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ESSAYS

Part I

Re-Writing as Aesthetic Experiment: A Study of Achebe's Early Novels

Timothy Ogene

Introduction

Since its publication in 1958, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* continues to attract critical responses that analyze its reaction to colonial narratives about Africa. At the center of these responses is Achebe's position as an author who "writes back" to the canon, who, as John Thieme aptly puts it, crafts "revisionist fictional histories which attempt to recuperate Africa from negative Eurocentric construction."¹ As one who "writes back," Achebe is essentially received as a writer invested in replacing one narrative with another, like proponents of Negritude who "opposed essentialist European constructions of African identity by promoting a view of the distinctiveness and dignity of the African personality . . ."² For Achebe in particular, resisting Eurocentric misrepresentation requires a replacement "of years of denigration"³ with "an alternative historiography of the period in which European colonial society was establishing itself in West Africa."⁴ By articulating his mission as a writer, Achebe offers his critics a ready-made parameter for receiving his work. That ready-made parameter is further solidified by the rise of postcolonial theory, an alternative, non-Western field of critical inquiry, which conveniently retains the reception of Achebe's work the way he circumscribes it—as essentially postcolonial. But one is forced to ask: are there no other ways to read and receive Achebe's work outside prevailing preoccupations? Furthermore, must we insist on—and engage—the author's articulated mission and circumscribed reason for writing?

There are no doubts that Achebe's early novels evince variants of postcolonial theorizing. At the content level, they highlight points of racial and cultural contacts with the West, as seen in *Things Fall Apart*, moving on to transitional moments and questions of internal cultural displacement and liminality, exemplified in Obi's entrapment between cultures, his acquired Western

idiosyncrasies, and his faltering attempt to reclaim the traditional values of his ancestors. Achebe's novels also document and bear witness to important transitions—colonial to post-colonial—once offering an insider's perspective to a country fraught with anxieties of political change. In addition, they chronicle the emergence of a metropolitan Africa, with the appearance of a new elite that struggles to navigate a socio-cultural and political landscape that was hitherto in the hands of the colonizer. It can therefore be said that Achebe's novels embody various incarnations of postcolonialism, as they reflect “a discursive stance, an epochal condition distinguished by the entry into metropolitan cultures of other voices, histories and experiences, and an achieved transition.”⁵

Achebe's articulated mission, his overall attempt to reclaim and offer an epistemological alternative that draws from and promulgates an Afro-centric model of interrogating lived-experiences, is an easy pointer to the postcoloniality of his work. “For colonized and postcolonial cultures traumatized by colonialism,” writes Benita Parry, “a fiction that recuperates Africa's autonomous resources and reconstitutes the fragmented colonial subject makes an active contribution to the collective aspiration of regaining a sense of direction and identity.”⁶ In Achebe's case, fiction is a means to crafting a national and pan-continental identity that challenges the image of Africa that, as Achilles Mbembe points out, “is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal*,” with an “elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind.”⁷

Of that image of Africa, one is reminded of Joyce Cary's *Aissa Saved* and *Mister Johnson*, novels that indeed depict Africa as “elementary” and perpetually “on the fringe” of existence. The locality of both novels, and their imposition of anthropological authority over local spaces, informs why Achebe's response via *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are at the center of this project. It is, however, the internal workings and dynamics of that response, not the event of a response, that features prominently here. For the purpose of this project, Achebe's literary responses are here called *text-citizens*, as their production and dissemination—embedded with anthropological, sociological, and political

“rights”—authoritatively interact and contest space with textual misrepresentations of the colonial imagination.⁸

The rise of the *text-citizen* came with the decline of empire, as more and more writers from post-colonial societies began to contest stories (texts) that did little or no justice to their cultural spaces. Their writings, texts from empire, became receptacles for the native’s story. Set forth into an existing network of circulated mis-narrations, they assume the important post of citizen-diplomats armed with sophisticated knowledge of local and historical nuances. The novel as *text-citizen* therefore operates systematically with the knowledge of empire as textual. If the colonizer claimed space by “inscribing” it, the postcolonial writer attempts to reclaim it by way of texts.⁹ The *text-citizen* carries out this function by speaking into (and for) local spaces, and at the same time questioning, subverting, and providing contexts where overlooked by colonial texts.

These functions of the text as articulate citizen are implied in Gikandi’s reflection on his readings of Achebe’s works. Most remarkable are his comments on Achebe’s representation of the symbolism of yam in Igbo economic and spiritual systems of thought, a representation that had been poorly articulated in a text the young Gikandi had encountered before Achebe. “But in reading *Things Fall Apart*,” says Gikandi, “everything became clear: the yam was important to Igbo culture, not because of what we were later to learn to call use-value, this time at the University of Nairobi, but because of its location at the nexus of a symbolic economy in which material wealth was connected to spirituality and ideology and desire.” Achebe’s text, therefore, became “a fundamental lesson that. . . provided. . . a different kind of education” for those who were geo-culturally removed from Igbo land.¹⁰

The effectiveness of Achebe’s response, as seen in Gikandi’s observation, cannot be overemphasized. That said, given Achebe’s articulated mission to reclaim and resist, the temptation to perpetually receive him within those frameworks is always present. This, perhaps, is worsened by a suspicion that one’s departure from said mission might dilute the announced purpose of the text as ascribed by the author. For as we gather from his essays, such as “Colonialist Criticism” and “The Novelist as Teacher,” writing must resonate with socio-political contexts contemporaneous with the author’s experience, implying that reception must also

pay attention to context and authorial intention. Articulated mission aside, could it not be said that the postcolonial function of Achebe's work, as imposed by its (and the author's) embodiment of resistance, distracts from the purity and modalities of his texts as *texts* divorced from all anxieties of resistance and subversion?

Although critics such as Simon Gikandi and Emmanuel Ngara have examined questions of form and content in Achebe's novels, both elements are often overshadowed by historical and functional dialectics. The act of re-writing is not interrogated as a betrayal of influence but seen as a tool for subversion. While those critical angles serve the purpose for which they are adopted, they fail to emphasize the nature and experimental dimensions of re-writing itself. They undermine the dynamics of textuality itself, and its possible independence from context is downplayed in favor of history as context, against history as material for interrogating influence. When Edward Said argues that "texts" are "worldly," as they are (to some extent) "events," though "they appear to deny it," his language of assertion equally introduces us to the discursive elements of texts as constituting self-contained clues to their origins.¹¹ One could thus say that a reception/interpretational trajectory that thrives on pre-delineated writer-context agenda downplays the text as material metaphor for space, implicitly undermining the novel as a vehicular form that transports and points us towards the writer's influence. In Achebe's case, the novels reveal a hybrid embeddedness in global and local influences.

Against his articulated resistance of universalism, Achebe's global/local tendencies are visible in the joint appropriation of Western and indigenous tropes in the narration of local experiences. We must also highlight his offering of characters whose fates, although planted in Nigeria, are identical to those we encounter in novels written and set in post-colonial cultures across the world. The liminal space that Obi occupies, for instance, as he finds himself between a new idea of progress and the desire to return to tradition, is not peculiar to post-colonial Nigeria. Similarly, Okonkwo's crisis is a major study in the existential nature of the native's struggle to exert the self against forces of colonialism, be it in Africa, the Americas, or the Indian subcontinent.

As for Okonkwo's existential crisis, Achebe would disagree with us on the grounds that existentialism is foreign and

un-African, though it is clear that Okonkwo indeed undergoes a crisis that *is* existential in nature. He once dismissed Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as relying too much on European existentialism.¹² Ato Quayson would later respond that while Achebe claims existentialism "is inherently alien to the African condition," he also has "deployed this foreign metaphor."¹³ Embedded in Quayson's criticism of Achebe's stance is the idea that the author's framing of his or her work does not, irrespective of visible contextual delineations, limit the extent to which meaning and interpretational trajectories may be ascribed. Quayson's re-reading of Achebe's work echoes Barthes' call for a removal of the author from the texts once the work itself is complete. "Literature," as Barthes contends, "is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes."¹⁴

"Instead of thinking of a novel as being written by someone," says Gabriel Josipovici, "we must think of it as a *text*, something which exists in the world, which is governed by its own laws."¹⁵ Once declared neutral and removed from its authorial circumscription, the possibility of exploring other ways of interpreting text becomes a viable option outside author-context limitations. But this is where the critic must be careful, since the possibility of abandoning the author-context limitations—in Achebe's case—is challenged by the author's articulated mission that conveniently places him within that Foucauldian author-function dynamic, where all possible "discursive limits on, and conventions of, the author," ranging from "the social, historical, institutional," and political, are present.¹⁶ Consequently, attempting a pure Barthesian removal of authorial presence may be construed as a simplification of what Said refers to as "the realities that make the texts possible."¹⁷ While this project will not ahistorize the texts or disregard their centrality to the discussion of decolonization and postcolonialism, it will consider them for what they *are*—texts—and will also consider their interactions and influences drawn from other texts. In that regard, it is important to point out that Achebe's work, when conventionally read as postcolonial, still betrays questions of influence and intertextuality, two key trajectories that deserve attention outside the preoccupations and circumscriptions of postcolonial theory.

Intertextuality itself, as used here, goes beyond the textual and plot interactions between Achebe's novels and colonial texts; it encapsulates the systematic appropriation of Western motifs and local metaphors. By paying attention to those interactions, style and sensibility, as well as aesthetics, are privileged over theme and authorial intention. The broader goal is, therefore, to momentarily de-postcolonize Achebe's work by moving from that which it attempts to subvert to the act of subversion as symptomatic of style and aesthetic. By so doing, we gravitate towards the modalities of subversion as a functional element of stylistic proclivity. Achebe's texts are therefore approached as re-threadings of colonial texts, not merely as subversions of colonial narratives. In the process, we interrogate Achebe's constructed image of himself as completely rooted in the local. And as Quayson's criticism suggests, Achebe's anti-universalism is not necessarily reflected in his novel when read outside ascribed frameworks.

The constructed image of the author, in this case Achebe's assemblage of a framework that sets him up as postcolonial, is deconstructed here along the lines of influence and intertextual resonance. The realistic nature of Achebe's novels, as renditions of history and expressions of interiority, is thus considered an offshoot of European realism.¹⁸ His appropriation therefore becomes a transition into an established tradition, grafting his texts into a universal comity of realist texts. Realism itself, in Achebe's work, becomes a symptom of influence. This, however, does not suggest a dilution of his articulated mission but welcomes us to appreciate the act of appropriation as conscious, experimental, and functional. The consciousness of which we speak derives from the active and direct interaction with other (colonial) texts, since postcolonial texts were produced by writers who were aware of—and indeed studied—colonial texts and the preceding critical frameworks that birthed them. This conscious experimentation, by way of appropriation, implies an admission of influence.

Whether this admission is articulated or not is of no consequence. But since the writer's announced agenda is to present a new version of that which has been misrepresented, implying that the new version is more nuanced, we take it that the writer's effort is influenced by the existence of the old narrative. In Achebe's case, the new and nuanced narrative, perhaps better described as articulated authenticity, comes from a rootedness in the narrated

space, which is why he contends that “Cary could [not] have written a Nigerian novel” with the capacity to capture the very essence of Nigeria, since Cary “was the product of a tradition of presenting Africa” without emphasis on its cultural nuance and interiority.¹⁹ Interestingly, Achebe’s articulated authority—that derives from rootedness in local space—does not highlight rootedness in the *other* space, the colonial text, even when it is obvious that *Things Fall Apart* points to Cary’s *Aissa Saved* the same way that *No Longer At Ease* finds significance as a retelling of *Mister Johnson*.

Again, we must be clear about one thing: that this project is neither a rebuttal of the writer’s articulated mission nor an indictment of aforementioned representational authenticity. It rather is a celebration of the writer’s practice, or, to put it differently, an interrogation of influence via intertextual evidence, hence a trajectory that appreciates re-writing and intertextuality as literary experiments in their own rights.

Intertextuality as Influence

It is rare to encounter a critical text on Achebe’s work that does not reference his views on empire and the purpose of literature. And since his essays have become classics of postcolonial responses to colonial narratives, critics continue to read his work within the framework of his articulated mission. Past and present orbits of African literary criticism further solidified this allegiance to an articulated mission, where the author is positioned as articulator of a “new” literary vocabulary and, indeed, a literary philosopher.

Highlighting the role of the author, for instance, M.S.C Okolo argues that the “imaginative writer can thus perform the function of political philosopher,” whose role is “to disseminate ideas significant for the understanding of politics in a given socio-cultural context.”²⁰ Her argument comes from Achebe’s own sentiments on writers: “An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant.”²¹ In a similar argument, James Booth notes that unlike his or her European counterpart, who may chose to “reject political commitment in favor of ‘abstract morality’ or pure aesthetic,” the African writer is faced with a “political and ideological context” that is uncertain yet at the center of how he writes.²²

Booth places the African writer in the middle of the continent's political and socio-economic transitions and sees the writer as one who is aware of the need to "[return] imaginatively to the pre-colonial past," consciously freeing his or her ancestral space from all traces of "neo-colonialism" and non-African concepts and ideals, whose relevance to his situation is questionable."²³ Booth's position on the writer's aversion to so-called abstract ideologies echoes Achebe's articulated resistance to universal abstractions: "I should like to see the word *universal* banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world."²⁴ We can see a trend here: Achebe critics are unable to bypass the centrality of articulated circumscription. The question is not necessarily the prevalence of authorial agency but the explication of the author's work via self-articulated intention and historical burden. But at this point in Achebe scholarship, and in the study of African literature in general, it has become increasingly important to emphasize the appreciation of texts as structurally aligned with other texts and as self-contained outcomes of carefully considered processes.

Emmanuel Ngara has made substantial gestures towards a study of the stylistic elements of African fiction. While positing the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of form and stylistic proclivities, he also examines the "critical norms which can adequately handle the problem of the relationship between art and ideology," since the African novelist "is not only concerned with artistic forms but with ideological problems as well."²⁵ Here, again, we see the promise of a pondering on aesthetic crossed out by a reflection on the novel as receptacle for ideology. "Art is not ideology," Ngara insists, but as "one of the forms of social consciousness, it has a peculiar relationship with ideology. This relationship is not the same as the relationship between science and ideology," for "while science gives us a knowledge of reality, art makes us 'see,' 'perceive' and 'feel' reality."²⁶ But the driver of that process of *seeing*, *perceiving*, and *feeling* is a central ideology. The writer's duty, thus implied, is first to sieve experience through available—and palatable—ideological framing. Style and aesthetic are therefore in the service of said ideology. To Achebe's work, then, Ngara ascribes a two-strand nationalist flavor: the

dismantling of Eurocentric cultural hegemony and the policing of the new governing class.²⁷

In *Reading the African Novel*, Simon Gikandi warns of the danger of approaching African literature as though content and form are estranged elements of narrative. “I do not believe,” he begins, “that we can read the African novel meaningfully and effectively without bringing content and form into play as elements of literature which are equally significant,” as “these elements cannot be mutually exclusive.”²⁸ Whether focusing on content or form or both, Gikandi’s work highlights the writer’s duty as narrator of experience, interpreter of socio-political realities, and interface between the past and the present. He divides African literature into broad, author-centered categories based on narrative form as inspired by content (or vice versa): the parabolic narrative, the biographical narrative, the subjective narrative, and the political novel. Reading Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Gikandi focuses on the author’s interface with oral tradition and mythology, both of which provide an interiority that is absent in colonial narratives. Here, Gikandi gravitates towards an intertextual reading of Achebe’s work beyond its duty as a receptacle for ideology. Indeed, the representation of oral tradition in Achebe’s novels, the very act of translating, transmitting and re-inscribing it, is intertextual.

What Achebe achieves in his fiction, as Gikandi highlights, is the combined representation of power struggles and the very presence of an Igbo system of thought. Gikandi’s reading also hints at the idea of empire as an *ascriber* of texts on local spaces, and at the same time an *interactor* with local, oral equivalents (Igbo mythology, epistemological sense of being, and metaphorical notion of life). “On another level,” Gikandi notes, “colonialism peddles its own myths and fetishes in an attempt to win over new converts to its cause.” Hence “the battle. . . is fought in the symbolic and mythical universe.”²⁹ The broader significance of Gikandi’s reading is, therefore, on Achebe’s intertextual sensibilities, the pairing of biblical symbolism with those of Igbo culture, placing emphasis on influence at the textual levels in the process. And the main success of Gikandi’s reading of Achebe’s *Arrow of God* is the final revelation to the reader that Achebe deliberately appropriates local and Western symbols. The reader thus becomes

aware of colonialism's unfortunate grafting of the African writer into an alien system of knowledge.

Put differently, we are made aware of the African writer's systematic *writing from* and *writing into*. Achebe, for instance, *writes from* a place of cultural awareness (of historical misrepresentation) and at the same time *writes into* a local space with a view to constructing a new identity. He further *writes into* (and against) the canon by contesting its authenticity, especially its articulated modalities of representation. On the reverse side, he *writes from* an equal embodiment of European literary expressions via his education in colonial schools. There are more transactions going on in the process described here, which in themselves betray influence at various levels: horizontal, vertical, and diagonal.

Horizontal influences are contemporaneous, drawn from authors and texts within the same socio-cultural and political spectrum. These, in Achebe's case, would include fellow writers in Ghana, Nigeria and the emerging post-colonial world at the time, writers who share a common urgency to resist cultural hegemony.³⁰ The vertical is that which reveals itself in Achebe's awareness of non-African literary productions, especially those that are written about Africa. As his novels show, Achebe does *enter* the colonial writer's imagination, and once there he reworks to subvert the narrative. *Entering* and *re-writing* colonial narratives, this vertical level of influence, implies two things: first, it shows that the re-writer acknowledges a non-superficial knowledge/encounter with the target text, an encounter that is strong enough to inspire a new text that re-threads and re-ascribes that which has gone before. Informally speaking, and if the original text were a painting, we can imagine the postcolonial artist holding up the "original" piece and painting over it, coating the "original" until it fades in the light of the new. This, we must acknowledge, is a conscientious method that requires meticulous effort on the part of the writer, knowing that his or her undertaking must be substantial and significant enough to obscure and make obsolete the old. Achebe's prominence, as Gikandi acknowledges, results from his ability to accomplish this goal, to re-thread effectively until a new narrative holds up against and over the old.

Second, it implies an entry into a universal comity of texts, an *entry* burdened by transactional anxieties since the new text—the re-threaded material—must contest the old narrative and

negotiate space for authenticity. The result of this transaction is what we now know as “a balance of stories,” which suggests a transaction between two weighted ends.³¹ That “balance of stories” is often the subject of Achebe’s interviews, his articulated reason for writing, which now foreshadows the reading of his work.³²

The third level of influence, the diagonal, is drawn from the second. Here, the writer extrapolates the colonial writer’s own influence and whatever anthropological and sociological factors interfere with prevailing narrative proclivities and at the same time *enters* his or her own ancestral past, borrowing from local myths and folklores to narrate historical or contemporaneous experiences. In *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, the anthropological obsessions of Cary’s *Aissa Saved* are reworked along the lines of Cary’s own rootedness in realism and structuralist binaries. This is also the case when Achebe rewrites *Mister Johnson*, re-working its embedded binaries and limitations into *No Longer at Ease*. *Entering* and *re-writing* Cary, Achebe also draws from Igbo metaphors, idioms and proverbs to develop characters that are believable and rooted in local space.

These levels of influence, mixed into a whole that displaces colonial mis-narrations, are tangible indications of Achebe’s path to subversion. This further tells us that the process of rewriting, as implied above, is consciously experimental, hence an indication of the writer’s own awareness of the potential of texts as agents of change in perception.

Re-writing as Experimentation

The protagonist in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, like Cary’s Mister Johnson, is awkwardly sandwiched between the West and his local space. But in Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, this binary reduces the African to a brainless character without the capacity for independent thinking, which becomes all the more apparent as he is portrayed in contrast to his white bosses Blore and Rudbeck. Similarly, Bamu, who Johnson theatrically falls in love with, is contrasted with Rudbeck’s wife and consequently presented as lacking agency. Achebe carefully re-plots Cary’s work, replacing Johnson with Obi Okonkwo, who, although schooled in England, does not sheepishly ape the English. But it is not the subversion of Cary’s character assemblage that fascinates this project; instead, it

is Achebe's awareness of character and the meticulous process of erasure that ensues

Take the process of falling in love, for instance. For Mister Johnson, it is a savage process that is instinctual and theatrical. Having begun by describing Johnson "as black as a stove, almost a pure negro. . . half-grown. . . [with] a small body, as narrow as a skinned rabbit," Cary presents us with a young man who brashly stalks and coerces a girl to marry him.³³ I work as "a government clerk," Johnson announces, and lies about his "rich and powerful" social status.³⁴ If she marries him, she will be transformed from a village girl to an English lady, "loaded with bangles," allowed to "wear white women's dress, sit in a chair at table. . . and eat off a plate." In summary, he promises to "make her a great lady."³⁵

Beyond the anecdotal stupidities of his hastily pursued marriage and debt-ridden life, Johnson reveals nothing of himself to us. We do not hear him speaking or making any effort to converse in his native tongue. He would rather stumble through the English language, which, within the context of Cary's emplotment, distances him from cultural specificities. Cary therefore denies us access to Johnson's interior by placing him in a framework—linguistic and intellectual—outside that in which he belongs. We do not see this denial in Achebe's work, since his characters reveal a robust interior via "translated" conversations (from Igbo to English). Johnson, on the other hand, is a joke. On his way home after sighting Bamu for the first time, he "jumps over roots and holes like a ballet dancer," and can "imagine [Bamu] in a blouse and skirt, shoes and silk stockings, with a little felt hat full of feathers."³⁶ He is both smitten by the girl and the idea of civilizing her. Between both extremes lies his love for everything English, as made evident in his "poems" and "songs." On one occasion he sings: "England is my country. / Oh, England, my home all on de big water. . ."³⁷

We simply do not understand why Johnson is the way he is. If the narrator's goal is to present a "native" who has been reduced to a pariah through forced cultural encounters, that objective is rather defeated by an absence of context. Who, for instance, is Johnson before we see him on the first page? What are the nuances of his culture and language outside that which he now embraces as authentic and important? The narrator does not

bypass the caricature on the page but develops it into an entertaining monolith that amuses in a disturbing way.

At a closer look, we see the narrator's assertion of anthropological authority over Johnson and his cultural space. This begins at the opening of the story, where the narrator provides the reader a context of sorts: ". . . in Fada history all strangers have brought trouble; war, disease or bad magic. Johnson is not only a stranger by accent, but by colour. He is as black as a stove. . ." ³⁸ Having established this context and its congruent authority, the narrator expects us to believe his sweeping remarks about the people of Fada. When we are told that Tusaki is lazy and works "only as a negro can work, when [they] see the value and purpose of it," we must agree. ³⁹ We must also agree when Bamu is presented as morose, constantly listening without agency; and when she does attempt speech, it is to "utter a scream like a parrot." ⁴⁰

This anthropological voice, amplified by a third-person omniscient narrator, makes the text a messenger, a decoder—for Europe—of the African mind and cultural space. The language of conveyance consequently assumes itself of "benevolent" service to all sides involved, Africa and Europe. Describing huts in Fada, for instance, the narrator explains to Europe, "A *Zungo* is like a little fort. It consists of a quadrangle surrounded by a high mud wall." ⁴¹ Europe is further told, "Fada is the ordinary native town of the Western Sudan," and "has no beauty, convenience or health." To drive the image home, Europe is fed a familiar metaphor: "It is a dwelling-place at one stage from the rabbit warren or the badger burrow." ⁴² And this is a place where "young boys, full of curiosity and enterprise, grow quickly into old, anxious men, content with mere existence." ⁴³

Aware of Cary's anthropological assertions over space, Achebe carefully restructures *Mister Jonshon* with a keen eye for the corrupted spaces and absent channels to interiority. If we ignore subversion and emphasize the art of re-writing itself, what we see is a closely re-threaded material in *No Longer at Ease*. This begins with the choice of a third-person narrator that quickly enters into conversation with Cary's own third-person "authoritative" voice. We also note how Obi's story opens where Johnson's ends, at the hands of the law. Achebe starts from the end and works his way to the beginning, an approach that, in itself, is a metaphor for his narrator's journey into Obi's interior. This

journey is one that is self-aware. The Obi we first encounter knows his crime. Its weight on his emotion is visible, as betrayed by the “tears” he sheds.⁴⁴ Johnson, on the other hand, remains carefree with a sense of irony that the narrator fails to convey.

Achebe’s third-person voice is also anthropological in its mission. It dismembers the plot and character components of Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, showing a level of awareness beyond the intention to subvert. This does reveal to us a workman with an eye for that which must be reconstructed, “painted” over, and represented as a better version of the original. Indeed, the original, or the old, confronted by the new, is rendered inauthentic. But the effectiveness of this process is the workman’s experiment with key elements of plot, which then finds identifiable expression within the text. It is no coincidence, for instance, that Achebe’s protagonist is also a clerk in the colonial service. It is also not by chance that he, like Johnson, is smitten by a woman and makes all efforts to marry her.

That process of falling in love, however, is re-written, and the process itself used to navigate both lovers’ psychosocial, political, and cultural interiors. Theirs is not a brash encounter but a well-curated experience. We see them “at a dance organized by the London branch of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons,” where “Obi was immediately struck by her beauty.”⁴⁵ They dance, but she leaves before he has a chance to speak his mind. The next time they meet, “at the Harrington Dock in Liverpool,”⁴⁶ they are embarking on a journey back to Nigeria.⁴⁷ The Clara we see is sharply different from Bamu. Her agency is asserted, as she sophisticatedly takes charge of how and when Obi makes his move. This contextual positioning of both characters erases the image of their equivalents in Cary’s text. Clara is not an object to be haggled over, neither is Obi an illiterate whose sole “ambition is always to make a perfect S in one sweeping movement.”⁴⁸

Johnson’s pompous and devastating attempt at poetry, itself a front for his love for all things English, is contrasted with Obi’s knowledge of English poetry, having himself studied English in London. Indeed, Obi writes poetry but as a sentimental amateur. He recalls “a callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria” he wrote during “his first winter in England.” In this poem, he desires to “lie beneath a tree/ At eventime and share the ecstasy/Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies.”⁴⁹ It is, no doubt, as the narrator points

out, “a callow” poem. It however tells us that Obi is literate, even more so when we see him affectionately announcing the similarity between Clara and T.S Eliot: “To meet people you don’t want to meet, that’s pure T. S. Eliot.”⁵⁰

The invocation of Eliot must be interrogated seriously. At once it betrays the narrator’s vertical influence, announcing the writer’s access to the intellectual and cultural workings of the West. This in turn shows an attempt to graft the text into a tradition that is foreign yet universally resonant. The insertion of Eliot points us to the backbone of the re-writer’s broader project. Embedded in that insertion is the textual re-framing of plot, character, theme, and the narration of space. As noted earlier, the journey back to Nigeria holds a two-fold metaphorical duplicity, first as a journey to the interior of Clara and Obi, and then as a conveyance of the symbolism of the return itself.

This symbolism first appears in the prefatory quote at the beginning of the novel, an extract from Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi,” a poem that teems with symbols. “We returned to our place,” begins the quote, “these Kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods. / I shall be glad of another death.” From the re-writer’s standpoint, the new text—which displaces Cary’s—is a reclamation of voice and a doing away with “the old” narrative “dispensation.” Most significant, however, is Obi’s own return and subsequent unease with the cultural and political state of his homeland.

Aware of Johnson’s obsession with—and metaphorical journey towards—England, Achebe offers us a character who is returning home, physically, spiritually, and culturally. Obi’s desire to return can be traced back to an experience in his childhood, when he was humiliated for not knowing how to tell his “class a folk-story.” Against his Christian father’s wish, his mother would share a story with him, which he subsequently shares in school to escape another round of humiliation. He would, nonetheless, draw a lesson from that experience⁵¹ and would become aware of the inadequacies and limitations of Christianity. The Obi that returns from London has long replaced his Christian faith with a genuine interest in his own culture. That return is, perhaps most importantly, a spiritual phenomenon, signifying his rebirth as his grandfather (if we are to go by Ogbuefi Odogwu’s observations.)⁵²

The complex idea of “return,” as ambiguously set up by the narrator, is nestled between Christianity and Igbo mythology. Obi is presented as a fulfilment of scriptures, as Christ set forth to bring light. In this case, he is sent to the white man’s land to “enter,” demystify, and return with the light. This is hinted at when the Reverend Samuel Ikedi, praying during Obi’s going away “prayer meeting,” quotes from the prophet Isaiah:

The people which sat in darkness
Saw great light,
And to them which in the region
and shadow of death
To them did the light spring up.⁵³

The significance of Isaiah’s prophecy, its appropriation to buttress Obi’s return, is further accentuated when Obi runs a commentary on the meaning of “Ibo names” and then references Isaiah as “that prophet in the bible who called his son The Remnant Shall Return.”⁵⁴ The creation of Obi, a character who carries within him a localized interpretation of biblical return and a universalized idea of reincarnation, tells us that the writer himself is embedded in (and has taken ownership of) a distant culture he also seeks to resist. This is evident in the appropriation of Isaiah’s prophecy—Obi as he who will bring light.

This preoccupation with the idea of return, which finds expression in carefully constructed and symbolically astute textual references, is an extended play on the prefatory poem, Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi.” The poem itself is burdened by the idea of conversation, which Achebe puts to a different use in *No Longer at Ease*, where it symbolizes a return to ancestral ties with an underlying pessimism of Nigeria’s political future. Obi’s physical return—marked with jubilations, for which Obi could care less—is in itself analogous to the journey and celebration of Christ’s return/birth by the three wise men. An extended analysis would compare Obi’s betrayal by a fellow Igbo man to Christ’s own betrayal by his close disciple, Judas. Both characters, Christ and Obi, like Cary’s Johnson, would subsequently face the law in full, public view.

Aside from its biblical allusions, Obi’s return is significant for the way it recalls (and indeed highlights) his father’s departure/detachment from home/tradition. In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye

converts to Christianity and becomes Isaac, against Okonkwo's wish, and leaves home to never return.⁵⁵ Obi's decision to give up Christianity is therefore rendered significant for its juxtaposition with Isaac's departure, as well as its echo of his grandfather's attachment to the old ways.

These *enterings* and re-threadings of texts and histories are even more visible in *Things Fall Apart*, and how it *enters* and re-threads Cary's *Aissa Saved*. Achebe uses *Things Fall Apart* to highlight the flaws of Cary's *Aissa Saved*, and does this by employing the same authoritative voice and anthropological stance that Cary uses in his work. At the plot level, both novels are preoccupied with the incursion of Christianity in native spaces and the cultural turmoil that ensues. Unlike Cary, Achebe returns to the beginning, before the appearance of European Christians, and works his way into the future.

While *Aissa Saved* begins with an established European presence in Shibi, a small coastal town on the bank of the Niger River, *Things Fall Apart* begins in the heart of Umuofia, without the presence of a single European. This perhaps is to establish historical grounds, to *enter* the epistemological depths of the narrated space before presenting a contrast that shatters and displaces that epistemological depth. To further assert claim over space, the story is told in the third person, with the same anthropological authority that we see in Cary's *Aissa Saved*. Cary's anthropological authority, as in *Mister Johnson*, finds expression in conclusive assertions that summarize people and/or spaces. Describing the people of Kolu, for instance, Cary's narrator tells us "The Kolu are an intelligent, brave people";⁵⁶ implying that he knows them conclusively, inside and out. This is also the case when Oke, "the Kolu goddess of mountains and fertility" is described as fierce and responsible for "bad rains. . . bad harvest. . . and drought."⁵⁷ These statements tell the European reader that the narrator is sharing a depth of knowledge that comes from authentic encounters. Achebe employs the same voice in *Things Fall Apart*.

Speaking of the Ibo in *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator declares: "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are palm oil with which words are eaten."⁵⁸ Speaking further, we are told that, "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father."⁵⁹ These assertions are used to lend credibility to the socio-cultural

dimensions of the story, just as Cary does in his Nigeria novels. However, Achebe goes further, establishing broader authenticity by rendering a rounder, richer report on elements of culture. Take the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, for instance. It is Achebe's version of Cary's goddess of mountains and fertility mentioned in *Aissa Saved*. But in Achebe's text, the goddess is not mentioned in passing; instead, it is presented as a central element of culture that features in the spiritual and physical realities of Umuofia. The town "never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle."⁶⁰

This fierce goddess is also humanized, and its human (humane) aspects are used to introduce the multifaceted symbolism of deities in Ibo cosmology. First, the Oracle, Agbala, is named, hence humanized. Second, her abstraction as a goddess is rendered real by the very presence of Chielo, her physical priestess. We see Chielo chatting with Ekwefi at a wrestling match, enjoying the social event like the rest of the town. "In ordinary life," the narrator intervenes, "Chielo was a widow with two children," which tells us that her other life as a priestess does not exclude her from the vagaries of life in the flesh. We are further told that "She was friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market."⁶¹ These descriptions demystify the idea that builds up at the mention of the Oracle, thus offering a fuller journey into the heart of Umuofia's relationship with its powerful deity. In another instance, Chielo is completely transformed into her role as priestess, chanting into the night as she carries Ezinma into the caves. This duality, spirit and human as one, is absent in Cary's description of Oke, the Oracle of mountains and fertility in *Aissa Saved*.

Similarly, the characters and cultural spaces in *Aissa Saved* do not develop beyond a surface description of their existence. While Cary presents Aissa as a hysterical character who, although the entire story revolves around her, neither lets us into her interior nor shares her rootedness in culture with us, Achebe presents a version that counters this shallowness. We meet Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, who is also "possessed," not by Christianity but by her intrinsic nature as a spirit child. Unlike Aissa, she is not without roots; we meet her parents and siblings. In other words, she is not a strand outside history and community. Cary's description of characters, comparing them to either animals or objects and presenting them as childish and hysterical, is displaced by Achebe's

focus on characters who are rooted in culture, with the capacity to initiate dialogues that draw from their own systems of thought. Most significant is the direct re-threading of characters, as in the case of Ezinma's displacement of Aissa.

The creation of Okonkwo is also a direct response to Cary's Obasa in *Aissa Saved*, "the most respected and the richest man in" Kolu, who the villagers flock to when the conflict between town and church escalates out of control. Obasa is described as "tall. . . jet black, with a handsome and intelligent face," and his "expression was always sad, because it seemed to him. . . that his country was going to the dogs."⁶² That is all we know about Obasa. Although he is mentioned in passing, exiled to the margins of the novel, the short description we have been offered suggests his potential centrality. We briefly see him moderating talks between all sides, yet know nothing of his life, not even a page's worth of biographical detail. Achebe picks this shallow strand and re-threads it into Okonkwo, a hero whose life drives the plot of *Things Fall Apart*. We know Okonkwo's father and the troubled relationship between father and son. We watch Okonkwo's transformation from a struggling young man to a hero, all the time living with an inner fear of failure. Through Okonkwo's worldview we see conceptions and limitations of masculinity in Ibo culture. Where Cary bypasses the complexities of pre-colonial cultures, Achebe takes us there through Okonkwo's tragic journey towards death. By focusing on Okonkwo's life, as against multiple, confusing characters, Achebe weaves a story that universalizes the clash of cultures in Umuofia. The story becomes an opening into the emotions that arise from anxieties in the face of imminent threat to culture.

Beyond Okonkwo, there are more elements of Achebe's re-threadings that should be considered here. Take the church and its clash with local spaces, for instance. In *Aissa Saved*, we see an established church venturing out to expand its reach. It runs into troubles with the village and its members are threatened and assaulted. In *Things Fall Apart*, the church begins in Abame, where it takes root before moving to Umuofia and neighboring villages, where its presence becomes a major source of contention. The church in Cary's work recruits misfits like Ojo, who Cary's narrator describes as "a man uglier than a frog."⁶³ This is also the case in *Things Fall Apart* but carefully re-threaded to situate said misfits

in culturally articulated frameworks. They are not just misfits but “mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men.” And “in the language of the clan [an *efulefu*] was a man who sold his machete and wore the sheath to battle.” Looking at these men, Chielo “called [them] the excrement of the clan” that “the new faith. . . had come to eat up.”⁶⁴

These comparisons, drawn to show a careful attention to narrative, plot, and characterization, are aimed at redirecting attention to the intricacies of Achebe’s aesthetics and craftsmanship. His experimentation not only seeks to subvert, as we are wont to notice, but reveals an awareness of process, hence a testament to the re-writer’s journey through the source text and his keen interest in reconfiguring fragments of narrative. Put differently, re-written fragments, whether character or elements of plot, are as important as the prominent mission to subvert narrative. By ignoring the politics and complexities of postcolonialism—whether interrogated through form or content—the observations made here suggest a return to the text as a standalone discursive material in the study of Achebe’s contribution to African literature.

Conclusion

Evaluating African literature without recourse to history and politics is an ambitious undertaking. The tight relationship between writers and their sense of civil obligation is one that demands “a subtle form of literary evaluation,” with close attention to “socio-cultural and political dynamics” aligned to the production of the text.⁶⁵

As Quayson notes, “considering that particularly African writers and critics regularly give interviews defining their work as of a political nature, it is not possible to ignore completely the political dimensions of their representations of African life and society.”⁶⁶ Quayson’s concerns raise questions of interpretation and aesthetic limitations, and he wonders why “African aesthetic theories frequently aim to read literature and politics and political ideologies simultaneously.” He considers this approach “somewhat simplistic” in its reception of “literature. . . as an unmediated mirror of society, ideology and politics.”⁶⁷ To establish a middle ground that does not ahistoricize the text in an attempt to return to style and aesthetic, Quayson suggests an approach that explores

the “relationship to the past and to a putative *transitional* movement towards the future.”⁶⁸ The emphasis here is on the work and its transactional dimensions with indigenous culture and knowledge, contemporaneous literary productions, and anticipatory nature as a vehicle for progress.⁶⁹

The approach above implies awareness on the part of the writer, which expresses itself in visible traces of local and borrowed tropes, motifs, and narrative forms. This awareness also includes the writer’s place within a broad political narrative, one that demands textual response to dominant narratives that distort native spaces. One could say that Achebe’s novels are self-aware of their political and cultural importance, not because the author articulates that significance, but because we see how the text returns to reclaim space and agency. There are therefore two strands to the cultural and political importance of Achebe’s novels: its end and the means to that end.

As a discursive field, postcolonial studies emphasize the end result as articulated by the author or self-evident in the text. This framework is predicated on the notion that the “postcolonial is a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty” as well as “the realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination.”⁷⁰ Cultural productions emerging from this context, as Young notes, are marked by the revision of “the ethos and ideologies of the colonial state” while gravitating “towards the very different conditions of national autonomy.”⁷¹ Postcolonialism, as Young further contends, “is both contestatory and committed towards political ideals of transnational social justice,” as it “attacks the status quo of hegemonic. . . imperialism, and the history of colonialism.”⁷²

Achebe’s articulated reason for writing, and the very subjects he explores, are clear indications of the postcolonial. But that in itself is the end result and not the means to that end. The means is the method, which takes us back to the very workings of the text, the *how* of subversion as evident in the revisionary process. While the discursive elements of the texts, supported by a theorized field, remain relevant, a careful consideration of the texts outside these preoccupations is equally important. With the recent publication of Terri Ochiagha’s *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making*

of a *Literary Elite*,⁷³ which emphasizes a return to the network of textual and institutional influences on the writer's imagination, there is an indication of a more robust conversation that temporally distances itself from postcolonial preoccupations. This distancing does not assume a complete dismissal of postcolonial theory, but attempts at a complimentary balance that does not privilege theoretical context at the expense of the writer's method.

Notes

¹ John Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing back to the Canon* (London: Continuum, 2001), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ Chinua Achebe, *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 44.

⁴ Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing back to the Canon*, 19.

⁵ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

⁸ Text-Citizenship is here borrowed from the field of cultural diplomacy, drawing from Daniel Šíp's remark that "literature can work for cultural diplomacy as it can allow readers to imagine foreign countries or foreign cultures." That is, "characterizations of protagonists can invite us to empathize with people we would usually never meet or even fear, and even fictitious societies can potentially make us understand the workings of distant cultures." See Šíp, Daniel. "Literature and Cultural Diplomacy: An Essay on Cultural Readings." *CulturalDiplomacy.org* (2011). Accessed June 6, 2015.

⁹ See Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds. *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994). Also see Elleke Boehmer, "Imperial Textualities," *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 13–57.

¹⁰ Simon Gikandi, "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture," *Research in African Literatures* 32, no. 3 (2001): 3–8, accessed June 9, 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3820418>.

¹¹ Edward Said, *The Word, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4.

¹² "Ultimately," Achebe begins, speaking of Armah's work, "the novel fails to convince me. And this was because Armah insists that this story is happening in Ghana and not in some modern, existentialist no-man's land." See Chinua

Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 25.

¹³ Ato Quayson, "Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature: Achebe's *Arrow of God*," *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 2 (2011): 31 – 32, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafritelite.42.2.30>.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author* (UbuWeb Papers), http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf.

¹⁵ Gabriel Josipovici, "Text and Voice," in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, ed. E. S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁶ Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 5.

¹⁷ Said, *The Word, the Text, and the Critic*, 5.

¹⁸ See Ato Quayson's "Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It," *Research in African Literature* 25, no. 4 (1994): 117–136, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819871>.

¹⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004), 39.

²⁰ M. S. C. Okolo, *African Literature as Political Philosophy* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴ Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 9

²⁵ Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on African Writing* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985), vii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸ Simon Gikandi, *Reading the African Novel* (London: James Curry, 1987), ix.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁰ For a closer look at this type of influence, Ogede's work on literary influences across the African continent will be of great help. See Ode Ogede, *Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature: Looking Inward* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011).

³¹ See Chris Walsh, "A Balance of Stories or Pay-back: Chinua Achebe, Joyce Cary, and the Literature of Africa," *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. Ernest Emenyonu (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

³² See Bernth Lindfors, ed. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

³³ Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (New York: New Direction Books, 1989), 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

- ³⁷ Ibid., 36.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 11.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 83.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 86.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 84.
- ⁴² Ibid., 99.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 100.
- ⁴⁴ Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (London: William Heinemann, 1967), 2.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ The journey itself is significant at two levels: it metaphorically symbolizes the return and reclamation of home and also signifies the narrator's journey into—and through—the inside of both characters.
- ⁴⁸ Cary, *Mister Johnson*, 21.
- ⁴⁹ Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, 17.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 59.
- ⁵² Ibid., 53.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 8.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.
- ⁵⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: William Heinemann, 1973), 137–38.
- ⁵⁶ Joyce Cary, *Aissa Saved* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 30.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 31.
- ⁵⁸ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 4.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 42.
- ⁶² Cary, *Aissa Saved*, 84.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 16.
- ⁶⁴ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 128.
- ⁶⁵ Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 83.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 85.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 86.
- ⁷⁰ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 57.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² Ibid., 58.
- ⁷³ See Terri Ochiagha, *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: the Making of a Literary Elite* (Suffolk: James Curry, 2015).