

Living and Narrating the Tensions of the Postcolonial Situation: Chinua Achebe Between Ambiguity and Ambivalence.

Klohinlwélé Koné

University Félix Houphouët-Boigny Abidjan (République de Côte d'Ivoire)

Abstract: *If Chinua Achebe has sometimes been presented as “the father of modern African literature” it is because by many of the characteristics of his personality and artistic practices, he embodies most of the traits of the postcolonial African writer. He sums up the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that most African intellectuals and artists have been through with their dual educational identities in their artistic and intellectual developments.*

The objective of this paper is to show that Chinua Achebe, not only by his positions on social and political issues in his country but also in his fiction works, has embodied in his lifestyle and narrated in his artistic works, the tensions and paradoxes that have been synthesized by theoreticians of postcolonial studies as the traits of the postcolonial situation.

Key words: Postcolonial – tensions – rhizome – ambivalence - paradox.

Introduction

In the constellation of modern African literature, Chinua Achebe is one of the stars to reckon with. For many readers and analysts, if he is not the father of that modernist trend, he is one of the pioneers of a generation of excellence who wrote the history of African literature in golden words. If he is considered as one of the founding fathers of that literature, it is because his works have inspired so many writers whose first contact with African postcolonial literature can be traced back to his celebrated *Things Fall Apart*. In that sense he can be considered, according to French sociologist P. Bourdieu's phrase, as the "nomothete"¹, that pioneering figure, of a true African literature asserted against colonial literature.

Many a theoretician or literary critics agree that Achebe's writing is postcolonial literature.² This

claim is generally based on the content of his works of fiction. This study will submit to that claim but will focus even more on the personality of the Nigerian writer. This personality is developed by his education, his life choices and social convictions. This article will show that Achebe, by many facets of his personality and artistic practice, falls into the literary category of what is referred to as postcolonial literature.³ Robert Young's concept of "cultural nomadism", otherness/alterity and national identity were used to qualify the reality of the postcolonial situation. As for Homi Bhabha, he popularized concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence which are used to describe the ways colonized people resisted the power of the colonizer. It is important, from the outset, to clearly define "postcolonial literature." If post followed with a hyphen (post-colonial) generally has a temporal understanding, postcolonial with no hyphen cannot be reduced to

¹ P. Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art : genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 95

² refer to articles by Simon Gikandi's Chinua Achebe and the Postcolonial Esthetic: Writing, Identity and the National Formation", Abiola Irele's "The Crisis Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* », Emmanuel Chukwuudi Eze, "Language and Time in Postcolonial Experience", Jacob Fuchs' Postcolonial Mock-Epic: Abrogation and

Appropriation", Tejumola Olaniyan's Chinua Achebe and an Archaeology of the Postcolonial African State", etc.

³ These definitions summarize Homi Bhaba and Robert Young's field's terminologies and neologisms. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (Routledge 1994) and *Nations and Narration* (ed) (Routledge 1990) and Robert Young's *Postcolonialism: a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

the period after colonial era.⁴ Even with a hyphen, it still cannot be reduced to temporality with some thinkers. For Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, its main features are to be found elsewhere:

The term post-colonialism is according to a too-rigid etymology – is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state. Not a naïve teleological sequence, which supersedes colonialism, post-colonialism is, rather, an engagement with and contestation of, colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies ... A theory of post-colonialism must, then, respond to more than merely chronological construction of post-independence and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism. (Gilbert&Tompkins 1996:78)

It is not simply the literature that was produced after the colonial era. It is more an issue of aesthetic than of time, of spatial considerations (centre vs periphery), etc. It is about discourses and their agents and representations of subjects and knowledges. The postcolonial situation is about the present but a present which is not to be taken for a static moment or condition but as a dynamic reality that crosses borders of time, space, and aesthetics. In its literary understanding the postcolonial situation stretches beyond the colonial era, portrays precolonial times, depicts the colonial context, and then focuses on the period of independences. It presents as reality tension between the past, the present, and the future. It also represents the tension between two worlds: the imperial center that the colonial world was and the periphery that is struggling to decenter that former centre.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the specifics that can serve to establish the postcolonial identity of Achebe. This will be done by analyzing not only his artistic creations but also his life through his social and political commitments, the positions he takes on burning issues of his time. The postcolonial identity that we ascribe to Achebe is

complex, conflicted and produces no easy reconciliation between past and present, his people's worldview and that of the (post)colonial world. The study will be conducted with the theoretical tools systematized by postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha, R.Young, Anthony Appiah, Ashcroft et al,. Achebe's life and his works will be analyzed in the light of that postcolonial reality. His postcolonial identity will be revealed through the context of his education, his actions and reactions faced with the realities of independent Africa.

I- A writer and his identity: the tensions of a dual educational process.

Education is one of the key concepts on which postcolonial theory is based. In fact, most of the traits of the postcolonial situation mentioned above are the consequence and results of the educational system of the former colonial power. The tensions between the colonial system of education and the traditional education of the colonial subject resulted in educated hybrids and dislocated migrants.

1. The education of an African child during colonial era.

As the son of a schoolmaster, an early convert to Christianity and catechist, Achebe's father saw in the British formal education the prospect of a bright future for his son. Sending his children to the British modern school system was a token of his allegiance to new values, to Christianity, and to western cultural norms in general. Indeed, by the time Achebe went to the British modern school, all new values adopted by the colonial subjects were understood to be Western and Christian. Western, civilization, Christianity, modern education, etc. invariably referred to one another and meant the same thing.

Postcolonial identity tries to reconcile two or various identities, at minimum that of the colonial power whose prints are indelible on the colonial subject's mind and the indigenous presence which cannot be rejected because it is part of the postcolonial identity's intimate being. To put it in simple terms, we can argue that the postcolonial identity is a conflicted state of mind, no matter how serene that identity presents itself.

⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodern the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 17, N°2 (Winter 1991), p. 14.

In Achebe's childhood, the offspring of a schoolmaster, of a catechist or a civil servant or any educated African, could be regarded as a fine specimen of the British colonial policy. In the British system there was no class of "évolué" like in the French Direct System policy, which molded an African personality into a French one, but the reality was almost the same. The educated Nigerian was no ordinary African. Such a colonial subject was different from his fellow natives and was most respected if not feared by the latter. He indeed shared with the colonial master some of the latter's privileges and his closeness in attitudes to that white master singled him out. Some white agents of that system disliked such educated Africans but their own people generally envied them or singled them out as their future leaders when the white master would leave. By his progress within the framework of the British educational system, Achebe proved his worth and was an excellent student going successfully through each colonial "rite of passage." (Van Genep 1981)

In *There Was a Country*⁵, Achebe shows his awareness of being a child of two worlds. His father, who was born in the last third of the 20th century, was a pioneer "of a new frontier". This period the writer recalls as an "era of great cultural, economic and religious upheaval in Igbo land"(TWC:7) As for himself, Achebe was born on November 16, 1930 in Nnobi, near Ogidi and recalls the world of "cultural crossroads" in which he was born. "By then," Achebe contends, "a long standing clash of Western and African civilizations had generated deep conversations and struggles between their respective languages, religions and cultures." (TWC: 8)

When the Nigerian writer recalls his schooldays, he appears to be proud of his achievements within the system, the excellence of the education he got there and the relationships he established with those figures who were later to be the elite of independent Nigeria. Achebe seems to be claiming he belongs to that elite. His last publication, *There Was a Country*, amply proves that claim. In this book, he recalls with precision

thousands of events and names of that early period.

The least one can say about that early period is that Achebe was fascinated by the colonial educational system, its actors and methods. He recalls with some nostalgia the sense of commitment and mission of its actors. He provides a record of his pride in being part of that educational system. Achebe confesses that "[his] professors were excellent people and excellent teachers" (TWC: 34) This pride is even more striking when he juxtaposes it with his indignation at the way things have developed in post-colonial Nigeria after the colonial master left. There is no controversy in arguing that Achebe uses an anglophile tone to speak about his appreciation of the institutions and the teachers he met in these early years of his life. The teachers he familiarizes his readers with are men of faith, committed to the high sense of the mission they were vested with. When they left, all their hard won achievements, particularly the educational system, collapsed. Those who took after them did have the training and education required to do the job but lacked the colonial master's sense of commitment. Things therefore fall apart in their hands. In a few words, Achebe was rather surprised that the leaders who took over after the colonial master failed in the management of their countries. He considers that they had been well prepared by the British educational and administrative system to do the job but quite surprisingly failed to match the challenge.

Achebe was fascinated by leaders of the colonial empire's educational system because its administrators were doing their best to prepare Africans to lead. Achebe writes that this period was marked by "a strong culture of meritocracy and a very high quality of instruction at Umuahia". (24) Several decades after independences, some people of the age or time of Achebe almost regret this colonial period and its main actors who were white agents of the colonial adventure. Some of these actors of the colonial era are A.P.Slater, R.H.Stone, Rev.Robert Fisher and W.C.Simpson to list a few. (TWC: 25) Their contributions were important. For example, Fisher and Simpson's initiation of a "textbook act" encouraging students to put away textbooks and read novels between 4 and 6 pm influenced many

⁵ Titles of Achebe's works will be abbreviated in the following way: *There Was a Country* (TWC), *Anthills of the Savannah* (AS), *No Longer At Ease* (NLE), *Things Fall Apart* (TFA), etc.

of the pioneers of modern African literature: Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, Christopher Okigbo, Elechi Amadi, Chike Momah, Gabriel Okara and Ken Saro-Wiwa. To these must be added leaders in the fine arts such as Ben Enwonwu, some political figures and many other renowned African intellectuals. He recalls that he was a close friend of Benjamin Uzochukwu who became the Director of the Federal Department of Public Works in Lagos, a school mate Jaja Wachukwu, Nigeria's First Speaker of the House of Representatives and later ambassador to the United Nations, Chu Okongwu, a Minister of Finance, J.O.J. Okezie, a famous physician and First Republic Minister of Health. (TWC: 24-26)

This colonial educational system celebrated hard work and high achievement. Parents like the sort Achebe had were aware of the prospects of investing in education and encouraged their descendants on the way to these educational achievements. In the case of the Igbo, the whole community seemed to foresee the gains of investing in education. All through the first seventy-two pages of the book *TWC*, Achebe recalls his performance in the national entrance examination. (27; 34; etc.) Achebe demonstrates his acknowledgement and appreciation of how well the British managed their colonies when he explains their competence, experience of governing, and high sense of duty:

The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently. I am not justifying colonialism. But it is important to face the fact that British colonies, more or less, were expertly run. (43)

This anglophile feeling is one of the main paradoxes of the Nigerian writer, one he shares with other intellectuals in post-colonial countries. Though he was one of the best supporters and defenders of indigenous values, Achebe was also fascinated by a colonial educational system which denied that Africans made any contribution to anything of worth in world history and

civilization. The artist and intellectual who lambasts in his fiction and essays the colonial system is the same man who celebrates in essays and personal notes that same system. This best summarizes the postcolonial identity we defined in earlier paragraphs. As the very embodiment of that postcolonial identity, Achebe was therefore no easy or Manichean mind because he was led to acknowledge the qualities and importance of the subject of his attacks (the colonial master) and also to highlight the flaws and weaknesses of his own society he defends against western prejudices. He was able to see in any man some positive qualities and in any culture some invaluable contribution to man's well-being. The celebratory tone about aspects of the colonial system and its criticism reveals the paradoxes of a postcolonial thinker. His attitude shows the blindspots of his thinking system, even his naivety about the colonial system. He seems to have identified some good in the bad system of colonization. The actors of the colonial enterprise seemed to wish well though it is clear they were for their own interests. Achebe's tone shows clearly that the goal of putting the local elite on their side of that system has been attained. The openness of mind could also be a legacy of his ethnic wisdom and background: the Igbo's sense of openness to new values, their cultures' sense of modernity which makes them welcome any value or cultural practice that brings something positive to them. Achebe who criticizes the colonial master's sense of "Euro-centrism" and shows the ideology lurking behind any said truth about dark Africa was the same Achebe who openly celebrates some figures of that colonial educational system. That paradoxical relationship the artist had with the colonial educational system was similar to the one he had with his indigenous cultural heritage.

2. A hybrid religious education for an ambivalent personality: Achebe between Christianity and the traditional religious system.

Achebe wondered in "The Writer and His Community" who his community was? (Achebe, HI 1988: 59-60) It would also have been useful for readers if he had asked himself "Who am I?" for Achebe is rarely confined within categories

already set. All through his life, Achebe remained a practicing Christian, a religion he embraced since childhood as his parents were both early converts and devout believers. This conversion did not prevent him from remaining deeply rooted to his ancestral cultural paradigms. The burial ceremonies organized in his honor proved he had a personality that claimed two cultures. He recalls in his notes that he owes this hybrid personality to the dual education he received from his father and mother and an uncle who related him to his indigenous roots:

The bible played an important role in my education. My parents often read passages out loud to us during prayer time and encouraged us, when we were all able, to read and memorized several passages. (TWC: 10)

The Christianity to which Achebe adhered was one that had room for the cultural values of Igbo people. Even his father was not the type of catechist who would turn his back on anything non-Christian. This tolerant Christianity is the one Achebe defended and practiced. *TFA* shows clearly that among early missionaries who came into contact with the Igbo land, some succeeded in establishing sound relationships with the local people, enlisting both their sympathy and respect. Achebe's relationship both to Christianity and traditional beliefs is no blind adherence to these systems. For instance, the way he rejects the narrow-mindedness of Reverend James Smith for the latter's excess of zeal and lack of compromise, the same way he takes distances with hard liners of the traditional world like Okonkwo who wish to keep their traditions pure and inviolable. Both systems of belief are analyzed critically from a historical perspective. Achebe clearly takes a stand with Mr. Brown whose policy of compromise and accommodation with native customs is the exact opposite of Smith. The tragic fate of *TFA*'s hero, Okonkwo, or to a lesser extent Ezeulu from *AG*, shows clearly that the sympathies of the writer go to Obierika and the other open minded characters of his fictions. Indeed Obierika is the exact opposite of Okonkwo despite their friendship. Obierika reproaches his age-mate for taking part in the ritual sacrifice of the lad Ikemefuna. Okonkwo has an essentialist and un-historical conception of the values of his community which is opposed by the postcolonial

ambivalent conception of historicity and culture. (H.Bhabha 1994) For the Igbo hero, the values of his people are beyond history; they are eternal and are neither to be questioned nor adapted to any new context. The final impression that readers are left with about Okonkwo is that of the hero who refuses to question the existing norms and remains trapped by his own illusions and phantasms. The tragic end of Ikemefuna, who is killed to abide by the decree of the gods, ends up alienating readers and even some characters in the diegesis, such as Okonkwo's own friends and family members. This episode and the narrative turn it takes suggest that the writer's opinion does not go along with that of the hard-liner hero of the village of Umuofia. It is more likely that Nwoye's ambiguous feelings about the twins thrown away into the evil forest resonate with Achebe's feelings about some practices in his own traditional community.

Achebe may have been keen on showing that his people were not a savage and barbaric community who emerged from a long night of savagery thanks to the colonial adventure, but he would not do so by trying to show that everything about them was perfect. In several episodes of his fictions, we have scenes where he casts a critical look at traditions and their practices. Irony is one of his favorite devices used to achieve that goal. *TFA* narrates a community that practices infanticide, gender discrimination, and phallocracy but has women and procreation at the heart of its core beliefs. Why should the child turn to his maternal family when in trouble but would belong to his father's in happier times? "Nneka", Okonkwo's maternal uncle explains, means that "mother is supreme." (*TFA*: 134) The community of Umuofia recognizes or establishes the primacy of the female principle but practices phallocracy in its everyday life. By the stylistic device of irony, Achebe casts a critical look at some traditional beliefs and practices. By so doing he questions their relevance for the present society.

The postcolonial situation is the site of two conflicting values: an imperial dominating Discourse and Counter-discourses, a Knowledge and alternative knowledges, of a Culture and counter cultures. (G.Spivak in Nelson & Grossberg 1988:271) Against the colonizers' pretension or claim of a hegemonic knowledge,

the postcolonial subject maintains the marginal knowledges of his people. Achebe presents in his fictions the Culture of the imperial power to which is juxtaposed the cultures of the local peoples in a bid for existence and acknowledgement. An example of the postcolonial conflict Achebe presents is the interplay of the colonial cultural educational system and Christianity. To these two main components of colonial culture, he opposes the traditional education he received. Such an option of faithfulness to both cultures in what he considered positive in them produced a personality with a cosmopolitan mind but who remained deeply rooted into ancestral cultural norms. He is no blind follower of any religious system and is fully aware of the link between Christianity, the slave trade, and colonialism:

My father had a lot of praise for the missionaries and their message, and so do I. I am a prime beneficiary of the education that the missionaries made a major component of their enterprise. But I have also learned a little more skepticism about them than my father had any need for. Does it matter, I ask myself, that centuries before European Christians sailed down to us in ships to deliver the Gospel and save us from darkness, other European Christians, also sailing in ships, delivered us to the transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in our world? (TWC: 14)

Achebe expressed appreciation for his Christian upbringing and colonial education as well as gratefulness to his great-uncle, Udoh Osinyi, for the latter's enormous value and "example of fidelity" (TWC: 14) to the local traditions. In his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe recalls both his early education in Christianity and participating in his uncle's heathen festival meals. These two religions, therefore, both shaped his personality. He sees himself as one of a "lucky generation ... planted at a crossroads at a time when the meeting of two cultures produced something worth." (TWC:14) The tension between these two systems of faith, to Achebe, sparked off his imagination and therefore his artistic career:

I can say that my whole artistic career was probably sparked by this tension between the Christian religion of my parents, which we followed in our home, and the retreating, older

religion of my ancestors, which fortunately for me was still active outside my home. I still had access to a number of relatives who had not converted to Christianity and were called heathens by the new converts... (11)

The Nigerian thinker and artist claimed the "dialectics" that he inherited from a father who was a teacher and an early evangelist and the "dialectics" that he learned from a grand uncle who was the very embodiment of traditional beliefs. The rich childhood experiences he had in both cultures taught him to water down his childhood's enthusiasm about Christianity:

Now it's impossible to grow up having the same faith, belief and attitude toward religion that I had as a child. Of course, I did have long periods of doubt and uncertainty, and had a period where I objected strongly to the certitude of Christianity - I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. When I was little, that didn't mean anything to me, but later on I was able to compare it with the rather careful and far more humble attitude of my indigenous religion in which because they recognized different gods they also recognized that you might be friendly with this god and fall out with the other one. You might worship Udo to perfection and still be killed by Ogwugwu. Such sayings and proverbs are far more valuable to me as a human being in understanding the complexity of the world than the narrow, doctrinaire, self-righteous attitude of the Christian faith. This other religion, which is ambivalent, is far more artistically satisfying to me. (12)

The world Achebe inherited was one of "dialectics" and "ambivalence". Words like "dichotomy", "oscillating faith", "a period doubt", "skepticism", to "bestride both worlds" are part of the thinker's familiar rhetoric.

The interplay of opposing social voices in *AS* shows the social link the author longs for and which reflects his education and personality: a western educated intellectual voice brought into contact with that of the wisdom of Ibo traditional peasantry and urban lumpen proletariat. In *The Trouble With Nigeria*, he attributes Nigeria's problem with the lack of communication between the urban elite and farmers from outlying districts of the country. In his last fiction, (i.e. *Anthills of the Savannah*), this lack of solidarity and

prevailing division is addressed and ways are suggested in the fiction to solve the problem.

Achebe's world rejects some aspects of colonial Christianity and also some cultural practices of his people. But he is able, like poet president Senghor's Manatees who will drink from the fount of Simal, to draw from both sources invaluable resources for a life of harmony for the hybrid postcolonial situation. The best illustration of that allegiance to the hybrid world of postcolonial Africa is the uncle of Elewa and the whole ecumenical ceremony around the naming ritual of Elewa's baby in *Anthills of the Savannah*. In this same novel, characters like Chris Oriko, Ikem, and Beatrice are not the products of a single and pure religion, culture and education. They belong to a cosmopolitan and open world which finds its values not in essences but in margins or narrow interstices, that is a cultural in-between. They belong to varying cultures, educational backgrounds, political ideologies, artistic conceptions and intellectual circles. These characters are not beings of one single chapel. Ikem ridicules ideologies of liberalism and the easy rhetoric of socialism through discourses that are parroted by students and half-backed professors of the University of Kangan. The only thing he believes university education should provide young people is a sharp critical sense and a rejection of ready-made systems of thought and belief. Beatrice loathes the patriarchal system that has prevailed since her childhood but does not accept wholly the ready-made theories of feminism as expounded by some western feminist activists or theoreticians. Ikem, Chris and Mad Medico make a joke of so-called serious issues of established systems like Christianity, nationalist rhetorics and other moral issues often deemed sacred. Like the real Achebe, his characters will not be entrapped in any codified system that limit their freedom. The consequences of this hybrid identity in such an ambivalent situation are a subject characterized by the postcolonial traits of 'rhizome' and paradoxes.

II- The paradoxes of a "rhizomatic" personality.

The concept of rhizome which was developed by French philosophers G.Deleuze and F.Guattary is a concept borrowed from biology which can be used fruitfully to analyze the identity of the

postcolonial subject who is the product of the ambivalent nature of the postcolonial situation. The term is opposed to the principle of foundation and origins as embodied in the figure of the tree which is hierarchical and centralized. The rhizome is rather "proliferating and serial, functioning by means of the principles of connection and heterogeneity." (J.Marks in Wolfram 2004) The rhizome symbolizes connections, multiplicity as these are opposed to binary subject/object structure of modern western thinking system. "A rhizome", the French thinkers contend, "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance." (1987: 25) Applied to our study, it implies a personality that does rank into mainstreams but tries to assert its marginal identity. In the traditional context, such a person would cast a critical look at some aspects of traditional life. In the modern contest, as fostered by colonialism, he would question some of the basic assumptions of that modern society.

1. From fascination to revolt against colonial structures.

Albert Chinualumogu went through an educational process that took him from fascination with the British educational system as analyzed earlier to a period of unease which ended in exasperation and open revolt against a system he saw as dehumanizing for his people. His career as a writer and an intellectual was a reaction to the picture drawn by British colonial literature about his people.

As a schoolboy at Government College in Umuahia in South-eastern Nigeria, Achebe is remembered as a regular visitor of the college library who loved reading so much that friends nicknamed him "Dictionary." (27) He was familiar with works by famous writers like w.Shakespeare, John Milton, Daniel Defoe, and Jonathan Swift. As a mere schoolboy, he would devour fiction books by R.L.Stevenson, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Tennyson.

Achebe was particularly interested in some of the English writers because of their disdain for provincialism, an attitude that seems to be in agreement with Bakhtin's theories of the novel.

For the Russian theoretician, the novelistic discourse dismisses established rules to be followed blindly by novelists. The novel is an experimental artistic experience. What Achebe likes in a Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is their disruption of rules, their often unexpected or even outrageous stylistic experimentations which extend formal possibilities. In that, these novels provided great inspiration to the postcolonial literary experience which was contesting the universalist pretensions of colonial or imperial literature. We must add to that list, as it is revealed in an interview with Bradford Morrow, as a token of Achebe's openness to world culture and literature, books by Russian writers, writers from the Arabic world like Mahfouz, women writers like Alifa Rifaat, El Saadawi, from eastern Africa like Nuruddin Farah (Somalia) and who all endeavor to understand and explain the world in which they live(d). (www.conjunctions.com archives/c17-ca.htm) Achebe's interest for the marginal discourses, rebel voices can be seen through these writers who have in various ways transformed literatures in their own countries.

As it can be seen, Achebe has always been fascinated by English literature. It can be assumed that his sensitive mind brought him close to that literature which was the only literature available to him during his schooldays. His British professors had only that corpus in store for him. In his later development, Achebe would never deny that fascination for the writers and heroes of this prime initiation to the literary world. These writers and their heroes have remained his heroes lurking behind his local heroes even in the most "indigenous" works he would publish later on. The title of his first novel is found in an epigraph borrowed from a verse of W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming." In a similar epigraph, he paid tribute to British poet T.S. Eliot in *No Longer at Ease*, a title inspired by a verse of that famous poet.

Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* turned out to be a turning point in Achebe's career. It is the reading of that novel that persuaded him that if he had anything worthwhile to do in his life and career, it would be to right the wrongs this prejudiced book about the local people was putting forward. In this novel, the hero, a British colonial master shoots,

and kills his Nigerian docile servant. Reviewers in the western press saw in this work a masterpiece that they praised as "the best book ever written about Africa." (HI) Achebe had a different reaction and described with some exasperation the hero as a "bumbling idiot of a character." (Ibid) The picture that was drawn of his country, its inhabitants, and their values was to him too simplistic, naïve, and racist. The then unknown Nigerian writer, like many other African writers⁶ decided to "write back"⁷ to tell stories removed from the framework of the colonial perspective. Thus, borrowing from the wisdom of his people who have it that until animals tell their own stories, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter, Achebe decided to write his own story, the stories of his people. "If you don't like someone's story, you write your own" he said in an interview. (*The Art of Fiction*, N° 139) The Nigerian novelist confesses that stories told from the perspective of the winner or dominator, as is the case of Joyce, Defoe, Conrad, etc., had a great impact on him as a school boy. Far from being troubled by the stories told, for instance, by John Bunchan which described heroic white men battling and killing repulsive natives, he was rather excited to read these adventures. Later on, he would recall these readings as "wonderful preparation" for maturity when he started reading between the lines and asking questions.

The Nigerian writer was certainly fascinated by this literature which he would later criticize with acerbity. Like western writers Sterne, Eliot or Yeats, Achebe understood his role at that time as one of questioning the values and norms of the colonial world. As a postcolonial writer, his art, in agreement with Edward Said's *Orientalism* also shares A. Mbembe's definition of the postcolonial art:

"[It] deconstructs colonial prose, that is to say the mental set-up, the symbolic forms and representations of underpinning the imperial project. It also unmasks the potential of this prose for falsification – in a world, the stock of falsehoods and the weight of fantasizing functions without which colonialism as a historical power-

⁶ Like Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, G; Okara.

⁷ In reference to Ascroft & al, *The Empire Writes Back*, Routledge 1989

system could not have worked. In this way it reveals how what passed for European humanism manifested itself in the colonies as duplicity, double-talk and a travesty of reality. (Interview in *Esprit*, 31-47 March 2016)

The overall goal, for Achebe and his African counterparts, was to bring to the fore an indigenous literature. Against the “literature under tutelage” in which native writers of the first generation were miming their colonial masters and patrons in styles and themes, sought patrons, editors among agents of the colonial empire, Achebe and writers of his generation endeavored to write against this colonial literary tradition. African literary Renaissance was therefore the ultimate goal. This goal could be attained only by writing their own stories to counter the negative clichés conveyed by a colonial literature: “a major objective was to challenge stereotypes, myths, and the image of ourselves and our continent, and to recast them through stories – prose, poetry, essays, and books for our children.” (53) After dismissing *Mister Johnson* as a set of simplistic colonial clichés, Achebe lambasted in an essay Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* whose fiction he tagged as “thoroughgoing racist” (“An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad ‘Heart of Darkness’” in HI).

After Achebe equated Conrad with Joyce and accused both of racism, his criticisms against these western icons were met with hostility from some American academics. “The real question” the essayist argued, “is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which [an] age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world.” (ibid) Achebe admitted he was forced to see himself as one of Conrad’s threatening savages jumping naked on the river bank, those “dogs standing on their hind legs” and he contended that it was “terribly, terribly wrong” to portray his people or any people from that superior stance.

This stance illustrates J.M.Moura’s definition of the postcolonial situation. The postcolonial situation is the one in which the colonized people, that is, its leaders and intellectuals are trying by violence or negotiation to attain to the status of historical agents that write their own stories and manage their societies:

La postcolonialité se définit comme la condition par laquelle les peuples colonisés à accéder

violemment ou pas, au statut de sujet historique (...) Globalement, il s’agit pour ces écrivains de ressaisir leur passé, d’en contrôler l’expression et de lui donner forme, c’est-à-dire, de traiter de la négation et de l’aliénation que l’ordre colonial les avait amenés à intérioriser. (1997:62)

Achebe has been prepared for his literary career by his extensive reading of English writers whose works were made available at the colonial school system. This system was more or less a faithful copy of the metropolitan English educational system found in schools and universities in the British Empire. The styles of the writers found in books of the colonial school libraries greatly influenced him: “When I saw a good sentence, saw a good phrase from the western canon, of course I was influenced by it. But the story itself – there weren’t any models.” (TWC: 54) If he found their stories uninspiring if not blatantly antagonistic toward his native culture, their style was a source of influence for him. In a word, Achebe was interested in British writers’ art, their techniques, but not their ideas.

The later generations would see in Achebe’s effort to write an African story from the perspective of Africans a pioneer work that opened the literary career to them. The best known literary protégé of Achebe is the highly acclaimed Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In a testimony she made in tribute to her literary god father in 2008, Adichie recalled her own experience as a child. In the books available to her, “all characters were white and ate fruits found in Britain and played in the snow and had dogs called Socks.” (www.pen.org/.../) When she started writing her own stories, as early as when she was 7, Adichie tried to recreate the world she could read in English novels. She is quoted saying that she wrote exactly the kinds of stories [she] was reading, i.e., “all characters were white and blue eyed – played in the snow [and] ate apples.” Although she lived in Nigeria where there was no snow, no apples but rather mangoes ... she wrote such stories as a consequence of her early contact with british literature. It is thanks to writers like Camara Laye and particularly Chinua Achebe that she went through a mental shift in her perception of literature and started writing about things she recognized.

(https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/)

I didn't know that people like me could exist in books ... I had assumed that books, by their very nature, had to have English people in them. And then I read "Things Fall Apart" [...] I realized that people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form pony tails, could also exist in literature. (sunnewonline.com www.pen.org.org/.../)

Such is the postcolonial identity of the Nigerian writer. The earlier fascination for the colonial educational system in which he was educated turned into a revolt when he was in an age to read between the lines and ask questions about the very system that had earlier seduced him so much. Achebe loved British literature but did not sacrifice the love he had for his own people and their stories on the altar of that first love. This situation best summarized the postcolonial condition of intellectuals and artists. As fine products of a system that ensures the success in their careers, postcolonial writers like Achebe came to revolt against the colonial system. But this revolt does not imply denial of their former allegiances and interests. They have remained fascinated by a system they criticized and go on criticizing. Such a paradoxical attitude is revealed in the social and political stances of the Nigerian writer where the values he celebrated in fictions and essays gave way to contrary stances in real political life during the Biafra crisis.

2- From panafricanism to secession or the ambiguities of a postcolonial intellectual

If Achebe is a postcolonial writer, it is because in his essays and fiction he makes not only a critical analysis of the colonial situation but also a critical analysis of the independent societies of Nigeria. Achille Mbembe defines the postcolonial discourse as "a way of reflecting on the fractures on what remains of the promise of life when the enemy is no longer the colonist in a strict sense, but the brother. It is a critique of the African discourse on the community and fraternity." (Esprit n°330, 2006) The gist of Mbembe's critical stance is about his own society, the inability of the political and intellectual elite to address its responsibilities. Even though he holds the colonial masters responsible for the ordeal of

the postcolonial subjects, Achebe does not spare Africans and their leaders of their responsibilities in the mess in which he and his people live. Achebe's postcolonial discourse is not wholly anti-colonial nor is it afrocentrist which would consist in celebrating the independent nations and discharging them of their responsibilities.

The writer grew up in the context of a growing African nationalism. Through his essays and fiction, it can be seen that he always opted for a broadly panafrican view akin to that held by leaders like Nandi Azikiwe, Nkrumah, etc. For his desire to rewrite the history of precolonial Africa and colonialism from an African perspective, Achebe is rightly regarded as a pan-africanist. His works are deeply rooted in his Igbo, Nigerian and African culture. Many generations of Africans from various parts of the continent and even from the Diaspora have seen in these literary works the living embodiment of their proud indigenous identity.

The question "who is my community?" that Achebe asked in an essay shows that he was concerned and conscious of the open and diverse nature of his personal identity and the identities that made up the audience for which he writes his stories. If the ideal of pan-africanism is generally to be cherished, Achebe seems to warn against claims of exclusive and pure identities into which human communities often lock themselves. It is the writer's conviction that there is no room for racial or ethnic purity. The people to whom he has addressed his stories are Christians, Muslims, or adherents of traditional religions. They are Nigerians from the North, the South, the East, or the West. Although the option of writing in English excludes many illiterate Africans from enjoying his stories, they are always present in his narratives. The stories are about this hybrid community and fragmented identities. The Minister stays with the taxi driver, the university graduate civil servant (Okoh) is friend with the market seller (Elewa). All social classes, ethnic groups, illiterate and graduates, are represented in Achebe's fictions. AS, NLAE, AMOP show all these social classes and fragmented identities, each with its characteristics, hopes, failures, and weaknesses. The writer seems to have made sure that all these components of the society identify with some characters in his novels.

The old man who chairs the delegation that has come from the Abazon region to plead for water infrastructures teaches a lesson to his ethnic assembly which seems to favor regional and tribal loyalty over national interests. With his wisdom, we see that his ideas try to relate to “One Nigeria” beyond divisions of class, region, ethnic allegiances and occupation. The village elder who has sympathy for the narrator Ikem tries to make his tribal audience understand that the voice of “the largely silent and invisible millions and millions” (AS) of Nigerians who identifies with Ikem is far more important than the pride felt by one ethnic group putting its interest before national interests. To those who complain that Ikem favors his national duty to the detriment of his ethnic or tribal duties, the village elder has a firm rebuke:

But leave this young man alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole of Kangan; the cock that crows in the morning belongs to the household but his voice is the property of the neighborhood. You should be proud that the bright cockerel that wakes the whole village comes from your compound. (AS: 122)

The fable of the boa-constrictor which is introduced into the main narrative suggests an inclusive narrative perspective for the story of the land. The forester mistakes the middle of a mighty boa for a tree trunk: this shows partiality and a narrowness of vision that makes us cling to the “little scraps of tale bubbling in us.” (AS: 125) The old man opts for the totality of the nation but a totality that acknowledges and respects the differences in the social whole. The truth is to be found in the whole. The discussion between Ikem and Beatrice in chapter 7 reveals the very open-mindedness of the two characters and shows how close they are intellectually. For Ikem, “contradictions are the very stuff of life”(100) which Beatrice agrees with when she shows that “orthodoxy whether of the right or the left is the graveyard of creativity.” (100) The narrator’s sympathies with poet Walt Whitman are justified by the latter’s celebration of contradictions and multitudes against “certitudes” (99) which are suspect. Terms like “patriots”, “party – liners” are dismissed as being obnoxious notions playing on facile emotions of people. In an intertextual note, Achebe, through explicit allusions to the

American poet Walt Whitman and novelist Graham Greene, shows clearly his conception of art. Like the poet who did not object to contradicting himself claiming that he was “large” and contained “multitudes” (100), Achebe’s alter ego, Ikem, conceives of the “genuine artist” as someone who, “no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy.” (100)

In A.S, taxi drivers, market sellers, and students are brought into contact with ministers, journalists, civil servants, and even a president of a republic. Christians work with Muslims and followers of traditional faiths as demonstrated during the naming ceremony of the baby of the late Ikem. Each element of the society asserts its presence through his sociolect or social dialect.⁸ These various sociolects intermingle to create a linguistic, religious and cultural melting pot. The hero of *No Longer at Ease* displays a visceral rejection of tribalism and its core value of ethnic purity. *A Man of the People* criticizes the shortcuts of tribalism that allow some ill-inspired politicians to have recourse to these threats to national cohesion and which ensures their victories in their electoral constituencies. From the entire novelist’s fictional world, it can be inferred that Achebe is no supporter of ethnicity or tribalism. For the writer, one of the main causes of the failure in the management of African countries is the inability of the elite in postcolonial societies to connect with the rest of the people. “It is the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation’s being.”(AS: 141)

Achebe was a firm believer in the pan-Nigerian vision in which “a [Nigerian] citizen could live and work in a place of his choice anywhere, and pursue any legitimate goal open to his fellows; a Nigeria in which an Easterner might aspire to be Premier in the west and a Northerner become Mayor of Enugu.” (TWC: 5)

It is this long-time supporter of nationalism and panafricanism who became an ardent supporter of

⁸ These terms are used in sociolinguistics to refer to a variety of language that is associated with a social group or class. Cf Finegan & R.Rickford , *Language in the USA: Themes for twenty-first Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

the secessionist Biafra republic in the late 1960s when Odumegu Ojukwu made his declaration of independence on the 30th of May 1967. During the Biafra war, Achebe served as that entity's communication minister and international envoy to promote the cause of this republic in the West and in some African countries. The Igbo born novelist and friends like Christopher Okigbo set up a publishing company and wrote a manifesto for the new declared republic. As part of an intellectual elite, they came together "to recreate a Biafran microcosm of Nigeria's early spirit, their ideals drawn from a mix of traditional Igbo philosophy, U.S. style liberalism and socialism."(Noo Saro-Wiwa in www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/05)

When people reproach Achebe for having joined the Biafran cause, it is out of the conviction that as an artist, he shouldn't have sacrificed his art to politics. To those who contend that the writer has no role in politics and should stay on the sidelines with his notepad and pen to observe with objectivity, Achebe argues that such a writer "can only write footnotes or a glossary when the event is over" (TWC: 55). Indeed, Achebe finds futile the preoccupations of writers who are concerned about existential angst and universalist pretensions such as the early books by Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah. This argument by Achebe was taken as an insulting offense by the Ghanaian writer who reacted vehemently to that insult in his *The Eloquence of the Scribes*. Achebe also recalls Ali Mazrui's fiction, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, in which the poet Okigbo is charged with "the offence of putting society before art in his scale of values ... No great artist has a right to carry patriotism to the extent of destroying his creative potential" (Mazrui 1971) In that regard, Achebe and Okigbo both dismissed the conception of art as something irretrievably disconnected to society and its problems. In a community of crisis, it is the moral obligation of the artist not to "ally with power against the powerless" (TWC: 58), his responsibility to write the crisis as a way of revealing its uglinesses, to take sides with the oppressed against the emperor or oppressed.

Nigerian writers Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensy, Gagriel Okara, Okigbo and Achebe himself shared the *Nri* philosophy which states that intellectuals in periods of crisis should turn

into "warriors of peace" and each of these writers did work toward a peaceful resolution of the Biafra conflict. Achebe was far from being one of the hardliners of the Biafran cause. Soyinka's plans of setting up an anti-war delegation composed of artists and intellectuals from both sides were thwarted by the federal authorities who arrested and jailed him on his way back from the Secessionist Biafra where he went in an attempt to appeal for a cease-fire. In these writers' conception of their role in society, Art should reconcile (wo)man to her/himself, to other human beings, to one's environment. It is therefore against an unfruitful division, isolation and social ugliness. It calls for a psychological, social, and aesthetic harmony.

Achebe's last book, *There Was a Country*, shows the painful divorce between the panafricanist and the secessionist, the uneasy option of secession for a disappointed mind deeply committed to national unity. He did not choose to be part of the secessionist movement out of some irredentist tribalism. His personal experiences after the mass murders of the Igbo in the northern state when the government declared that they could not guarantee the safety of the Igbos persuaded Achebe to join the secessionist forces. The Igbo writer reproached the federal government for failing its mission to provide safety to an important part of the national population. Achebe contended that a republic should be against genocide, racism, and ethnic cleansing. For Achebe, there is no such a thing like unity for unity sake. A state that is unwilling or unable to provide what its citizens are looking for in unity is in no position to require from them their allegiance. In such a context, division becomes a solution. "When we noticed that the federal government of Nigeria did not respond to our call to end the pogroms, we concluded that a government that failed to safeguard the lives of its citizens has no claim to their allegiance and must be ready to accept that the victims deserve the right to seek their safety in other ways – including secession." (TWC: 95) In his last fiction (AS), the writer argues through Beatrice's words against unity understood as intolerance towards differences and contradictions. She contends that safety can lie in contradictions. "In the very vocabulary of certain radical theorists contradictions are given the status

of some deadly disease to which their opponents alone can succumb ... If there had been a little dash of contradictions among the Gadarene swine some of them might have been saved from drowning.” (100)

Achebe's disappointment and divorce from *One Nigeria* sometimes took unexpected tones which have been interpreted as anti-patriotism. In a keynote address on October 9, 2008 at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) in Victoria Island Lagos for the Silver Jubilee of the Guardian Newspaper, the writer said that in (his) “next life, he will be a Nigerian ... but not yet” (allafrica.com/stories/200812100355.html) Such an address was likely to alienate some of his readers but the writer was not one to follow the crowd and he refused to speak the language of the populous.

For the novelist, Nigeria failed to be the father or mother for all Nigerians, and in protest Achebe boycotted all national awards and refused Nigeria's highest national honor, i.e., the Commander of the Federal Republic, awarded him twice. In an interview, he justified his Biafra stance as a reaction to the betrayal of the federal authorities:

We wanted the kind of freedom, the kind of independence, which we were not experiencing in Nigeria. [...] the fact that a government stood by while parts of the population were murdered at will in sections of the country went against our conception about what independence from the British should mean. So, Biafra was an attempt to establish a nation where there would be true freedom, true independence. (www.conjunctions.com/archives/c17-ca.htm)

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to show to what extent Chinua Achebe embodied all the traits of the postcolonial situation. He shared these features with most intellectuals and artists whose origins can be traced to countries which experienced the colonial situation and who lived in the postcolonial context, a colonial situation that refused to pass away and lingers on in attitudes and behaviors. By his education, Achebe was among the elite of his people, a status he shared with his intellectual counterparts who excelled in the formal institutions the colonial master set up

before leaving. But as fascinated as he was by the colonial master's institutions, he equally held fast to his ancestral values which he claimed to defend with the new weapons provided by the colonial master, i.e the modern literary forms. From the fascination he felt for the colonial education and ways of life, he came to a period of revolt. The paradoxical development and ambiguities of many episodes of his life made him the living embodiment of the postcolonial situation which is one of ambivalence, paradox, irony and ambiguity. Achebe was an early panafricanist and a committed supporter of One Nigeria. He ended up an ardent advocate of a secession bid in his country. Another apt symbol of the complexity of the postcolonial situation is the paradoxical situation of the postcolonial elite who remains fascinated by the people and values they claim to reject. It is not surprising that postcolonial theoreticians such as John Maxwell Coetzee, Marise Conde, Achille Mbembe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Ali Mazrui, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have chosen to live in the countries whose systems they criticize. Ironically enough, like all these scholars who have generally chosen to live and prosper in the western educational institutions, Achebe ended his days working in the USA where he died 2013.

Bibliography

Achebe (Chinua)

There Was a Country: a Personal History of Biafra, New York, The Penguin Press, 2012.

Things Fall Apart, New York, Anchor Books, 1994

Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987, 1988

Anthills of the Savannah, Heinemann AWS, 1987.

The Trouble With Nigeria, London, Heinemann AWS, 1983

Arrow of God, London, Heinemann AWS, 1971.

No longer at Ease, London Heinemann, 1960.

Appiah (Kwame Anthonin), “Is the Post- in Postmodern the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry*, The University of Chicago Press, vol.17, N°2, (Winter 1991) pp.336-357.

Ashcroft (Bill), Griffiths (Garteh) & Tiffin (H.), *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in*

Post-Colonial Literatures, London, Routledge, 1989.

eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006

Bhabha (Homi), *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994

ed., *Nations and Narration*, London, Routledge, 1990.

Bourdieu (Pierre), *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.

Deleuze (Gilles) & Guattari (Félix), *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword Brian Massumi, London – Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1987.

Emenyonu (Ernest) & C.E. Nnolim, *Remembering a Legend: Chinua Achebe*. African Heritage Press, New York Lagos London, 2014.

Esprit n°330, 2006, *Esprit* 31-47, March 2016
Interviews with Achile Mbembe.

Finnegan (E.) & R.Rickford, *Language in the USA. Themes for Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Ferguson (R.)and al, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, M.A. MIT, 1990.

Gilbert (Helen) & Tompkins (Joanne), *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, 1996.

Mazrui (Ali), *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, Heinemann, 1971

Mbembe (Achille), *On the Postcolony: Studies on the History of Society and Culture*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 2001.

Moura (Jean-Marc.), *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*. Paris, PUF, 1999.

Nelson (Cary) & Grossberg (Lawrence) eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*, Urbance, IL: University of Illinois Press 1988.

Said (Edward), *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon, 1978.

Vann Gennep (Arnold), *Les rites de passages. Etude systématique des rites*, Paris, Picard, 1981.

Young (Robert), *Postcolonialism: a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

On the web :

- The Buried Christian Achebe was not ModernGhana.com

- Chinua Achebe, An Interview – Conjunctions www.

- More – The Source Magazine Online. www.the

sourcing.com/countrynovember52012htm

- www.worldliteratureforum

- www.nytimes.com Africa/Chinua-achebe-nigerian-

- Sunnewonline.com www.pen.org/.../

- Allafrica.com/stories/2008/2/00355.html

- Bradford Morrow's interview with Chinua Achebe in

www.conjunctions.com/archives/c17-ca.thm

consulted 20th December 2015.

- Noo Sara-Wiwa

www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/05/

consulted on 20th December 2015