Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 272

Volume 272

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Chinua Achebe
1930-

(Full name Albert Chinualumogu Achebe) Nigerian novelist, essayist, poet, short story writer, and children's writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Achebe's career through 2008. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 26, 51, 75, 127, and 152.

INTRODUCTION

Achebe, considered the father of the African novel in English, is one of the most significant writers to emerge from contemporary Africa. His literary vision has profoundly influenced the form and content of modern African literature. In his novels, he has chronicled the colonization of Nigeria by Great Britain and the political turmoil following its independence. These novels represent some of the first works written in English to articulate an intimate and authentic account of African culture and mores—especially his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which critics have proclaimed a classic of modern African fiction. A major theme of Achebe's writings is the social and psychological impact of European imperialism on indigenous African societies, particularly with respect to a distinctly African consciousness in the twentieth century. Critics have praised Achebe's works for their insightful renditions of African history as well as balanced examinations of contemporary African politics and society. Scholars have also admired Achebe's innovative fusion of Igbo folklore, proverbs, and idiomatic expressions with Western political ideologies and Christian doctrines.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Ogidi, Nigeria, Achebe attended Church Mission Society School, where his Igbo (or Ibo) parents were catechists. He continued his education at Government College in Umuahia, which is considered one of the best secondary schools in West Africa. In 1948 he enrolled in the first class at the newly established University College in Ibadan, run by the University of London. As an English literature student, Achebe often contributed stories, essays, and sketches to the *University Herald.* These works eventually were collected in *Girls at War* (1972). Within a year after his graduation in 1953, Achebe began a twelve-year career as a producer for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company (NBC) in Lagos, Nigeria's capital. During these years, Achebe also began researching and writing his most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart,* which was published two years prior to Nigerian autonomy in 1960. He followed his literary debut with three other novels—*No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966). By 1966, however, Nigeria's political climate worsened, deteriorating into a thirty-month civil war. Achebe quit his position at NBC and moved to the eastern region of Nigeria, which briefly seceded to become the independent state of Biafra. While there, Achebe devoted all of his time to Biafran affairs and the writing of poetry, short stories, and essays. His most notable work during this time was his book of poetry *Beware, Soul Brother* (1971).

After the war ended in 1970, Achebe accepted a series of visiting professorships in the United States, where he founded and edited the respected African literary journal *Okike* and published *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), a collection of literary and political essays written between 1962 and 1973. In 1976 Achebe returned to Nigeria where he began teaching at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. By the early 1980s, he was actively involved in Nigerian politics, serving first as the deputy national president of the People's Redemption Party and later as president of the town union in his hometown. At the same time, he also issued a polemical commentary on Nigerian leadership, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). In 1987 Achebe published *Anthills of the Savannah,* his first novel after a twenty-one-year sabbatical from writing long fiction and the work that won Achebe a nomination for the prestigious Booker Prize. In 1990 Achebe nearly died from injuries sustained in an auto accident on a Nigerian highway under suspicious circumstances. Achebe spent six months recuperating in England following the accident, then moved to the United States where he continues to write and teach.

MAJOR WORKS

A realistic and anthropologically informative portrait of traditional Igbo society distinguishes *Things Fall Apart,* which takes its title from a line in Irish poet W.

B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming." Set in the village of Umuofia during the initial stages of colonization in the late 1880s, the narrative traces the conflict between Igbo and Western customs through the characterization of Okonkwo, a proud village leader whose refusal to adapt to the encroaching European influences leads him to murder and suicide. *No Longer at Ease* follows Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the protagonist of Achebe's first novel, throughout his failure to successfully combine his traditional Igbo upbringing with his British education and affluent lifestyle in Lagos during the late 1950s. Describing Igbo village life during the 1920s, *Arrow of God* centers on Ezeulu, a spiritual leader, whose son Oduche attends a missionary school to learn about Western society and technology. When Oduche comes home, he nearly kills a sacred python, which precipitates a chain of events culminating in Ezeulu's loss of his position as high priest and his detention by British authorities. Highlighting the widespread graft and abuse of power by Nigerian leaders following its independence from Great Britain, *A Man of the People* focuses on the tribulations of a Nigerian teacher who joins a political group working to remove a corrupt bureaucrat from office. The poems of *Beware, Soul Brother* (later republished as *Christmas in Biafra* [1973]) reflect on the human tragedy of the Nigerian civil war in plain language and stark imagery. Similarly, some of the stories in *Girls at War* revolve around aspects of imminent war. Most of the stories deal with the conflict between traditional religious values and modern, secular mores, displaying the full range of Achebe's talents for humor, irony, and political satire. Divided into two parts, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* addresses a number of literary and political themes, with special emphasis on the traditional and contemporary roles of art and the writer in African society.

Set in the fictional West African country of Kangan, *Anthills of the Savannah* is about three childhood friends who hold influential governmental posts. When one of them fails in his bid for election as president for life, he works to suppress his opposition. After successfully conspiring to murder one friend, he meets a violent death during a military coup, while the third friend dies in a street riot. Generally considered Achebe's most accomplished work, *Anthills of the Savannah* illustrates the often dire consequences for society when individual responsibility and power are recklessly exploited. While retaining the use of Igbo proverbs and legends to enhance his themes, Achebe also pays more attention to the development and role of the women characters in this novel. In the book, Achebe gives women strength and composure as the agents of traditional morals and precepts. *Hopes and Impediments* (1988) gathers new and previously published essays and speeches, including a controversial essay attacking British novelist Joseph Conrad as racist. The book also includes a tribute to American novelist James Baldwin, along with several commentaries on post-colonial African society that highlight cultural forces influencing its modern-day character. *Home and Exile* (2000) is an autobiographical work based on three lectures Achebe gave at Harvard University in 1998. In the volume Achebe recounts the birth of native African literature in parallel to his own life and career.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Many critics regard Achebe as the finest Nigerian novelist of the twentieth century, with his writings often serving as the standard for judging other African literary works. Achebe's literary criticism and sociological essays also have won praise. As one of the most discussed African writers of his generation, Achebe has inspired a substantial body of criticism and scholarship about his writing and political stances. Achebe's inventive usage of Igbo proverbs and folklore in his novels is the most studied feature of his art. Scholars have primarily concentrated on the significance of proverbs in Achebe's construction of vernacular speech patterns and social conventions, as well as a way to distinguish identities of his fictional characters. Additionally, scholars have focused on how the proverbs provide thematic control to Achebe's narrative structures. Critics note, however, that Achebe's writings have relevance beyond the borders of Nigeria and beyond the anthropological, sociological, and political concerns of post-colonial Africa. Achebe's literature also deals with the universal qualities of human nature. As Achebe has said, "My politics is concerned with universal communication across racial and cultural boundaries as a means of fostering respect for all people. . . . As long as one people sit on another and are deaf to their cry, so long will understanding and peace elude all of us." Recent criticism of Achebe's writings takes a sweeping perspective, assessing his works with over fifty years of hindsight. Achebe's fiction is increasingly upheld as educational for younger authors. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, for example, reads *A Man of the People* as an ideal tutorial for aspiring African novelists. Modern scholars are particularly interested in examining Achebe in comparison to other iconic authors such as Wole Soyinka. Kole Omotoso gives book-length consideration to the two fellow Nigerian authors in *Achebe or Soyinka? A Study in Contrasts.* Critics also remain awed by Achebe's impact on his native Nigeria. Clement A. Okafor, for example, declares that Achebe "has valorized the culture of his people, which was

deliberately inferiorized by the colonial system. By so doing, Achebe has raised the self-esteem of his people and has empowered their psyche."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Things Fall Apart (novel) 1958
No Longer at Ease (novel) 1960
The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories (short stories) 1962
Arrow of God (novel) 1964
Chike and the River (juvenilia) 1966
A Man of the People (novel) 1966
Beware, Soul Brother, and Other Poems (poetry) 1971; republished as *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, 1973
Girls at War and Other Stories (short stories) 1972
How the Leopard Got His Claws [with John Iroaganachi] (juvenilia) 1972
Morning Yet on Creation Day (essays) 1975
The Drum: A Children's Story (juvenilia) 1977
Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967) [co-editor with Dubem Okafor] (poetry) 1978
The Flute: A Children's Story (juvenilia) 1979
The Trouble with Nigeria (essays) 1983
African Short Stories [co-editor with C. L. Innes] (short stories) 1985
Anthills of the Savannah (novel) 1987
Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays (essays) 1988
The Voter (novel) 1994
Another Africa (poetry and essays) 1997
Home and Exile (essays) 2000
Collected Poems (poetry) 2004

CRITICISM

Annie Gagiano (essay date 2000)

SOURCE: Gagiano, Annie. "Chinua Achebe." In *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*, pp. 59-122. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

[*In the following essay, Gagiano defends the argument that Achebe's work is more revolutionary than is generally believed.*]

A deep-seated need to alter things

Chinua Achebe, ***Morning***

For an author who writes with so much compassionate irony, so well known for his judicious sense of historical balance, one who has himself labeled his famous first work a "sceptical" novel (***Morning*** 4), Achebe's proclamation of a "need to alter things," an ethos of artistic *activism*, even of revolutionary fervor, may seem an unlikely claim. I suggest, however, that a study of Achebe's depiction of power forms and transformational energies must begin by touching on the way(s) in which his texts are themselves attempts to (re)balance international power relations through these texts' own kinetic transformation of contemporary readers' visions of the world—and of the place of Africans in that world. The proclamation occurs in a passage from the 1974 essay **"Colonialist Criticism"** (***Morning*** 3-18; reprinted in ***Hopes*** 68-90), in which the usually urbane Achebe explains that "earnestness *is* appropriate to [his] situation," because that situation has been shaped by "the role and identity fashioned for [him]" by "earnest agents of colonialism" whose attitude of "resolve" he consequently needs to adopt himself, in the inevitable dialectic of this position (***Morning*** 14).[1]

If the "resolve" of colonialism's agents and their heirs, "Colonialist [Critics]," was fueled by "big-brother arrogance" and by the "narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe" (***Morning*** 3, 9), the writer's "resolve" is fired, I suggest, by a profoundly moral indignation and a quest for restitution. He tells us that he feels called upon to write "because of the myths created by the white man to dehumanise the Negro in the course of the last four hundred years," with whites "talking" but not "listening" to black people (***Hopes*** 23, 24). His is the commitment of a champion of the dignity of African people generally and of Igbo society in particular, though his methods are to employ the subtlest and most complex forms of verbal artistry.

Achebe's move to refute "appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson*)" (***Morning*** 70)[2] first necessitated a personal shift from this initially highly "Westernized" writer. He had been "named," as he said in a later essay, "for Victoria, Queen of England" (Albert was the name of Victoria's consort) (***Hopes*** 30-39). Consequently, "Albert" became "Chinua" Achebe and embarked upon "an act of atonement" for his past, "the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son."[3] For the story that had to be told, he found, "could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned" (***Morning*** 70). The statement is well known. The point to be made in this context is that Achebe is undoubt-

edly one of the first and one of the most effective of postcolonial critics.[4] Achebe's anger and his restitutional purpose are much more explicitly stated in his essays[5] and in interviews, but should be recognized as the fueling source of even the apparently most detachedly ironic or satirical passages or works by this author. His deeply held loyalties are the perpetual context of his writing.

To address the spheres of existence that Achebe problematizes—in the very act of re-creating them fictionally—I have throughout drawn principally on his texts themselves. I have consulted Igbo writers and commentators such as Ogbaa, Nwabara, Emenyonu, Egudu, and Uchendu along with Wren (*Achebe's World*), but they are not foregrounded in this text.

The issue of Achebe's defense of his choice of English as his major medium of writing, a question so much debated by African writers as well as critics and commentators on African writing, arises naturally at this point. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the best-known critic of African writers' attempts at achieving cultural restitution in the colonizers' languages—which Ngugi sees not only as an irony but as a political betrayal: the essay collections *Homecoming, Writers in Politics,* and *Decolonising the Mind* exemplify these ideas. The issue is for many people a fraught and complex problem. Abiola Irele in the chapter "African Literature and the Language Problem" (from his *African Experience in Literature and Ideology*) explains the agonies and the difficult choices of the African-language situation in a particularly eloquent way.[6] Achebe's own defense of his choice of English is primarily pragmatic: English is a "given" (***Morning*** 62),[7] the Nigerian, African, and virtually global lingua franca; if the African writer's "message" is to be heard (61), English is its most useful instrument: a powerful tool, essential in the task of transforming the conception and consequent "position" of Africa. Achebe's Igbo loyalties can hardly be questioned, or his commitment to Nigeria and to the African continent. He himself refers to "a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language" (61).

Although the influential Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) does not discuss writing from Africa in his essays, some of his comments prove remarkably applicable to the language choices—which can themselves be seen as strategies or power negotiations—of Achebe and other Europhone African writers. Bakhtin speaks of the writers' use of "languages . . . [which] struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 292). Achebe's English, one might say in application of the point, always invokes an Igbo or a generally Nigerian or an African "origin"; he is the encompassing artist that he has shown himself to be partly by showing us, in English,[8] the competing languages of many people—natives versus colonists; proletarians versus government officials; rural versus urban lifestyles; ancient versus modern (Bakhtin speaks of languages "intersect[ing] with each other"—291). In doing so Achebe empowers his people's voices to be heard in English, without homogenizing them.

"Consciousness," writes Bakhtin, "finds itself inevitably . . . *having to choose a language* . . . , orient-[ing] itself amidst heteroglossia" (295). A writer's language choice is, hence, recognizable as a strategy: Achebe's use of English is no mere obeisance toward British culture, but a seizing of the "microphone" of this European language to send an African message and to tell an African story. Somewhat cryptically, Bakhtin indicates that no language is uncontaminated and no story the first—a point that helps one grasp Achebe's powerful *redirection* of the English tongue and the novel form to correct earlier "versions" of Africa. The Bakhtin passage reads: "In the novel, the 'already bespoke quality' . . . of the world is woven together with the 'already uttered quality' . . . of language, into the unitary event of the world's heteroglot becoming, in both social consciousness and language" (331).

An Achebe, had he lived in a unilingual world, Bakhtin would suggest (had he known any African writers), might not have written; the eloquent Igbo world of which Achebe writes so vividly would have remained shut into itself until a new language was brought from outside, "destroy[ing] the homogenizing power of myth over language" (Bakhtin 60). To see the multiplicity of historical disasters brought by colonialism as *also* providing new opportunities is by no means foreign to the Achebean vision. As he implicitly tells us, he is not himself an Okonkwo figure: "If you refuse to accept changes, then . . . you are swept aside" (quoted in Duerden and Pieterse 14). The destruction referred to, Bakhtin adds, created "[a] distance . . . between language and reality that was to prove an indispensable condition for authentically realistic forms of discourse," and "the creating artist began to look at language from the outside, with another's eyes, from the point of view of a potentially different language and style" (60). Although Achebe's "return path" via *falsifying* depictions of Africa inverts the Bakhtinian sequence, the notion of the fruitfulness of "disturbance" of an original language and world-view remains applicable. Especially appropriate to Achebe's use of English seems this final Bakhtinian quotation: "After all, it is possible to objectivize one's own particular language, its internal form, the peculiarities of its world view, its specific linguistic habitus, only in the light of another language belonging to someone

else, which is almost as much 'one's own' as one's native language" (62).

Another theorist whose remarks contribute to an understanding of political strategy in the language choice of a writer like Achebe is Trinh T. Minh-ha, who expresses the recognition that there is a "relation," yet also a world of difference, "between [saying, in English] *we,* the natives, and *they* the natives"—between a "voluntary" and an "enforced designation" (Minh-ha, *Woman,* 48, emphases added). Calling for intercultural mingling (in somewhat convoluted prose), Wilson Harris can be seen as making a related point in his work *The Womb of Space.* He emphasizes "the need to begin to transform claustrophobic ritual by cross-cultural imaginations that bear upon the future through mutations of the monolithic character of conquistadorial legacies of civilisation" (Harris, Introduction, xv).

Africans have to mount the international stage, need to participate in the global cultural exchange if they are not to continue to be largely ignored, silenced, and exploited—a continent of victims. Achebe is undoubtedly the African artist who has most successfully—hence, to date, most influentially—entered the international marketplace without ever pandering to European prejudices in the way that he sees a writer like V. S. Naipaul doing.[9] By writing his superbly crafted African novels in English, Achebe might indeed be taken as being a champion practitioner of the strategy of "sly civility" outlined by Bhabha as an anticolonial strategy (Bhabha, "Sly Civility," 72).

Achebe is nevertheless no African chauvinist. No bucolic never-never Igboland or brave new Nigeria emerges from his pages, since he recognizes both the duty *and* the superior strategy of giving Africans their share of the blame for disasters that have happened and are occurring on the continent. As he has phrased it, "We do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name . . . the very worst our acceptance—for whatever reason—of racial inferiority. . . . What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us" (***Morning*** 44).

This single factor of his accuracy and balance as historian of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa (thoroughly complex and difficult as its *presentation* may be) is what has earned for Achebe's writings their central position in African literature and their innumerable readers. One might at this point, then, invoke the term "realism" in its fullest resonance—for Achebe's work is known not merely for its slice-of-life vividness, its human recognizability, but also for its complex, questioning depiction of past and present aspects of the African condition.

According to the influential, visionary Caribbean author Wilson Harris, realism is, however, an inherently suspect mode; politically compromising or undermining for the would-be postcolonial author; incapable of serving a liberatory purpose.[10] Of course it is a notoriously slippery term, but Achebe has been often enough "accused" of realism[11] for the issue to demand comment in this introduction to a discussion of his works. In refutation of the suggestion that "realism" is necessarily "in league with" politically reactionary attitudes, I would suggest that Achebean realism masks subtle symbolism and carefully complex evaluation of the actual. In showing "real" worlds, Achebe never merely records or passively endorses what happened, but conveys a deeply, politically committed vision. He allows no evasions, however, since his approach to power realities and possibilities of change is investigative and diagnostic. In his refusal to manufacture a "pristine" Africa for romantic Western consumption, Achebe might be thought of as having heeded the following warning from Fanon: "In the universities the rare colonised intellectuals find their own cultural system being revealed to them. . . . The concepts of purity, naïveté, innocence appear. The native intellectual's vigilance must here be doubly on the alert" (*African Revolution* 48-49). Yet no other African author has, as effectively as Achebe, fulfilled the following injunction by Fanon:

> It is not only necessary to fight for the liberty of your people. You must also teach that people once again, and first learn once again yourself, what is the full stature of a man; and this you must do for as long as the fight lasts. You must go back into history, that history of men damned by other men; and you must bring about and render possible the meeting of your people and other men.
>
> (*Wretched* 236-237)

Against this multifaceted background, this necessarily brief *and* general introduction to Achebe's work can conclude by linking and contrasting his authorial stance with Shelley's famous rebuttal of Plato's denigration of artists; Shelley saw poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world, powers "behind the scenes," so to speak. On at least one occasion (in Texas, at the end of 1969) Achebe abandoned his more characteristic low-keyed authorial stance and, upon being asked whether African writer's have any influence in determining Africa's future, answered that "the writer's role is more in determining than in merely reporting . . . to act rather than to react" (quoted in Lindfors et al., *Palaver,* 11). It is time, he says boldly, to stop "pleading with some people and telling them we are also human . . . let us map out . . . what kind of society we want, how we are going to get there [and] what values we can take from the past, if we can, as we move along" (quoted, *Palaver*

12). In that emphasis on transformative energy Achebe makes clear that he sees "art . . . [working] in the service of man" (***Morning*** 19) and that his novels, far from being nostalgic or plaintive, are intended to strike blows in the struggle for a better future.

Things Fall Apart and *No Longer at Ease*

to locate a people in the world

Chinua Achebe, *Classic*

The purpose of "locat[ion]" (of a people) may be considered in a dual sense as indicating *the staking of a claim* ("here we are"—which is tantamount to demanding recognition)[12] and as *the contextualization of a people*—historically as well as in relation to the international political and economic system. To "locate a people in the world" hence requires a careful reading of power relationships and also consideration of the energies of change at work in these interrelationships. Because this location process is "redefinitional" rather than a matter of taking up a place reserved for oneself and one's people, it requires "commitment" (quoted in Lindfors, *Palaver,* 7) and courage and involves daring—risking a challenge to vested interests and settled habits of seeing (Africa). Achebe's foregrounding of urgent social and political questions in his own work and that of other writers from the continent is an aspect about which he is entirely unapologetic. Achebe writes that "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant" (***Morning*** 78).

The popular image of Achebe, probably because of the overwhelming fame achieved by ***Things Fall Apart,*** is that of a writer concerned mainly with the African "tribal" past, and he is praised for writing of it in an anthropologically reliable and vivid way. Important as his concern with the precolonial past is, it is necessary to recognize that his work of "location" does not stop there and that the "long view" (Duerden and Pieterse 17) that he so values reaches both back into history and forward into the future. He is not and never was a merely nostalgic writer, which is why this section on location issues considers both the early Igbo world of ***Things Fall Apart*** and the more nearly contemporary urban and cosmopolitan sphere of his second novel, ***No Longer at Ease.*** Indeed, Achebe himself has said that his "original conception of the story was really a combination of [these two novels]. It was one story originally" (quoted in Duerden and Pieterse 16). The purpose in looking back, moreover, for Achebe is not to lament what is lost, but to equip oneself and one's people with understanding in order to cope with the exigencies of the present—and the future.

In a 1986 essay (**"What Has Literature Got to Do with It?"—*Hopes,*** 154-170), Achebe refers approvingly to the example of Japan as a society whose "spectacular" success in technological advances ("modernization") occurred or was facilitated (in a "gigantic paradox") because the society "was also systematically recovering lost ground in its traditional mode of cultural expression . . . to regain a threatened past and selfhood" (***Hopes*** 160).[13] In other words, the cultural dignity and self-knowledge that literature of the Achebean mode can help people to (re)discover[14] are an essential empowerment affecting the whole practical world of economic survival and international political hierarchies. Put more simply, any route to a nation's future must first reencounter the past (cf. Achebe's comments in Killam, *African Writers,* 8-9).

Level-headedness and fair-mindedness—stances appropriate to a depiction of the national crises of colonisation and decolonisation investigated in these two novels—are everywhere in evidence in Achebe's texts. "We have had grovelling, we have had protest, now we must have something in between . . . so that's how I wrote it" is how Achebe puts it (quoted in Duerden and Pieterse 15).

The basic enquiry underlying ***Things Fall Apart*** can be seen as a number of sequential questions: What was precolonial Igbo society like? How and why did it fall to the onslaught of the European incursion? What kind of power(s) did it have, and why were its members incapable of withstanding the force of the new, the strange, and the "Western" ways? What was the nature of colonial power? Of course both issues of power (contests) and forms of transformative energy are involved here, and one does not find a simple conquest-victim scenario in Achebe's investigative "reenactment" of the colonial encounter in Africa.

In a 1967 interview Achebe stated this point, implicit in the novels, quite explicitly, saying, "I am not one of those who would say that Africa has gained nothing at all during the colonial period. . . . We gained a lot. But unfortunately when two cultures meet, . . . some of the worst elements of the old are retained and some of the worst of the new are added on to them" (quoted in Duerden and Pieterse 13).

He refers to the "unhappy . . . way things have turned out," yet recognizes that as a perhaps "necessary stage" (quoted in Duerden and Pieterse 13). Such philosophical detachment from the situation is of course highly unlike the sense of passionate involvement (or even anguish) conveyed by the novels. Like the sense of profound cultural loss ***Things Fall Apart*** conveys (in its title and in the entire texture of its writing), ***No Longer at Ease*** powerfully conveys the malaise of a dislocation process. This process is not primarily

ascribed (as in the Eliot poem)[15] to the religious and ethical shift of the protagonist and society, but to the need for and trauma of belated modernization exposing inherent weaknesses in the indigenous ethos—and in the socialization of its best and brightest young people.

In ***No Longer at Ease*** questions investigated by the novelist include the following: What is decolonization? Why has political independence failed? What *is* independence? What new and which ancient webs of power enmesh the emerging society? Is it possible for modernization to be other than a mere dislocation or a new form of victimization of an African society? What is required for modernization to work to the advantage of an emerging nation? The issues are large and (sadly) as topical at present as they were almost forty years ago, when the novel was written (and set). In this second novel, forces of the past and of the future neither integrate successfully nor clash decisively (to produce a "victor"), but remain in an uneasy stasis, betraying the promise of a "new people" and the hope of successful modern statehood.

Things Fall Apart

The nine-village cluster of "about ten thousand men" (***Things Fall Apart*** 8) (that is, households, many of these accommodating at least two wives and numerous children) that ***Things Fall Apart***[16] depicts is a secure clan society considered "powerful in war and in magic" and "feared by all its neighbours" (8). The hierarchies of powers and authorities that characterize its existence are contextualized by the recognition that habitability is a condition that had to be won from untamed nature. The statement "the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (3) presents this process metaphysically; reference to "the axe and the bush-fire" (42) does so more practically. The complex web of awe and law that orders this segment of Igbo civilization is headed by "Ani, the earth goddess and source of all fertility" (26), "the owner of all land" (13), "the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (26). The female nature of this most potent presence points forward to the belief that "Nneka"—"Mother-is-Supreme" (96) in this otherwise so blatantly masculinist society.

Ani supersedes Agbala—the "Oracle of the Hills and Caves" (12),[17] a god whose male nature is offset both by the fact that his name (when used as a common noun) is the word for "woman"[18] and by the fact that he "speaks through" his priestess Chielo, Ekwefi's widowed friend (35).

It is the Oracle (through the priestess) who pronounces on major power issues such as the validity of a military venture[19] and who reliably assesses human endeavor in terms of an ethos of labor and effort (12-13). This makes Chielo's the most powerful influence in the clan, although her power is intermittent and neither a personal nor a political "position" ("there was no humanity here. It was not the same Chielo who sat with her in the market"—76, cf. 71). Indeed, it is "the shrine of [the] great god," "this ring of hills" that "double[s the priestess's voice] in strength" (77) and makes her a source of "terror" (74) capable of commandeering a child at night from its parents' household (71-72). Chielo's is also the voice of the Oracle that decrees Ikemefuna's death (40). Something of the combination of harshness and humane decency that characterizes Igbo society is hence already evident in an examination of its theological dimensions.

Walter Benjamin's observation that every document in civilization is a document in barbarism is well known.[20] Achebe's depiction of this settled, precolonial African society recognizes its staggered benefits as well as the human cost of its establishment borne by some of its members. Both the civilized and the "barbaric" aspects of the early Igbo community are acknowledged—paralleling Achebe's balancing vision of both cruel and humane aspects to the Christian incursion that comes later. This balance cuts through the racist assumption that "barbarism" is the essential power form of "pre-Christian" Africa and "civilisation" the essential power form of the colonizing cultures.

Far from merely celebrating the masculine ascendancy that characterizes his Igbo society, Achebe analyzes this marked feature with great scrupulosity, exposing (through Okonkwo's "exaggerated" masculinism) its ironies and weaknesses as well as outlining its strengths and achievements. We are shown that the social force of the male leaders of the society is tempered by being (so to speak) theologically filtered: decisions of public assemblies are led by the Oracle's pronouncements through his priestess, and those who provide spiritual leadership and administer justice are the *egwugu*: not leading males in *propria personae,* but in their roles as "embodiments" impersonating "the departed fathers of the clan"—with whom the earth goddess Ani is "in close communion" (26). Their presence is "awesome," "powerful," and "terrifying" (64). The high court of the clan (when the *egwugu* are "in session") is a "communal ceremon[y]" (63), but it is said that "the ceremony was for men,"[21] with women placed "on . . . the fringe like outsiders" (63). These nine *egwugu,* known as the "fathers of the clan" (65), represent "the nine sons of the first father of the clan"—a theological family group as male as the Christian trinity.[22] Yet in the only case we see the *egwugu* judging, they roundly rebuke an abusive husband: "It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (67).[23]