
Between Realism and Modernism

Chinua Achebe and the Making of African Literature

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The award of the Booker International Prize for Literature to Chinua Achebe in 2007 was perhaps the single most important acknowledgment of the role he had played in the emergence of African literature and the transformation of world literature in the twentieth century. The prize was a recognition of the seminal roles that Achebe had played since the publication of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958: his role in the invention or institution of modern African literature, and his insertion of this new body of writing into the international canon of modern letters. As Nadine Gordimer (see Nadine Gordimer), one of the judges of the prize, noted: “Chinua Achebe’s early work made him the father of modern African literature as an integral part of world literature” (Associated Press 2007). Today, among literary critics, historians, and general readers alike, there is a consensus that more than any other African writer of his generation, Achebe used creative writing to give Africans a voice; that he instituted a literary practice in which African being and becoming could be imagined; and that he had used creative writing to help consolidate national and regional identity. Above all, his works transformed our understanding of world literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

In “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature,” I argued that Achebe was the person who invented African literature (Gikandi 2001). This contention has irked other writers of his generation, and it has been vigorously contested by numerous critics who find it unhelpful in positioning Achebe’s work “in literary and cultural terms” (Morrison 2014, 31). The objection was that giving Achebe precedence diminished

the contributions of his predecessors. My contention, however, is that giving Achebe precedence is an important step in acknowledging the significance of the moment that produced him as a writer – the period of decolonization after World War II. For while no one doubts that there was an African literature before 1958, it was a literature that had not yet irrupted onto the world scene. Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi in Nigeria, and Sol Plaatje and Peter Abrahams in South Africa, had published important novels in English well before Achebe; but none of these works seemed to be read as either part of an African corpus or as a significant contribution to world literature. For example, although published by Faber and Faber under the patronage of T.S. Eliot, Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) was welcomed and promoted not as a contribution to world literature, but as a literary anomaly; it was celebrated by its European and American reviewers as an ethnographic curiosity, and condemned by its African readers as bad writing (see Lindfors 1975; Lowe 2011, 1–25).

There is, of course, the material evidence of Achebe's influence on the modern culture of letters. Since its publication in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* has sold over 10 million copies in the English-speaking world; it has been translated into over 50 languages; it is taught in almost every high school in the United States, one of the largest literary markets in the world; and it is part of the curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities across the globe. The book's influence on modern writing has been acknowledged by many writers, from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), who encountered the text when he was an undergraduate at Makerere University College in Uganda, to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, opens with a line that echoes the title of *Things Fall Apart*. Adichie has described Achebe as a model of what "writers should be" (BBC News 2007).

Achebe's influence on common readers across the world is an equally important, though not always well-documented, aspect of his legacy. The novel appears on almost every major list of the top 100 books of all times (*Guardian* 2003). In translation, *Things Fall Apart* has acquired a life of its own. There are, for example, at least five translations of the novel in Persian (Babaii and Rashid 2017, 154). Achebe's work is now the subject of a vast library of monographs and critical essays. Furthermore, the novel has been used across various disciplines, including anthropology and history.

Giving Achebe precedence, then, is an indirect way of posing several questions that clarify the conditions in which African literature became important for the global imagination: What made Achebe's work different from that of his African and (one might add) his colonial predecessors? Why were his early works able to enter the scene of modern writing and create a space for African self-fashioning? To answer these questions, I start with a discussion of what Isidore Okpewho has identified as the interplay between Achebe's biography and "the succession of forces controlling his development as a writer" (2003, 3). I then explore his turn to the novel to create a new space of literary expression, one hitherto prohibited to the African, or controlled by the colonial library. I conclude by showing how, facing the political pressures of what Biodun Jeyifo (1990) aptly describes as "arrested decolonization," Achebe was compelled to adopt, and then reject, the idiom of modernism as he sought to develop a language for representing what was considered to be the unprecedented and opaque new world ushered in by decolonization (see From Decolonization to Decoloniality).

I

Except for *There Was a Country* (2012), his personal account of the Nigerian civil war, none of Achebe's published works are autobiographical; yet, there is a significant interplay between the key themes in his work and the writer's biography. In other words, each of the key themes in Achebe's works can be traced to a significant experience in his biography (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1997). The encounter between the Igbo and Christian missions, a key theme in *Things Fall Apart*, is informed by Achebe's own father's conversion to, and subsequent work as, a catechist in the Anglican Church. This "family romance" is continued in *No Longer at Ease* (1960), where the conflict between Obi Okonkwo and his father Isaac mirrors the tension between the first generation of Westernized Africans and their nationalist children. *Arrow of God* (1964), a powerful meditation on the nature of modernity in Africa, is drawn from key episodes in Igbo history at the beginning of the twentieth century, including the "pacification" of Eastern Nigeria, the institution of "Indirect rule," and the Aba Women's revolt of 1929, events that undoubtedly touched Achebe's family. The political satire, *A Man of the People* (1966), comes out of Achebe's keen observation of the crisis of Nigerian politics on the eve of the 1966 civil war, an event that is prominent in the short stories and poems written when he worked as an unofficial diplomat for the breakaway Republic of Biafra. *Antibills of the Savanna* (2001), which draws on Achebe's long observation of the politics of atrophy in a postcolonial African state, can be read, together with his political manifesto, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984), as a narrative on the crisis of citizenship in decolonization.

Achebe's works hence render themselves well to the chronographic approach adopted in leading monographs on his work (Killam 1969; Wren 1980; Innes 1990; Gikandi 1991; Morrison 2014; Ochiagha 2015), casebooks (Okpewho 2003), guides (Whittaker and Msiska 2007), authoritative editions (Irele 2009) and collected essays (Innes and Lindfors 1978; Petersen and Rutherford 1990). Beneath this chronographic approach, however, are to be found complex intersections between the self, society, and cultural institutions. Like many other African writers in the period of colonization, Achebe was born into a Christian family, one with an intimate relation to what were considered to be the three pillars of colonialism – European culture and manners, Christian conversion, and literacy. As a subject and a writer, then, Achebe was produced within what he aptly described, in an early interview with Donatus Nwoga, as "the colonial complex" (1972, 8). Achebe sketched out the "crisis of the soul" generated by colonization to Nwoga in the following words:

I could give you illustrations of when I was growing up, the attitude of our parents, the Christian parents, to Nigerian dances, to Nigerian handicrafts; and the whole society during this period began to look down on itself, you see, and this was a very bad thing; and we haven't actually, even now with the independence, we still haven't got over this period. (1972, 8)

Yet, the same institutions that created this colonial complex also enabled Achebe's coming into being as a modern writer.

One such institution was Government College, Umuahia, a high school in Eastern Nigeria where Achebe was part of a remarkable generation of students who turned to literature

as part of the project of African self-fashioning. At Umuahia, Terri Ochiagha notes, this generation of writers made history “by contesting the hegemony of colonial discourse in the literary arena, a discourse they had imbibed and began to abjure in the institutional milieu of Umuahia Government College” (2015, 7). Later, at University College, Ibadan, Achebe used his mastery of English literature as an instrument of rethinking the project of colonial culture and moving it toward nationalist (see *Nation: The Mighty Idea and the Novel*) ends (Wren 1991, 53–60). It was at Ibadan, where he was a student of English literature, that Achebe started writing fiction, convinced that the narratives about Africa by colonial writers were crude distortions of the African character.

After graduating from Ibadan, Achebe embarked on a career with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, undertaking training with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in London, and rising to be the head of external broadcasting. Locating him at the center of debates and disputes on the Nigerian political project, Achebe’s work in broadcasting helped shape his “sensibility as a public intellectual” (Morrison 2014, 17). With the outbreak of the civil war in 1966, Achebe’s role as a public intellectual became even more critical when he aligned himself with the Biafran cause and served as the international face of what was to turn out to be a lost cause. In between his shuttle diplomacy for Biafra, Achebe wrote short stories (collected in *The Insider, Girls at War*) and poems (*Beware Soul Brother* and *Christmas in Biafra*) detailing the tragedies of one of the most brutal conflicts of the postcolonial period in Africa.

While the consumption of abridged versions of British literature at high school would add up to what Achebe would later describe as a “wonderful preparation for the day we would be old enough to read between the lines and ask questions,” this moment was in the postcolonial future, not the colonial present (*The Education of a British-Protected Child* 2009, 21). Still, what was crucial in Achebe’s making as a writer was his encounter, or confrontation, with the colonial library, especially the modernist literature written by European writers with an African setting, adventure stories, and the colonial romance. As one of the first students of English at Ibadan, Achebe was introduced to Africanist English novels – Joseph Conrad’s (see Joseph Conrad’s [Post]Colonial Fictions) *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, for example – that were purported to be authoritative accounts of African landscapes and subjects; but he soon came to realize that, in these works, Africa was a “setting and background” that eliminated the African as “a human factor” (“An Image of Africa” 1977, 12). Faced with the firewall of certain established European ideas about the African as the other of Europe, Achebe set out to undo Eurocentrism by producing an alternative narrative. His immediate problem, however, was that the model for the new narrative had to be borrowed from the colonizer. Both the colonial library – be it ethnography or the modernist novel – and the English language were a gift and a debt.

For Achebe, the gift was the English language and the literary conventions associated with it, which he assumed were essential to African self-fashioning:

The real question is not whether Africans could write in English, but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal, and produces a guilty feeling ... But for me there is no other choice ... I have been given this language and I intend to use it. (“English and the African Writer” 1965, 29)

This acceptance of the gift of English presupposed a debt, for neither the gift of the English language, nor its literature, could be separated from the colonial complex; they were both mechanisms for excluding the African from the domain of the civilized and, with it, culture and the literary (see Gikandi 2001, 2016). Achebe's claim, however was that, like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, he could use the given tongue to create a new literary sensibility and will new African subjects into being. In the process, he would broaden the conception of literature in the world to include Africa, which, Achebe told the BBC on the award of his Booker International Prize, "wasn't there" (BBC News 2007).

II

However, Achebe's work as a writer cannot be isolated from the larger events that were taking place in Africa in the 1950s. This was a period in which young Africans, caught in the fervor of decolonization, no longer looked to empire or the imperium as space of experience or horizon of expectations (see Koselleck 1985, 267). As he set out to write *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe felt that there was "something in the air ... something was already happening in the sphere of independence and freedom" (Gikandi 2009, 5). The context for imagining and engaging Africa had changed. As V.Y. Mudimbe has noted in *The Invention of Africa*, the atmosphere of the 1950s (and continuing into the 1960s) "meant a new valorization in the Africanist discourse, namely the promotion of another center, history and its ideological activity" (1988, 176). For Achebe, African writers were no longer apologists for the colonial situation but teachers chaperoning a new order, helping their society "regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Killam 1973, 3).

It is not accidental, then, that each of Achebe's first three novels was intended to displace the assumptions of a key colonial text on Africa: *Things Fall Apart* would be a reversal of the recursive temporality and hermeneutic delirium in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; *No Longer at Ease* would challenge the conception of the African as a passive agent in the works of Graham Greene and other late modernists; *Arrow of God* would deploy parody and irony to displace the ideological and aesthetic claims of Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and the ethnographers of colonialism. The creation of a new African literature with its own idiom and linguistic register would lead to a systematic critique of Africanist discourse and its dominant allegories (Miller 1985, 6; JanMohamed 1983, 7–9).

In his early fictions, Achebe sought to valorize the temporal depth of Igbo culture, the rhythms of precolonial social life, and the fluidity of subjective identity, in order to undermine the dominant Hegelian idea that Africa was a blank slate before European conquest. Significantly, Achebe didn't seek a romantic resolution to the crisis engendered by colonization or colonial history; on the contrary, his goal was to imagine African subjects in a dialectical relationship with the process of historical transformation. Reflecting on the role of the writer as a chronicler of the past, Achebe would note that while the recreation of the past was an essential aspect of the new African writing, writers had to avoid the temptation to idealize it – "to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never happened" (1973b, 7). Defined by what Irele has identified as two perspectives – "the celebratory and the reflective" (2009, xxi) – Achebe's novels were intended to both represent colonial

history as it was – brutal, degrading, and destructive – while celebrating communities that had survived the detritus of this history.

One of the most salient, and perhaps unexpected, aspects of Achebe's fiction was his rejection of romance, both as love or wish fulfillment. Tragedy, rather than romance, would become the central trope in Achebe's early works. Closely associated with colonial modernity, tragedy would enable the novelist to relocate African subjects from the romance that underwrote colonial authority to an awareness of how colonial power and law displaced the centers of African being as an autonomous, self-contained habitus to a site of marginality and difference (see Irele 1978; Scott 2004). And so, where readers might expect romance and its redemptive or utopian claims, Achebe's novels would confront them with a tragic and melancholic history, often marked by unexpected moments of closure: Okonkwo responds to the institution of colonialism by committing suicide, an act considered by his community to be an abomination; Obi Okonkwo ends up in jail, convicted of corruption; and Ezeulu simply goes mad. In all these instances, tragedy would mark the space of what Achebe would call the "middle passage" of colonialism – the primal scene in which African history, selfhood, and sociality were deracinated ("Duty and Involvement" 1968).

III

From a narratological perspective, Achebe was astutely deploying the idiom of modernism (fragmentation, the crisis of the subject, and the rhetoric of failure), but he was also striving to generate realism to counter what JanMohamed has described as "historical catalepsy" (1983, 183). In fact, Achebe's major contribution to the literature of the twentieth century was perhaps his recognition that modernism (see *Modern Narrative in World Literature*) and realism were not mutually exclusive. This claim can best be illustrated by exploring what appears to be Achebe's belated adoption of the modernist idiom. This idiom was, of course, part of Achebe's colonial education; after all, it was modernism that had first excited him about the possibilities of literature (see Hyde 2016). Achebe's debt to modernism is reflected in the titles and epigraphs of his early novels: *Things Fall Apart* draws from W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" and *No Longer at Ease* from T.S. Eliot's (see T.S. Eliot and Modernist Translation) "The Journey of the Magi." But more than signaling Achebe's knowledge and affiliation with modernism, these titles and epigraphs were signs of the author's desire to use the rhetoric of modernism to reflect on the colonial condition and its afterlife.

Here, then, modernism's rhetoric of failure and displacement provided Achebe with a vocabulary for thinking and writing late colonialism as an aporia, a site where old centers could not hold and things fell apart; or where subjects unable to return to our worlds found themselves unmoored in the new dispensation. Modernism would attract Achebe not because of its ideology (his critique of Conrad in "An Image of Africa" reflects his disdain for its use of Africa as an aesthetic playground), but because it enabled the writing of the in-between space between colonialism and the decolonized nation. Modernism seemed suited to the representation of what Hannah Arendt would call "afterness" – the space "of no longer and not yet" (1993, 158). Achebe would signal this space of afterness by ending his novels with aporias or ellipses, figures that marked the end of one era as the beginning of another.

But if modernism had given Achebe the language to mediate arrested decolonization, there is no doubt that in his later works he had retreated, at a conceptual if not formal level, from the modernist idiom. Evidence of this can be found in his harsh criticism of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which was being heralded for its masterful use of the language of modernism to represent the crisis of decolonization. Achebe criticized the novel for merely using its Ghanaian setting as an alibi for reflecting on the human condition:

Armah is clearly an alienated writer, a modern writer complete with all the symptoms ... So there is enormous distance between Armah and Ghana ... You have to go to the early European writers on Africa to find something of the same attitude and icy distance. (1973a, 625–626)

This criticism initially seems strange because Achebe had adopted a satirical tone and ironic distance to represent political corruption in *A Man of the People*; but what was at issue here was not so much Armah's use of satire and ironic distance, but his rejection of a measure of realism and its redemptive impulse. While keenly attuned to the kinship between modernist fragmentation, distance, and irony with postcolonial atrophy, Achebe still wanted to retain realism as the essential mode for representing the crisis of nationalism. He seemed to share Fanon's claim that the project of culture in the new African nation could not escape the realities of the present, "the stark facts which weigh down the present and future of men and women" ("On National Culture" 1963, 207) and that the task of writing could not be separated from the imagination of a future that transcended the lived experience of (post)coloniality.

Even as he remained critical of the Nigerian state, Achebe still believed that critique needed to be balanced by aspiration. As he noted in his introduction to *The Trouble with Nigeria*, there was nothing wrong with the Nigerian character, land, or climate; rather the Nigerian problem was the "unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (1984, 1). Thus in the later novels (*Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*), a diagnosis of "the trouble with Nigeria" went hand in hand with dramatization of its possibilities. In both novels, Achebe, finding his writing bogged down in the detritus of postcolonial everydayness, would invoke an imaginary future in which ideals could be realized and an embittered history be appeased. The author had made a significant move from modernist irony, which left things open ended, to a symbolic language that posited the novel as a site of self-discovery and reconciliation. Within the leitmotif of *Anthills of the Savannah*, for example, Beatrice would be cast as the queen bee who survived the fires of the harmattan, "keeping the colony together" (Boehmer 1990, 106); the birth of her baby would symbolize "a redemptive new order" (Morrison 2014, 218).

IV

In conclusion, we can say that Achebe transformed the project of world literature by simply adopting the vocabulary of modernism, combining it with a measure of realism, and forcing it to account for the lived experience of colonialism and its afterlife. A number of transformations, with significant implications for debates on world literature, were taking place

in his early works. First, if late modern writers had used the rhetoric of failure to inscribe the collapse of modern subjectivity, this had been done at the expense of the African who had been denied subjectivity and identity so that modernism could come into being. This was essentially Achebe's critique of Conrad in "An Image of Africa" (1989, 12–13). But instead of retreating from modernism, Achebe transformed it into a diagnostic tool, using its idiom to expose the anxieties of late empire. In this sense, his early novels would function as metacommentaries and critiques of the European deployment of Africa as a "blank space" (Miller 1985, 173–176). In short, Achebe turned modernism against itself.

Second, having used the idiom of modernism to displace the authority of this European writing on Africa (think of the ironization of colonialist discourse in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*), Achebe turned to what might have appeared to be the discredited language of realism to imagine an alternative narrative of autonomous communities and subjects, progressive temporalities, and a redemptive hermeneutics. For if colonialism had made things fall apart, or left subjects unmoored, the production of African literature would have to take place in a void – what Achebe described as a cultural "middle passage" ("Duty and Involvement" 1968). Third, Achebe, unlike his predecessors, did not set out to add to the ethnography of Africa (think again of the critique of colonial ethnography in his early novels), but to contribute to English, and by implication, world literature.

It is not my claim that Achebe decided to become a writer in order to produce texts for the library of world literature. His work was a response to the situation in which he found himself – the colonial situation – and his ambition was to produce stories for his own particular world and audience. At the same time, however, his writing was taking place in the larger history of the twentieth century and the geography of modern literature; he wanted his people to be part of the world narrative; and he needed a story to tell people that "something new was beginning in Africa and that they had better sit up and listen" (Gikandi 2009). African writing could not emerge except in relation to the tragedies and expectations of its time; it is only when writers came to a self-awareness of their liminal position in relation to both their colonial inheritance and a compromised narrative of liberation that they could produce works that provided what Achebe called "an alternative handle on reality" (*Hopes and Impediments* 1989, 58). This is the point he made in an interview with Bill Moyers: "It is the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have – otherwise their surviving would have no meaning" (Achebe 1988, 337). Achebe brought the storyteller back to world literature.

Works by Chinua Achebe

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