Postcolonial Identities and West African Literature

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By

Anwesha Das

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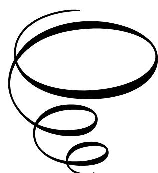

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To my husband, for his encouragement and support

"I broke at last
the terror-fringed fascination
that bound my ancient gaze
to those crowding faces
of plunder and seized my
remnant life in a miracle
of decision between white-
collar hands and shook it
like a cheap watch in
my ear and threw it down
beside me on the earth floor
and rose to my feet."

—Chinua Achebe,
"Answer," Collected Poems by Chinua Achebe

Table of Contents

Foreword ix

Preface xi

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 11
Ethnicity and Difference: Narratives, History and Africa

Chapter 2 27
Reversal of Gaze: Beyond a Single Story

Chapter 3 41
The Soliloquy of the Past: Memory, Nostalgia, and History

Chapter 4 51
History Re-told: Ethnography and *Nne-nne*'s Oral History

Chapter 5 65
Her Story(s) of Rebellion: Gender and Power

Conclusion 81

Bibliography 87

Index 93

FOREWORD

I profoundly thank the author of this book, Anwesha Das, for asking me to write its foreword. Das is one of those scholars who show interest in society, which a literary text mirrors; hence, her interest in anthropological writings. Her current book, which depicts African people's experience in a historical context, through the works of a literary scholar, Thomas Obinkaram Echewa, calls our attention to the richness of the interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and the capacity of a scholar to transcend disciplinary boundaries to "dialogue" with other disciplines. The book presents to the reader critical thoughts on cross-cultural encounters in a historical epoch; it takes the lens of postcolonial theory and political theory to critically examine the works of Thomas Obinkaram Echewa who has used narrative as history to tell the story of colonial Nigerian history. The encounter of West African people with the Western world, which started from the fifteenth century with the Trans-Atlantic Trade to the hoisting of the British administration in Nigeria in the early twentieth century, brought about social and cultural transformations, which shaped the people's lifeways and redefined their identity. The effect of colonialism in African societies is not monolithic, as it cuts across gender, age, ethnicity, and religion and is also intergenerational.

Part of the unique aspect of this book is that it brings a multi-layered approach to interrogating the experience of colonialism in Nigeria. From these experiences, the author introduces a novel concept, "postcolonial soliloquies," which demonstrates how each people in their cultural and ideological imprisonments hold on to their perspectives and culture. This tendency also manifests in separate discourses, ranging from historical documentation to knowledge production. By drawing the attention of the reader to the binary oppositions that characterize intra- and intergroup interactions, between the Self and the Other, this book points to how these constructions hinder the acceptance of our common humanity. Colonialism that privileged Western positionality represents the Self, the knower, the centre, while the colonized is the Other, the periphery or the margin, and often presented as voiceless. The knower, the West, presents Western rationality as that worthy of universalizing, an attempt that privileges the Self, denying dialogic engagement based on mutual acceptance and respect. How then can the disjointedness and particularities inherent in "postcolonial

soliloquies" be resolved? Das's book shifts the attention of readers to the need to question some of the taken-for-granted narratives that present colonialism as liberating and emancipating. The book also draws our attention to the weakness inherent in indigenous culture, for instance, where it denies women autonomy, while also recognizing women's power bases in indigenous Igbo culture.

By focusing on the works of Thomas Obinkaram Echewa, a relatively unexplored author, the book demonstrates the richness that is thrust up when we throw wider the net of our scholarship, particularly in the study of West African literature, and how it can add to our understanding of human experiences in particular and the study of literature in general. This book brings to the fore the interconnectedness that exists between history, literature, and anthropology.

This is a text that should be read by researchers who desire to know more about the Western colonization of Africa and the impact on identity, gender, religion, class, and ethnicity in Africa. Although what is discussed in this book centres on African literature, readers curious about anthropology, history, African studies, and gender studies, and their interconnectedness will find the book handy. This book fills a knowledge gap that exists in the understanding of the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and religions in Africa.

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PREFACE

This is a book on the junctures of history addressed by West African literature. The dehumanizing category of otherness, the practice of otherness during colonial rule in Africa, and the extension of otherness after independence bind the narrative pattern in a meaningful way. Our existential underpinnings as postcolonial identity(s) have their roots in a sophisticated whiteness that acts as a marker of our identity(s) as social and political beings. This book enables me to voice a shared history of the "periphery" through literature.

The glorification of a picture-perfect pre-colonial past being overshadowed with a devastating colonial history—marking the beginning of a resisting postcolonial era—is challenged here. The West African author Thomas Obinkaram Echewa writes for Nigeria, of Nigeria, and to a global audience about a past that redefines identity(s) in the present era that is anti-colonial and neo-colonial at the same time. He does not call himself a "literary scholar," but a "storyteller." In an interview with the modest eighty-two-year-old author in 2012, he recalls why he wants to call himself a "storyteller/writer":

> I like literature, but I am not what you would call a literary scholar. Instead, I call myself a storyteller/writer with eclectic interests in the arts, sciences, philosophy, and religion. I believe that these distinct disciplines are actually differing outlets of a common creative impulse. Aesop, the storyteller, was no less wise than Aristotle, the philosopher; Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, with his novel *Things Fall Apart*, is no less a paradigm shifter than Albert Einstein, with his formula $E=mc^2$. In deciding a dispute, an assembly of Igbo villagers had nothing to learn from Greek syllogistics in reaching a just and sensible verdict in a disagreement between two villagers. Western physics originated from Western metaphysics and famous scientists like Newton and Leibniz regarded themselves as philosophers of nature. A thesis for an essay is kindred to a hypothesis for an experiment; both are propositional. A novel, such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, is a simulated field experiment or case study: what happens when a group of English adolescents are marooned on an island without adult interference? What type of society are they likely to create? My point is that, at their roots, science and philosophy and art are inextricably intertwined. . . .
>
> I recall that for Nigeria's independence anniversary in 1964, a group of Nigerians at my undergraduate university screened *Sunrise in the East*, a

> documentary made by the government to commemorate Independence Day in Eastern Nigeria in 1960. The voice-over was a quotation from the prophet Isaiah: "*They that dwelt in darkness hath seen a great light*!" The suggestion by this Nigerian filmmaker, on the occasion of our political independence from Britain, was that our people had lived in darkness until they were overtaken by the civilizing light of British colonialism! This was the lowest possible form of self-deprecation, but it was a prevailing idea at the time among Africans as well as Europeans. *Things Fall Apart* reversed this idea.[1]

In his search for answers, the novelist considers his own memories, politics, history, and especially stories.

If we learn postcolonialism by example, then literature plays an important role in the history of colonialism and postcolonialism in West Africa. Echewa writes about the juncture of the end of colonial history and the beginning of postcolonial history, contrasting it with prior ways of approach by West African writers. He looks at the configurations of blackness and whiteness, notions of hierarchy, intergenerational conflict, and religious dilemma, and revisits storytelling of colonial imposition to drive plot. The characteristic folktale feature of grandmothers' stories bear the burden of the discourse of women's history-making through intergenerational storytelling in his novels. The scope of his concern extends beyond postcolonial interpretation of history and literature. It calls for a dialogic approach across civilizations addressed by political theorists such as Fred Dallmayr, Hans Köchler, and Ronald Niezen.

Societies are not *tabula rasae.* "Our historical differences actually make a difference. . . . The universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently."[2] This is true not only for Africa but for India as well. Sharing a history of similar yet very different experiences of colonial history, I make an inquiry into the intrinsic worldview and value-system of indigenous societies that was disrupted by colonial intervention. Stories of childhood, myths and fables of native culture, and ceremonial practices define our native identities in important ways. Echewa's plunge into history is well defined by his indigenous Igbo identity and is explored through storytelling. He says:

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[1] Anwesha Das, "A Rendezvous with T. Obinkaram Echewa," *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 45, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 151–52.

[2] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Preface to the 2007 Edition," in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), xii.

> When you grow up in a village, as I did, you hear and overhear people telling stories of every kind. By custom, Igbo society is parabolic. Stories, storytellers, and story occasions abound. If you ask a question, you get a story for an answer. Like children everywhere, you imbibe the culture around you. If you have a creative disposition, you see, hear, and remember more than your peers. You also have an ability to reconfigure and transform your experiences into stories of your own. [3]

Nigeria speaks to itself through his voice. This book connects his stories to the discourses around postcolonialism, political theory and history-writing, and proposes the notion of "postcolonial soliloquies" in this context.

[3] Das, "A Rendezvous," 153.

INTRODUCTION

This book approaches the field of postcolonial studies with a turn to political theory. On the basis of insights gained from postcolonial theory and the concept of "dialogue" from political theory, it analyses West African literature—with focus on the "neglected novelist"[1] Thomas Obinkaram Echewa—in order to understand how stories stand as soliloquies. The concept of "postcolonial soliloquies" is proposed and theorized in an interdisciplinary context in this book.

Postcolonial theory includes within its scope an omnipresent discourse of power and hierarchy that makes its way through stories of representation and identity. Postcolonial critics and scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall—to mention a few—have analyzed these notions in varied contexts, some of which are addressed below. The binary of the postcolonial world gains precedence over political theories of dialogue in many ways. The West African novelist Echewa trudges across the repeatedly visited terrain of postcolonial history to weave narratives that address this crucial juncture of postcolonial discourse and political theory. Echewa's narrative explores known territories with new boundaries. The boundaries of identity, culture, and orality created within indigenous traditions and ways of engaging with history offer a very different understanding of colonial history in West Africa. The author engages with history as narrative in order to understand—as Achebe says—"where the rain began to beat us."

In 1978, with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, postcolonial theory entered into a field of inquiry about the Orient based on "scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological distinction," and nurtured a discourse that questioned the manipulation of colonial power.[2] Said drew references from multiple theorists and philosophers including Michel Foucault, and questioned the imposition of a power structure in the distribution of knowledge, marking certain pockets of the world as "marginalized." Foucault did not define

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[1] Derek Wright, "T. O. Echewa: A Neglected Novelist," in *Contemporary African Fiction*, edited by Derek Wright (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Breitinger, 1997), 254–63.

[2] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1980), 20.

power as repression. He argued that power "functions in the form of a chain," and is "exercised through a net-like organisation."[3] It is not merely employed by one dominating institution. It works in day-to-day processes, and is extremely significant in global functioning, by nurturing narratives, discourses, and truths, which govern societies, cultures, people, and their thoughts and beliefs. It is "a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges . . . to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, a formal and scientific discourse."[4]

Africa—with its shared history of colonialism—is coerced into a discourse that nurtures the web of a perpetual otherness, and epitomizes "the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the other-worldly."[5] For the continent of Africa, "the term post-colonial does not mean 'after independence.' Rather, it is a concept which takes into account the historical realities of European imperial incursions into the continent from the fifteenth century onwards."[6] The narrative around Africa and the politics of representation fall within the discourses of colonialism as well as slavery. There was a deliberate attempt to define human nature as per the norms of the White world. Clifford Geertz writes about the "typological" definition of human nature proposed by Enlightenment and colonial anthropology:

> They [Enlightenment and classical anthropologists] endeavor to construct an image of man as a model, an archetype, a Platonic idea or an Aristotelian form, with respect to which actual men—you, me, Churchill, Hitler, and the Bornean headhunter—are but reflections, distortions, approximations. . . . the differences among individuals and among groups of individuals are secondary. Individuality comes to be seen as eccentricity, distinctiveness as accidental deviation from the only legitimate object of study.[7]

The quest for "Man with a capital 'M' calls for a sacrifice of the empirical entity we in fact encounter, man with a small 'm.'"[8]

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[3] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Sopher, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.
[4] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 85.
[5] Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *Public Culture*, Volume 16, No. 3 (2004): 348.
[6] Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-colonial Theory: African Inflections* (London: Routledge, 2001), 14.
[7] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 51.
[8] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 51.

The notion of rationality and an archetype was constructed by the West during the colonial period by propagating a colonialist ideology. Communities that did not adhere to the constructed "rational" cultural norms were grouped as binaries. They were labelled as "irrational" and uncivilized. On the basis of the Western stereotype of rationality and irrationality, distinction was made between countries as "developed and underdeveloped (or developing) countries; in large measure this distinction coincided with that between Occident and Orient, with the former assigning to the latter its status and significance in the global context . . ."[9] The colonial discourse constructed a stereotypical version of "truth" that worked effectively to sustain a power-structure that facilitated colonial rule. Foucault's philosophy of how truth and power work in societies is significant to understand in this context:

> . . . truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. . . ."Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A "regime" of truth. This regime is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism.[10]

Discourses of representation were bound by the colonial "truth" of superiority and inferiority. Anthropologists in the colonial era, such as Margery Perham, represented the "true" African culture and ways of life to be primitive and uncivilized, owing to her jaundiced vision of interpreting non-White communities as barbaric. Representation by colonial White ethnographers maintained the silence of subaltern non-White culture.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" addresses the politics of representation in an interesting way. Her essay ends with the statement: "The subaltern cannot speak. . . . Representation has not withered away."[11] It has led to a series of debates and arguments regarding the position of the "subaltern" and the notion of "representation." Benita

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[9] Fred Dallmayr, *Dialogue among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 33.

[10] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 131–33.

[11] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 306.

Parry argues that Spivak "restricts (eliminates?)"[12] the voice of the colonized, and Leela Gandhi questions the erasure of pluralities of voices in Spivak's essay.[13] Tabish Khair interestingly states that "the subaltern may not 'speak' but the subaltern can and does act. Acting . . . is the kind of 'underprivileged' speech which is resorted to when the 'privileged' speech of words is denied to a subject."[14] There is an ongoing debate on the centre–margin conflict and the issue of representation. The question arises: How effective are these theoretical underpinnings to the "subaltern"? Where does theory move beyond the academic sphere? Spivak has been quite conscious of the position of the intellectual in addressing issues of representation. How does the discursive merge with the non-discursive? Like Spivak, Homi Bhabha has addressed this concern in an interesting way. It is said, writes Bhabha, that:

> . . . theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged. It is said that the place of the academic critic is inevitably within the Eurocentric archives of the imperialist or neo-colonial West . . . I believe it ain't necessarily so. Must we always polarize in order to polemicize? . . . Is the language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?[15]

It is this problem of defining or locating the non-discursive space that is central to Bhabha's famous statement, "there is no knowledge—political or otherwise—outside representation."[16] He moves beyond Said's discourse and questions the trope of representation as stereotype. He calls stereotype "a false representation of a given reality."[17] He locates representation out of the political into the psychological, and thus "allows a free-play of meanings which are not inevitably caught up in the discursive paradigms of colonial rule. What Bhabha is trying to achieve is a dynamic of equality between the

[12] Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995).
[13] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 1999.
[14] Tabish Khair, "Can the Subaltern Shout (and Smash?)," *World Literature Written in English*, Volume 38, No. 2 (2000): 10.
[15] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 28–31.
[16] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 33.
[17] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 107.

First and the Third World in terms of representation."[18] The question arises: How far can it be achieved using the trope of representation? It is an ever-shifting and ever-evasive space that creates multiple possibilities as well as limitations for the non-discursive space of equality to emerge.

The binary of the postcolonial world gains precedence over political theories of dialogue in many ways. Political theorists such as Hans Köchler argue that:

> For those who are concerned about the human race, a *universal* dialogue of civilizations is of crucial importance for the future of mankind because such a dialogue is a basic condition of peace and stability on both the national and the transnational level.[19]

Going back to the colonial period, he states that cross-cultural interactions had a "*missionary* ideology" that aimed to "propagate Western *rationality*." He draws one's attention to a similar dominating tendency working at present in the world:

> This *dominationist* approach in cross-cultural encounters has not disappeared with historical colonialism. In a more or less secularized form, it lives on in the *cultural self-perception* of the United States—which claim[s] to represent the "West"—as the herald of "human rights" and "democracy" in a self-declared "New World Order."[20]

He argues that every civilization must be able to "relate" to each other in order to create a space for co-existence and dialogue. In a similar vein, Ronald Niezen denounces the notion of "cultural universalism."[21] Fred Dallmayr states: "all we can plausibly and honestly do is seek universality in our different ways. To do this, however, we surely need to take others and their aspirations seriously, which requires dialogue and empathetic

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[18] Sumit Chakrabarti, "Moving beyond Edward Said: Homi Bhabha and the Problem of Postcolonial Representation," *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, Volume 14, No. 1 (2012): 11–12.
[19] Hans Köchler, "Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue: The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-Comprehension versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict," I.P.O. Online Publications, 1997,
http://www.hanskoechler.com/civ-dial.htm.
[20] Köchler, "Philosophical Foundations."
[21] Ronald Niezen, *A World Beyond Difference: Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 1.

attentiveness."[22] A related worldview is also shared by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his book *Globalectics.* He states that, "globalectics" proposes the need for "wholeness, interconnectedness" of different parts of the globe, making way for dialogue between cultures:[23]

> Reading globalectically is a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its contents and themes form a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place. . . . It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present.[24]

These discourses of dialogue and co-existence tend to remain on a discursive plane, while the non-discursive reality takes on an alarming turn in many contexts. Echewa uses fictional narrative as history to reinforce this idea.

The narrative mode of representation of history is a subject of intense debate among historians. Hayden White distinguishes between "historical" and "fictional" writings, and addresses the question of authenticity. He takes into account traditional historical theory, Anglo-American analytical philosophers, structuralists and poststructuralists, and puts forth his argument that narrative history is something other than a scientific account. However, that is not adequate reason to reject the "truth-value." If historical processes are represented with coherence "in the 'literary' or 'poetic' endowment of modern, secularized cultures, this is no reason to rule them out as *merely* imaginary constructions. To do so would entail the denial that literature and poetry have anything valid to teach us about 'reality.'"[25] He argues that historical discourse and literary discourse differ in subject matter—one being "real" and the other "imaginary"—and not in form. But that should not be a matter of concern as "the systems of knowledge production" for both generate from the historical experience of people, as he writes: "In the historical narrative, experiences distilled into fiction as *typifications* are subjected to the test of their capacity to endow 'real' events with meaning."[26] The "allegorical" nature of a historical narrative does not mean that it deals with false beliefs and experiences. What it does is to use "imaginary" events to endow deeper meaning to "real" happenings related

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[22] Fred Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory," *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 2, No. 2 (2004): 249–57.
[23] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 8.
[24] Thiong'o, *Globalectics*, 60.
[25] Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory*, Volume 23, No. 1 (1984): 21.
[26] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 21.

to the human past. The language plays a significant role here, and to miss out the allegorical element would lead to a loss of a more nuanced representation of past experiences and history. White emphasizes this allegorical nature of a historical narrative and claims that "[a] narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory."[27] He further states:

> In any event, the dual conviction that, on the one hand, truth must be represented in literal statements of fact and, on the other, that explanation must conform to the scientific model or its commonsensical counterpart, has led most analysts to ignore the specifically "Literary" aspect of historical narrative and therewith whatever "truth" it may convey in figurative terms.[28]

He draws references from Ricœur's notion of historiography, and describes how history writings contribute towards developing a plot that symbolically represents the past. Narrative, then, is considered more as a "mode of representation" rather than "a vehicle for conveying information."

The existing records that hold significance in historiography are also of importance in reclaiming history through narrative accounts. Narrative constitutes a sense of ambiguity that is evident in the writing of history too. White defines narrative as a "mode of discourse, a manner of speaking," which can be used to "represent "real" events, as in "historical narrative," and the result of this would be a "kind of discourse with specific linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical features, that is, 'narrative historiography.'"[29] The element of imagination in a narrative does not necessarily relate to a false portrayal of the past. An imaginary account of something "real" holds the same significance as an objective literal way of writing because the content of the discourse remains the same. It is only the mode of representation that varies, and that cannot question the authenticity of the subject represented. White very clearly states: "One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being 'imaginary.' It all depends upon how one construes the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature."[30] Echewa's novels engage with history writing in experimental ways. He reclaims pre-colonial and colonial history by approaching history as a narrative in constructing the plot of his novels and shaping his characters in an intricate manner. This book locates Echewa's novels in the wide spectrum of themes that address West African literature. The chapters focus on his craft of weaving history into his

[27] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 24.
[28] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 25.
[29] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 32.
[30] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 33.

narrative. He explores the terrains of postcolonial contexts and political theory to reimagine the history of Igbo society.

Taking into context the novels of Echewa, this book introduces the concept of "postcolonial soliloquies." The word "soliloquy" refers to "a speech in a play in which the character speaks to him- or herself or to the people watching rather than to the other characters."[31] The approach of "postcolonial" theory reclaims and rethinks the disparate voices across cultures with a history of colonization. The notion of "postcolonial soliloquies" addresses the cross-cultural barriers that restrain dialogue and an empathetic approach in the global context. "Heteroglossic"[32] narratives tend to remain in the sphere of monologic "soliloquies" in the postcolonial era. Attempts to exchange diverse standpoints and cultural beliefs on an equal footing become trapped within the ever-pervasive web of hierarchy weaved by power. It gives rise to civil wars and ethnic conflicts in the postcolonial global era. The novels examined here give a detailed understanding of the notion of "postcolonial soliloquies." The "soliloquy" of the subaltern, the "soliloquy" of the past, and the "soliloquy" of the older generation engage in a dialogic space that entails mutual recognition as well as contestation in Echewa's novels. He problematizes the notion of "postcolonial soliloquies" by revisiting the colonial past. He uses folktales and proverbs to reconstruct an Igbo worldview that nurtures the philosophy of co-existence. "Postcolonial soliloquies" address the disturbing silence of the "Self" on the dominant civilizing mission that ruled the colonial Empire for centuries, leaving a debilitating mark in the postcolonial present. Be it the colonial policy of the dual mandate by Lord Frederick Lugard in Nigeria, or the "divide and rule" policy of British colonial rule in India, the brutal consequences of civil wars in postcolonial Nigeria and Partition in independent India bear testimony to the violence of colonial imposition. The attempt to define "postcolonial soliloquies" is not done with an intention of searching for answers to the postcolonial conflict but to address the politics of the colonial past that has shaped the postcolonial present in ways that inevitably lead to ethnic conflicts and corruption in governance.

Echewa writes about the politics of the colonial past by addressing junctures of history manifested in family ties and relationships in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. His story of the "master" and the "servant" transcends the quintessential meanings of these words in extraordinary ways in his first novel, *The Land's Lord*. In his second novel, *The Crippled*

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[31] *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1376.
[32] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 291.

Dancer, he turns an inner gaze to his own community and indigenous practices, raising critical points of inquiry. His third novel, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, brings a myriad of histories together using the method of storytelling across generations. His use of storytelling adds a breath of fresh air to the stories of the colonizer–colonized relationship, also found in the novels of Chinua Achebe, Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, and other West African authors.

Locating the author in the context of West African literature, the chapters in this book understand narrative as history in addressing the crucial juncture between postcolonial theory and the concept of "dialogue" in political theory. The first chapter addresses the concepts of ethnicity and difference, and analyzes novels from Africa. The discourse of Black African literature situates itself in a postcolonial misery of a tortuous past and a lost present. Taking the discourse that emanates from the body of literature explored, the second chapter explores the conflict of religion and identity in Echewa's *The Land's Lord*, and draws points of comparison with Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*. The powerful symbol of rebaptizing a White priest by an indigenous village elder subverts the colonial discourse. As the author says:

> *The Land's Lord*, as it were, represented my emancipation from an abstract, theological, and doctrinaire form of Christianity, which loses its argument with Ala, the silent, present, and ubiquitous Land-Goddess of the Igbos. At the end of the novel, Old Man Ahamba, an Igbo elder, baptizes the priest in the name of humanity. The question that is implied is, why can't we be human together?[33]

The third chapter challenges the stereotype of a glorified pre-colonial past in addressing history, memory, and intergenerational conflict in *The Crippled Dancer*. The fourth chapter looks at history-making through the lens of a Western anthropologist and at the same time engages with indigenous storytelling by Nne-nne (the grandmother) as a counter-anthropological discourse. Nne-nne's storytelling finds a more detailed analysis in the fifth chapter, which is about the wars of women against the hierarchy of native patriarchy and colonial rule. The conclusion re-examines Echewa's engagement with history through literature, and situates the notion of "postcolonial soliloquies" within the debates of a dialogic space proposed by political theorists.

[33] Das, "A Rendezvous with T. Obinkaram Echewa," 154.

CHAPTER 1

ETHNICITY AND DIFFERENCE: NARRATIVES, HISTORY AND AFRICA

> Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter.[1]

Colonialism in Africa played a major role in bringing forth a universal identity for all African people. Cultural differences were obliterated. Ethnic identities were subdued. The colonial rulers attempted to mould the colonized by emphasizing the sameness between them, and denying distinctive cultural traits. In the words of Stuart Hall, "There was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the black experience but with its simplification and its stereotypical character."[2] He defines ethnicity and reflects on its role in constructing Black identity:

> The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual.[3]

He questions the manner in which the notion of "ethnicity" was used by the colonial rulers to construct a similar identity for all Black people with a history of colonization. He proposes a "new conception of ethnicity" that "engages rather than suppresses *difference* and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities."[4] This "new ethnicity" is also a "constructed" one. It is constructed based on the way we engage with our past, and the way we define ourselves politically. Thus, this new notion of ethnicity, called "the emergent

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[1] Chinua Achebe, "Today, the Balance of Stories," *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 73.
[2] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 223.
[3] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 226.
[4] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 226.

ethnicities," has a relation with the past. But this relation with the histories of our cultural roots happens through memory and narrative. Remembering the past and recovering lost memories and cultures play important roles in discovering this new notion of ethnicity. It acknowledges the variety in cultures, beliefs, and experiences, and upholds a "new conception of our identities," which is "neither locked into the past nor able to forget the past. Neither all the same nor entirely different. Identity *and* difference. It is a new settlement between identity and difference."[5] This need to create new ethnic identities in order to reclaim cultural identities and revisit histories has led postcolonial writers to write about their indigenous cultures.

C. L. Innes argues that "literary works by Achebe, Brathwaite, Rao, Rushdie and others can be read as alternative histories which both challenge colonial narratives and give voice to those whose stories have been ignored or overwhelmed by European historians."[6] These works take a critical approach to the histories of colonized countries, emphasizing not only the sameness of their experience of colonization but also the difference. The differences in experiences, memories, and cultural pasts form an extremely significant part of critical inquiry and discussion. Jacques Derrida criticized Western structures of thought for attempting to erase differences and cultivate a uniform culture in the world. His notion of "*differance*" is interesting to consider in this context. "*Differance*" implies both "to differ" and "to defer":

> [Derrida] attempts to demonstrate . . . that this *differance* inhabits the very core of what appears to be immediate and present. . . . The illusion of the self-presence of meaning or of consciousness is thus produced by the repression of the differential structures from which they spring.[7]

Meanings of words not only "differ" from each other but also are perpetually "deferred"; therefore, any concept—such as the Western colonial concept of Self—cannot be a determinant "presence." As Michael Ryan and Danielle Sands put it: "*Différance* plays on the double meaning of *différer*

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[5] Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America*, Volume 23, No. 4 (1991): 20.

[6] C. L. Innes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40.

[7] Barbara Johnson, "Introduction," in *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), ix.

as both to differ and to defer. *Différance* implies that both non-identity and delay are inherent in presence and make it possible."[8]

Difference and "new ethnicity" define Black African literature in interesting ways. Black African writers celebrate the distinct cultures of people from different ethnic groups. African literature reclaims indigenous cultures and challenges the stereotype of Africa constructed during the colonial period. This chapter makes a critical inquiry into certain African novels in order to read history through the narrative patterns explored by the writers. It takes into context Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*, Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* from Nigeria (West Africa), Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* from Guinea (West Africa), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* from Kenya (East Africa), and Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* from Cameroon (Central Africa). This chapter first addresses the novels with the theme of colonization, then proceeds to analyze the intergenerational conflict in some of the novels, and finally reads women writers.

Achebe narrates the story of the incursion of White culture and the nature of imperial oppression. Recalling an Igbo proverb in this context, he says: "If you can't tell where the rain began to beat you, you will not know where the sun dried your body."[9] It is not necessary to construct a glorified past in order to celebrate indigenous African culture; but it is important to recover pre-colonial cultures and ethnic identities to revisit history and reclaim lost stories. Achebe gives voice to the suppressed stories of the Igbo ethnic group, and presents them as sentient human beings in his novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.

Things Fall Apart is set in "the period between 1850–1900; that is, the period just prior to and after the arrival of white men in this part of West Africa" in two Igbo villages, Umuofia and Mbanta.[10] The confrontation between White colonizers and Igbo people is re-evoked in his third novel, *Arrow of God*, which is "set in the period between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*; that is, the period when colonialism had become entrenched in Nigeria."[11] The setting is the union of Umuaro and six other villages. Achebe presents the democratic and egalitarian nature of Igbo society, well expressed in the proverb "Igbo enwe eze," that is, the Igbo do

[8] Michael Ryan, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3 vols. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 553.

[9] Chinua Achebe, "Spelling Our Proper Name," *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (England: Penguin Classics, 2009), 59.

[10] G. D. Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 13.

[11] Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, 59.

not have kings. Community is ascribed a significant role. However, individual achievements share an equal place of importance in Igbo society. The coming together of the society in the New Yam Festival and the rituals performed give the picture of a close-knit community, while the wrestling match on the second day of the festival is a means for the display of individual physical might. The novel itself opens with the honour associated with individual achievements:

> Okonkwo was well known throughout nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino.[12]

Igbo communal life finds expression in *Arrow of God* too, when the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves brings the six villages together, and communal unity shatters whatever enmity there may have been between the villages:

> A stranger to this year's festival might go away thinking that Umuaro had never been more united in all its history. In the atmosphere of the present gathering the great hostility between Umunneora and Umuachala seemed, momentarily, to lack significance.[13]

Achebe's narrative reclaims the Igbo worldview through storytelling and characterization. Ezeulu—the Chief Priest of Ulu, the deity of six villages—is presented as the possessor of immense power. At the same time his power is restricted in the way power functions within a community. Community holds the utmost power in an Igbo village:

> . . . the Igbo postulate an unprecedented uniqueness for the individual by making him or her the sole creation and purpose of a unique god-agent, *chi*. No two persons, not even blood brothers, are created and accompanied by the same *chi*.
>
> And yet . . . this unsurpassed individuality [is balanced] by setting limits. . . . The first limit is the democratic one which subordinates the person to the group [or community] in practical, social matters. And the other is a moral taboo on excess which sets a limit to personal ambition.[14]

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[12] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2007), 3.
[13] Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986), 66.
[14] Chinua Achebe, "The Writer and His Community," *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988), 39.

Okonkwo's and Ezeulu's attempts to act against the community and its customs lead to their downfall.

Orality constitutes an important part of Igbo societies. Proverbs and anecdotes in everyday speech form essential elements of Igbo culture, and oral storytelling practices within the family play significant role in imparting values to children. Oral literature serves as the storehouse of their customs and mores. In the pre-colonial period, it was the only way to preserve native culture. Achebe uses oral storytelling techniques to revisit the pre-colonial culture of Igbo people and uphold the significance of *chi* in Igbo cosmology. *Chi* is "translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit-double, etc." It also means "day or daylight but is most commonly used for those transitional periods between day and night or night and day."[15] The traditional life in the Igbo village of Umuofia is disrupted by colonial invasion. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the coming of White men in Umuofia through second-person narration. He experiments with narrative points of view in order to engage with history through the multiple lenses of his characters. Obierika reports to Okonkwo (in exile) in Mbanta about the colonial inroad: "The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. . . . And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women. . . ."[16] Thereafter, he comes to know about the building of the church, and finally about his son Nwoye's conversion to Christianity. Christianity makes its inroads by captivating young men like Nwoye in propagating the presence of One God and the gospel. Nwoye is attracted to the "poetry of the new religion."[17] The outcasts or *osu* became the first converts. Achebe's narrative upholds the violent demolition of Igbo egalitarianism and democratic rule. The society accepts changes and moves on. The Igbo community adapts Christianity according to their indigenous needs, and prevents the society from falling apart, as Derek Wright writes: ". . . the novel's title has a misleading finality because Umuofia, rejecting Okonkwo's counsel of a war of resistance which would have meant total obliteration, does not fall apart: it changes in order to go on."[18]

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[15] Chinua Achebe, "*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology," *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 93.
[16] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 144.
[17] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 151.
[18] Derek Wright, "Things Standing Together: A Retrospect on *Things Fall Apart*," in "In Celebration of Chinua Achebe," eds. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, special issue, *Kunapipi*, Volume 12, No. 2 (1990): 81.

In *Arrow of God*, colonialism disrupts the Igbo worldview and the oral culture that forms the backbone of Igbo life. The church introduces new myths and beliefs pertaining to Christianity, and rejects Igbo beliefs as false: "Christianity . . . sees its primary function as the degradation of Umuaro's traditional symbols. . . . the Christians can only succeed in controlling the minds and hearts of the people of Umuaro by degrading national symbols and denying them their mythical significance."[19] Ezeulu sends his son Oduche to the mission so that he remains informed about the ways of the White man, but finds his son trying to kill the python—a sacred symbol for the Igbo—in order to prove himself a good Christian. Tejumola Olaniyan points out that:

> . . . Christianity, unlike Igbo religions, is monotheistic and therefore selfish . . . univocal. It is not a religion you can "share" with other religions; all it says is "Jesus Christ *or* hellfire and damnation." This is why the "share" the little boy Oduche brings home, rather than co-existing with others, attempts to stifle them out of existence.[20]

Arrow of God highlights the colonial power gradually establishing its dominance in Umuaro. Ezeulu's refusal to be the White man's chief shakes the power structure of the colonial administration in Umuofia, and finally the colonials succumb to Ezeulu's decision. Achebe reveals how the Igbo community preserves its own traditions, customs, and ways of living, and does not completely submit to the White culture. However, Ezeulu's destructive ambition to go against his community and to consider himself the possessor of supreme power and authority leads to the destruction of Igbo society. He goes against the customs of the land, similar to Okonkwo.

The intrusion of colonizers in Africa, disrupting the traditions and culture of the land, also finds a living presence in Thiong'o's novel *Weep Not, Child*:

> The conflict now is between the aliens and their black lackeys on one side, and a deprived native population represented by the Mau Mau on the other. The issue centers round the question of who owns the land of Kenya, its indigenous people or the white settlers.[21]

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[19] Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 154–55.
[20] Tejumola Olaniyan, "Chinua Achebe and an Archaeology of the Postcolonial African State," *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 32, No. 3 (2001): 24–25.
[21] Ime Ikkideh, "James Ngugi as Novelist," *African Literature Today*, Volume 2 (1978): 6.