theories and methodologies

Chinua Achebe: A Tribute

Chinua Achebe, a Father of Modern African Literature

ELLEKE BOEHMER

If it is true that legends never die but only grow and transmogrify, then the death of the African literary giant Chinua Achebe, at the age of eighty-two, on 21 March 2013, will do nothing to dim his assured status as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. Two months after his death, he was buried in his hometown, Ogidi, in the state of Anambra, Nigeria, after a week of funeral rites in the national and state capitals, as well as at Nsukka University, where he worked as an academic in the early 1970s. The ceremonies marked Nigeria's sense that here was a writer whose vision had shaped not only the nation's understanding of itself but also, and as profoundly, anglophone world letters. In 2007 these contributions were justly acknowledged with the award to Achebe of the Man Booker International Prize, which recognizes the full trajectory of a writer's career and achievements.

The death of a literary figure bearing a reputation at once local, national, and international invariably raises questions about the writer's legacy and the afterlife of his or her work. Achebe's legacy appears particularly well founded, for at least two reasons. First, there is his role in interrogating what might be termed canonical racism in the academy—especially by way of "An Image of Africa," the bold, uncompromising essay on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which Achebe scrutinized critics' long-term indifference to the inarticulacy of Africans in the novella. That his essay has been included alongside the Conrad classic in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* since the anthology's seventh edition, linking his name indelibly to that of the colonial writer, is a mark of an important and lasting quality in Achebe's work—his ability to give memorable, if also inevitably controversial, expression to the core concerns of the modern human *and* African conditions. Unsurprisingly, Nelson Mandela, that leading African humanist, was during his incarceration on Robben Island an inspired reader and admirer of Achebe's work.

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Biographical notes about the contributors appear on page 256.

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PMLA 129.2 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The second reason for assuming the endurance of Achebe's legacy is that his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), permanently changed perceptions of African literature on the continent and worldwide. In 1964 a comparable impact was made by *Arrow of God*, many readers' favorite work by Achebe, which explores a similar sensory and mythic space. To date, the tale of how the yam farmer Okonkwo's intransigence fatally comes up against missionary infiltration in Igboland remains the best-selling African story of all time, ten million copies of which have been sold in fifty languages. To the same degree as Salman Rushdie's perhaps more widely celebrated *Midnight's Children*, *Things Fall Apart* deserves to be regarded as an inaugural postcolonial novel. Though its appearance predated the institutional establishment of the postcolonial and world literary studies fields, it nonetheless helped to determine the protocols whereby the postcolonial novel might be read (Bahri 44). The classical status of Achebe's work, therefore, is undeniable. After 1958 African literature could be authoritatively viewed as literature and not as anthropology or sociology, as it was often labeled by its colonial-era detractors. Even if the traditional subject matter of *Things Fall Apart* was unfamiliar to a metropolitan reader, the novel's epic arc and the tragic fate of its hero, Okonkwo, enabled the work to transcend its superficially exotic aspects.

The question of Achebe's global and generational influence became particularly acute within days of his death, when his compatriot Wole Soyinka, the 1986 Nobel Prize–winning playwright, gave an interviewer a seemingly ambiguous, or at least qualified, answer about Achebe's media-inflated status as the "father of African literature." In response to the question about African literature's paternity, Soyinka commented that Achebe's place in the canon of world literature was assured "wherever the art of the story-teller is celebrated" but that the attribution of fatherhood betrayed "momentary exuberance" and an ignorance of Africa's myriad other literary traditions, in a host of languages. Since only one biological father is possible, the question evidently reignited for Soyinka a long-standing rivalry with a compatriot, Achebe, whose literary-critical terrain, like his, was much given to genealogical and familial metaphors.

Readers of Achebe might well wish to question the decorum and appropriateness of damning his reputation with unmistakably faint praise at a time when the writer's body had hardly begun its transit to Nigeria for a hero's burial. It would seem that differences of national and regional affiliation possibly thrown up by Achebe's 2012 publication of *There Was a Country*, his personal history of the Nigeria-Biafra war and lament for Nigeria's unfulfilled promise, may have worked paradoxically to exacerbate other differences between the two writers. On one specific level, however, Soyinka's response was undoubtedly a fair one. Looking no further than the significant African novelists, poets, playwrights, and journalists active in the 1910s and 1920s, in various languages, African and European, we would be hard-pressed to raise up a *single* father of modern African literature, nor would a writer as nuanced and thoughtful as Achebe was wish to assume the mantle. The question is flawed, since it takes for granted the existence of a monadic and homogeneous Africa—much as the characterization of the continent as simply Africa, without reference to any countries, as on tourist Web sites, can do.

Even so, it is possible to credit Achebe with the foundation of modern imaginative literature in Africa in the postwar period, as one of his major critics, Lyn Innes, acknowledged in her *Guardian* obituary. Moreover, he was not only a practitioner but also an important architect of that literature, in particular in his role as the editor of the influential African Writers Series for nearly a decade (Currey 34–35). These contributions Soyinka neatly sidesteps, perhaps with an eye to safeguard-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing his own legacy from rival influences. Yet, expanding the case for Achebe's global significance, his oeuvre is as varied in genre and approach as that of any world writer one might care to mention, ranging from the tragic histories already cited through the social satires *A Man of the People* (1966) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and the Booker-shortlisted political novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) to literary essays, poetry, short stories, and memoir. From the early 1960s onward, Achebe's global status incrementally solidified as rising new generations of writers across Africa defined their voices by interacting with his characteristic mixed Igbo and English inflections. His influential perspectives on the interaction of modern life with tradition, on the colonial incursion and the struggle for national freedom, and on other keynote African yet also global themes mark the work of the many who have written in his wake, in Nigeria and elsewhere, including those in his immediate Igbo cultural circle. As the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of his literary daughters, aptly put it, Achebe "gave permission" (Boehmer 141). The British Nigerian writer Ben Okri relatedly wrote that Achebe allowed all humankind to dream more richly (132).

In English departments across the Anglo-American world, Achebe is now best known, not to say notorious in some contexts, for his talking back to institutional racism and to the biases of the English literature canon in the Conrad essay. Ironically, given his receptiveness toward English as at once a colonial language and an African lingua franca, he became regarded as *the* combative black African voice. In fact, however, his views were always a great deal more ameliorative, nuanced, and conciliatory than this characterization suggests, as is clear from his debates with more radical writers, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, about English as a medium of African expression. He made of what he called the Igbo philosophy of "the middle ground" a highly crafted, writerly approach (based on one of his favorite proverbs, "Wherever Something Stands, Something Else Will Stand Beside It" [*Education* 5–6]).

Yet it is not only for his foundational position nor even for his willingness to speak truth to power and indict the Western world for its racial biases that Achebe deserves his readers' undying respect. His reputation as a great world writer rests centrally on his staggering success in wresting Africa into non-African frameworks of cognition through the medium of the novel form, yet, importantly, without ever compromising or substantially changing his novels' structures of religious and cultural reference. With *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, in particular, a coherent, "self-engendered" world sprang into the world's view, as if from nowhere (Gikandi 317). Finally, by contrast with the many negative images of Africa that still circulate in the global media, Achebe let us know that Africa—the many countries and communities that make it up—is a vast cultural universe, coherent, involving, richly textured, the same as any other complex cultural universe. If, as the philosopher Achille Mbembe warns us, we should remember when we write of Africa that doing so should not merely be a pretext to write of Europe, then Achebe's great achievement has been always to write of Africa as the core yet also the whole of the world.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Chasms and Silences: For Chinua Achebe

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Achebe valued the power of silence. His work insists that seemingly unbridgeable chasms in a text or a culture alert us to possibilities beyond our grasp. Like the Caribbean novelist Wilson Harris, Achebe understood that such chasms leave us space to imagine how "eclipsed bridges and potential bridges exist between divorced or separated or closed orders and worlds, bridges that are sometimes precarious, never absolute, but which . . . engender a profound awareness of the numinous solidity of space, inner space/outer space, space as the womb of simultaneous densities and transparencies in the language of originality" (Harris 239).

When I first wrote about *Things Fall Apart*, I argued that Achebe's silences finessed moments where the competing literary expectations of British anthropologists and Western romance readers intersected with a new Nigerian elite's modernist aspirations, as well as its nostalgia for those unnamed *things*, whose existence no one had thought to articulate until they fell apart. For examples of this architecture and process, I focused on the novel's strategic silences around gender issues. However, *Things Fall Apart* contains other moments where silence registers possibilities beyond representation. Okonkwo brings us to the brink of one such chasm when he contemplates his son Nwoye's defection to join the Christians:

> Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. (153)

The novel does not counter this haunting image of cultural annihilation, and Okonkwo's ignominious death seems to realize his worst fears. Yet the fact that a Christianized author orchestrates such anxieties suggests that ideological bridges a previous generation could not have foreseen already had begun to crisscross the chasm Okonkwo feared would engulf his memory.

Conversely, in delineating Nwoye's consciousness the novel acknowledges Christianity's potential, even though in *No Longer at Ease* that potential never materializes. The new religion's poetry unearths memories of unnamed twins and missing sacrificial vic-

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PMLA 129.2 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press