yoruba proverbial expression: ‘Ko si ede t’olorun Ko gbọ’ - there is no language or tongue that is unintelligible to God. Both expressions seem to affirm the underlying premise of cultural relativism: each age or epoch, each culture or society is an integrated, systematic, coherent whole or totality which obeys its own laws and is comprehensible in terms of its own reference points, no matter how imperfect these may be. This conception in turn accords, in almost all respects, with the following statement of intent by Achebe relatively early in his novelistic and essayistic career: ‘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 long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”

Given the ideological and emotional charge of this statement of intent by Achebe, it is remarkable that it has not led to consummated grand narratives of emancipation, or for that matter, meta-narratives of retrieval of an absolutely originary past. It is also remarkable that this has not been adequately critically examined, given all the critical attention which Achebe has attracted to his work as a sustained response to the colonialist master narratives of European writers like Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Graham Greene and Joyce Cary. In other words, why hasn’t Achebe written a master narrative like Heart of Darkness or A Passage to India?

The answer to this question seems to be that since Achebe had, perforce, to write reactive counter-narratives to these meta-narratives of Western representations of the colonizing Self and the colonized Other, he was thus structurally precluded from producing a master-narrative. But this seems too mechanistic an expression of something more complexly inscribed in the interstices of history, ideology and artistic discourse. One answer surely lies in the historic fact that the post-colonial writer is axiomatically and imaginatively excluded from the kind of intuitive, subjective access to the ideology of imperialism which makes the production of colonialist master-narratives possible.

Speculations such as these somewhat occlude the specificity of Achebe’s narrative art and, more pertinently, the fact that this narrative art involves a representational economy located at a juncture between the totalizing meta-narratives we now identify with a hegemonising imperialism of representation and the counter-narratives and fictions of de-totalizing, fragmenting discourses and inscriptions from the margins and from below. Thus the ‘main’ narrative logic of the text is linear, omniscient, centred around Okonkwo’s ‘inevitable’ tragic destiny. For this, Achebe adopted the ‘objectivity’ and ‘impersonality’ which many scholars have remarked as the ‘realistic’ provenance of Things Fall Apart. Some of the expressions of this ‘objectivity’ are quite exceptional in the tradition of African post-colonial fiction of the colonial past, both in their conception and execution. For instance, it is hard to find in this fictional tradition the kind of ethnographic self-distancing which allows Achebe’s authorial voice such articulations as: ‘Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them’ (p. 7). Or: ‘In Umuofia’s latest war he [Okonkwo] was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head, and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank the palm wine from his first human head’ (p. 8). Moreover, this omniscient narrative logic presents both the pre-colonial social order
and the new colonial presence, at least in their respective self-representations, as contending totalities. We are told that the ‘new religion and government and trading stores’ constituted an integral formation in the evolving consciousness of the historic encounter; and the representation of the pre-colonial order is itself all-encompassingly systemic: the democratic village assemblies and ritual-judicial institutions as political-administrative units; the inscription of conversational arts and a vast stock of proverbs, aphorisms, myths, legends, ceremonies as embodiment of an elaborate superstructural symbolic realm; farming, trading, warfare, recreation and the separate, parallel but hierarchically bounded orders of men’s and women’s lives and activities as the content of a mundane but primary sociality. Inside these totalities the logic of tragedy and ‘inevitability’ works itself out, propelled by the polarised agency of an Okonkwo among the colonized and among the colonizers by the manichean-minded missionary, Mr Smith who ‘saw things as black and white’ (p. 130).

Outside this omniscient totalizing meta-narrative, however, are the counter-narratives ‘from below’, the stories within stories, the fragments, episodic fictions, motifs and tropes which reveal a far more complex, dynamic, ambiguous and paradoxical world than that of the closed circuit of the ‘main’ narrative line, a world which in particular calls into question Okonkwo’s rigid, authoritarian and masculinist identity. As I have argued elsewhere, the most central of these stories, motifs and tropes collectively inscribe a topos within the text of Things Fall Apart which explores the fundamentally gendered nature of Okonkwo’s world (and not merely his personality or subjectivity, as most critics have tended to see it). In this topos, there are ‘men’s stories’ and ‘women’s stories’, ‘male’ crops and ‘female’ crops, ‘male’ and ‘female’ crimes and abominations, as well as, more centrally, ‘male’ and ‘female’ deities. It is indeed significant that the ‘female’ deity Ani (by the way, ‘the most important deity in the lives’ of Okonkwo’s people) has a male priest, Ezeani, while the ‘male’ deity of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has a female priestess, Chielo. But this is a point beyond Okonkwo’s ken: he completely represses the ‘female’ principle and values in himself and his tragedy in fact largely derives from his remarkable success in this venture.

One cannot read the countless fragmentary stories around ‘minor’ characters like Unoka, Chielo, Ogbuefi Nbulue and his wife Ozoemena, Ikemefuna and Nwoye, Ekwefi and Ezinma, Okonkwo’s uncle Uchendu, Akunna, Obiako and many others, without consciously or unconsciously feeling oneself in the presence of a narrative and discursive logic which admits of illogic and which makes everything negotiable, including the most sacrosanct values of the culture. Obiako’s ‘story’ which confounds
one of the supposedly most inviolable ritual and psychological injunctions of the culture — deference to the cult of the ancestors — is particularly trenchant in the way in which it as much questions Okonkwo’s reified conception of the culture and the ‘inevitability’ of his fate:

‘Obiako has always been a strange one,’ said Nwakibie. ‘I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, ‘Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.’ Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, “Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.” Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because, as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. Okonkwo remembered his own father. (p. 15)

This story of Obiako, like many of the other fragmentary stories within the main linear, totalizing narrative of Okonkwo’s tragedy and historic colonial ‘pacification’, has an emblematic significance within the double, fractured narrative scheme of the novel. The main totalizing narrative as it were deals with History capitalized, with the ‘great’ events and epochal shifts, all with a seeming inevitability, if not with a secret Hegelian telos. But the story fragments, the episodic fictions about the Obiakos deal with *histories*, with the interstices of the ‘great’ epochal movements. It is significant that these ‘mini’ narratives have to do with ‘small people’ in the community, not the ‘lords of the land’, the *male* ‘ozo’ title holders like Okonkwo who, it seems, always dominate discussions at the otherwise ‘democratic’, egalitarian village assemblies. Indeed, in the deeply *gendered* discourse of personality and identity in the novel, the other name for these small people, where they are men, is *agbala*, which means ‘woman’; collectively both men and women within this subaltern group are named *efulefu*, which means ‘worthless’. Among many of the ironic twists and articulations of *Things Fall Apart* is the fact that while the main narrative line about Okonkwo leads to tragedy and a general sense of social malaise, the fragmentary stories and motifs of the *agbala* and the *efulefu* move this social category to restitution at the end of the novel. Almost all the first converts to the new religion, the first minor functionaries of the colonial administration, the first teacher-pupils of the new school, are drawn from this subaltern group. For this group, things certainly did not fall apart! However, Achebe’s ironic vision extends as well to their ‘liberation’ by colonialism: already at the very inception of their incorporation into a new social and economic order, new forms of subjectivity are crystallizing as the corruptions and alienation of a new social class are prefigured in the venality, insensitivity and brutality of the messengers and petty officials of the colonial administration and over-zealous Christian
converts like Enoch. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise Achebe’s depiction of the process of ‘othering’ within the pre-colonial social order, a process which creates a vast body of marginalised Others made up mainly of the *osu* (slaves), social outcasts and, significantly, women.

**HISTORICAL CONFIDENCE AND DIFFIDENCE; PREFERRED NARRATIVES AND DISCOURSES**

Obiako in the short, fragmentary story we examined above takes on the attributes of resilience and the salutary, worldly and human-centred scepticism which we find brilliantly encoded in Obierika. Obierika, on the other hand, leads us to the paradigmatic narrative and discursive stance of his author, Chinua Achebe in many of his novels and essays: stubborn hope, and an ethical rationalism marked by a deeply ironic view of history and existence. We are some three decades into our post-independence disillusionment, and at this stage of our neo-colonial history when things, again, seem to be falling apart, we can learn much from this resilience. Historical calamities like the many civil wars and the endless run of inter-communal strife on the continent; political disasters like the regimes of the likes of Idi Amin, Bokassa, Nguema, Mobutu; and the seeming historical impasse of arrested decolonization: all these contradictions and negations will not crush us. This resilience, though, is not without its predicament: unlike Okonkwo, Obierika is not crushed; but his survival, and the survival of the *agbala* and the *efulefu* of the neo-colonial present, is haunted by a sense of failure, of diffidence before these historical negations.

My reading of *Things Fall Apart* in this essay in terms of a narrative economy which both totalizes and detotalizes, which presents, on the one hand, a grand narrative of the colonial encounter as History capitalized and unified around great personages and events and, on the other hand, counter-narratives and fragmentary stories of decentred, over-determined histories and identities of subaltern groups, might seem to indicate that Achebe’s art and discourse are easily assimilable to post-modernist, post-structuralist or deconstructive perspectives. Nothing could be further from this, for Achebe has remained rather wary of modernist aesthetics, not to even talk of post-modernism and post-structuralism. What I have tried to show in this critical tribute is that Achebe’s particular brand of realist fiction and his profoundly ironic, demythologizing vision entail some of the problematics of cultural representation highlighted by post-modernism and post-structuralism. This is particularly true of the dangers and pitfalls of self-essentialization in
the construction of community, identity or tradition by ex-colonised
nations and peoples, and by minority, non-canonical or 'popular' cul-
tural currents in the 'First World' context. I do not by this wish to im-
ply that Achebe's texts are crying for post-structuralist, post-modern
critical condescension and patronage. Rather, I wish to underscore the
fact that post-colonial critics and theorists who think that these problem-
atics of identity and representation are substantively or brilliantly ar-
ticulated only in contemporary post-structuralist discourses may want to
consider the case of Achebe, as elaborated here. It is important also to
add that other texts of Achebe like Arrow of God and Anthills of the
Savannah are also superb, engaging exemplifications or inscriptions of
these issues. Indeed, on a much wider social and cultural terrain, the
most important theorists and critics of post-colonial writings in the
Third World are of this intellectual and ideological expression in their
involvement in a vast project of demythologization of cultural produc-
tion and cultural politics from the residue of colonialist myths and their
more neo-colonial re-codings. 38

The potential contribution of post-modern, post-structuralist theoreti-
cal methods and perspectives to this project is incalculable, especially
with regard to the thematization of language and signification as the
very grounds of both self-essentialization and the possibility of its de-
mystification. But the consummation of this potential contribution, it
seems, is conditional upon two factors, among others. First, it is con-
ditional upon a salutary self-awareness of post-structuralism that the
critique of essentialism did not start only in the last two decades. Sec-
ondly, there is also the need to recognise that post-structuralism breeds
its own pieties, its own mythologies and reifications as well, some of
these indeed assuming the paradoxical character of neo-colonial fetish-
ism. An instance of this, which is pertinent to the subject of this essay,
is the view that grand, totalizing discourses and narratives are exhaust-
ed and historically and culturally regressive. 39 For post-colonial writers
and critics to accept this without qualification is to accept the delegit-
imation of any and all attempts to construct identity and community in
the face of the continued ravages and displacements of neo-colonial bar-
barism, even of self-critical, politically sophisticated constructions of
community and identity. Achebe is not post-modernist in his aesthetic
sensibilities and predilections, at least in the contemporary theoretical
understanding of the 'condition', 40 but the way in which he combines
totalizing and detotalizing narratives and discourses, doxa and para-
dox(a), is a powerful critique of smug, fashionable pieties that an em-
brace of, or an interest in totalization in the ultimate in artistic and in-
tellectual naivety.
NOTES


3. Achebe was closely associated with the left-of-centre People's Redemption Party (PRP) during the civilian Second Republic in Nigeria (1979-83). He was Deputy National President of the party and was even rumoured at one stage to being seriously considered as the party's Presidential candidate in the federal elections of 1983. Achebe's leftist, somewhat social-democratic political inclinations, with all their ambiguities, are clearly woven into his fourth and fifth novels, A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah.


5. Things Fall Apart (Heinemann African Writers' Series, 1958). All page references are to this edition and are hereafter incorporated in brackets in the text of this essay.

6. See Harry Magdoff, 'Imperialism without colonies' in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., Studies in the Theories of Imperialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). The terms 'post-coloniality' and 'coloniality' in the context of this essay refer to writings dealing with these historical and cultural phenomena considered as disciplinary formations, that is as objects of study.


17. Anthony Appiah, ‘Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1988, pp. 153-178. Given his well-known coolness toward deconstruction and post-structuralism from the standpoint of analytic philosophy, it may seem out of place to include Appiah’s essay within this formation of a post-colonial discourse which is deeply imbricated in post-structuralist theory. The inclusion is justified, I believe, in the fact that if one conceptualises this expression of post-coloniality as one of ‘disavowal’, as I do here, then Appiah is entirely at ‘home’ within this formation. Nothing so much expresses this as the fact that if one is at first startled by Appiah’s title – ‘Out of Africa’ – which comes from Isak Dinesen’s text of that title, one looks in vain for any ironic deployment of the title in Appiah’s essay. All cultural-nationalists in Africa’s post-colonial cultural politics are, it seems to Appiah, little more than varieties, or ‘topologies’ of *nativism*, where nativism means naive, uncritical self-essentialization in the politics of identity. For a longer critique of Appiah and what I call ‘post-coloniality of hybridity and disavowal’ see my ‘Literary Theory and Theories of Decolonization’, forthcoming.


23. The rash of nostalgic films about the British Raj in India, and films like ‘Black and White in Color’, ‘Gorillas in the Mist’ and ‘Out of Africa’, all projecting a yearning for the lost world of the colonials in East Africa attest to the commodity value of this residual colonialist nostalgia in popular cultural production.


25. C.L. Innes in *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) has related these aspects of Achebe’s narrative style and technique to Brechtian and Bakhtinian perspectives. This is a novel, fruitful approach to Achebe’s fictional art, especial-
ly since Innes stresses that Brechtian or Bakhtinian motifs in Achebe are not so much a matter of the direct influence of literary intertextuality as one of ‘similarity of effects’ based on the fact that all three ‘learned those techniques and concepts of the relation between author/narrator and audience from a non-literary tradition’, Achebe from an African one, Brecht and Bakhtin from European oral folk sources. What I have done here is to relate these aspects of Achebe’s narrative art to post-modern, post-structuralist themes in post-colonial critical discourse, especially with the move away from the grand récit of European colonialist narrative and discursive traditions.


27. I must thank Don C. Ohadike of Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, for help with my etymological analysis of the name Obierika. I should say, however, that I have taken the heuristic possibilities in the nomenclature way beyond Professor Ohadike’s more exact, literal rendering; hence any errors or solecisms in this exertion remain mine.

28. This pertains to his mythological but moral and philosophical interpretation of the ‘abomination’ of Okonkwo’s participation in the killing of Ikemefuna, an action which, in his view, could bring ruin on whole families, as retribution from the earth goddess. Chapter 8, p. 46.

29. An example of this kind of scholarship on Achebe’s works is Robert Wren, Achebe’s World: the Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe (Longman, 1980).


33. This point is made with perspicacity by Timothy Mitchell in Colonizing Egypt, op. cit. See especially Chapters 1 and 2. See also, for the response of the colonized to this ‘historical confidence’, Bill Ashcroft et al., eds., The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). One of the most theoretically sophisticated explorations of this subject, from the standpoint of modern intellectual and cultural history is Samir Amin, Eurocentrism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).


35. C.L. Innes explores this rather sharply in Chinua Achebe, op. cit., as does Carole Boyce Davis in ‘Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu’, in Carole Boyce Davis and Anne Adams Graves, eds., Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1986). My point here is that Achebe takes the question of gender beyond its neurotic, pathological expression in Okonkwo’s masculinist, misogynist personality to the very division of knowledge and reality on gender terms. Consequently Things Fall Apart ought to be read as a critique, mostly implicit, of the dominant national-masculine tradition of post-colonial African fiction. This is a point I develop further in a monograph, For Chinua Achebe, forthcoming from Africa World Press.
36. I have explored this aspect of Achebe’s artistic vision in ‘The glow-worm of consciousness: Achebe as a literary theorist’ in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., Contemporary Nigerian Literature, op. cit.

37. Achebe’s reserve and coolness toward the aesthetic aspects of the works of writers like Arnah and Soyinka comes largely, in my view, from this disdain for modernist aesthetics. See, for an example of his disdain, his remarks on Soyinka in ‘Class Discussion’ in Karen L. Morell, ed., In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka (Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, 1975), pp. 50-51.

38. This is a subject I explore more extensively in Postcoloniality: Paradigmatic Theories, forthcoming.