

Critiquing the Postcolonial Construct in Chinua Achebe's Novels

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By

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PREFACE

It has always been a pleasure and a challenge to read and teach Chinua Achebe. Writing about him is a rewarding experience. To all of you who turn the pages of this book – students newly introduced to Achebe, research scholars inspired by his works to read further or teachers searching for fresh insights into this great writer who will not write anymore – hope this book is of help. As someone who has been all the three, I know that a lot can still be written about Achebe. My work is only a small contribution to that.

Chinua Achebe's poems and novels are part of the syllabus of many Indian Universities, and this gifted writer is the first to introduce us to the rich writings in English by African writers. No syllabus or course on Postcolonial Literature/ Commonwealth Literature/ New Writings in English is complete without a text by Achebe. Nor is an understanding of Africa complete without any knowledge of the great African spirit reflected in Achebe's works. Indian students respond well to writings from Africa, our shared history of the colonial encounter being one of the reasons.

When I started studying English Literature in college, there was a reworking of the canon. We read English and American Literature along with Indian Writing in English, Commonwealth Literature and Translations from various Indian languages. Though there were examinations to be passed after reading them, the world of written words made studying more enjoyable and tests less burdensome.

I first read Chinua Achebe in my second year of undergraduate studies at Jyoti Nivas College, Bangalore. *Things Fall Apart* was a prescribed text where we had to answer questions on Okonkwo's character, Ikemefuna's killing, festivals and rituals of the Igbo and the position of women in Igbo society. The novel was then read without any theoretical interventions. When I had to read it again for my post graduation, the text became a counter narrative to the one paragraph written by the coloniser at the end of the novel. *The African Trilogy – Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God* were now texts from an erstwhile British colony, and the three novels seemed to rightly chronicle the pre-colonial, colonial and the days before Nigeria's independence. But as we were also introduced to literary criticism and theory at this stage, Achebe's novels were read as

postcolonial texts, the readings based on the practices of postcolonial theory. This meant reading texts as corrections of distorted versions of histories written by colonisers, writing back to the empire and representation of new voices in English writings. I will always remember and thank Dr. Shantha V and Ms. Maya V Harave who taught me Chinua Achebe at Jyoti Nivas. It was from here that I began to read other African writers.

But I believe that the beginning of my colonial/ postcolonial studies was in Cotton College, Guwahati where I had studied for two pre-university years. While teaching George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*, our teacher Dr. Garima Kalita had taken time to explain how the white *sahib* was expected to do something which his conscience did not permit. He had to kill a mighty creature to live up to the image colonisers had created of themselves and to avoid looking like a fool. The relation between the coloniser and the colonised went beyond the political issues, making deep inroads into the psyche. What I can recall from that lecture is that a writer who held a position of power in ruling the empire did not shy away from admitting his weakness. Orwell's confession may be insignificant but it did present the human side of a person who was a part of the inhuman institution of colonisation.

Orwell writing about an individual's feeling of guilt about an act committed in a moment of crisis comes nowhere close to Achebe's representations of his characters and community. Okonkwo's suicide, the Ikemefuna episode, the discarding of twins, Ezeulu's refusal to eat the sacred yams and how it paved the way for the spread of Christianity, the prevailing corruption before and after independence or the failure of the state are examples of how Achebe does not gloss over the darker and unfortunate events in the lives and times of his people.

When I chose to re-read Achebe's novels for my doctoral studies at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, I tried to read them as texts from a part of the world where the colonial encounter is only a part of its long history. I read them as stories of ordinary and gifted individuals who very often failed to keep pace with the changing times, the phase of colonisation being only a part of those changing times.

Achebe himself mentions the word 'postcolonial' for the first time in *Anthills of the Savannah* and the issues he deals with in his novels are not always direct consequences of colonisation. Though the academic world continues to attach much importance to the coloniser's departure and what happened later, Achebe moves beyond this unending 'post' situation to write of the freedom of the human spirit which refuses to be crushed by any form of oppression, perpetuated either by the coloniser or the enemies from within. His works show that one no longer needs to countenance the

'post' conditions and that theory has to be appropriated to one's cultural needs. The power of the written word is such that it can transcend boundaries imposed by theory. Achebe's novels show that the issue of colonialism is relevant only to the extent of explaining the factors that stunted Nigeria's growth as a nation and sowed the seeds of corruption. He also contends colonial rule as a phase of Nigeria's historical past which despite being inhuman and unfortunate cannot be erased. And there is no longer the need 'to write back' because Achebe's writing is empowering and does not look out for a center as the arbiter of correctness.

After reading Achebe for years as a postcolonial writer, to re-read his novels as alternative narratives of the colonial experience and its aftermath required another re-reading of postcolonial theory. This time I chose to read critics from Africa beginning with Achebe's non-fictional works, Wole Soyinka, Ngugiwa Thiong'o, Leopold Senghor. Chidi Okonkwo, Victor C Uchendu, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Elizabeth Isichei, Simon Gikandi and many others. A reading of these critics along with the fictional works of Nigerian novelists like Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie helped to understand what shaped Nigerian literature. Nigerian writers achieve universality through a sensitive interpretation of their culture and use it as the background to explore human conditions. These writings are not entirely influenced by historical events; instead the Onitsha Market Literature and the literature of the Biafran War have gone a long way in shaping Nigerian Literature.

The first chapter is a comprehensive study of postcolonial theory. This chapter presents views of African critics on philosophy and literature in response to colonialism. The second chapter is a study of the role of writers in bringing about paradigmatic shifts in thinking. It examines Achebe's role as a writer in showing how he uses the African art of storytelling in his novels and how writers like him can be viewed as mediators in the debate on location. The third and fourth chapters are a study of his five novels – *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. The concluding chapter arrives upon the answers to the questions about looking out for and finding new and empowering methods of reading texts. It is here that I would like to sincerely thank my research supervisor Professor Moon Moon Mazumdar for her time and patience in reading and listening to all that each re-reading of the novels revealed.

I would like to thank five helpful persons at Cambridge Scholars Publishing – Theo Moxham, Victoria Carruthers and Adam Rummens,

Hannah Fletcher and Amanda Millar for being online every time I needed help.

The book which you are holding in your hands is the work of a team headed by Sophie Edminson. I wrote to her a few times, today I write to thank her.

And thanks to all those who have over the years taught me to love the written word.

2018

Ranjana Das Sarkhel

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Achebe seems to be concerned with those forms of narratives which ...can speak to future generations with new forms of narration that might have the power to liberate us from the circle of our post-colonial moment.

—Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (1991, 131)

The act of critiquing the postcolonial construct requires one to address and examine various questions relating to the term ‘postcolonial’ and its use in literature. Is the issue of colonialism still relevant at all, since all postcolonial societies have achieved political independence? Does the empire still need to write back to the centre long after the dismantling of imperial structures? How long do we need to emphasise that one event in the political history of a nation? Do writers from former colonies still need to rewrite\ reassert their past and resist imperial constructs of their people and their history? Or, perhaps should they be constrained to limit their themes to those that owe their genesis and currency to colonial domination? How long can one countenance the ‘post’ situation in postcolonial theory?

Over the last few decades the idea that postcolonial theory and its praxis have to be appropriated to our cultural needs has gained ground. Since then postcolonial studies have gained institutional prominence in academic circles and new cultural theorists of post structural and postmodern sensibilities have emerged. Their critical positions have been both engaging and provocative. According to Sylvester O Osagie, this common theoretical persuasion “...threatens to undermine the authenticity of the contradictions generated by the colonial impulse.”¹ There have been debates on questions related to the hegemony of western discourses and the possibilities of resistance. Attempts have been made to intervene in the construction of culture and knowledge, and ideas have been generated on bridging their hiatus. Postcolonial studies, as Jeremy Hawthorn says, “...has created institutional space for the study of a wide variety of non-canonical literatures, and has given academics...a focus for the development of new areas of study.”²

The term 'postcolonial', with or without the hyphen, is used to refer to the period after independence in the former colonies, but it also covers the experience of colonialism shared by pre-independence and post-independence societies. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin use the term to cover "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day."³ They also suggest it as the "most appropriate term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted."⁴ The hyphenated form of the term clearly refers to the period after colonialism or independence but is not free from the 'colonial'. Bill Ashcroft in his essay, "On the Hyphen in Post-Colonial" says that it represents:

...an increasingly diverging set of assumptions, emphases, strategies and practices in post-colonial reading and writing. The hyphen puts an emphasis on the discursive and material effects of the historical 'fact' of colonialism.⁵

The enduring effect of the colonial period is suggested by the hyphen which "...signifies difference, resistance, opposition ... it also carves out a space on the post-colonial continuum."⁶ According to Leela Gandhi:

...some critics invoke the hyphenated form 'post-colonial' as a decisive temporal marker of the decolonising process, others fiercely query the implied chronological separation between colonialism and its aftermath – on the ground that the postcolonial conditions inaugurated with the onset rather than the end of colonial occupation. Accordingly it is argued that the unbroken term 'postcolonial' is more sensitive to the long history of colonial consequences.⁷

Postcolonial discourse now operates within a large field of study which includes historiography, history of law, anthropology, political economy, philosophy, art history and psychoanalysis. Though diverse in character, it offers a specific critique of the imperialist subject. It is seen by Leela Gandhi as a "disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and crucially interrogating the colonial past."⁸ Postcolonial theorists, according to Sally McWilliams share an attempt to "...unweave the complex structures put in place by colonialist rule...revealing the complex interactions of coloniser and colonised... to discuss how subjects are constituted now that the colonial powers no longer have overt political control."⁹ It acknowledges and theorises the ways in which societies and their subjects are positioned differently and unequally in relation to colonialism which ensures continued problematising of the term

‘postcolonial.’ Peter Brooker suggests that the prefix ‘post’ is a “...common attempt to describe a process of change, involving both continuity and new departures.”¹⁰ Postcolonialism to Brooker is “...the study of the ideological and cultural impact of western colonialism and in particular of its aftermath – whether as a continuing influence (neocolonialism) or in the emergence of newly articulated independent national and individual identities.”¹¹

Postcolonialism has been shaped by the study of imperialism and its aftermath, where colonialism remains the decisive condition and experience. The ‘postcolonial’ seems to describe the second half of the twentieth century in general as the aftermath period of colonialism and is used to signify a position against imperialism and Eurocentricism. Research in postcolonial studies is growing because postcolonial critique allows for a wide-ranging investigation into power relations in various contexts. The formation of empire, the impact of colonisation on history, economy, science, culture, cultural productions, feminism, marginalised people and contemporary economic context are some broad topics in the field.

Postcolonial literature describes a wide array of experiences. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define postcolonial theory as discussion of “migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe... and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being.”¹² They suggest that the term should be restricted to signify after colonialism, since all “post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved the problem.”¹³ Postcolonial Literature is often self-consciously a literature of otherness and resistance, and is written out of the specific local experience. It has emerged out of an experience of colonisation, asserted by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and emphasised by its difference from the assumptions of the imperial centre. A major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement leading to a crisis of identity between self and place resulting from migration, enslavement and the concern with myths. It intervenes in the subject by resisting tendencies to homogenise postcolonial experiences and draws attention to cultural specifics.

As the term implies, one of the central features of postcolonial theory is an examination of the impact and continuing legacy of the European conquest, colonisation and domination of non-European land, people and cultures. Central to this critical examination is an analysis of the inherent ideas of European superiority over non-European people and cultures and

an attempt to uncover the damaging effects of such ideas on the identity of the colonised. A key feature of this theoretical examination is the analysis of the role played by representation in perpetuating notions of European superiority.

Theorists of postcolonialism like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, have been influenced by the post 1960s intellectual movements of structuralism and post structuralism and stress the importance of concepts of representation, identity and history as central to postcolonial theory. As this study concentrates on the African situation, postcolonial criticism pertaining to African and Nigerian contexts which can be traced in the works of Homi K Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o will be discussed later in the chapter.

In postcolonial theory, literary activities in the countries which were once colonised are linked to their history and political condition. This approach privileges the colonial experience over all the others and gives the feeling that the present has been solely brought about by (the accident of) European colonisation. This is a misleading approach which situates the colonial experience almost at the beginning of a nation's history, ignoring the long precolonial past of African and Asian countries. Though postcolonialism claims to celebrate diversity, it sometimes ends up popularising ethnic culture as the 'other.' This creation of the 'other' is capitalised into a valuable intellectual commodity where the critic can pretend to speak for the margin while occupying a space that is more close to the centre. On the whole postcolonial theory creates a monotype homogenised sphere locating upon the literature of the privileged rather than of protest.

This has allowed literary expressions to be determined by the political position of the narrator and the protagonist. Literary themes are based on the quest for identity and culture practiced in a society that has been changed forever by the experience of colonisation. The creative interpretation of history has been seen as a process of recovering or writing back into a history others have written by rewriting it. Attempts are made to interrogate misrepresentations of colonial accounts by restructuring the past for the present and using the text as a site for cultural control on account of being motivated by heightened awareness of power relations between Western and Third World cultures. Literature is always the means of giving form and utterance to the despairs and hopes of a nation's history as it moves from freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to the tasks of reconstruction. The process does not come to an end with political liberation and the task of nation building. The literature resulting from this

process stands on its own and does not have to rely on borrowed concepts. Though the colonial situation had led to imitation in its early stages, but as the identity of the colonised gradually asserted itself, it took to creating its own form, structure, syntax and style in all genres of literature.

An examination of literary works on colonial themes seems to suggest that literary activities cease to have much significance at the stage where a nation gains independence. The only task ahead then becomes nation building. The term 'postcolonial' moreover does not let go of the colonial hangover and thus themes do not go beyond the limitations imposed by the term. But if at this stage the frontiers are opened up, it would only help in enriching narratives. Geoffrey Bennington says that, "Frontiers are articulations ..."¹⁴ as they do not just close but also open to an outside world. And opening up the frontiers calls for an end to the 'post' situation.

Gyan Prakash suggests that postcolonial critique "...does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after – after being worked over by colonialism."¹⁵ This continuation, according to Aijaz Ahmad "... becomes a trans historical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in one part of the world or another."¹⁶ The post period of history (after colonialism) appears to be an unmarked and endless period prompting one to wonder when the condition would end. Postcolonial critics have been dissatisfied with the attempt at periodising history in accordance with the terms laid down by western imperialism. Aijaz Ahmad states that:

It is worth remarking ... that in periodising our history in the triadic terms of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath.¹⁷

This "infinite aftermath" which does not liberate literary activities from its confines can only end when writers take alternative positions towards national and international issues and cultures; for literature must be written, and stories have to be told. As Jonathan Culler says,

Literature is a paradoxical institution, because to create literature is to write according to existing formulas ... but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticising its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently.¹⁸

Writers need to go beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis without making the colonial encounter the primary structure of history. A new discursive space has to be created with discourses that produce national cultures by moving out of historical imbalances and cultural inequalities engendered by the colonial encounter. Individual absorption of local influences has to be written not only against the white gaze, but outside it, so as to claim its irrelevance. Writers need to be freed from the past. The need to look upon one place and group as the arbiter of correctness is no longer the only “politically correct” or obvious choice. The control exerted by colonial administration on thought and human relations have to be shaken off as the scope of writing has to be widened, frontiers redrawn, issues redefined and structures freshly erected. Judie Newman’s view is that, “When colonialism ends, writers must have the right to write about trees or love.”¹⁹

And it is this right to write beyond the confines of the postcolonial which calls for an alternative mode of critique which will be outside the parameters of postcolonial discourse, whose cultural choices will be more accommodating and which will emerge from culturally rich contexts. In such writings western ways of knowledge production and its dissemination in the past and present will become an area of study aimed at seeking out alternative means of expression to yoke together a diverse range of experiences, cultures and problems.

Chidi Okonkwo draws attention to the literature created in former colonies and offers his own critique. Okonkwo re-reads and redefines literature of formerly colonised people and views them as strategies for resistance and also as expressions of their perception of history and the universe that seek affirmation through the “reconstruction of the precolonial universe.”²⁰ Okonkwo talks of “an universalist, homogenising discourse”²¹ which integrates all marginalised literatures and empowers marginalised people and their cultures by “asserting the validity of their ... cultural products and world views in opposition to the universalist claims of imperial power.”²² A new reading of these texts is a reflection of the extent to which scholars are drawn to the subject.

The concern of writers with the state of affairs in former colonies can be understood when we narrow down our focus of study to the literature from Africa and particularly to that of Nigeria. The brutal encounter of the African world with the European colonisers is epitomised in the colonial phenomena. A painful colonial period whose wounds hurt deep and long is seen by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze as:

....the indescribable crisis disproportionately suffered and endured by the African people in their tragic encounter with the European world from the

beginning of the fifteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century – a period marked by horror and violence of the transatlantic slave trade, the imperial occupation of most parts of Africa and the forced administrations of its people, and the resilient and enduring ideologies and practices of European cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) and racial supremacy (racism) which goes beyond the brief seventy years between the 1884 Berlin Conference, which partitioned and legitimised European occupation of Africa, and the early 1960s, when most African countries attained constitutional decolonisation.²³

Colonisation affected not only the political and economic spheres of life, but also changed the religious and cultural perspectives of African people. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Europeans acquired an active colonial interest in Africa. Though it continued for only half a century, it left behind a lasting residue. The coloniser achieved political and cultural domination simultaneously, which disrupted all aspects of daily life of the indigenous people, wrenching them from the roots of traditional culture. Yet the sufferings endured by the African people did not kill their creative spirit. Being artists at heart, the changes and sufferings made them more committed towards their creative works. Known as the ‘Dark Continent’ to the western world which had failed to perceive that this world did not need any western intervention, the Europeans went on to introduce their language and literature to the Africans ignoring the rich oral tradition of the people found in myths, legends, folktales, proverbs and riddles.

Africa has a long literary tradition, although very little was written down until the twentieth century. In the absence of widespread literacy, African literature was primarily oral and passed on from one generation to the next. In colonies where education was introduced by Christian missionaries, literary works were written in English, French and Portuguese. African Literature in English has been influenced to a remarkable extent by the continent’s long tradition of oral artistry. Before the spread of literacy in the twentieth century, texts were preserved in memory and performed or recited. They were a source of entertainment, instruction and commemoration.

The foremost among prose forms in African oral literature is the myth. African myths explain the creation of the universe, the activities of the gods at the beginning of creation, the essence of all creatures, and their interrelationships. After myths, come legends which deal with events that occurred after the era of the gods and heroic feats such as establishing dynasties or preventing disasters. The folktale, another prose form, features human beings and animals which present a social commentary

and instruction and serve as a means of affirming group values. A trickster tale is the most popular one which features a small but witty animal, cunning enough to protect itself from larger and powerful animals. Examples of animal tricksters are Anansi, a spider in the folklore of the Ashanti people of Ghana; A'ja'pa, a tortoise in Yoruba folklore of Nigeria; and Sungara, a hare found in central and east African folklore.

African cultures possess a rich repertoire of epigrams, including proverbs and riddles. In many African societies effective speech and social success depend on a good command of proverbs. These treasured sayings convey the wisdom of ages and serve as a reliable authority in arguments or discussions. Closely related to proverbs are riddles as both are based on principles of analogy that require the listener to decipher the intended meaning. African folklore stresses on three functional aspects – practical wisdom, moral range and didactic value. Despite the major transformations that have taken place in Africa in the last few centuries, people have remained in close contact with traditional cultures and institutions and oral traditions continue to be a part of their lives. Oral traditions are useful resources for making writings on Africa authentic which further help in the reconstruction of traditional life and in the understanding of Africa.

African literature of the twentieth century has to be primarily seen in relation to the forces that have changed this traditional society. Postcolonial African writers have made an enormous contribution to world literature. These writers examine such issues as emerging identities in the postcolonial climate, neocolonialism, new forms of oppression, cultural and political hegemonies, language appropriation, and economic instability which have elicited increasing critical attention. According to Eustace Palmer, the African novel "...evolved not from the western novel, but from the well-established tradition of African prose writing and the even more ancient traditions of oral literature."²⁴ Edward Sackey further adds that African writers "...boldly willed themselves to break the rules of the conventional novel form and to show that African literature is reactive. It is a literature that is defensive of the African heritage."²⁵ It must also be remembered that Africa's oral tradition is an integral part of African life whose structures have been appropriated to the needs of a written literary tradition. This integration into the written tradition not only rekindles interest but also strengthens it as an instrument of defense to challenge western misconceptions about Africa. Edward Sackey says that this integration "...shows a tremendous leap forward in African imaginative works of art, from orality to literacy and from tradition to innovation."²⁶

And this calls for a re-reading of post-independence writings from African nations, not as postcolonial texts but as Literature from Africa, the

objectives of which would be to look beyond the restrictions of postcolonial discourse. This shift in the focus of study is to see how writings after independence which might have begun as an attempt at decolonisation, moved beyond to offer an alternative critique of the postcolonial construct. The past (the period of colonisation included) is a collective legacy of the African people, and not just certain fragments of it. Colonisation is a great historical, political and sociological fact for African writers which cannot be ignored, nor can the postcolonial situation be overlooked. Colonisation is one historical moment that disrupted the continent's natural development, but, the disturbing times instilled a deeper sense of commitment in the writers who could write their stories even during such troubled days.

African literature in English presents the conflicts and contradictions within the African society and also provides a glimpse of the future as writers interpret contemporary realities. Kolawole Ogungbesan views it as "... the writer's search for an appropriate response to the political moment of his society."²⁷ Accessible to the readers of English anywhere in the world and yet with distinct sensibilities and concerns, these writings project local experiences globally, and secure an identity through images that had not been turned into stereotypes by the imperialists. It is important for writers to alternate histories, put alternative pictures of the world to the ones the world would have one believe and thereby to become adversaries of that process, and threaten a view of the world that is false.

This shift from colonial and postcolonial themes has been justified by Niven Alastair as:

Things have fallen apart creatively. The centre has not held because there is no longer a colonial need to look to one place as the arbiter of correctness. It is all about the shift away from the notion of centrality. Far from attempting to impose unity among diversity, to focus an Eurocentric focus on many different cultures, it recognises a multiplicity of equally valid centers, but then proceeds to evaluate their interconnections and converging their coincidences of history and their individual absorption of local influences.²⁸

What began as an urgent task for writers to contribute to the revision of history, went on to offer a creative interpretation of history. And this could only be possible when they could get rid of the vestiges of colonialism. This has been suggested by Shatto Arthur Gakwandi as:

We must go back to the sources of our values, not to confine ourselves to them, but rather to draw up a critical inventory in order to get rid of archaic stultifying elements, the fallaciousness and alienating foreign

elements brought in by colonialism, and to retain only those elements which are still valid, bringing them up to date, and enriching them with the benefits of the scientific, technical and social revolutions so as to bring them into line with what is modern and universal.²⁹

Getting rid of colonialism calls for a deep search into one's own past to find stories which have remained unaffected by one brief and yet turbulent historical event. These stories find a place in the African novel where the past becomes a rich site of culture. They help in locating other issues that concern writers, who become a "voice of the debates of the century concerning cultural conflict, religious and indirectly, political conflict."³⁰ C.P Lloyd says that the African novel "has developed as a response to the far-reaching social revolution of the twentieth century on the continent."³¹ This concern with contemporary issues has led to interventions in the postcolonial construct by writers who "interpreted contemporary realities and proposed their own visions of the future."³²

While interpreting contemporary realities writers have been able to preserve an identity that is distinctively African, that makes their writing a part of world literature and yet sets them apart. The authors of *Writing and Africa*, Mpalive-Handson Msiska and Paul Hyland say that "...the need to preserve a distinct cultural identity has always been accompanied by the simultaneous incorporation and rejection of a colonising alterity or modernity."³³ According to G.D. Killam, "Modern African writing has been concerned exclusively with the reality of African life."³⁴ And though the colonial period and its aftermath are a part of African reality, writers have looked beyond this event to create an African identity. Their themes, as Killam says:

...stem from a group past with its ambiguous and generally bitter experience of colonialism, and from a group present which seeks to define the relevance of the colonial experience to the present. They stem further from the contact, in some cases collision, both historical and immediate between the traditional and/or mythic pasts of various ethnic groups and their systems and values, and those imported from Europe. They result from a relatively brief nevertheless intense experience with separate and dominating institutions – political, social, educational and cultural – and express a desire to modify these to suit local and national needs by incorporating what is valuable in the colonial legacy whilst retaining an African identity.³⁵

At the First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Sorbonne, 1956, Leopold Senghor declared, "African literature is politically committed."³⁶ This sense of commitment to issues related to the political situation of the different African countries has led writers to

situate events in their narration within contexts of the historical and the political conditions. The attainment of independence by many African countries and the resultant changes in the political atmosphere of these countries influenced themes of narratives, giving rise to a form of the novel which seeks to interpret the present in terms of the human characteristics of African communities without reference to the past.

All twentieth century intellectual movements in Africa have been associated with nationalism as the intelligentsia searched for a new place in the world for the African. Ben Enwonwu observes that the "...present generation of African artists have to face their political problems, and try to look at art through politics."³⁷ This has been further strengthened by the common heritage and common destiny shared by Africans. At the Second Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Rome, 1959, it was stated that –

The negro writers and artists regard it as their essential task and sacred mission to bring their cultural activity within the scope of the great movement for liberation of their individual peoples, without losing sight of the solidarity which should unite all individuals and peoples who are struggling for liquidation of colonization and its consequences as well as all those who are fighting throughout the world for progress and liberty.³⁸

At this point it would be appropriate to take a look at critics and their discourses on the postcolonial with emphasis on the African context. Here it also needs to be mentioned that discourses on African literature in English usually cover literatures from only south of the Sahara. The literatures of North Africa are not included because North African cultures share greater affinities with the Arab world than with sub-Saharan people and cultures. The literature of South Africa is also excluded as it is more closely linked with the European literary heritage.

The western construction of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' ignored its historical origins that date back to antiquity and it became a dominant western stereotype of the continent in the nineteenth century, which is the period of European colonial expansion in Africa. Colonialism in Africa undervalued the African literary tradition and failed to recognise the extent of its autonomy, particularly in the periods before and after colonisation. Although the colonisation of Africa began centuries earlier, it was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that European economic and political rivalries resulted in the appropriation of African territory that came to be known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 established 'spheres of influence' that seemed to legitimise the control of large sections of the continent by European powers and in turn provided an impetus to more expansionist designs, resulting in a redrawing of the

African map. This had repercussions in the post-independence period, as such political cartography imposed borders that cut across traditional tribal boundaries bringing about traumatic experiences.

Independence did not bring an end to the traumatic experience. Decolonisation involved a process of change bringing about economic, cultural and psychological transformations. In cultural contexts, the privileging of the Western has led to contesting such hegemony. Movements in Africa like Negritude and Pan-Africanism are two such intellectual movements which challenged western cultural hegemony and went on to influence African literary discourses.

Negritude, a black consciousness movement which originated among African students in Paris in the 1930s sought to assert pride in African cultural values in order to contest the inferior status accorded to them in European colonial and cultural discourses. The movement's most important figures were Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire who were inspired by the Harlem Renaissance's efforts to promote the richness of African cultural identity. Negritude emphasised that African consciousness is different from the European and that all people of African descent share certain common characteristics. Negritude, in the history of Africa can be seen as a phase in the development of African consciousness.

Pan-Africanism believes in the unity of all Africans and is a political movement that seeks a united Africa. The movement was founded at the first Pan-African Congress in London, 1900. The movement gained momentum in the 1930s when Italy invaded Ethiopia. After World War II, Pan-Africanism was associated with the independence struggle of Sub-Saharan African nations. In the post-independence era, the movement seeks to promote co-operation among African nations.

These developments in the continent influenced discourses on culture and literature. African writers with a first hand knowledge of their own people, cultures, languages and problems set out to present their views. Works of critics like Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe who are arguably among the most prominent, need to be studied for a better understanding of the African context which would further help in critiquing the postcolonial construct.

To begin with Frantz Fanon, who has greatly influenced postcolonial theorists as well as writers, draws his critique on a broad range of disciplines, which include philosophy, psychology, social anthropology and literature. Fanon's works can be divided into three sections – the search for a black identity, the struggle against colonialism, and the process of decolonisation. His work on black identity was formed through his experiences in psychiatry, deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud and

Jacques Lacan, which is illustrated in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). This work can be seen as a pioneering example of psychoanalytical theory being used as a critical tool in political theoretical writing. Here Fanon suggests that colonialism with its concepts of white racial superiority has created a sense of division and alienation in the identity of non-white colonised people. The imposed history, culture, language, customs and beliefs of the coloniser further created a strong sense of inferiority in the colonised subject, leading to the construction of stereotypes presented as primitive and uncivilised. Fanon's writing rejects such representations and calls for the creation of subjects that would reach out for the universal. In this book he presents his desire to go beyond history as he writes, "I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and my future."³⁹

The second stage of Fanon's critical works is the struggle against colonialism, which grew out of his active involvement in the Algerian war of independence. Fanon's contribution to the struggle against colonialism involves the claiming back of history by the colonised from the versions produced by the colonisers. He stresses the importance of culture and representation of the past as central to the creation of new subjects which are necessary in the post-independence era. The emphasis on history can be found in Fanon's most famous and widely read work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), a passionate and revolutionary work of political critique and a cornerstone of postcolonial theory. Fanon writes:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.⁴⁰

The process of decolonisation relates to the third stage of Fanon's critical activity. Along with the reclamation and reconstruction of their own history and culture as the basis for the new postcolonial forms of nation and national identity, Fanon also discusses the role of the middle-class intelligentsia in the new nations. He says the educated must be aware that their education is based on the ideologies and beliefs of the colonisers and so they must take care not to reproduce the inherently racist concepts while rebuilding the nation.

Fanon's works set the stage for development of political consciousness in colonised nations and with the liberation of most African countries, his works have continued to influence spheres of culture and literature. Fanon proposes a "national literature"⁴¹ engaged in the formation of national consciousness and committed to the struggle for national liberation, armed

with the unconditional affirmation of African culture. The formation of a national consciousness began from the rediscovery of the African identity with its beginnings in the rich past. Fanon writes that,

...it was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory and solemnity.⁴²

Fanon's critique does not confine itself to Africa but seeks an international dimension as he writes, "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."⁴³

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is another critic who dreams of a true communal home for all Africans which would re-establish the communal character of the old culture on new plans and move on to create a pan-tribal, pan-African and Pan-Third World. And to achieve this, Ngugi considers education as a catalyst to development, the mold of new leaders who will guide through the changes of the world. His essays in *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (1972), emphasise the important social functions of literature. Ngugi believes that a writer lives within history and is shaped by it, and literature is "...primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationships."⁴⁴ He goes on to say that the African writer was born on the crest of an anti-colonial upheaval and worldwide revolutionary ferment. The consequences of that history of inequality and oppression made writers more assertive of Africa. In *Moving the Centre - The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), Ngugi writes:

It was Africa explaining itself, speaking for itself and interpreting the past. It was an Africa rejecting the images of its past as drawn by the artists of imperialism. The writer even flaunted his right to use the language of the former colonial master anyway he liked ... to subvert the master.⁴⁵

With an intense sense of progressive social commitment it called for writers to share the responsibility to reshape a distorted history and a misguided society. *Moving the Centre* calls for a moving away from western structures and locations of power, where Ngugi writes:

Moving the centre in the two senses – between nations and within nations – will contribute to the freeing of world cultures from the restrictive walls of nationalism, class, race and gender. In this sense, I am an unrepentant universalist. For I believe that while retaining its roots in regional and

national individuality, true humanism with its universal reaching out can flower among the peoples of the earth.⁴⁶

In the postcolonial period, this moving away becomes even more important as the site of resistance changes with the end of colonial domination. Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) campaigns for African culture and African writers to write in their language which would make cultural and literary productions relevant to the mass of the people. Here he writes, "Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world."⁴⁷ To break free from this control, Ngugi set an example by first writing in his own language, Gikuyu, and then translating them into English. His novels present pictures of Kenya from the 1930s to the contemporary days, the struggle against western domination, and the Mau Mau rebellion.

Language was a powerful tool used by the coloniser to assert a linguistic hierarchy and suppress the traditional oral literature which Ngugi argues strongly against:

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next...The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.⁴⁸

His views emphasise the important social functions of literature, a view shared by many African writers.

Wole Soyinka, the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1986) is acknowledged as a distinguished contemporary critic of postcolonial African literature besides being a novelist and a dramatist. Though there are no doubts that the Nobel Prize was for his plays, the prize can be seen as a recognition of the whole African literary tradition by the world outside Africa. Soyinka is a chronicler of his traditional Yoruban culture as well as the turbulent history of Nigeria, who views literature as an agent of social change. His commitment to promoting human rights in Nigeria, the humour in his writings and his portrayal of political greed and oppression after independence add a universal significance to his works. As an honest observer of his land and people, he calls for African artists not to bask in the nostalgia of their past while neglecting the urgent

problems of the present. He writes, "The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past."⁴⁹

In 1967, at the African Writers' Conference held in Stockholm, Soyinka in his lecture urged African writers to end their preoccupation with the past and focus on those forces which threaten to disintegrate African society. Soyinka suggested that writers had to move beyond the sins of the imperialists and write about the chaotic state of affairs in African countries. When Soyinka delivered this lecture, most African countries had become independent; the first military coups had taken place in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; Congo had had a civil war and the Nigerian Civil war was beginning. African society was still trying to come to terms with the turbulent consequences of colonisation that followed the end of imperialist occupation. Soyinka pointed out that the African writer had to be sensitive to the changes in his community and act as the conscience of his nation. New values had to be discovered to stand against the prevalent corruption, incompetence, nepotism, social inequality and debasement of standards in their countries. If a writer could face up the truth, he could make his readers see them as well. This called for writers to be socially committed and involved in the affairs of their society.

According to Eustace Palmer, "The consequence of Soyinka's call is that in the later 1960s and early 1970s the focus in African writing shifted from historical, cultural and sociological analysis to penetrating social comment and social satire."⁵⁰ Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) are two examples of this shift in the African novel. While Achebe's novel presents the political scenario of post-independence Nigeria, Soyinka exposes the decadence of African society.

Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), Soyinka's collection of critical essays inspired by Yoruba mythology and cosmology, presents the artist's role in society as equivalent to that of Ogun, the Yoruba god of creativity. Soyinka upholds the values of the African world when he writes:

Man exists, however, in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other 'world' is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent.⁵¹

Writers from Africa have been inspired to pursue this simple route which leads to the rich world of Africa, never discovered by the

conquerors and thus it leaves the responsibility on the African writer to retrace it.

As African writers began to write their stories, they had to write about their newly independent nations. And as concepts of the nation undergo changes with theoretical inventions, it would be helpful to take a brief note of critics like Homi K Bhabha and Benedict Anderson. Postcolonial debates over 'nation', 'nationalism' and 'cultural nationalism' are concerned with the creation of cultural and national identity cutting across differences of race, class, gender and cultural traditions. Bhabha argues that cultural identities cannot be pre-given, irreducible and scripted, nor can coloniser and colonised be viewed as separate entities defined independently. He suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves continual exchange of cultural performances that produce representations of cultural difference. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha writes:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformations.⁵²

The space of transformation between culture and historical periods referred to as the 'liminal' space by Bhabha, also extends to the space between theory and application. Bhabha's 'liminality' leads to a re-thinking "the realm of the beyond" that until now has been understood only in terms of the prefix "post: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism."⁵³ This rethinking has been due to "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."⁵⁴ Liminality in postcolonial theory identifies the space where cultural transformation can take place. Bhabha uses psychoanalysis and deconstruction to deal with postcolonial identity, its boundaries, temporalities and movements and the liminal space opens the way,

...to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalistic histories of the 'people.'⁵⁵

Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990) narrates stories of the nation from different perspectives and its effect on narratives and discourses. Narrations are central to nations as there are always stories of a nation's origins, myths of founding fathers and genealogies of heroes. Bhabha views the nation as an ambivalent construction which, he says, "...haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality."⁵⁶ He goes on to add that the "scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture."⁵⁷ Bhabha's critique of nation and narration has been influenced by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities – Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson's influential work advances the view that nations are narrative constructs that evolved from the fictions of 'imagined communities.'

Anti-imperialist resistances of the twentieth century resulted in not just the formation of new independent nations but also found expression in various literary texts where writers have used the nation as a metaphor and emphasised on the role of the community in the construction and contestation of the nation. Anderson's book examines the creation and global spread of the imagined communities of nationality from a small beginning, where the idea of a nation grew when a significant number of people in a community considered or imagined themselves to have formed a nation. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined community because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁵⁸ He also adds that the nation is imagined as "both inherently limited and sovereign"⁵⁹ It is limited because "even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite...boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" and sovereign because "the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm."⁶⁰

The nation is imagined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship...it is this fraternity that makes it possible ...for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings."⁶¹ Anderson writes that the imagined world is visible in everyday life where "... fiction seeps quietly

and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.”⁶²

Anderson also says that “print capitalism ... made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”⁶³ Anderson’s definition of nations as communities and the use of the print to reach out to the people has found expression in the works of many African writers, whose works are not just literary creations but assume a greater role of involving the readers in the process of narrating the times they are living in.

This relation between writers and readers, artists and society can be seen in Nigerian novelists, which has led to interventions in the postcolonial construct as writers have been able to create a distinctive literature from Nigeria. Their works can be read without placing them in the category of Postcolonial Literature, as their narrations have moved beyond the situation created by the coloniser’s departure. Their moving beyond brings an end to the ‘post’ conditions and liberates their writing from the confines of a term that does not seem justified to be used decades after independence. This also confirms their commitment to writing which they have been able to pursue even during the disturbing times their country has gone through.

Nigeria, along with Benin, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Togo constitute West Africa. This oil-rich region has been witness to economic exploitations, ruthless wars, redrawing of maps and colonial rule. The Berlin Conference divided the West African countries between different European powers who ruled till the 1960s when most of them gained independence.[The history of colonial rule and the events that followed Nigeria’s independence will be discussed in the chapters on the colonial encounter (chapter III) and independence and after (chapter IV)] The chain of events that follow imperialist occupation of a land creates a deep impact on the mind of the people as they try to preserve their land and self. Writing then becomes a way of fighting back the invaders and gradually of preserving their heritage. Nigerian writers have moved beyond this in creating a distinctively national ethos. The Nigerian situation has led to the emergence of a national literature, as discourses that emerge in moments of historical transformations produce a national culture. A national literature emerges when a community’s cultural collective existence is called into question and it tries to put together the reasons for its existence.

Nigerian writers write against a particular historical tradition and a national context to present their accumulated spiritual experience which also lends a universal appeal to their works. Nigerian novelists achieve

universality through a sensitive interpretation of their culture. They use their African background to explore the human conditions of pride and power, defeat and dejection, love and loss. Though firmly set in Africa, they are universal in nature, as Bernth Lindfors says:

...accomplished works of art communicate in such a universal human idiom that they are capable of transcending their particular time and place and speaking to all mankind.⁶⁴

Nigerian writings were not entirely influenced by the English novel, or the historical events resulting out of the colonial encounter. Instead, the Onitsha Market Literature and the literature of the Biafran War have gone a long way in shaping Nigerian literature.

Onitsha Market literature emerged in the late 1940s as a popular form of pamphlet writing. It took its name from the town of Onitsha which stands on the Niger in Eastern Nigeria and can be marked as a liminal space where various segments of society met, cultural interaction took place, language forms ranging from Igbo, Yoruba to pidgin were brought together leading to cultural productions. Onitsha pamphlets were easily accessible to literate Nigerians and facilitated the emergence of writers like Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe. Achebe in his essay "Onitsha, Gift of the Niger" writes:

Onitsha was always the market-place of the world. In its ancient emporium the people of Olu and Igbo – the riverain folk and the dwellers of the hinterland forests – met in guarded, somewhat uneasy commerce; old-time farmers met new, urban retail traders of known and outlandish wares. Onitsha was the original site of evangelical dialogue between proselytising Christianity and the Igbo religion; between strange-looking toeless harbingers of white rule and (at first) an amused and indulgent black population that assembled in their hundreds to enjoy the alien spectacle. It was finally the occult no-man's land between river-spirits and mundane humans.⁶⁵

Situated at the threshold, it became a space for cultural productions, influencing the works of writers like Achebe as David Carroll writes, "Onitsha seems to epitomise sharply for Achebe the basic features of life which traditional Igbo society acknowledged and sought to accommodate within its own structures and *mores*. And the persistent features of this social system are clearly related to the qualities customarily associated with the Igbo – his individualism and ambition, his tolerance and egalitarianism, his down-to-earth practicality and mistrust of authority."⁶⁶

The Biafran War or the Nigerian Civil War was another event for the development of Nigerian writing as it led to the production of many works