

## Early Eurocentric Criticism of Achebe and Postcolonial Realities in Africa

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### ABSTRACT

Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* has attracted a glut of global opinions on the nature and character of the work. This is to be expected as any good work of literature will elicit much scholarly criticism. Thus, this paper looks at the early Eurocentric criticism of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. The study leans on bio-bibliographical approach to literary criticism. It tries to situate their conclusions within the realities of the postcolonial environment of most African societies and reaches the conclusion that features of culture clash and social dislocation which these critics misinterpreted, glossed over and out rightly dismissed have become the albatross of virtually all post-colonial African states.

**Key words:** Eurocentric, Criticism, Achebe, Postcolonial

### INTRODUCTION

The creative consciousness of African artists urges them to assert the humanity of the African. Accordingly, African values are positively affirmed and idealized in their literary works. Slavish imitation of the Euro-American literary mode is discouraged while conscious effort is made to develop creative styles and idioms rooted in the African experience. Ironically, ill-informed critics, particularly the Western-oriented pundits, have tended to ignore these realities, preferring to judge African literary works with criteria based on Euro-American tradition.

Black literatures in European languages are generally seen as intellectual colonies of Europe. The languages represent values and sensibilities that the colonized peoples should aspire to acquire. Languages as having validity only in so far as they embody qualities recognized as artistic in Europe. Elements that appear strange to the critics are given negative evaluation, and the entire work may be misunderstood or out rightly condemned, depending on the extent of the critic's prejudice. This attitude smacks of parochialism, punditry, insensitivity and dogmatism. It assumes the existence of an absolute artistic standard. Accordingly, an African literary work is judged good or bad, depending on the degree to which it approximates European literature. The result has been the misinterpretation and misconception of the writers' circumstances and thematic intentions. A vivid example of this brand of criticism is seen in the early reactions to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has since its publication attracted a growing band of opinions on the nature and character of the work. This is to be expected as

any good work of literature will elicit much scholarly criticism. Besides, productive criticism like productive scholarship is never static. It evolves and grows through continued research and investigation. This is particularly true of the above novel. The present study therefore, is an attempt to review the critical reactions to the work with a view to situate it within the framework of contemporary realities that post-colonial Africa faces.

As Cindy Anene Ezeugwu avers "in Achebe's urban novels, the society is basically represented as a rural society, rapidly being urbanized under the influence and pressure of colonial culture" (p. 323). *Things Fall Apart* is a model of the first phase of the African novel. It asserts, in reaction to colonial experience, that Africa has a culture of which she can be proud of. Thus, although the author builds up a formidable personality for the hero, Okonkwo, he subordinates the latter's individualism to the ultimate moral thesis of the novel, namely, cultural assertion. Achebe himself admits it in unmistakable terms;

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. (p. 9)

Further illustration of this fact is seen in Okonkwo's suicide. That the latter is the only escape from the consequences of his actions emphasizes the irreconcilable character of his cultural dilemma and the uncompromising nature of his opposition to the European contamination of that culture. Regrettably, many Euro-American readers appear not to appreciate this aspect of the novel. The attitude of the white District Commissioner in the book would seem

to be the author's caricature of such biased critics. For the commissioner, the tragedy of Okonkwo is simply 'the story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself' (p. 187). Such a simplistic conclusion obviously betrays a misunderstanding of what traditions means to a man like Okonkwo. Thus, the European as a critic is more interested in the hero's individualism than in the cultural dilemma that influenced his actions. Having thus misplaced the priorities, the would-be critic naturally plays down the seriousness of the issues involved in the tragic conflict. It is little wonder therefore, that the early criticism of *Things all apart* was largely impressionistic. For instance, Milton Byam referred to the work as "a tale rounded in folklore rather than a novel" (1959, p. 860), whereas Davis Hussoldt saw it as "Ibo Moeurs" which "do not deserve the serious treatment Achebe gives" (1959, p. 18). For Phoebe Adams, *Things Fall Apart* is a portrayal of "witchcraft, superstition, savagery as well as the more acceptable facets of heathen existence" (1959, p. 203). Diana Speed called it "a piece of history" (1959, p. 5). Following the same impressionistic trend, Ronald Christ, accused the novel of being "longer on native customs and idioms and short on narrative interest" (1967, p. 22). Those who had something positive to say about the moral of the work twisted their views in favour of the colonial position. Thus, Okonkwo's struggle against the desecration of custom and tradition was seen by Robert Serumaga as the "conversion of tribal ethic into individual neurosis" (1969), concluding that in refusing to accept the new order Achebe's hero dies a coward. In a similar reaction, Donald J. Weinstock (1970) saw Ikemefuna as a Christ-like figure ushering in a more humane order. It is interesting to match this observation with yet another vision of Okonkwo by Omolara Leslie (1971). Okonkwo, for this critic, is "a destructive element who needed to fall as he actually did". Here, the hero's so-called "neurosis and ultimate self-immolation" are also emphasized as to create the desired impression, namely that abusive and all that he represents must give way so that the new order may survive. In this sense, his fall is seen as liberation of the Igbo world from the grip of the old order. The latter is portrayed as a milieu characterized by "violence" and "dehumanization". Accordingly, Charles Larson interprets Nwoye's conversion from this milieu as an indictment, a rejection of the past and a vote for the future (1971, p. 60). We see in this interpretation, a classic representation of the stereotype, colonial view-point which chooses to see only one side of the coin, and musters all sorts of argument in support of it, even when such position lacks objective logic. For example, the irony implied in the title of the District Commissioner, which Achebe aims at the colonial officers, is twisted by Larson and applied to Okonkwo's career in particular and the African resistance in general. He argues that:

History is facts not individuals and the history of the coming of the Whiteman to Africa is not the story of the pacification of individuals but of entire tribes of people and even beyond that... the new dispensation is desirable and the old is unsatisfactory. (Larson 1971, p. 60)

It is clear from the above quotation that the critic either understood Achebe's witty irony in its literal sense, or

deliberately twisted it in support of the colonial viewpoint. Whichever is the case, the result is the same, namely, subjective and impressionistic judgement. The climax of this brand of criticism is reached in Molly Mahood's application of his so-called "rational argument to Ezeulu's religious impulses. For Mahood, Ezeulu reverts to "idols of the den" to "unreason" (1977, p. 33).

What these critics have in common, apart from their subjective dogmatism, is the tendency to hide under a peculiarity of Achebe's writing, namely, its susceptibility to various interpretations, all claiming authority and legitimacy from the author's expressed opinions in various interviews. But we know, after a careful study of these views that Achebe carefully refuses to make final critical judgments. Consequently, his statements, like the proverbs in the novel itself, are open to interpretations, depending on scholarly persuasion or ideological orientations. In this sense, Achebe is more astute and more mature than most volatile artists who come out to pronounce subjective judgements. It is a pity that this major classic, written to help his people regain confidence in themselves and belief in a noble past, has been interpreted by dubious scholarship to vindicate the passage of an inadequate, if not altogether, a dark heritage.

Reacting to this state of affairs, Widdowson affirmed:

The ultimate purpose of literary criticism is to interpret and evaluate literary writings as work of art... The primary concern of the critic is to explicate the individual message of the writer in terms which make its significance clear to others. His task is to decipher a message encoded in an unfamiliar way to express its meaning in familiar and communal terms and thereby to provide the private message with a public relevance. (1975, p. 5)

If this definition of literary criticism is anything to go by, and there is no doubt that it is, then the early critical reception of *Things Fall Apart* by the Eurocentric critics is more of parochial "cavilism" than serious criticism. Accordingly African writers and critics such as Achebe himself, Abiola Irele, Emmanuel Obiechina, Ayi Kwei Armah and Okpaku, to mention just a few, have spared no effort in exposing the ridiculous assumptions of this form of criticism. Okpaku, for example, is particularly vehement in his denunciation of it. He declares:

The present practice of judging African literature by Western standards is not only invalid; it is also potentially dangerous to the development of African arts. It presupposes that there is one absolute artistic standard. Consequently, good African literature is taken to be that which most approximates to Western literature. (Okpaku 1969, p. 139)

Chinweizu dismisses as "spurious" the imperialist hegemonic bias of Western-oriented criticism, and adds:

To insist on judging African literature by European criteria, or by criteria allegedly universal which turn out to be European, is indeed to define African literature as an appendage of European literature and to deny its separateness and autonomy. (1980, p. 10)

Following such sustained attack on biased criticism, there has been an appreciable shift towards some measure of

objectivity. The growth of the impact of *Things Fall Apart* on the global literary scene and the diversity of opinions expressed on it has necessitated a reappraisal and redefinition of critical criteria as applied to it. Thus, since these early impressionistic views, the novel has undergone a more positive scrutiny along the lines traced by David Cook (1968, p. 67), and G. D. Killam (1969), Brenth Lindfors, Donatus Nwoga and Emmanuel Obiechina. Taking advantage of previous studies on Achebe, Cook has become more flexible. For example, he is now able to appreciate and highlight the formidable and enduring strength that Okonkwo represents. In a reassessment of the novel he declares:

I do not myself believe that *Things fall apart* is concerned neither to pass judgment on social systems nor to assert dogmatically that one is better or worse than another. What it does is to demonstrate that every society depends on a fairly rigid set of conventions which can only be lived as a whole and can therefore only be evaluated as a whole ideally from the inside. (1968, p. 67)

While studies by Arthur Ravenscre and G. D. Killam sawed to those positive elements only fragmentarily, Bruce King presents them more vividly. In a brief analysis of the novel, he highlights the author's skillful handling of plot, structure, point of view and style, and demonstrates how these elements are cleverly transmitted into the Nigerian, Iybo texture (1972, p. 3).

Ibo idioms translated into English are used freely. European character study is subordinated to the portrayal of communal life; European economy of form is replaced by an aesthetic appropriate to the rhythm of traditional tribal life. (p. 3)

This technique continues and enables the author to highlight Iybo cultural traits and the impact of European intrusion on the traditional society, a society that is efficiently organized and traditionally cultured, a community in which there are leaders rather than rulers and cohesion is achieved by rules rather than by laws. Here tradition and custom have created politeness, correctness, mutual respect and simple dignity. That was the society which the European colonial intruders did not quite understand and sought to change. Is it any wonder then that its collapse under the pressure of militant alien culture fill the objective observer with a deep sense of tragedy! One such observer is Ayi Kwei Armah. He attacks Charles Larson's failure to appreciate the true spirits of *Things Fall Apart*, describing his (Larson's) criticism of the novel as pure "larsony" (1976, p. 4). In an article titled *Larsony of Fiction as Criticism of Fiction* he analyses how Larson subconsciously but unsuccessfully uses documents to support an impressionistic interpretation of the work. We see in Larson's criticism the fate of an African writer in the hands of the ill-informed, Eurocentric critic. Larson would probably not have made the unfortunate comment, if he were well-informed on Achebe's socio-cultural circumstances and thematic intention.

#### PESPECTIVES ON COLONIAL REALITIES IN ACEBE

In investigating post-colonial realities there may be need to highlight the background of the novelist biographically.

Briefly put, this approach looks at a literary work in relation to a careful study of the author's overall personality and global environment, or what Taine has described as the writer's "Race", "Environment" and "Time" (1863, p. 17). It examines all variations of given literary data as influenced by these three factors. Literature thus becomes the expression of society, a document awaiting the judgement of not only the literary pundit but also that of the scholar, the philosopher, the historian and the social anthropologist etc. This approach is necessary, if the complex realities behind an author's creation are to be fully and objectively appreciated.

An author's intellectual personality consist in the thoughts he has, the way he expresses them and how he interprets them in action. This personality is nurtured by experiences from the surrounding world which offers to each person a challenge and elicits from each a response or a reaction. Thus, Achebe became a creative artist after going through various vicissitudes in life. These come from the external world, from others who had lived or were living with him in that world, and from thoughts which they had or actions to which these thoughts led them. To get a balanced insight into the novelist's work, therefore, it does not suffice to rely on ready-made theories of criticism developed in the Western world.

We need to examine not only the structure of what the writer has written but also the forces producing this structure, the influences determining the movement of thought in his particular milieu, the coherent way in which his predecessors and contemporaries organized these ideas and, finally, the organization which he himself has been able to create out of these heterogeneous influences. We cannot therefore equitably judge *Things Fall Apart* unless we study it in relation to the author's biography, that is, unless we possess enough bio-bibliographical data to understand and appreciate the novel.

A thorough and objective evaluation of a work of art in relation to artistic and cultural cannons that give it content is the basis of any serious criticism. If this basis is lacking, the effort of the critic results only in mere cavalism, in an impressionistic and subjective appraisal, the type of which Achebe himself lamented when he declared:...We are getting a little weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited (1962, p. 75). This means that the serious critic of the African novel must fortify himself with those data that throw more light on the author's intellectual and cultural background, disclose his relationship with his milieu and permit a clearer understanding of his work. Thus, by sifting Achebe's works and ideas, and correlating them to the main trend of this historical and socio-cultural character of his society, it becomes possible to discover the driving energy of his thought and to judge his writings objectively.

Since different socio-cultural concepts govern the rise of the novel in Europe and Africa, critical approaches should reflect these differences. There is thus, a pressing need for a radical redefinition of the criteria for assessing black creativity. We are not suggesting that African novelists should be pampered by critics, nor do we imply that their works should

be insulated from factors that have shaped modern literature in other parts of the world. Indeed, Achebe has rightly observed that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being irrelevant (1969, p. 8).

All we are advocating is that these factors should not be artificially imposed as criteria for judging African literature even before they actually become operative in the African situation. What is the sense in sticking slavishly to dogmatically establish Western conventions, if these hinder effective communication, the latter is Achebe's goal and any so-called "Literary purist" expecting him to sacrifice it to artificial conventions would do well to heed Lan Watt's stern warning on the subject:

Since the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity of human experience, attention to pre-established former conventions can only endanger his success. What is often felt as the formlessness of the novel as compared say with tragedy or the Ode, probably follows from this: the poverty of the novel's formal conventions would be seen to be the price it must pay for its realism. (1963, p. 13)

If the above affirmation is valid, and we believe it is, then the criticism of Achebe, based mainly on aesthetic consideration, is not only reckless but also an injustice to his genius. This is not to say however, that ideological literature should be devoid of artistic beauty, indeed we wholeheartedly agree with R.G. Hamilton that "literature at the service of a cause has to give aesthetic depth to meaning" (1974, p. 112).

Achebe satisfies this requirement in *Things Fall Apart* because as an art form, the novel obeys certain rules, but as a recreation of the human situation, some of the conventions such as the mode of discourse are influenced by the author's ideological conditioning. Language as a cultural mode is a value-laden mode, and as a vehicle for communicating and understanding the world, it is ideological because it is the product of a civilization. Thus, although Achebe's use of language in *Things Fall Apart* is 'cautiously domesticated', this use exhibits the personal brilliance of a literary artist. It is conditioned by his cultural, historical and ideological origin and may not be fully appreciated without reference to that origin. Some part of the psychic constitution of an author find expression in what he writes. We cannot appreciate the work unless we can understand those psychic traits. We may never be able to trace them back to their ultimate sources probably buried deep in the author's childhood. But we need to gain as much light on them as we can since they appear in the work we are trying to apprehend, and determine its character. This is what the bio-bibliographical approach to literary criticism has always sought to do.

The rationale for this stance is obvious, since the cosmic environment is a realm where man exist within a social order structured by morality, the writer as a man must adapt to conditions designated as good or evil; must live within a developing self. He must give a priority to some and relative priority to another. But in submitting to this weight of tradition, the momentum of present activities, he naturally submits to those influences which in his opinion have interpreted life in

his own terms, whether these influences are part of his own generation or otherwise. This is precisely what Achebe, as a committed African writer has done in his work. Immersing his own existence, in the stream of history, he associates himself with the values which seem important to him. By implication, he uses what they have created, the works they have produced, the organizations they have formed, the tendencies they have initiated and the goals they have set. So, for Achebe, what literary creation is consists of what Africans have been and what they have thought, said and done, plus the way he himself utilizes their heritage.

## CONCLUSION

The realities of postcolonial situation in Africa are encapsulated in the contemporary phenomena of globalization and liberalism. These postcolonial features are the purveyors of culture and information which most of the continent is fed and create the template from which Africa is viewed. Using the medium of the media and internet, the West has advanced the same biased view on Africa similar to those propagated by Eurocentric criticism of Achebe. There is very little difference in the condescending way that the Western media and intelligentsia look at African achievements and human resources from the tendencies they exhibited over their reception of Achebe's first novel.

Scholars such as Chimamanda Adichie, in *The Dangers of a Single Story*, (2009) best encapsulates this proclivity which as we have tried to show has its origins in the relationship between the colonial masters and the indigenous people. Even though there has been a great deal of effort at integrating African world view and culture into the global village, the overbearing influence of neo liberalism has continued to play a pervasive role in sub Saharan Africa similar to those that Achebe saw and wrote against in this early work.

We can conclude by highlighting the fact that the globalization, multiculturalism, and multimedia although laudable in the contemporary world, have become a veritable tool in the hands of the West. They have exploited these media to create and orchestrate images and stereotypes of an Africa which border on the same warped conclusions which Chinua Achebe wrote against in the middle of the twentieth century. These images are often cast in the mold of a war ravaged, hunger stricken, politically unstable and vile territory that still needs the intervention of the benevolent so called "humanitarian organizations created by the West. As Victor Oguejiofor Omeje posits:

It has become a normal way of thinking, to the extent that the continent is often seen as one single country or entity, devoid of diversity and progress. (p. 377)

There is very little attempt to highlight the genuine cases of human effort and advancement in Africa. The few occasions such is done there is always a refrain, a reminder that it is still a place of much indignity.

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