

ART AND INTENTION: REVISITING ACHEBE'S ANTI-IMPERIALIST THOUGHTS

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Abstract

Art, especially in an Africa that was still smarting from the bewilderment of colonization by Europe, could not but be characterized by intentionality. Hence, beginning from Chinua Achebe's seminal post-colonial and anti-imperialist novel *Things Fall Apart*, African writers devoted their artistry to disillusioning both Europe, on its false impressions of Africa, and Africans, on their mystified conception of the white man. According to Achebe himself, *Things Fall Apart* was written to make Europe understand that the African past “- with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them...” This cardinal intention of freeing the people's mind, as it were, is generally reflected in the plot, characterization, setting, language and thematic inclinations of the African writers' works.

Introduction

The author's intention simply has to do with what the author has in mind as he writes and which often he refrains from saying on the pages or lines of his work. Therefore, it is usually the critic's lot to unearth that intention and to argue it. However, often the author gives a hint of this intention either in his critical essays, interviews, autobiography or other kinds of discourse, making the work of the critic easier. For, according to Anne Sheppard, "critics often appeal to considerations outside the text to provide additional support for their views", considerations which key aspect she says is "the artists' intentions" (94). Also to Paisley Livingstone, intentionalism is "the thesis that the artist's or artists' intentions have a decisive role in the creation of a work of art and that (the) knowledge of such intentions is a necessary component of some adequate interpretive and evaluative claims."(831)

There is though the extreme anti-intentionalist view expressed by W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley in their theory of Intentional Falacy where, according to Anne Sheppard, they posit that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a

standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (101). In addition, according to Livingstone, the anti-intentionalists postulate that "if a work has determinate meanings and value, they must be immanent in the artistic text or structure" (833). These anti-intentionalist views have however been punctured by both Sheppard and Livingstone among others. Sheppard holds that Wimsatt and Beardsley "are in the end mistaken"(102) because they are not able to distinguish between judging the success or otherwise of a literary work of art (evaluation, based on the details of the text) and ascertaining how relevant the author's intentions are for interpreting his works, which to him involves the use of, among other things, "biographical evidence, including the author's intentions, to illuminate literature"(102). For Livingstone, his defense of intentionalism is that "not all of the artistically or aesthetically relevant features of a work of art (to intention) are intrinsic properties of the text; some are relational and can only be known when the text or structure is cognized correctly in the context of its creation". (833)

The import of the above exegesis of sorts is to show that artists more often than not do not make their intentions, their ultimate artistic motives, explicit, especially in their works of art. Benedetto Croce approaches his discourse through careful and methodical study of the mind of the artist. According to George C. Wickie, Croce sees art as intuitive knowledge, an image in the mind of the artist, such that the physical text "is simply an aid to help in the recreation of art in the mind of the appreciator" (54). Wickie thus believes that Croce developed his intentionistic critical philosophy based on this intuitive principle which supposes that, since art exists only in the mind of the artist, a valid critical analysis of a work of art must include the known intentions of the artist. Also in his famous essay on the aesthetics of art *The Essence of Aesthetic* Croce states that among the three most important items to consider in the context of a work of art, the first is the genesis of the work of art which, according to him, "comprises all the artist's mental states, both conscious and unconscious, in the creation of the work, including his intention with regard to the work" (697).

There are two types of intentionality identifiable in Achebe's works: the philosophical/cultural and the artistic/expressive. In the former, Achebe exhibits a positive ethnocentric motive and presents the African cultural heritage, the traditional judicial system and social order of the Igbo African society as unique. His most compelling prompting, as Ebenezer A. Omoteso, puts it, is "to correct the distorted image of Africa" (216). It is in that regard that he sees Achebe's major role as a writer in the light of what he (Achebe) sees as helping his society "regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement..." (Morning... 44) Also, in another instance, Achebe says that when he started to write, the "major objective was to challenge stereotypes, myths, and the image of ourselves and our continent, and to recast them through stories... and books for our children. That was my overall goal"

(There Was A Country, 53). But there probably can be no better encapsulation of Achebe's sense of cultural patriotism than this, that he wants to let the West know that, "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity" ("The Role...",158). It is perhaps to emphasize the rather destructive impact of the European colonial advent on African culture and the high degree of mutual distrust between the two cultures that he said through the lead masquerade, Ajofia, about the colonial church missionary, Mr. Smith, in *Things Fall Apart* "... he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away." (152)

In the area of artistic/expressive intention, Achebe subtly demonstrates the feeling that since Africa cannot yet achieve linguistic independence and self-sufficiency because of the multiplicity of tongues in the continent, the adopted foreign language could be made malleable for expressing Africa's deepest desires for freedom, including linguistic freedom, from imperialism. To achieve this subtle protest of sorts, he taps deep into the resources of the Igbo oral culture for his narratives as well as adopts Igbo words whole into his English structure in order to minimize the English vocabulary contents of his writing and also in order to maximally project the Igbo African culture. Achebe is able to achieve these, especially in his novels used for illustration in this essay, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, through the deployment of proverbs, idioms, folktales, myths, legends, traditional settings and the use of mostly elderly characters. The discussion of this domesticated English language in Achebe's works will equally benefit from what Phanel Egejuru sees as Orethory in Achebe's narrative language. According to her, "... Achebe set himself the task of artistically experimenting with Igbo Orethorical genre in *Things Fall Apart* and perfected it in *Arrow of God* (409)", and *Anthills of the Savannah*, one would add. Achebe himself equally attests to this when he tells Ezenwa-Ohaeto why he set out his first major characters in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* depicting the speech mannerism of the average Igbo elder. According to him, "It was quite clear to me that if you are representing the speech of people who take language seriously, as our traditional elders did, then you have to represent it with care. They did not use words in a shoddy fashion, so I had to create something that would convey that" (Chinua Achebe, *Straight*, 82).

However, it is ostensibly his experience of an encounter with a Japanese professor, Kinichiro Toba at an international conference that further energized Achebe's drive for a special type of English for his creative works as a step towards evolving an African language, accepted internationally, in which African literature should be written. In his biography of Achebe, Ezenwa-Ohaeto records the intellectual impact that a family

anecdote by the man, Professor Kinichiro Toba, made on Achebe. The anecdote goes thus:

My grandfather graduated from the University of Tokyo at the beginning of the 1880s. His notebooks were full of English. My father graduated from the same university in 1920 and half of his notes were filled with English. When I graduated a generation later my notes were all in Japanese. So... it took three generations for us to consume Western civilization totally via the means of our language. (Chinua Achebe: *The Author...* 222)

Ohaeto records also that the 'intellectual impact' that the anecdote which another Japanese at the Tokyo colloquium called "the software of modernization" (Chinua Achebe: *Straight...* 22) had on Achebe moved him to ruminate aloud that :

As Japan began the count-down to its spectacular technological lift-off, it was also systematically recovering lost ground in its traditional model of cultural expression. In one sense then, it was travelling away from its old self towards a cosmopolitan, modern, identity while in another sense it was journeying back to regain a threatened past and selfhood.(Chinua Achebe: *The Author...*222).

In Ohaeto's words, Achebe "urged his compatriots to comprehend the positive dimensions of that experience in Japan" (Chinua Achebe: *The Author...* 222 -223). The 'positive dimensions'include the need to initiate a programme of developing an indigenous national language that would "consume" English and the other imperialist languages just as Japanese did for Toba's people.

This directly leads us to the mainstay of Achebe's art, especially in his novels in context: *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Critics have described Achebe's creative style which underscores his said intentions from varied perspectives. Quesseynou Traore sees Achebe as using the elements of Igbo folktales in such a way that they actually anchor his narratives so that his stories and the mythical essence of the folktales blend and "become one inseparable piece of rhythmic movement of ideas, thought and pleasure" (325). For Dan Izevbaye, "the technical problem to which Achebe addresses himself in *Things Fall Apart* is how to inscribe the traditional values of Umuofia on the mind of his reader. He does this by transcribing the oral modes of Okonkwo's world onto the written mode of communication associated with the whitemen" (352). For *Arrow of God* he notes also that:

Achebe needs to find in the novel form an adequate medium for providing a structure of meaning for the historically unprecedented encounter between the public oral culture of the small village community of Umuofia and the expanding imperial power of Europe

whose colonial ambitions are sealed in secret dispatch and...achievements are disseminated and stored in written records (348).

To him, too, "the stories of literacy told in *Arrow of God* follow very closely the historical experience in many parts of Africa. The knowledge is purchased at a very great and sometimes even tragic cost thus suggesting that the choice of writing follows a tide that not many actions can arrest (353). Izevbaye concludes that "Achebe's novels present the more historically comprehensive picture of an African response to writing, revealing it as a skill that is not as totally unprepared for and uncomprehended..." (354) In the same vein, Virginia Azolu observes that through his linguistic performance, Achebe "explores the socio-cultural reality of a society undergoing transition of consciousness from the psychodynamics of orality to the psychodynamics of literacy...the movement from a sparse use of modifiers in the rural novels (*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) to a profuse use (of modifiers) in *Anthills of the Savannah*". (412)

All the same, Abiola Irele so well foregrounds the cultural factor that gives force to Achebe's language use, a new kind of literary expression in Nigeria and in Africa. He says that the "emergence of a modern expression in the European languages has resulted in the creation of third domain of African literature... in which it is engaged for the recuperation of the values -aesthetic, moral, and social - associated with orality" (78 -79). According to him:

When Achebe writes, adapting an Igbo proverb into English, that proverbs are "the palm oil with which words are eaten", he is drawing attention to the central position that the form occupies in African speech. He is also indicating relish in words that has been cultivated in nearly every African society as a matter of cultural conditioning, a sensitivity to language that orality encourages, and the aesthetic function of the proverb which this cultural factor promotes". (80)

Obiukwu Ogwueleka, in his apprehension of oral heritage as it "conflates with the literate mode" (85) of expression as seen in Achebe's works, observes that it is "paramount in Achebe's art that one's culture or cultural exhibits are as important as the food one takes for sustenance (89). According to him, as seen in Achebe's writing and in the speech of his characters, Achebe explores "his heritage such as mode of salutation'... and the deft habit of foreshadowing his speech or creating a tranquil atmosphere to enable his speech permeate and sink deep into the consciousness of his audience' (86). He exemplifies this with reference to *Arrow of God* on the occasion where Ezeulu uses such effects to command the attention of his people and also when Nwaka so mischievously but so expertly employs them in order to dull the efficacy of Ezeulu's speech.

In the same line of thought, Chinwe Okechukwu is emphatic in her opinion that Achebe whose artistic mission has been to educate his society through the novel “demonstrates in Arrow of God the calamity that overtakes a society that does not have a responsible rhetorician to guide it in its time of political need. Such a time is exemplified in the novel as the moment when a society is in imminent danger of cultural genocide...” (568). To her, even though Ezeulu is cast in the image of the Italian moralist rhetorician, Quintilian's "a good man...", he does not have Cicero's "well-ordered and embellished speech" (567). This situation makes his arch-rival, Nwaka, 'a bad man' but truly "skilled in speaking" (567) to ride public roughshod over him and mislead Umuaro, thus paving the way for the whiteman in the image of his agent, Goodcountry, to disintegrate the community.

This also leads us to Achebe's main persuasion in his novels that through a display of Igbo oratory in his English language, the people's cultural values and linguistic virtues will be preserved and advanced until it achieves enough independence to compete favourably with any other significant lingua franca. He therefore weaves this intention into his stories because, according to him, "[t]he story is our escort; without it, we are blind" (Anthills of the Savannah, 124).

Chinua Achebe, with his first-hand experience of colonialism in Africa, and of course now of neo-colonialism, is one of the African writers who experienced what Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze calls "a time out of joint" (26). Therefore, in Eze's view:

The language to "mend time itself is one through which the writers strived to invent new meanings of culture for themselves and for their societies. Among the writers ... Achebe, it seems, was the first to grasp - and in a series of criticisms, aesthetically articulate -the full dimensions of the modern African sense of tradition as that which is in need of artistic healing and repair". (26)

That is also why Anthonia Kalu posits that the "[effective engagement using the African narrative world and its techniques is evidenced in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, and others whose explorations of both worlds (the African and the Western) resulted in the development of a merging of fictional techniques such that the dynamism essential for the retention of an African core is retained"(55). Evidencing further the emergence of a new narrative trope through Achebe's writing, she sees Achebe as extending "the relationships between the language, the archive, and relevant discursive modes" (59). To her, even without knowledge of Achebe's stated intentions in the crafting of Okonkwo's story, the introductory sentences of Things Fall Apart - "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by

throwing Amalinze the cat"(TFA3) - can only be seen to fit a rhetorical mode that is non-Western.

To Kwaku Korang, Achebe's most 'solid achievement' rests on his ability, especially through *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to make the West and us all see that "tragedy and realism" in literature are not "Eurocentric (or European) precedent"(3). According to him too, Achebe is able to expose, through his art, Joseph Conrad's "egregious humanistic failure at the level of language" of "portraying Africa in an aesthetic form and rhetoric that obscures rather than illuminates humanity" (3).

Simon Gikandi is full of glowing tributes to Achebe for making him to know the true meaning of Africa, its culture and its literature via *Things Fall Apart*, especially, and also through his other novels as he, Gikandi, "came of age in the 1960s and 1970s" (4). According to him, "reading *Things Fall Apart* brought me to the sudden realization that... literature was about real and familiar worlds of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a language and structure..." (3). Furthermore, he talks about "the transformative power of *Things Fall Apart*" in its "role in literature in the making of African subjects... of culture, of literature, and of the destiny of Africa" (4). Thus he came to grasp with the reason behind "the institutionalization of *Things Fall Apart* and the wisdom of using it as a supplement for African culture or the authorized point of entry into Igbo, Nigerian, or African landscapes" (6). In conclusion, he emotionally quipped these questions and answers:

What is it about his (Achebe's) novels that enabled them to play their unprecedented role as the mediators of the African experience and the depository of certain ideas of Africa? Why is it that when the term African culture is mentioned, Achebe's works almost immediately come to mind?...Achebe is the person who invented African culture as it is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation... I want to insist that Achebe's intervention in the already existing colonial and Pan-African libraries transformed the idea of Africa and that his project has indeed valorized the ideas of culture in the thinking of African worlds (7).

In the same summation and eulogistic spirit, Korang says that "Achebe's humanist-realist philosophical and aesthetic proposition is that he can in his artistic re-working, cross-culturally and originally translate that which has an African priority into English", adding that "his technique in *Things Fall Apart* insists on the corollary that he can 're-territorize' and remold as 'African' a language with a European priority" (26). Equally, Bruce King sees Achebe's art as being "the first solid achievement upon which others could build" (Qtd in Akubuiro, "Digging into the Palimpsest"...3).

Among the most notable anti-imperialist writers that could be said to have built on Achebe's 'solid achievements' is Ngugi wa thiong'O. Ngugi carved a niche for himself in that regard by adopting the Marxist communist literary principles and situating it in the African context. In his novels as well in his plays, one sees manifest his depiction of the dogged confrontation of the forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism (Western imperialism) by the African masses. Perhaps one of his socialist revolutionary statements that most capture his artistic vision is this, that "[f]reedom is a total immersion in the struggle of Kenyan workers and peasants for the liberation of the products of their labour for the benefit of Kenyans (African masses). Imperialist foreign domination of a people's economy and culture is completely incompatible with freedom of the artist in the third world" (68). However, it is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most contemporary African writers, that most fits the mould of artists to carry forward Achebe's vision. Adichie may not be very pleased with anyone suggesting that she is an "Achebelette" as Kehinde Ayoola would say (193), if that would imply that she slavishly adopted Achebe's literary style. The point is that both Achebe and Adichie are of the Igbo extraction and therefore inherited the same cultural background of the Igbo and belong to the same Nigerian society, even though they grew up and experienced life at different periods. But if we remember that Achebe wrote his classic *Things Fall Apart* at the age of 28, we will understand that these are simply literary gifts to us at different generations of our history. Adichie has furthered a tradition that Achebe established. But in doing that, she has brought her own individuality and of course uniqueness of experience to bear, giving the tradition a new perspective and hue. Thus Ayoola includes Chimamanda Adichie among the "generations of contemporary African creative writers" who have continued to be inspired by Achebe's "lyrical evocations" and who have "greatly optimized the (Achebe's) style" (193-194).

Adichie's art and critical statements do not contain such obvious anti-colonial and anti-imperialist intentions as we find in Achebe's, Ngugi's and others. This is accounted for by the obvious reason of her belonging to a much later generation of Africans who did not witness colonialism first hand. However, as a person born into an African home and who grew up in an African country, she would certainly glean into her consciousness certain manifest vestiges of the erstwhile colonial experience of the earlier generations of her people. Also, her high level of education would have exposed her to adequate knowledge of the implications of the said colonial experience. Hence we find in her works and her critical essays, interviews and public lectures, connotations and insinuations that strongly point to her anti-colonial or anti-imperialist consciousness. For

one, her truthful and near-innocent portrayal of the Nigerian society which form the setting of most of her works and from which she draws most of her characters shows a country made by Britain from raw materials of incoherence, so to say. For one, her British colonial officer character in *Half of a Yellow Sun* captures the Nigerian society in these words, “the Hausa in the North were a dignified lot, the Igbo were surly and money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly, even if they were first-rate lickspittles” (55). No wonder then Ujam A. Ujam quotes Sir Ahmadu Bello as saying, “God did not create Nigeria, the British did” (145), to underscore the plight of the ethnic strange bedfellows that European colonialism forced together and named it Nigeria.

All the same, *Purple Hibiscus* depicts the awful antagonism between the senior Achike, Papa Nnuku, a traditional religion adherent, and his son, Eugene Achike, a fanatical adherent of the Euro-Christian religion, on one hand, and Eugene Achike’s tyrannical high-handedness in handling the affairs of his family, on the other. Onyemachi Udumukwu sees in Eugene Achike’s autocratic rule over his household a kind of correlation with the “domination and submission” (194) state of affairs that existed between the erstwhile colonials and their subjects, respectively. He further illustrates this while explaining the implications of the argument between Eugene Achike and his son, Jaja, over the holy communion. As he puts it:

The interplay between host and wafer is indicative not only of the opposition between denotation and connotation but also of the importance of signification for constituting postcolonial discourse. By insisting on the connotative import of the sign, Eugene hopes to maintain tradition and thereby to keep discourse at the level of fixity. If he succeeds in doing this he will equally exercise his control, his power of ownership and domination, not only on words but on his hearers. But by insisting on the primary or denotative significance of words Jaja calls attention to the fact that words function in accord with the user’s intention... (19)

Onukogu and Onyerionwu see Adichie’s ideological convictions as bordering on “the Pan-African creed... characterized by the noble ethos of justice, equity, fairness, and above all, humility...” (9). Pan-Africanism by the way, drew its impetus from the African colonial and post-colonial challenges from which African literature also took its philosophical bearing.

Christopher Anyaokwu and the pair of Abalogu and Onyerionwu have given consummate and overlapping study of Adichie’s language domestication skills. These range from her infusing lone Igbo words, and sometimes phrases, into English structure to her glossing style of placing a whole sentence in Igbo and repeating it in English in the same sentence.

These have the effect of compelling her reader to learn the Igbo language or at least to have a working knowledge of the language. This is a kind of language hybridity, which belongs to the domain of language ‘abrogation and appropriation,’ according to Ashcroft, Goreth, and Aelen. It takes the form of a willful deviation, a subtle protest against colonial imposition of an alien language on a people. Thus while in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie employs the narrative and linguistic style that Daria Tunca refers to as “Freedom song and Mind style” (1), in *Half of a Yellow Sun* her glossing formula of language hybridity is pervasive.

In the end, though the primary intention of Chinua Achebe may be to “write back” to the imperialist West, to borrow from Bill Ashcroft et al and James Currey, in doing that he has also bodied forth the core of Igbo African life and linguistic ethos to the literary world. Also, although Achebe may not have literarily and directly mentored Adichie, his writing evidently influenced hers. This must account for the very close affinities, so to say, of their creative, socio-political and cultural intentions. In line with an Igbo adage, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie having washed her hands properly has dipped hands in the same clay bowl with her elder, Chinua Achebe.

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