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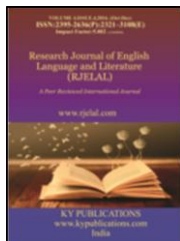
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## Chinua Achebe: The Founder of Modern African Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe, Africa's best-known novelist and founding father of African fiction brought uniqueness to African Fiction. Many have written novels about Africa but he wrote truly African novel, a work that truly looks at Africa from inside out. This does not merely refer to geographic location but to historical, psychic, cultural, social and emotional location in consciousness, time and space. This paper discusses how Chinua Achebe gave voice to Africa's thoughts, emotions, idioms, sensibilities and nuances thus making it possible for Africa to speak for herself to the rest of the world.

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Chinua Achebe is the single most important literary figure in modern African literature. Perhaps, he is the most well-known, most widely read, most translated, and most widely respected modern African writer, novelist and polemical essayist. Indeed, he has been described as the person responsible for "inventing" modern African literature. That description of Achebe as the inventor of modern African literature is in order, despite the fact that his first and most successful literary work, *Things Fall Apart*, which has been short listed as one of the 100 most important books of the twentieth century, was not the first African novel rendered in English in the twentieth century. "Achebe's novel was preceded by other important novels by Africans such as Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*, Sol Plaatje's *Mhundi*, and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*" (Gikandi X). In fact, adding to Gikandi's list, Nigeria's Cyprian Ekwensi published his *People of the City* [1954], and Guinea's Camara Laye published his *L'Enfant Noir* (1954), four years before Chinua Achebe published his classic novel,

*Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Yet, capturing the essence of Achebe's unique impact and appeal as a modern African novelist, Gikandi (1996) explains that;

If Achebe is considered to be the man who invented African literature, it is not so much because he was a pioneer or an innovator. In the very simple and conventional story of Okonkwo, a strong individual and an Igbo hero struggling to maintain the cultural integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule, Achebe was able to capture the anxieties of many African readers in the 1950s. We can understand these anxieties much better if we examine the important historical and psychological parallels between the years in which Okonkwo's story is set (between 1860 and 1890) and the years in which *Things Fall Apart* was conceived, written and first published (1952-58) (X).

Achebe's most successful literary work, and the one by which his name has become immortalized in African and world literature, *Things Fall Apart*, was

first published in 1958, However, as Gikandi (1996) reports, ironically, this now hugely successful literary work was almost lost to modern literature because it nearly did not see the light of day.

Gikandi goes on to add that “Things Fall Apart is not only the most widely read African novel-the English edition alone has sold millions of copies-but is the one work on postcolonial literature that almost every student of English is bound to encounter at one time or another, often in high school, and most certainly in college and university.” It is said that Things Fall Apart was originally an integral part of a much longer draft of a novel about the Nigerian encounter with British colonialism, spanning the lives of three generations of the same family. However, a later revision of, the original draft of that novel “ultimately divided [it] into two parts, and published [it] as *Things Fall Apart* (in 1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (in 1960). These were followed by *Arrow of God* in 1964” (vii).

Writing African Novels rather than Novels about Africa anyone can write and many have written novels about Africa. Few, however, can-and have-written African novels. The distinction between the two is neither subtle nor idle; a novel about Africa is a work that looks in on Africa from the outside in, whereas an African novel is a work that looks at Africa from the inside out. This distinction does not simply refer to a writer’s geographic location at the time of writing it refers concretely to historical, psychic, cultural, social and Emotional location in consciousness, time and space.

Of course, a novel about Africa can also be an African novel. Its subject matter can be simultaneously about Africa, even as it is written from an African social and cultural perspective. However, an African novel is, per force, a novel about Africa. An African novel is Africa freely expressing herself in her own words. A novel about Africa, on the other hand, is someone else putting their own words into Africa’s mouth. It is impossible to know what someone truly thinks or feels if others speak for them. It is hard enough knowing what someone truly thinks or feels even when they speak for themselves, let alone when someone else speaks for them.

Achebe’s works are African novels that give voice to Africa’s own thoughts, emotions, idioms, sensibilities and nuances, thus making it possible for Africa to speak for herself and to the rest of the world in her own voice in order that the outside world better understands and appreciates her own unique thoughts, feelings, sensibilities and literary expression. Ogbaa (1999) excellently summarized Achebe’s pioneering contribution to writing African novels rather than novels about Africa when he stated that

### The Proverbial Narrative

In his most popular and successful novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) points out that among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, the ethnic group upon whom that novel is based, “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.” (7). The proverbial narrative, in a nutshell, then, is the employment of the African (and especially, Igbo) conversational style of integrating proverbs into description, dialogue, philosophy, explanation, imagery, allegory and context, with particular reference to storytelling. The conversational and/or oratorical use of proverbs in public discourse in African traditional society-especially Igbo traditional society-has at least five values and functions associated with it: (1) metaphorical or symbolic value and function, (2) aesthetic value and function, (3) philosophical value and function,(4) conservatory value and function, and (5) the value and function of literary refinement.

The metaphorical or symbolic value and function of the proverbial narrative in traditional African discourse (especially Igbo traditional discourse), serves the conventional purpose of the use of metaphors in linguistic communication, referred to as a figure of speech: “...a word or phrase used for vivid of dramatic effect and [not taken] literally.” (*Oxford American Dictionary* 1980, 322). The aesthetic value and function of the proverbial narrative in traditional African discourse, especially in traditional Igbo discourse, serves the purpose of the creative expression of the artistic use of language in conversation –a display of oratorical skills, the expression of the high art of verbal erudition, a skill which, apart from its empirical

truth-content, if well executed, has its own definitive and demonstrable power of persuasion. How well something is said becomes almost as important and as powerful as the truth-content of what is said.

The philosophical value and function of the proverbial narrative in traditional African discourse serves the purpose of allegorically engaging moral questions or issues-or their opposites-and seeking a relative, even if not, an absolute resolution to their confliction. Often, employing the use of proverbs, or even short-form parables drawn from folklore, the skilled user of the proverbial narrative draws upon or weaves into their conversation, allegories that assist with the illustration, allusion, contrast or reconciliation of analogs with the concrete situations at hand.

The conservatory value and function of the proverbial narrative in traditional African discourse- especially in traditional Igbo discourse, serves the purpose of conserving - keeping from being damaged, lost or wasted-not only that conversational art form, but also the values, traditions, customs and sense of history-the "collective memory" of the society-especially a society that was predominantly preliterate and therefore, of necessity, employed oral tradition as its principal means of the preservation of its intellectual property.

Finally, the refinement value and function of the proverbial narrative in traditional African discourse-especially in traditional Igbo discourse, serves the purpose of refining-civilizing-the sensibilities of public discourse, in order to distinguish high standards of public speech from those of casual or coarse conversation. The language with which a respected elder or an Ozo-titled man, for example, in Igbo traditional society, uses to address matters of state, would hardly be expected to be the same he would employ to address private, personal or ribald matters, especially in a public rather than in a private social space.

Today, libraries across the world abound with hefty compendiums of African sayings, proverbs, aphorisms, allegories, etc. Yet, neither at the point of the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, nor as this commemorative book

went to press, has anyone since Chinua Achebe been more able to weave that African (especially Igbo) conversational art form-the proverbial narrative-into literary prose with as much dexterity and artistic finesse as Achebe has. So extensive and thorough has Achebe's employment of that literary style been in his works, and so scarce his competitors in that art form, that it must clearly be judged an exceptional contribution he has made to the modern African and world novel, and hence, to literature. Ogbaa (1999) observed of that aspect of Achebe's literary style that his use of "esoteric language," which constitutes "essential elements of the Igbo oral tradition and lore" are romanticized by Chinua Achebe "in his rural novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. By themselves, the verbal elements are not easily understood by the non-initiated, none Igbo reader; however, Achebe has appropriated them in all his novels in a style that is both easy to understand and attractively engaging" (10).

#### **The Poetic Narrative**

Chinua Achebe has perfected the poetic quality of narrative prose-the quality of seamlessly unifying poetry and prose in his works and in his reader's mind. With Achebe, we do not have to choose between the two. The literary elegance of his narrative, the musical cadence of his passages, and the oratorical maneuvers he executes in the dialogues of his characters combine to produce an overall literary effect on the reader that resonates with poetic power. Perhaps no passage penned by Chinua Achebe better captures that literary accomplishment of the conflation of poetry and prose in narrative form than that found in his novel *Antbills of the Savannah*:

It is the reason I pointed out in my tribute to Achebe on the day of his passing, titled: "Chinua Achebe: A Posthumous Tribute," that after reading his many works-creative, poetic, polemical, autobiographical, long and short stories, "I marveled at [his] creative genius, his philosophical breadth and depth; marveled at what he did with the English language; what he did to the English language. In fact, what he made the English language do for 'us' and for 'them'; sending it on explanatory errands through the

backwoods of our homesteads, in and around our neighborhoods-ethnic national, continental and global commons" (Aniagolu 2).

### The Translative Technique

It is one thing to weave proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, allegories, and the like into the fabric of narrative prose, and that is task enough if done well; it is quite another to deliver such proverbs, sayings, aphorisms and allegories from the womb of the mother tongue of a completely different language into the bosom of another with minimal loss of meaning (direct or indirect) and literary flavor.

R. W. Funk (1996), in trying to address the inherent difficulties associated with the art and science of translation notes appropriately enough that "among the more difficult translation problems is how to represent levels of meaning (double entendres), ambiguities, and irony." (p. 89) Such a task, in order to be successful, requires not only natural or God-given talent, but also thorough mastery of both languages: the mother tongue in whose womb the proverb, saying, aphorism or allegory was originally conceived and the adoptive mother tongue into whose arms the birth child of that translational labor is delivered. Good translation, I would insist, should not be a pony to the... text. The translation of words and phrases should be context sensitive rather than dictionary driven.

Chinua Achebe was a master of the *cultural and linguistic context, content, and expression* of both his native language Igbo, the language from which he mined the treasure trove of sayings, proverbs, aphorisms and allegories; and English, the language in which he rendered his African novels. Additionally, Achebe had to do more than translate from one language to another; he had to transliterate with exceptional skill and effectiveness. The reason a distinction between the two-translation and transliteration-is important and necessary is twofold: Achebe did not merely translate extant texts from his original Igbo language into English. He drew entirely from Igbo oral tradition for which he had to, of necessity, provide the interpretive (hermeneutical) and idiomatic

vehicle to deliver his reader, especially his nonIgbo/non-African reader, to the cross-cultural destination of their meaning, ethos and pathos. It is that which constitutes the essence of the unique translative skill Chinua Achebe brought to modern African literature and thus, to world literature.

### The Art of Purposeful Complexity

The fifth important and unique contribution Achebe made to modern African and world literature is a literary device I call the art of purposeful complexity. The "purposeful" before the word "complexity" is intended to distinguish it from the cacophony of imagery and verbiage that, unfortunately, all too many modernist and post-modernist writers of fiction have gotten into the habit of mistaking for literature. Purposeful complexity is the literary technique of deliberately weaving together into a quilted fabric an impressive tapestry of complementing, conflicting, confirming, confounding, hopeful and disappointing stories of heroic and flawed characters, motives, aspirations, and outcomes, tying them together into a delicately balanced, ironic and powerfully evocative narrative.

Regarding the first complaint- that of the alleged chauvinism of the novel *Things Fall Apart* on account of the novel's main character, Okonkwo, especially his beating his wife-the employment of Achebe's masterful literary technique of purposeful complexity can be seen at its finest. First, it is in the same novel that the power and centrality of the single most important deity in the Igbo pantheon of gods-a female deity, the venerable Earth goddess, *Ani*-is brought into bold relief. Second, it is in the same novel that one of the most powerful positions in Umuofia society, that of high priestess, can be, and is, held by a woman, Chielo. Third, it is in the same novel that Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, elopes from her first husband, in total contravention of tradition, to join Okonkwo's household. Ekwefi was neither lynched nor stoned to death for her brazen and willful act.

Fourth, it is in the same novel that a virgin girl and a lad-in the person of Ikemefuna, were given as ransom to the village of Umuofia by the village of Mbairzo for the murder of one of Umuofia's

daughters, the wife of the elder, Oghuefi Udo The whole tragic incident ends with the boy, Ikemefuna, being sacrificed to the gods and not the virgin girl. Did the virgin girl's gender-as a female, and hence a potential motif confer greater societal value on her than on the boy, Ikemefuna? Fifth, it is in the same novel, that the main character, Okonkwo, despite his vaulting machismo, harbors a deep and abiding love for his daughter, Ezinma, in whom he sees qualities of character he finds totally lacking in his son, Nwoye. Thus, the macho main character, Okonkwo, who has a son, Nwoye, and a daughter, Ezinma, wished that his daughter were his son!

Sixth, it is in the same novel, that Ozoemena, the wife of Ogbuefi Ndulue, dies soon after her husband's death, from sheer despair at the prospect of having to go on living without her husband, with whom she was so close. This constitutes a powerful allegorical moment of exquisite love, without indulging the reader in gratuitous romanticism or eroticism. Finally, it is in the same novel, *Things Fall Apart*, that it was to his mother's village-which in Igbo culture is known as *ilewurme*-that Okonkwo goes for refuge when he is exiled from Umuofia, his father's village, for accidentally killing Ogbuefi Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son at Ezeudu's funeral. Once again, the maternal principle appears to supersede the paternal, creating yet another of myriad ironic tensions in the novel.

It should be apparent from the foregoing that as a novelist, Chinua Achebe made magnificent use of the literary technique of purposeful complexity or multilayered ambiguity in his writings. It is difficult, therefore, if not impossible, to pigeonhole his works into a stereotypical, politically correct (it incorrect literary category of one kind or another.

It is even more important to attend to the tension in Achebe's novel between the masculine and the feminine inherent in a dichotomy root in nature. For the subjugation of women as a social practice is compensated for by the high valuation of the feminine principle in the symbolic sphere-the awe and respect accorded to Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, illustrates the institutional inversion of gender role and status she embodies at this level. The feminine theme is thus counterpoised to the masculine, of which Okonkwo is the incarnation.

Achebe exploits the tension involved in managing the natural opposition of male and female in order to suggest a reversal of the hierarchical values, one in which the male principle is no longer privileged in the general economy of the collective life and consciousness. This reversal is fully enacted, as it were, in the second part of the novel, in a celebration of the feminine principle as generative of life and as a summation of its sustaining values. In other words, the feminine theme, so far secondary to the main thrust of the narrative, is rung here in an assertive reversal of the theme of masculinity that has been so dominant in the first part of the novel. ( 18)

Through the sheer power of Achebe's fertile imagination and his literary craftsmanship, he has carved out an exquisite sculpture of the beauty, power, and enduring place for African culture and sensibility, intertwined in the literary schema of the human condition. It seems that where the main character, Okonkwo, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* left off with the strong arm of his hoe, making him one of Umuofia's greatest farmers; Achebe took up as one of Africa's greatest Wordsmiths with his intellectual equivalents of the hoe: the parchment and the quill.

Perhaps the greatest African statesman of the twenty-first century and one of the greatest men of our contemporary world, Nelson Mandela-lawyer, civil rights activist, pan-Africanist, one-time prisoner of the apartheid regime in South Africa for 27 years, freedom fighter, first African president of the post-apartheid Republic of South Africa, and 1993 Nobel Peace Prize laureate-had this to say in a tribute he sent in honor of Chinua Achebe's seventieth birthday celebration at Bard College in Upstate New York (November, 2000): "There was a writer named Chinua Achebe, in whose Company the prison walls fell down." Mandela went on to say that

Chinua Achebe is a world-renowned writer of great achievement, a founder of modern African literature. He has lived in many countries of the world. But his greatness is rooted in his Africanness; he is one who has brought Africa to the world. He comes from the more than ten million Igbo people of Nigeria, one of the major peoples of Africa. He



has written of them that in any assembly each “speaks his own mouth,” as they phrase it. Chinua Achebe “speaks the own mouth of Africa” through his superb novels, stories, and essays. He speaks for us all, he “speaks the culture of Africa” and enriches all humanity with his Visionary talent. He writes in his latest work: “Everywhere new ways to write about Africa have appeared, reinvesting the continent and its people with humanity, free at last of those stock situations and characters that had dominated European writing about Africa for hundreds of years.” The people of South Africa celebrate, as I do with everyone present today, the 70th birthday of the brilliant writer and man of Africa who has found those new ways, freed us, with his great gift from the past. (Proceedings of Achebe’s 70th Birthday Conference/Celebration at Bard College)

Finally, in one of the more celebrated Igbo proverbs popularized in Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, it is said that “God chases away flies for the cow that does not have a tail.” While one dare not dispense with God’s protective intercession, it is perhaps fair to suggest that the problem with the African cow, if one excuses that metaphor, force-fed as it has been on tasteless colonial gruel, is not so much the absence of a tail for which God’s benevolent intervention is sorely needed to chase away bothersome flies, but rather, the conditioned response of tucking its tail between its hind legs and timidly letting the bothersome flies have a field day!

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