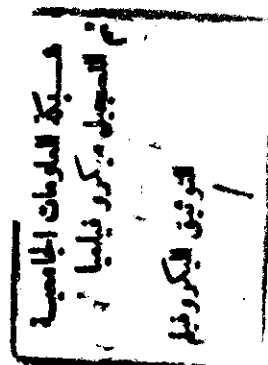


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**THE NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE :**  
**A Portrait of Pre and Post Colonial**  
**Society**



An M.A. Thesis submitted to the  
Department of English  
Faculty of Arts  
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M.B

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By  
**MONA BRENCE RADWAN**

Under the Supervision  
of  
**Professor NADIA SULIMAN HAFEZ**

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## Introduction

Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, is one of the most prominent literary figures in Africa. He is a novelist, a short story writer, a poet and an essayist. However, his reputation is firmly based on his novels especially his first one *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which has been considered a classic since its publication. He is also a nationalist figure in the sense of being a committed writer concerned with issues and subjects related to his people and his country at large. As his writings, both creative and essays, reflect, Achebe has a deep sense of duty towards his Ibo society in particular and the Nigerian society in general. Though born to a Christian family and educated in Western schools, he fully acknowledges great debt to the traditional culture of the Ibo. Therefore, when confronted with the racist claims and attitudes of the European literary traditions, Achebe takes on the challenge of presenting the African culture and history from within rather than from an outsider's point of view. Thus his literary career starts as a reaction to the dominant and purposeful misrepresentation of the Africans as sub-human race without history or culture.

Therefore, this thesis argues that Achebe's novels are socially and politically conditioned, and that art is not separate from the cultural milieu which has produced it. The thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter one is a cultural background that reviews the historical relationship between the Europeans and the Africans in terms of colonizers and colonized and the different strategies the colonizers used to establish their hegemony over the Africans. It also refers to some of the dominant European literary discourse which has permanently been negating the African personality. The first chapter also introduces Chinua Achebe as one of the literary pioneers in Africa who decided to use literature as a cultural weapon for decolonization. Finally, the chapter provides reasons for choosing the novel form in particular to convey the writer's message,



and the method of study used in the research that of analysing the four main components of the novel : time, place, character, and narrative perspective.

The second and third chapters in the thesis directly examine and fully analyse the pre-colonial novels : *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), and the post-colonial novels : *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Therefore, a definition of the two terms used here is necessary in this attempt at critical analysis. The term post-colonial has been widely used and it is therefore crucial to arrive at a narrowly defined meaning for use in this thesis. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin use the term post-colonial "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression".\* 'Post-colonial' in this thesis, when used with reference to Achebe's novels, is used to signify that the main body of these novels are set in the period after the settling of the white man in Africa and the effects of colonization. As for the term 'pre-colonial', it is a term coined especially in this context by the researcher, and it is used to refer to the novels which are primarily set in so-called pre-colonial Africa, that is to say before the arrival and settling of the colonizers from the West and also before the occurrence of widespread changes in the Africans' thought and behaviour brought about by colonization. *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, may be said to be 'pre-colonial' since the main body of the novel is devoted to narration and exposition of the traditional African tribal life and culture that existed before the advent of the white man. As for *Arrow of God*, while it is set in the period after the arrival of colonization, and focuses on Western disruption of tribal traditions, it may still, justifiably be termed 'pre-colonial' since the main body of the action takes place in the village :

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\* Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London : Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

the protagonists are the African characters and the core event in the novel is the disruption of an African religious ritual because of the interference of the white man. In contrast, 'post-colonial' novels focus on corrupted Africa : traditional life no longer figures in its pristine state. His novels *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* deal with Africans who are torn between their loyalty to their traditional roots and their aspiration to be affiliated with the white man and his Nigerian successors, living in a world full of ethnic and tribal divisions, lacking a real sense of nationalism, and threatened by military rule : problems that did not exist before the advent of colonial rule, and therefore, characteristic of 'post-colonial' Africa.

Thus in chapter two, Achebe presents a vivid and objective dramatization of the life and culture of his people before the arrival of the white man. It also traces the disruption of the traditional life and the loss of self-determination which resulted from the imposition of Western culture on the Ibo society. The chapter, also, aims at showing how Achebe tried to restore the African's 'actual consciousness' of their distinct existence and of their history and culture through writing the pre-colonial novels.

In chapter three, Achebe depicts the post-colonial politics in Nigeria after she has won the political independence in 1960 and the resulting corruption and instability. In the post-colonial novels, Achebe tries to understand and present the contradictory nature of the post-colonial era so as to break out of its vicious circle and to achieve the possible consciousness which seeks new possibilities for a better future.

The study ends with Achebe's vision of the world which is primarily drawn from his Ibo culture and traditions. Both concepts of art for society's sake and political plurality will be deduced from the analysis of the traditional culture and the post-colonial situation as developed in Achebe's novels.

## CHAPTER I

### Cultural Background

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly examine the colonial relationship between Europe and Africa which resulted eventually in cultural resistance and the emergence of African literature. This new literature was mainly a protest against the European's misrepresentation of Africa and the Africans, and a reassertion of the existence of African history and culture prior to the imposition of western civilization on Africa.

The relationship between Africa and Europe has never been one of equals. One can always notice that throughout the past four centuries, Europe has assumed the role of the master, while Africa has had to play the role of the subject. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, Europe dominated more than two thirds of the world either by trade or direct military occupation. Consequently, Europe accumulated wealth and power while its subordinates suffered from hunger, poverty and backwardness. And here the terms "development" and "underdevelopment" are dialectically interrelated, in the words of Walter Rodney :

... development and underdevelopment are not only comparative terms, but ... they also have a dialectical relationship one to the other : that is to say, the two help produce each other by interaction. Western Europe and Africa had a relationship which ensured the transfer of the wealth from Africa to Europe. The transfer was possibly only after trade became truly international, and that takes one back to the late 15th century when Africa and Europe were drawn into common relationship for the first time – along with Asia and the Americas. The developed and underdeveloped parts of the present capitalist

section of the world have been in continuous contact for four and a half centuries. The contention here is that over that period Africa helped to develop Western Europe in the same proportion as Western Europe helped to underdevelop Africa.<sup>(1)</sup>

Being in theory and practice the extension of the capitalist system, imperialism divided the world into two parts : the exploiters and the exploited, the dispossessed dominated and the prosperous overlords, the makers of policy and the dependent. As a matter of fact, and as Rodney has noted, such a long relationship of unequal exchange has to result in, in the long run, the good of the first part mentioned above and the dissolution or at least the disadvantage of the second.

In his comprehensive study *Imperialism and Underdevelopment in Nigeria*, Bade Onimode states that the pre-colonial history of Nigeria mentions that the social formations which were characterized by the communal mode of production were separate tribal societies. The clan was the unit of social organization, while the family was the unit of social production. The principal means of production were labour and land owned jointly by all the social groups. The land belonged to the community and was managed by the chief of the tribe and by individual families. Labour was divided among the people according to sex and age. Men would be responsible for clearing the land, cultivating crops, making tools for hunting and farming, whereas women and old men would be responsible for bringing up the children and taking care of the household. Surplus communal production was little and depended only on nature. That small surplus was used for mutual gift-giving which was one of the means that ensured social cohesion. As regards social and political distinctions, these were on a generational basis; the social structure was mainly egalitarian, power and authority were exercised by a council of elders and where chiefs existed. They were not hereditary, but were democratically elected and replaced. The relation between the elders and

the young was one of status not of class. Therefore, there were no classes or class conflict in the communal societies.<sup>(2)</sup>

Therefore, that general claim held for centuries, that Europe civilized these communal societies and changed them from anarchists and savages into decent, well-bred, civilized human beings, is a fallacy.

After colonizing Nigeria, and following the divide and rule policy, the colonial administration created new classes to serve its own interests and intensified clan interests and conflicts. District officers, interpreters and clerks acquired absolute authority from their affiliation to the white colonizers.

However, a colonial or neo-colonial power cannot fully exercise complete authority without a policy of cultural penetration. The imperial power would use or rather abuse all means to control the cultural life of the colonized : education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances, and every form of expression in the hope of controlling people's values and ethics, and, eventually, their vision of the world, self-image and self-definition. For the colonizing power would like to have a slave who not only accepts his reality but believes that he is destined to be a slave and nothing but a slave. And here is Amil Cabral strongly stressing the importance of cultural hegemony over a colonized country :

History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is quite easy for a stranger to impose his rule on a people. But history equally teaches us that, whatever the material aspects of that rule, it cannot be sustained except by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people in question. It can only firmly entrench itself if it physically destroys a significant part of the dominated people.<sup>(3)</sup>

Therefore, Western imperialism was persistent all through in rationalizing its illegitimate occupation and brutish behaviour by creating

theories and images, which, in fact, are nothing but crude racist formulations.

Cultural penetration involves two processes : a) the destruction of the values, ethics and traditions of the colonized, b) spreading a distorted version of Western values and the capitalist tradition among the people in question; simply because the imperialist power will never allow any dependent country to rise to the level of any advanced colonial country. They export to the colonized people what would serve in achieving the imperialist interests. Any colonial power would do like what Britain did in India as Marx states :

England has broken down the entire framework of the Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindu, and separates Hindustan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history.<sup>(4)</sup>

And although the "civilizing" mission propagated by the West was to de-construct so as to re-construct, the fact and reality proved quite the contrary : it was a mission for destruction and degradation. In "The Future of the British Rule in India", Marx comments :

England has to fulfil a double mission in India : one destructive, the other regenerative; the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundation of Western society in Asia ... They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society. The historic pages of their rule in India report hardly any thing beyond that destruction.<sup>(5)</sup>

Therefore, for the colonial powers to firmly manipulate the destiny of the so-called underdeveloped countries, they had to create the well-known mythical images of the natives; that of laziness, stupidity, faithlessness, violence, corruption among many other things. The colonizer would project all the possible negative characteristics onto the colonized, and attribute to himself all the merits and positive qualities possible and impossible. For the colonizer cannot feel or claim his superiority unless he degrades the colonized and makes him feel his inferiority. The colonizer never tries to understand or become closer to the colonized because that would destroy the whole system of exploitation and privilege of colonialism.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi discusses in length the dialectical roles played by each group that eventually lead to the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer. The colonizer creates the negative image of the colonized and imposes it on him. Not only that but he also makes sure that the colonized believes himself to be inherently inferior and less than human. This dehumanization process eventually resulted in the colonized who accepts the image and works within its context. And in order to justify their exploitation of the colonized, colonizers use several strategies which Memmi explains as follows :

One attempt can be made by demonstrating the usurper's eminent merits, so eminent that they deserve such compensation. Another is to harp on the usurper's demerits, so deep that they cannot help leading but to misfortune. His disquiet and resulting thirst for justification requires the usurper to extol himself to the skies and to drive the usurped below the ground at the same time. In effect, these two attempts at legitimacy are actually inseparable.<sup>(6)</sup>

The colonized, thus, would be looked down upon as disabled (mentally and spiritually), closer to animals than to human beings. They