

Achebe, Conrad, and the Postcolonial Strain

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Abstract: In his article "Achebe, Conrad, and the Postcolonial Strain" Eric Sipyinyu Njeng presents an analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in a context of postcolonial thought and argues that while Achebe's text is often placed against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a counter discourse - - thus interrogating Conrad's portraiture of Africans as savages -- Achebe's text in fact represents anti-Africanism and subservience to Occidental values. Examining Achebe's authorial intention in *Things Fall Apart*, especially as epitomised in the character of Okwoko, the protagonist, Njeng argues that Achebe corroborates Conrad's portrait of the African. In writing *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe falls under the "postcolonial writer's strain" resisting and at the same time seduced by Occidental ideology. In his novel, Achebe tries to veil his desire for the Occident by presenting Okwoko initially as a prominent character only to fulfil this desire in the course of the narrative by decentring the protagonist. Achebe's characterisation is centrifugal, that is, he constructs the events of the story to unfold such that Okwoko is systematically removed from the centre. This decentring of the protagonist diminishes him as well as the African values he is supposed to represent. This centrifugal aesthetics of constructing events resulting in the protagonist removed from the centre, satisfied Achebe's intention of supplanting African values with Western values. Removing the protagonist from the centre of events creates space for the antagonist to take root, supplanting African religion and culture with Western ideology and hegemony. Njeng postulates that *Things Fall Apart* appeals to Occidental audiences because Achebe concedes them the place they have always thrived for and thus the novel continues to reverberate in Western discourse.

Eric Sipyinyu Njeng

Achebe, Conrad, and the Postcolonial Strain

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is often placed against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a counter discourse, interrogating the view that pre-colonial Africans were savages. Achebe himself confesses that his intention in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to situate it as a counter discourse. In his essay "Named For Victoria, Queen of England," he fosters this view when he clearly states: "Although I did not set out consciously in that solemn way I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, a ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" (193). In another essay "An Image of Africa," Achebe takes issue with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, accusing Conrad of being a "bloody racist" (328). Other critics, however, take a distance from Achebe's scathing attacks. Wilson Harris in "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands" sympathises with Achebe's foreboding about Conrad's racist imagery, but insists that Conrad's creative thrust must have necessitated a dissection of the imperial agenda in those terms." Nevertheless, it was stroke of genius on his part to visualize an original necessity for distortions in the stases of appearance that seem sacred and that cultures take for granted as models of timeless dignity" (335). Achebe misses Conrad's distance as an artist true to art. Corroborating Wilson, Harry Sewlall in "'Masquerading Philanthropy': Conrad's Image of Africa in 'An outpost of Progress,'" interpellates Achebe's concern that Conrad denies Africans a voice. In "An Outpost of Progress," a short story that predates *Heart of Darkness*, Sewlall argues, "the African is presented as one who is not only given a voice but who demands an identity, and that of a white man to boot" (7). Makola, the African colonial agent in the story is not only multilingual but capable of manipulating white superiors and getting the upper hand. What is suggested by Harris and Sewlall is the fact that Achebe's attack on Conrad has to be reconsidered.

In this paper, I am not corroborating Harris's and Sewlall's postulates; rather, I examine Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to see to what extent it stands as a counter discourse to *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe's novel at its best, especially as epitomized in its protagonist Okwonkwo, simply disparages African values. Achebe falls subconsciously under the postcolonial writer's strain as someone who at once admires and resists Occidental influences. In his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," he unfolds this ambivalence in regard to colonialist ideology when he states: "but still the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man must perish there wrestling with multiple headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision" (191). In writing *Things Fall Apart* Achebe found himself astride crossroads and was lucky to return to his people "with the boon of prophetic vision" (191). I argue that the vision in *Things Fall Apart* does not depart from Conrad's; rather there are striking parallels. In his novel, Achebe veils his desire of embracing the Occidental influence in the portraiture of Okwonkwo, only to fulfil it later. Many instances in the novel portray Okwonkwo (who is supposed by many critics to be representative of African values) as a mechanical personality -- a mere robot who lacks the ability of reflection, intuition, and adaptability. Like Conrad, Achebe denies him the power of speech (language): "He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists" (3). His spirituality is also brought to question as expressed in his mechanical aggressiveness which leads him to commit acts of abomination that result in his exile and eventual suicide; acts that reduce him and all that he represents to nought. How can such a character be meant to represent the pre-colonial African? Yet, *Things Fall Apart* has received universal acclaim as an African classic, even when Achebe himself considers *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* as superior narratives.

Things Fall Apart appeals to Occidental audiences, I submit, because Achebe concedes them the place they have always thrived for. The novel portrays dramatically the fact that anyone who resists Western ideology is bound to face annihilation. Although Achebe himself believes that *Things Fall Apart* is inferior to his later works, Western scholars/critics continue to place *Things Fall Apart* above his other works. In an interview with Lewis Nkosi, Achebe states: "No *Longer at Ease* is better techni-

cally, but that's as far as I go" (*African Writers Talking* 4). *Things Fall Apart* fulfils the Occidental wish of the extinction of less sophisticated cultures. Okwonkwo's poor characterisation is revealed in his lack of insight and flexibility both within his own society as well as against colonialist intrusion. Achebe, from every indication never meant Okwonkwo to be an admirable character. He commits misdemeanours that are rather mean for a man of valour -- beats his wife during the week of peace, shoots at his wife at the least provocation, and insults the less accomplished. George Lamming in "The Occasion for Speaking" in defining the ambivalence of the West-Indian writer, makes an extension to other post-colonial writers when he states: "when the exile is a man of colonial orientation, and his chosen residence is the country which colonised his own history, then there are certain complications. For each exile has not only got to prove his worth to the other, he has to win the approval of Headquarters" (13). Being Achebe's first novel, it appears he set out to win the approval of the Occident.

Achebe's biographical inclination is evident in the novel. As a son of a convert, his sympathy and even possible pride, pushed him to make the "weak" to survive, while the "strong" perish. Achebe subconsciously defends his own father by pretending to kill Unoka (Okwonkwo's father) only to resurrect him in the guise of Nwoye. Achebe's experience as a child of a convert, considered as an outcast and a traitor, might have pushed him to write in defence of his father and of his own experience. In his essay "The Novelist as Teacher," he talks about the privileged position he experienced as a child of a convert. Unlike the children of the heathen who had to use locally made clay pots to fetch water, Achebe as the child of a Christian had access to modern materials. Speaking about this in a tone that is hardly without a touch of pride, he reports: "Christians and the well-to-do (and they were usually the same people) displayed their tins and other metal-ware. We never carried water pots to the stream. I had a small cylindrical biscuit-tin suitable for my years" (3). Achebe's Christian allegiance was very strong when he published *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 and continues to be even stronger today. This suggested, for example, in his "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" when he asserts: "And in fairness we should add that there was more than naked opportunism in the defection of many to the new religion" (65). This Western influence evident in Achebe, pushed him to decentre Okwonkwo in order to create space for Christianity.

The act of sacrifice Okwonkwo helps to perform on Ikemefuna is made to look like an act of murder. Ikemefuna is ordained to die by the Oracle of the Hills and the Cave as a ritual act, but Achebe renders it to look like an act of ruthless infanticide. Okwonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna is no less brutal than the celebrated act of killing of son by father in Abraham and Isaac. The offering of a son as sacrifice is not something new in literature. That Isaac is not killed by Abraham does not change the brutality of the idea. Yet, Achebe paints a picture of the act in such a way that the reader should miss the communal necessity of the act and, rather, condemns Okwonkwo. Why is it right for a father to slay his own son only in some instances and not in Okwonkwo's? Søren Kierkegaard questions this ambivalence between murder and sacrifice when he states: "The ethical expression of what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac" (22). That Nwoye is christened Isaac in *No Longer at Ease* is a sign *a posteriori* that the communal expression of Ikemefuna's sacrifice is negated to debase African religion in the novel. That Okwonkwo's obedience to the demands of the Oracle is reduced to murder is a sign that the author meant to reduce his stature and thus the collective feeling as expressed in all acts of communal sacrifice is withdrawn by the author. Maud Bodkin captures this communal exultation when she states: "then our exultation in the death of Hamlet is related in direct line of descent to the religious exultation felt by the primitive group that made sacrifice of the divine king or sacred animal, the representative of the tribal life, and, by the communion of its shed blood, felt that life strengthened and renewed" (21). Achebe denies in his text this collective bonding and in so doing denies the right to sacrifice Ikemefuna; consequent to this is the nullification of African religion. Rather than having the community strengthened and renewed because of the sacrifice, Okwonkwo is plagued with feelings of guilt and remorse: "His mind went back to Ikemefuna and he shivered" (46). This is further exacerbated when his closest friend,

Obierika, chastises him for the act: "If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (47). From then henceforth, all Okwonkwo's actions lead to his annihilation. That Okwonkwo's obedience to the oracle is portrayed by Achebe to be an act of murder, not an act of sacrifice, and this confirms my view that Achebe wished subconsciously to minimize the strength of African religion in order to supplant it with Christianity. To complete this reduction, Achebe makes him commit an act of manslaughter that must remove him from the centre to the margin. This centrifugal characterisation creates space for the authorial intention to take root, that is, to supplant African culture with Western culture. This is a point which G.D Killam fails to notice when he compares Unoka and Okwonkwo and then states: "His capacity to day dream... and his character is made to stand in direct contrast to Okwonkwo's and to enhance his central position in the book" (17). Okwonkwo hardly maintains a central position in the novel as Killam argues. His portraiture in the novel is that of a systematic reduction. Curiously, Achebe himself is misled in thinking that his novel is really a counter discourse. *Things Fall Apart* is hardly a sceptical novel; rather, it ascribes the colonialist the role of liberator and civilizer.

This reduction is also evident in the dialectical opposition between Okwonkwo and his father Unoka. Although Unoka is presented as a misfit in his society, he endures the historical changes and is reincarnated in his grandson, Nwoye. Nwoye is Unoka's carbon copy and inherits his grandfather's tendency to resist all forms of manual labour. Unoka is the seed that gives birth to the plant that flourishes today in independent African states. He prophesies the collapse of Okwonkwo in the novel when he sympathises with him during the drought: "do not despair. I know you'll not despair. You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone" (18). Given that these words are spoken by an ailing Unoka, they assume great potency. Okwonkwo is going to despair in the course of the novel because he fails alone. No doubt that the author emphasises the word "alone." It also bespeaks the fact that Unoka does not despair as he lay dying; his death is a result of collective failure. Unoka dies from an illness that is not understood; no rationale is given as to the cause of his illness. Unoka's underlying centrality in the novel make us wonder if Okwonkwo is the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. Okwonkwo's eminence as a protagonist does not have the effect that a central character should engender. O.R. Dathorne in *African Literature in the Twentieth Century*, exercises this doubt when he sees Okwonkwo as incapable of affecting the course of events in the story and being rather individualistic. As he argues, Okwonkwo "lacks the subtleties that one could wish from a character witnessing and participating in the psychological processes of change" (68). Okwonkwo is a rather flat character that adamantly refuses to adjust to the higher dictates of historical change. As Dathorne continues, "Because he has no dimensions other than his purely physical ambitions ... he is incapable of standing up to the centrality which the novel imposes on him" (68). The weak characterisation Achebe gives him, ironically portraying his stark resemblance to Unoka, creates room for the real events of change to take root. His intransigence leads him to commit offences which culminate in his banishment. This act is ironic because he is punished by a female deity, contradicting his perception of women as inferior beings. His downfall begins when he transgresses custom and beats a woman. He shoots at his wife and misses and this foreshadows the manslaughter that banishes him. Unoka who is considered a woman in his society because he took no title endures because the course of the story uplifts him from the oblivion in which he had fallen. Okwonkwo commits suicide, a taboo, and has to be buried by strangers. As such descending even lower than his father, Unoka is carried to die in the evil forest. Nwoye, Unoka's reincarnation, is lucky to meet the kind of occupation his grandfather lacked. Notice that Nwoye is also considered womanish by Okwonkwo; the fact that he becomes a convert and a catechist in *No Longer at Ease*, underscores this association with women in the novel. Curiously, the main currents of the novel are propelled by matriarchy rather than surface patriarchy. Born with the artistic temper of his grandfather, the boy resists physical strain and this puts him at

loggerheads with his father. What draws him to the Christians is the poetry he perceives in their preachments and songs: "it was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow" (106).

Achebe continues this reduction in other acts that Okwonkwo is forced to commit. If Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* makes the African look like a savage, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* corroborates it. If an act of sacrifice is presented to look as an act of savagery rather than a communal ritual; if Okwonkwo's suicide (considered in some cultures an act of courage) is perceived as an act of abomination in his society; then Achebe conceives of him as an enigma, somebody to be done away with. Suffice to say that Okwonkwo is aware that his punishment for killing the white man's messenger is death; whether he takes his life or allows the white man to parade him in dishonour before hanging him in public. Paradoxically, Okwonkwo's suicide is one of the greatest acts of valour he performs as an exceptional soldier ready to lay his life for his people. When he kills the white man's messenger, he is aware that it is a declaration of war. When it dawns on him that his people are incapable of mobilizing behind him, he prefers to take his life. Emile Durkheim's notion of "altruistic suicide" can be applied where: "where the individual's life is rigorously governed by custom and habit, suicide is what he calls altruistic; that is, it results in the individual taking his own life because of higher commandments, either those of religious sacrifice or unthinking political allegiance" (15). Okwonkwo chooses to take his life rather than live to see the traditions of his land desecrated. He dies therefore for something that is above the self. Yet, Achebe reduces his suicide to an act of cowardice. That Africans lacked respect for acts of self-denial and self-mortification is a pointer to a cultural weakness. Society in *Things Fall Apart* would deny to honour a member who takes his life as an act of honour to embrace an alien culture that worships a suicide -- Christianity: "All the neophytes who without killing themselves, voluntarily allowed their own slaughter, are really suicides. Though they do not kill themselves, they sought death with all their power and behaved so as to make it inevitable. To be suicide, the act from which death must necessarily result only have been performed by the victim with full knowledge of the facts" (Durkheim 227). Achebe reduces Okwonkwo thus unfairly in order to satisfy his religious bent. Both the killing of Ikemefuna and Okwonkwo's suicide, acts which are rendered such as to reduce him, are Biblically supported. Africans reject their own symbolic acts of ritual to embrace an alien mythology that carefully disguises the very acts Africans reject. This is exacerbated when Achebe permits the District Officer to make a caricature of the incident: "Every day brought him new material. The story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him" (149). Achebe's tendency to de-centre Okwonkwo mirrors his psychic state and his desire to supplant African values with Occidental values.

In his later works Achebe is more tactful in veiling this postcolonial strain. In *Arrow of God*, a novel I consider Achebe's best, Ezeulu suffers a similar fate but is presented with such technical complexity that gives the novel enormous power. The capacity to resist and appropriate is common to the wise. Ezeulu is not blind to the power of the intruder, yet he is careful in his collaboration with them. While resisting their influence, he makes an attempt to understand their source of power by sending his son to learn their secrets; an act of espionage. "I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something, you will bring my share" (46). Okwonkwo is denied this capacity of reflection and adaptability. However, all the great qualities that are attributed to Okwonkwo in the opening chapters are reduced to nought in the course of the novel. His stature as a great soldier is questioned when we see him using his muscular superiority over the weak. He shows no respect for the rules of war. Before committing suicide, he murders the messenger of a white man. No doubt that such an act of senseless courage diminishes him and he drifts into alienation. He hears the crowd ask "why did he do it?" (47), when he murders the messenger and it occurs to him that he must stand alone.

The current opinion many African scholars hold is that *Things Fall Apart* is a counter response to *Heart of Darkness* is seriously questioned when one considers the foregoing. That we are presented Africa as a well-knit society with clear political, economic, and cultural institutions is hardly evident.

Who are the ruling class, who the economic class, who the judicial and military class? Of course there is a goddess of the earth who takes care of the spiritual. However, we perceive that there is no clear drawn system that separates the judicial, executive, and military wings of society. Material wellbeing seems to be the attribute that catapults a person into the ruling class: we see how Okwonkwo rises because of material success. But there is no controlling force that could restrain that animal strength boiling within him. When the Oracle orders the sacrifice of Ikemefuma, there is no clear decision about who should do the act. There is hardly any organised resistance against the colonialist even when people are aware of his coming much earlier. News of the violent annihilation of all those who resist the colonialists paralyse the people and they surrender long before the white man arrives. When Okwonkwo returns from exile, he meets a people who have submitted to the white man without a single act of resistance. We hardly see an organised stance, albeit one that may be technologically inferior. At this time fire-arms were already widespread among the Igbo. This notwithstanding, the people make no move to resist the colonialist either militarily or otherwise. Society disintegrates because of the injustices that exist within. Outcasts see the white man as a source of redemption. Many customs of the people stood contrary to human rights and any reasonable ideologue who could free them from its fractures was welcome. Even Obierika, one of the elders of the land would consider the injustice of some of their customs. Questioning his friend's exile for an act of manslaughter, he considers the iniquities of some of the customs when he reminisces: "He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender" (89). These weaknesses within society invite and create space for the colonizer to take root as the advocate of those who suffer injustices. No doubt, Obierika acquiesces to the new forces and adjusts. Another character, Neka, is converted to Christianity because her previous four pregnancies and births were all twins; Christianity offers her a safe haven. Nwoye's conversion is marked by this fissure in the cultural organisation. He sought a place of refuge from the injustices of African culture: "It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed" (106). In reducing Okwonkwo from the high pedestal he places him initially, Achebe makes recourse to the dialectical opposition between the feminine and the masculine principle. Okwonkwo and all those who stand for African values are systematically de-centred to create space for the more flexible and feminine. This polarisation begins when he juxtaposes Okwonkwo and his father, Unoka. It is further developed in the opposition between Okwonkwo and his son Nwoye, who is Unoka's carbon copy. Thus, matriarchy supplants patriarchy in the novel. *Things Fall Apart* is therefore, as much about patriarchy as it is about matriarchy. Although the men stand apart prominently as the governing force, a matriarchate is very visible. We have the priestess of the Oracle Agbala and the earth goddess who play a dominant role in Okwonkwo's life. Okwonkwo's downfall, I propose, arises in large part from his disrespect for femininity even as he is forced to confront its enduring power. In the week of peace, he beats up his wife: Ojuigo, we are given room to argue, violates her duty to her aggressive husband because she is conscious of her power during this period. Her husband would not dare to beat her. When he does this he angers the priestess and the other acts he commits are just appendages of this first error. Okwonkwo pays the fine he is asked but shows disrespects towards the goddess "And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head" (22). This is followed by other acts of aggression against his wives that hardly show good reasoning. He beats his second wife for cutting a few banana leaves and shoots at her when she challenges his success as a hunter. These are all acts of disrespect against the womenfolk and they foreshadow the tragedies he experiences. The shot aimed at his wife is redirected probably by the earth goddess and

he shoots and kills a young lad inadvertently. This leads to his exile; yet he must go to his mother's land, the only place of refuge.

Okwonkwo's inability to acknowledge the feminine principle in humans is one of his major weaknesses. Considering his father effeminate, his denial of all qualities that may be termed feminine lead to his destruction. As if to save him from his foolhardiness, he is blessed with a daughter who is more masculine than feminine. This is meant to make him understand that femininity and masculinity are not biological but cultural. Yet, he denies to see this truism. The earth goddess has the power to punish and banish him, being feminine. When he goes to his mother's clan to take refuge, he is taught the lesson that the mother is the "real" parent but he hardly listens: "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there" (97). At a symbolic level, this can be interpreted to mean that acknowledging defeat is part of the reality of evolution. Events keep pushing Okwonkwo to recognise the feminine element in himself, the capacity to sit back in reflection and the capacity to be flexible but he denies, he is adamant. When it appears that all men have become women; he decides to be the lone man and drifts into oblivion. If defeat, or surrender is a feminine quality, it is also inevitable. The Igbo accept to surrender in order to conquer.

In sum, I argue that whereas most African scholars approach *Things Fall Apart* as a counter discourse to *Heart of Darkness*, the novel's main vein hardly furnishes us enough justification to hold this view. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe justifies the inevitable surrender of Africans to colonisation by portraying their shortcomings. Achebe's characterisation of Okwonkwo is centrifugal; that is, he constructs the events of the story to unfold such that Okwonkwo is removed from the centre. This decentring of the protagonist diminishes him and in turn diminishes the African he is made to represent. His lack of intuition, reflection, and foresight lead him into acts of transgression that first banish and later lead to his demise -- disgrace and dishonour. Even those who join the Christians are not certain of what it is all about. Achebe reduces the African to the childlike portraiture Western thinkers accord them when he captures the character of Ogbuefi Ugonna, an elder who decamps to Christianity. Invited to partake in the sacrament of holy communion, "Ogbeufi Ugonna had thought of the feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the village variety. He had therefore put his drinking horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion" (125). Thus, Achebe agrees with the colonialist that Africa was poorly organised and substandard measured with Occidental values and its ideology. No doubt, then, that the novel continues to please Western scholarship and Western readership.

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