

The Recuperation of African History in African Fiction

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The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0037

Abstract

The relationship between fiction and history is quite obvious, especially in postcolonial African settings, where it is more often than not that postcolonial African writers use their writings-creative or otherwise- to challenge the apologetic colonial Eurocentric historical discourses. This paper will demonstrate how African novelists portray in their imaginative creation a history denied or distorted by European historian and men of letters. Thus, the continent which is described in many Europeans documents as 'heart of darkness' and 'space without history', is forcefully vindicated by African writers. African novelists such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo' enlist their fiction to challenge the ubiquitous claim that Africa lacked culture and civilization. Through appraisal of a selected novel written by each of these two authors this paper will highlight ways in which fiction can be utilized to recuperate a displaced history. Both Ngugi and Achebe set their novels at a very contentious epoch in history of the African continent: the advent of colonial enterprise in Africa and within their respective communities. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart (1958)* depicts the evolution in history of the Igbo people which is, sadly, stopped by the colonial intervention. Likewise Ngugi's *The River Between (1966)* engages the history of the Gikuyu people and how it is disrupted by European missionaries and invaders. The two novels thus, provide a lucid illustration of the attempts to rectify the distorted image of the African continent painted by scheming Europeans whose foremost intention was to expropriate the continent's human and natural resources.

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Introduction

Human history is strewn with injustice and transgressions. Human beings' rightful occupation of planet Earth and the stunning material and spiritual advancement they achieved thereon was never without concomitant drawbacks. People, through different phases of history and everywhere they existed, have inflicted all sorts of suffering, both on themselves and on other beings. And indeed good and evil are in ferocious battle from day one of human sojourn on the face of Earth until the day they are interred one by one into its bowels. Religious texts chronicle the first ever murder in the world when the earth population was as scarce as six people. Abel's fratricide by Cane when the latter, contested his brother's right to marry his female twin was the first case of bloodshed due to conflict of interests.

Henceforth, and as the population of the earth started to multiply, the earth had become stage on which battles of various degrees of fierceness between different families, different tribes, different nations, different races, and different religions. As a result empires had risen and fallen, civilizations had been established and dismantled, tribes and clans had appropriated large plots of land from which they are flushed by other tribes, each leaving behind proud documents of their heroic deeds. These documents are essential components of what is referred to as 'literature'.

One of the most contested periods of human history is, probably, the period of colonialist expansion that took place at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The continent of Africa, during that period had fallen a prey to the Western predator nations that appropriated almost every inch of the continent. Africa had been divided according to the interest of European imperialist into territories each carries the flag of the particular colonising power. In effect the continent had become mere extensions of British, French and Portuguese empires, and the African people were turned into virtual slave on their own land.

That conquest was preceded by a concerted trajectory of what I would like to call soft invasion which came disguised in the cloaks of missionaries and robes of orientalist scholars.

Colonial Discourse on African History

One of the most apparent characteristics of literature written by African authors in the wake of colonization is its anxious attempt to counter the views presented by Europeans about the continent and its inhabitants. A very common conception propagated in discourse about Africa is that it is an empty geographical space without any history or civilization. . That misconception is perhaps best seen in Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*. Having discussed the absence of African political institutions which he regards as a major element of historical movements, Hegel (1900:99) states that Africa:

Is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part belong to the Asiatic or European World What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved

The quotation perfectly demonstrates the typical European conceptions of Africa which was and is propagated by leading European thinkers. This perceptions does not only conform to European colonizers and conquerors attitudes but actually provides them with the pretext to scramble on what they haughtily called "no man land". According to McCarney (2000) Hegel has depended on the tales of travellers, officials and missionaries which are motivated by their interests to project the Africans as primitive and exotic as possible so as to give a glow to their spurious civilizing endeavors.

The denial of African history is also expressed by Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. In 1963, he made a claim that [perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history. . . . But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, . . . and darkness is not a subject of history" (qtd. in Mazrui ,1972:7). It is worth-noticing that, in Trevor-Roper's view, Africa can enter "the World's History" only when it is under European colonial rule which makes Africa, the "dark" continent, visible to the rest of the world. In other words, as Achebe (1988:251) states, in his criticism of Joseph Conrad's portrayal of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is reduced to merely "setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor" . Since it is conceived of as having a "condition of blankness—of distance and ignorance, of sleep" as Miller (1985:62) calls it , Africa is never the speaking subject of its own history; on the contrary, it functions as a footnote to the history of European colonization. The mystification of the non-existence of African history is well articulated by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana:

It is said that whereas other countries have shaped history and determined its course, Africa has stood still, held down by inertia. Africa, it is said, entered history only as a result of European contact. Its history, therefore, is widely felt to be an extension of European history. (qtd. in Mazrui 1972:3-4)

Historical Background of African Writing in English

The history of English language in Africa is, inextricably, entangled with the history of exploitation and unpardonable injustices incurred by Africans at the hands of the erstwhile British Empire. Africans came into contact with the English tongue through one of two historical malpractices; naked slavery, and imperialist expansion. Griffith (2000:13) points out that the earliest writing in English by Africans ' were narratives of slaves captured and transported by European slave-traders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'. African slaves who had been captured and snatched from their peaceful abodes , faced one of two humiliating fates. They were either transported to the New World to work in plantations, or shipped to Europe to become domestic slave. In both cases they had to adopt English as means of communication.

As for the colonialist expansion, the second factor in transplanting English into Africa, it followed the infamous Berlin conference (1884–85) which initiated ' the scramble for Africa'. After that conference the continent of Africa had been ripped into smaller territories labeled countries each was affiliated to one or another of the expansionist European powers. The British Empire had emerged from Berlin conference with the largest proportion of the continent, and hence English language started to gain ground in those colonies under the British Crown. (Griffith,2000:32)

Colonization brought along with it education with the utilitarian purpose of training local cadres to assist the colonial administration in running the affairs of the colonies. Education in Africa was initiated by the Christian missionaries but the colonial authorities established public education which regulated and harnessed the existing missionary education. The colonial authorities had also created Government Literary Beaux in order to encourage the burgeoning native elites to write literary or non-literary works. The introduction of education by the colonizer should be understood as a utilitarian move and not as a step to civilize the colonized as the colonialist would like to believe.

As Griffith(2000:86) shows a number of literary text written by African had been published by those Literary Beaux. These texts contained some concerns about local issues in a way which makes us believe that they have in them seeds of "postcolonial counter discourse". They exemplify the ability of the colonized people to appropriate the English language and the European literary forms of the novel to serve their own ends.

Both Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi's *The River Between* the texts under focus in this paper epitomize the endeavors to

Snippet of Biography Achebe

Chinua Achebe, in full **Albert Chinualumogu Achebe** (born November 16, 1930, Ogidi, Nigeria died March 21, 2013, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.), prominent novelist, poet, essayist and political activist spent most of his creative life in exile to avoid persecution by dictatorial regimes ruling over his home country since independence.

Educated in English at the University of Ibadan, Achebe taught for a short time before joining the staff of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos where he served as director of external broadcasting during 1961–66. In 1967 he cofounded a publishing company at Enugu with the poet Christopher Okigbo, who died shortly thereafter in the Nigerian civil war. In 1969 Achebe toured the United States with his fellow writers Gabriel Okara and Cyprian Ekwensi, lecturing at universities. Upon his return to Nigeria he was appointed research fellow at the University of Nigeria and became professor of English, a position he held from 1976 until 1981 (professor emeritus from 1985). He was director (from 1970) of two Nigerian publishers, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. and Nwankwo-Ifejika Ltd. After an automobile accident in Nigeria in 1990 that left him partially paralyzed, he moved to the United States, where he taught at Bard College in New York. In 2009 Achebe left Bard to join the faculty of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Things Fall Apart (1958), Achebe's first novel, concerns traditional Igbo life at the time of the advent of missionaries and colonial government in his homeland. His principal character cannot accept the new order, even though the old has already collapsed.

In No Longer at Ease (1960) he portrayed a newly appointed civil servant, recently returned from university study in England, who is unable to sustain the moral values he believes to be correct in the face of the obligations and temptations of his new position.

In **Arrow of God(1964)**, set in the 1920s in a village under British administration, the principal character, the chief priest of the village, whose son becomes a zealous Christian, turns his resentment at the position he is placed in by the white man against his own people. **A Man of the People (1966)** and **Anthills of the Savannah (1987)** deal with corruption and other aspects of

postcolonial African life. Achebe also published several collections of short stories and a children's book, *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1973; with John Iroaganachi). *Beware, Soul-Brother* (1971) and *Christmas in Biafra* (1973) are collections of poetry. *Another Africa* (1998) combines an essay and poems by Achebe with photographs by Robert Lyons. Achebe's books of essays include *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), *Home and Exile* (2000), *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009), and *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). In 2007 he won the Man Booker International Prize.

Snippet of Biography Achebe

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, original name **James Thiong'o Ngugi** (born January 5, 1938, Limuru, Kenya), East Africa's leading novelist, whose popular *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first major novel in English by an East African. As he became sensitized to the effects of colonialism in Africa, he adopted his traditional name and wrote in the Bantu language of Kenya's Kikuyu people.

Ngugi received bachelor's degrees from Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, in 1963 and from Leeds University, Yorkshire, England, in 1964. After doing graduate work at Leeds, he served as a lecturer in English at University College, Nairobi, Kenya, and as a visiting professor of English at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, U.S. From 1972 to 1977 he was senior lecturer and chairman of the department of literature at the University of Nairobi.

The prizewinning *Weep Not, Child* is the story of a Kikuyu family drawn into the struggle for Kenyan independence during the state of emergency and the Mau Mau rebellion. *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), generally held to be artistically more mature, focuses on the many social, moral, and racial issues of the struggle for independence and its aftermath. A third novel, *The River Between* (1965), which was actually written before the others, tells of lovers kept apart by the conflict between Christianity and traditional ways and beliefs and suggests that efforts to reunite a culturally divided community by means of Western education are doomed to failure. *Petals of Blood* (1977) deals with social and economic problems in East Africa after independence, particularly the continued exploitation of peasants and workers by foreign business interests and a greedy indigenous bourgeoisie. In a novel written in Kikuyu and English versions, *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (1980; *Devil on the Cross*), Ngugi presented these ideas in an allegorical form. Written in a manner meant to recall traditional ballad singers, the novel is a partly realistic, partly fantastical account of a meeting between the Devil and various villains who exploit the poor. *Mũrogi was Kagogo* (2004; *Wizard of the Crow*) brings the dual lenses of fantasy and satire to bear upon the legacy of colonialism not only as it is perpetuated by a native dictatorship but also as it is ingrained in an ostensibly decolonized culture itself.

The Black Hermit (1968; produced 1962) was the first of several plays, of which *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976; produced 1974), co written with Micere Githae Mugo, is considered by some critics to be his best. He was also coauthor, with Ngugi wa Mirii, of a play first written in Kikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977; *I Will Marry When I Want*), the performance of which led to his detention for a year without trial by the Kenyan government. (His book *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, which was published in 1981, describes his ordeal.) The play attacks capitalism, religious hypocrisy, and corruption among the new economic elite of

Kenya. *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (1986; *Matigari*) is a novel in the same vein. Ngugi presented his ideas on literature, culture, and politics in numerous essays and lectures, which were collected in *Homecoming* (1972), *Writers in Politics* (1981), *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), *Moving the Centre* (1993), and *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998).

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngugi argued for African-language literature as the only authentic voice for Africans and stated his own intention of writing only in Kikuyu or Kiswahili from that point on. Such works earned him a reputation as one of Africa's most articulate social critics. After a long exile from Kenya, Ngugi returned in 2004 with his wife to promote *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*. Several weeks later they were brutally assaulted in their home; the attack was believed by some to be politically motivated. After their recovery, the couple continued to publicize the book abroad. In 2010 Ngugi published *Dreams in a Time of War*, a memoir of his childhood in Kenya.

Things Fall Apart and African History

Achebe's acclaimed classic novel *Things Fall Apart* is probably the best known text by an African writer. Translated into more than thirty languages, and taught as a representative text in many universities and schools, the novel aspires to paint a positive picture of the African continent. *Things Fall Apart* set forth the marsh of many subsequent African writers who employ their imaginative creation to the retrieval and recovery of the image of the continent distorted by European authors. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," Chinua Achebe criticizes Joseph Conrad for his racist description of the continent and people of Africa. He deplores Conrad's depiction of the "dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination" rather than portraying the continent in its true form. Africans were portrayed in Conrad's novel as savages with no language other than grunts and with no "other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow" (1792-3). To Conrad, the Africans were not characters in his story, but merely props. Chinua Achebe responded with a novel, *Things Fall Apart*: an antithesis to *Heart of Darkness* and similar works by other European writers. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recounts the story of the Ibo community showing through his main characters and episode in compelling racy read how African people live in harmony in a society that does have full-fledged methods and ethos that are if not better no less developed than those of Europe.

Commenting upon his own work nearly forty years after its appearance, Achebe has declared, "The story of Okonkwo is almost inevitable; if I hadn't written about him, certainly someone else would have, because it really is the beginning of our story" [Achebe, 1991].⁵ Achebe's observation concerning his fictional creation draws attention to the allegorical significance that Okonkwo has assumed for the African imagination: he is not merely a character in a novel but the representative figure of African historicity. A determining element of the novel's structure and development is thus the way in which his story is embedded within an elaborate reconstruction of forms of life in the traditional, precolonial culture, specifically, that of Achebe's own people, the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria.

The River Between Engagement with history:

The plot of *The River Between* evolves around the character of Waiyaki, a young Gikuyu man who comes of age in the most unfortunate historical circumstances. Waiyaki has to live in a period that has seen an intense polarisation between the denizens of two coterminous ridges, despite their common genealogy, language and several rites. The reason for the rift as the narrative reveals, is the fulfilment of an ancient Gikuyu prophecy that 'There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies' Ngugi (1968:2). Those people, doubtlessly, are the European colonisers.

The novel opens with an adept use of the landscape of its locale to symbolise and to, simultaneously, flashback and foreshadow the past stability and the current and future volatility of the region:

the two ridges lay side. One is Kamino, the other was Mukuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kamino and Mukuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lines which never woke. When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonistic. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region (RB:1)

Therefore nostalgia for the harmonious tribal past, and a desire for the recovery of the lost land permeate *The River Between*. The retelling of the Gikuyu myth of creation in the first chapter indicates the importance of land to the Gikuyu people. Murungu, the Creator in the Gikuyu mythology, is believed to have shown around Gikuyu and Mumbi- the father and mother of the tribe- the land that he allotted for them saying 'this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is for you to rule and till, you and your posterity'. (RB:2). The Gikuyu attachment to the land is total. Obiechina(1990:173) attributes Waiyaki's incompetence as a leader to his inability to understand that his people's relationship to the land is 'a very special one, and very emotional one'. Given the time setting of the novel, the reader of *The River Between* would readily grasp the political message embedded in the narrative. The narrator seems anxious to relate the details of the novel to the issue of land. Even circumcision is endowed with symbolic meaning. Waiyaki's bleeding after circumcision is interpreted as offering to the earth and 'henceforth, a religious bond linked him to the earth' Ngugi(1964: 45)

The alienation of the Gikuyuland and its appropriation by European settlers is, therefore, bound to cause an intense stir among the Gikuyu people which culminated into what came to be known as the Mau Mau movement. In *The River Between*, such stir is captured in the spirited political discussions in the teachers' office which 'were a sign of what was happening all over the ridges' where a teacher draws the attention to the way in which settlers prepare the ground for occupation:

Take Siriana Mission for example, the men of God came peacefully. They were given a place. Now see what has happened. They have invited their brother to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded. This Government Post behind

Makuyu is a plague in our midst. And this hut tax...
Ngugi(1964::64).

For the retrieval of the usurped land the Gikuyu people, as the narrative reveals, seem to be polarised along two conflicting courses of action. One line of action is led by Waiyaki who champions a reconciliatory movement aided by education and who believes that with knowledge he can ‘uplift the tribe’ by giving them the European education. Armed with ‘white man learning, he visualises a tribe ‘strong enough to chase away the settlers and the missionaries’. The second approach presses for immediate action and has serious doubts about the benefit of education. Led by Kabonyi, the die-hard nationalist who sets up a *Kiama* [a council of elders] ‘to preserve the purity of our customs’ (RB:95). In an open debate, Kabonyi once uses a series of rhetorical questions to undermine Waiyaki’s leadership abilities and to cast doubt over his educational project, referring to his young age :

‘Was the white man’s education really necessary?’

‘Or do you think the education of our tribe, in any way, below that of the white man?’

‘Do not be led by a youth. Did the tail ever lead the head, the child the father or the cubs the lions?’ (RB :95-96)

Although the narrator seems to endorse Waiyaki’s political perspective, Kabonyi’s radical standpoint seems to be more practical and effectual. The narrator, nonetheless, keeps the reader’s sympathy with Waiyaki by indicating that Kabonyi’s staunch anti-colonial activity is only fuelled by personal ambition and jealousy. Waiyaki eventually fails to achieve anything. His reconciliatory endeavours come to nothing. On the contrary, either of the factions between which he wishes to act as intermediary blames him for its misfortune. The Christian’s leader Joshua orders him out of the church when he comes to warn him against the violence intended by Kabonyi and his followers against the Christians, telling him that you ‘have always worked against the people of God’ (Ngugi(1964::133). Likewise, the traditionalist faction has interrogated in a fashion similar to the process of impeachment. He is asked to verify whether or not there is a secret dealing between him and the white man. The final verdict is that Waiyaki is a traitor and it is deplored that ‘betrayal is a bad thing for a man in a position of influence’ (RB:126).

With the failure of Waiyaki at the end of novel Ngugi seems to portray the defencelessness of the people of Kenya whose land will be occupied by the imperialist. Kabonyi despite his success in destroying Waiyaki, does not represent a viable alternative for him. No solution is offered as the novel closes as far as the fate of the country is concerned. Ngugi as Prasansak (2004:33) observes leaves the reader ‘afloat in uncertainty as to where Kenya would go’. Such uncertainty is suggested in the last paragraph of the novel:

The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising the dark stillness, reaching into the hearts of the people of Makuyu and Kameno. Ngugi(1964::153)

Conclusion

Below are conclusive remarks about the enlisting of fiction to recuperate the African history and rectify the shattered image of the continent that is presented in European documents.

-Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo employ the epistemological resources provided by colonizer to subvert the colonial enterprise and unveil the real intention of European colonizers.
-The novel, as a prototype European literary form, has been used as an apt tool to usher into the academia the African history which is denied by European scholars and literati.
-As exemplary protest texts *Things Fall Apart* and *the River Between* rebut and answer back claims ubiquitous in many European discourse that Africa has known civilization only after it came into contact with Europeans.

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