

Politics of rewriting: what did Achebe really do?

Bright Molande

The resistant post-colonial has become a scandal.

(Spivak, 1983.)

Introduction

All that we call writing is a form of rewriting.¹ Concepts of intertextuality, intermediarity, adaptation, translation and revision or re-visioning can all fall under rewriting. The act of 'the empire writing back to the centre' (Ashcroft et al. 1989) in which African writers such as Chinua Achebe have been involved is also a case of rewriting. The concept of rewriting is such a broad one that it becomes scaring to approach in a paper of this limited scope. But there is neither claim nor attempt to follow up the term in all its dimensions, let alone exhausting the concept. The paper rather starts by attempting to narrow "rewriting" down to the idea of a *resisting response* of one text to another but goes beyond this narrowed sense. We will explore Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*² as a resisting response to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*³ as one way of showing the complexities of rewriting.

The paper advances the now familiar theme of "the empire writes back to the centre" which Achebe himself prefers to be phrased in such a militant tone as "the empire fights back".⁴ Suggestive of writing back (rewriting) as "fighting back" in the aftermath of the colossal encounter of colonialism is a political act also because power relations are evoked in that encounter. We thus focus on rewriting as political warfare. The assumption in this paper is that Achebe clashes with Cary on the frontline of ideology. It is indeed ideology that becomes the bone of contention in Achebe's writing (fighting) back to the metropolitan text.

Since the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), discussing African literature as resistance or responses may sound banal. In my opinion, however, we need to undertake a further theoretical analysis of the basis of this 'writing back' in order to give an account of what happened at the birth of the novelty we have

labelled African Literature as well as what happens in the process of the birth of a literary text. Writing back to the metropolis has been one account. This paper, however, suggests that while 'writing back' denotes a one-way linear dimension, the process has been more complex than that. The 'writing back' has to be understood as a process of 'rewriting'. But this concept of rewriting needs to be grasped within the complexity of 'intertextuality'.

This essay is in two broad parts. The first part deals with the theoretical concepts of rewriting and intertextuality while the second part discusses Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a rewrite but within the notion of intertextuality.

Intertextuality: birth of a text

Every text is genetically informed and its newness, uniqueness as well as individuality arise amid old, sometimes banal and familiar tissues. The 'genes' that inform the new text come from other prior texts. Newness is born out of the old and such is the paradox of intertextuality. It is the very paradox of the birth of a text.

Scholarly tradition dates the coinage of the term "intertextuality" back to Julia Kristeva who, according to Allen Graham's (2000) account in *Intertextuality* (2000), is not necessarily the first to think through and write about the concept itself. Kristeva has Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes as her precursors. Kristeva sees the concept of intertextuality as a process of "transposition". She borrows from the Freudian notion of dream-making when she looks at intertextuality as a process involving the "altering of the thetic *position*- the destruction of the old and the formation of a new one" achieved through "displacement" and "condensation" of the raw materials (Kristeva 1986: 11). The raw materials in question are texts. This renders the text a more complex character in which it is neither "a self-sufficient" nor "a closed system" (Still and Worton 1990: 1). While the question of self-sufficiency, to say the least, remains available for a critical interrogation, that of being an open ended system leads us to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of novelty which is part of the theoretical concerns in this essay. The open-ended has the possibility of being ever new since it accommodates newness all the time. The novelty that emerged at the birth of African Literature led by such works as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* also becomes a relevant issue.

In the relationship between intertextuality and novelty, we are to trace Kristeva's underlining of "the destruction of the old and the creation of the new" beyond what she sees as "the textual space". Kristeva takes "a spatial conception" of the

text in which the text is not just a site for contention of meaning but also a space where coordinates of “the writing subject, the address[ee] and exterior texts” meet (Kristeva 1986: 36). But her idea of novelty itself, as well as the implied tension between the old and new allows one to pull Kristeva's views further into a larger socio-cultural framework beyond the written text. The very archetypal conflict between the old and the new, creation and destruction manifest themselves in discourses of many cultures.

The interplay of the binary notions of *destruction* and *creation*, on the one hand, and *the old* as opposed to *the new*, on the other manifest their importance by their pervasive presence in the human collective conscious as can be found in cosmogonic stories across cultures.⁵ Thus, intertextuality plunges us into the cultural realm where issues of origins and creation are central. One may then ask as follows: When is the creation of a text done? Where is the origin of a text? Where is the origin of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*? Of course, whatever is legitimised as the origin or original is bound to be in conflict with novelty as long as every binary opposition contains a latent conflict. Authority and its discourse also find themselves in conflict with novelty, especially when the former rigidly confine themselves to what is viewed as *the standard* (a word with obvious links to the origin or original). Thus, the open-ended that accommodates newness in a constant process of re/creation is also continuously self-destructive. A discourse that resists newness in fear of destruction paradoxically risks death. A text that resists new interpretations or rewriting risks death. We may also begin to wonder whether Achebe 'kills' Cary and Conrad as he may have intended to or ultimately 'resurrects' the two writers by rewriting and thus ironically keeping them a living subject in African literature. What is it that Achebe 'kills' or destroys by rewriting *Mr. Johnson*?

In relation to what Kristeva's “destroying the old to create the new” in intertextuality, one finds a reasonable number of myths that associate origins with destruction. Destruction also has connotations of the void, the ruin or simply the formlessness out of which the new, paradoxically, emerges. The Word of God “the Father” tells us, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And *the earth was without form and darkness was upon the face of the deep*. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (*Genesis* 1:1-2). Man, “the very paragon of creation”, was to be made out of nothing but clay in the preceding moments of that void. Notice that this is a very highly regarded cosmogonic version of creation which Mikhail Bakhtin would locate as belonging to the “high” because it is the

sacred and sacrosanct discourse coming from the authoritative Word of the Fathers.⁶ In Bakhtin's view, "Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse" in the same way that European literature has been both authoritative and prior to African written narratives but Achebe has done "untold things" with such authoritative discourse.

Another way of approaching intertextuality is to return to a structuralist paradigm outside the cosmogonic myths. The claim that every text is new as well as a unique voice emerging out of and among the old finds its support in the structuralist thinking of seeing the text as a speech act (Todorov 1988). The text is compared to *parole* produced out of and is dependent on a literary system which is synonymous to *langue*. According to Allen Graham (2000: 11), this is "the *langue* which pre-exists any speaker" - any writer in this case. The unstated assumption here is that there has to be a literary tradition, a system or a *langue* within whose framework the writer and the text are born. *Langue* could refer to established genres within which particular texts are situated and spoken out.

When this structuralist paradigm is misapplied, however, one may go as far as to deny originality and novelty in intertextuality. Graham typifies this thinking in making comments that amount to a claim that the text is a *compilation* of other texts. First she says, "Authors do not create from their own minds, but rather *compile* them from pre-existing texts" (Graham 2000: 35. Emphasis added). This claim is followed by a half-true and misapplied assertion that "the text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather a *compilation* of cultural textuality" (Graham 2000: 36. Emphasis added). One would argue that Graham's use of the word "compile" does undermine originality. It is also questionable to claim that the text is not an individual. The text does not, however, necessarily lose its individual uniqueness by virtue of existing in a literary environment or a network of other texts. Perhaps dependency and individuality need to be separated here. To claim that the text is an individual does not refute the fact that it is a speech act within a *langue* or that it is dependent on a system. Besides, the system is not undermined either when it gives birth to difference and differentiation because the two (which surely imply uniqueness and individuality) are inherently part of the system. That is why Fredrick Jameson (1998: 37) asserts that "a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system". This echoes John Frow's (1990: 35) proposition that the text is "differential and historical" at the same time.

Rewriting as re-/presentation

Rewriting is often viewed as an affirmative process or undertaking. One scholar who views rewriting as affirmative but broadly is Roland Barthes. Rewriting is for him a process that shifts with context. He also treats the notion of rewriting as a process synonymous to writing itself. A text that is rewritable is, therefore, capable of yielding to reproduction to suit new contexts and motives. Having called such a text "the writerly text", Barthes says it "is what is possible to write... (*to rewrite*), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine". He then adds that "to *rewrite* the writerly text would only consist only in disseminating it, in dispersing within the field of infinite difference" (Barthes 1990: 4, 5. Emphasis added.). The imagery of fecundity evoked here suggests that Barthes looks at the process of rewriting in affirmative terms.

Sometimes, it is the imagery of resurrection that is used to reveal the viewing of rewriting as affirmative. Ezra Pound has once defended himself as a translator against what was viewed (in the negative light) as an "inaccurate" rewriting in his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. Pound (1961) has argued, "My job was to bring a dead man to life, to present a living figure". Nothing is suggestive of rewriting being negative in both the Barthean and Poundian views.

Despite viewing rewriting in positive terms, this concept has an immanent negative characteristic. There is something rebellious about and within it. It often carries the desire to change the old. There is always an element of the new text disagreeing with something in the old text. This aspect is contained in the prefix "re-" placed before the word "writing". The prefix may immediately suggest something being written again or twice but not replicating it. It points towards the production of difference. Rewriting is not as a process of producing a carbon copy of any prior text. It produces difference as can be echoed from Barthes above. Perhaps it is not too far fetched to argue that when the word is hyphenated as *re-writing*, the will to resist, oppose or rebel becomes more explicit.

With the image producing difference called up to mind, to rewrite becomes *presenting* something with difference - so that it can be viewed differently. Re-writing (rewriting) is re-presenting (representing) with the prefix in all these terms serving the same multiple function. However, "re-writing" (rewriting) as "re-presenting" (representing) becomes more complex and highly ambiguous. The problem is in the word 'represent' itself. It is full of ambiguity and slippages.

"Re-presenting" is a politically loaded term. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak (1993: 70) has drawn our attention to a use of "representation" to mean "speaking for" or "on behalf somebody". Stating, therefore, that "Achebe represents Africans in such or such a way" is also to say that he speaks for them without implying that they cannot speak (for they have their own way of speaking). A representation can sometimes simply mean imitation thereby bearing a desire for replication. The same sentence on Achebe means he gives an image of Africans. One could add that there is another sense of re-presentation which is to present or stage something, someone or oneself differently. Every people's struggle in itself is (self) re-presentation for they are making a statement to their oppressor. Any struggle for liberation announces to the oppressor, "that is neither the way you should view nor treat us. See, we are different and thus treat us differently with all due respect!" The oppressed pro/claim difference because they struggle to assert themselves differently from what they are taken to be *on the stage of history*. If we take Jacques Derrida's (1991: 270) view of "representation" as "staging" or what he calls *mise en scene* we may (deliberately misread whatever Derrida is up to and) claim that the people in the struggle are *manipulating a stage* in history for that is what they are doing indeed. They are re-writing (changing) history. Thus, re-writing (rewriting) and re-presentation become two axes that converge and meet on the notion of resistance but both tend to be complex and elusive.

Achebe speaks for (on behalf of) African peoples and cultures that have been re-presented⁷ by Cary in a negative light by colonial writing. He sets out to re-present them by portraying them differently and positively. One of Achebe's main desires has been to re-present "An Image of Africa" that can help the West

to rid its mind of old prejudices and [begin] to look at Africa not through the haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people-not angels, but not rudimentary souls either-just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society (Achebe 1989: 18).

It is notable that this statement is significantly embodied in Achebe's character portrayal. Okonkwo the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is not an angel. He has his own evils - including the kind of pride and bravado that border on hubris. He is a man at times in conflict with his own gods. He, for instance, beats his wife during the Week of Peace, which is an abomination against the Earth goddess. He is at times in a strained relationship with his society. He has his own human weaknesses. He is possessed with the fear of accepting fear (like Julius Caesar) and ten-

derness in a struggle for measuring up to manliness: lest he should be judged as feminine. Like Cassius in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Okonkwo "loves no music" though his father Unoka is at home when playing music. All this hardens him into tragic inflexibility until he cannot bend with the course of history just like Brutus. Further, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna after being warned that "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" and yet he slashes him down with his machete for fear of being called a coward just at the moment the boy calls him "Father!" He commits a crime against the gods of the land whose revenge is swift in coming.

Against all that, Okonkwo has immeasurable human dignity and is at the beginning "strikingly successful in [his] enterprise with life and society." We also admire him and feel that just like Shakespeare's Lear, Okonkwo "is a man more sinned against than sinning" considering how well meaning for his society he is. We indeed share the feelings in the outburst of his best friend Obierika which can be said to echo Mark Antony's eulogy of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, "This was the noblest Roman of them all" except that the Igbo's is a society where no single human is greater than the rest of his clansmen. Obierika breaks down with,

"That man was one of the greatest men of Umofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog...." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked at his words (Achebe 1998: 167).

Achebe here shows how much colonial invasion has robbed the protagonist of all human dignity until he is "buried like a dog". The vices and virtues of Okonkwo summed up remind us that Achebe intended to re-present (re-write) image of Africa and Africans without attempting to exaggerate or romanticise that image.

The murder of Joyce Cary?

Achebe undertook this mission of rewriting after a class on Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and what followed described to have been "a landmark rebellion" (Achebe 2000: 22-3). Precisely forty years after the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's first novel, he still goes back to stress that it was Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* "that made me decide to write" (Achebe 2000). But what can we point at as anything that *Things Fall Apart* more specifically rewrites (changes, replaces, overwrites) in *Mister Johnson* at all?

Katherine Slattery (1998) has attempted to address this question by making a general point that Achebe wanted to tell an African story from inside in his first three novels namely, *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. Achebe

keeps echoing this observation at several places in *Home and Exile*. Thus, the position from which a people's story is told becomes critical. Achebe is aware that he is writing "from somewhere" thereby locating his ideological position.

Achebe contends with the ideology lying deep under skin of Cary's narrative. Achebe says,

My problem with Joyce Cary's book was not just the infuriating principle character, Johnson. More importantly, there is a certain undertow of uncharitableness just below the surface on which the narrative moves and form where, at the slightest chance, a contagion of distance, hatred and mockery breaks to poison his tale (Achebe 2000: 23-4).

What is this that lies "*below the surface* on which the narrative moves" that concerns Achebe most? It is colonialist ideology.⁸ Ideology could be the whole "set of beliefs by which a particular group or society orders reality so as to render it intelligible" (see *Collins English Dictionary*). The reality of the native constituted a world constructed by and framed through the eyes of Englishness. Colonialist ideology then extends to beliefs that would also underlie and justify the colonialist political mission of domination masked by the euphemist banner of a civilising mission. Central to these beliefs was that the African is not human.

The reduction of African humanity in colonialist writing such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson* has been a major concern for Achebe. "The real question," Achebe (1989: 12) declares, "is the dehumanization of Africa and African". This is what Achebe discovers to be running deep under Cary's narrative. Achebe (2000: 25. Emphasis added.) thinks "Cary has a very strong aversion to the people he is *presenting* to us". Hence, Achebe's undertaking to *re-present* (rewrite) the humanity of Africa in order to re-write (overwrite and replace) the colonial image of such humanity. This is Achebe's underlying motive beneath his portrayal of character, theme and way of life in general in *Things Fall Apart* and the two novels that followed.

It is imperative to note that the beliefs embedded in the image of Africa found in *Mister Johnson* are clearly shared by the author. They are beliefs that were pervasive in the socio-cultural collective psyche which was Eurocentric in its outlook. The too often blurring line between the author's personal views and his narrator's (which are taken to give us the worlds of reality and art) disappears once Cary's personal testimony made in "a prefatory essay" to the 1952 Carfax Edition is considered. Cary betrays how deeply he shares the colonial mentality of his narrator

and characters. He writes,

None of my characters come from life, but *all of them are derived from some intuition* of a person, often somebody I do not know, a man seen in a bus, a woman on a railway platform gathering her family for the train. And I remember letters of some unknown African clerk... [who] subdued raging sobs of '*this savage people*' with a word. ... This clerk had been a disappointment; *he was stupid*, and could not be trusted with the files. He seemed also, a rare thing in an African, unapproachable. ... What struck me so forcibly I suppose was that this unhappy boy who was a failure at his job, who felt much more of an exile in Borgu, among the *pagans* whom he both feared and despised... was capable of making this dramatic gesture... This poor clerk was nothing like Mister Johnson, but I remembered him when I drew Johnson (Cary 1952: 5. Emphasis added).

The terms like "savage people" or "pagans" pervasive in the description of the natives in the story is obviously Cary's own way of looking at Africans. Cary could see a person once in a bus and imagine what their character would be like. If his characters did not "come from life" as he puts it, but from his imagination, then it was an imagination mediated with Eurocentric stereotypes and myths about Africans.

What we are given are Africans as the colonialist sees them rather than what they really are. Metaphorically put, they are Africans looked through the spectacles of the colonialist. Here is the metaphor dramatised but in more literal terms:

Blore, bald and pensive as a Buddha, sits at the table *watching Johnson through his small, gold spectacles*. His expression is mild and benign, but the truth is, that he dislikes all negro clerks and especially Johnson. He is a deeply sentimental man, a conservative nature. He likes all old things in their old places and he dreads all change, all innovation. To his mind, a messenger in a white gown, even if he writes and speaks English, is a gentleman; but a clerk in trousers, even if he can barely do either, is an upstart, dangerous to the established order of things (Cary 1952: 22. Emphasis added).

This White District Officer is disgusted but "he respects himself too much to show his disgust" as the narrator informs us in a line that follows. But why the disgust even with the very clerks they are refining into Englishness (signified by reading and writing English)? The fact is that the Whites attitude that the African is inhuman is so fixed that the very possibility of their being human (like the White race) becomes unbearable. That is the case Achebe makes by emphasising that some

Whites could not simply believe or accept, not even bear the very suspicion that Africans are not inhuman in his discussion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel Achebe describes as "appalling" as *Mister Johnson*. Achebe quotes *Heart of Darkness* to underscore colonialists' view of African humanity cast as thus: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity" (Achebe 1989: 5-7).⁹

The reference to the primitiveness of the natives worsens into the belief that Africans are beasts in their place rather than human beings in a society. The White administrators, for example, think that they are in the bush rather than in a society. At one point Rudbeck says, "the bush is just the place where a man needs a wife. I only wish mine could be with me" while "to Celia Africa is simply a number of disconnected events which have no meaning for her at all. [...] She gazes at the pot maker [but] she doesn't really see either woman or pot, but only a scene in Africa. Even Mr. Wog [Johnson] is to her a scene in Africa". (Cary 1952: 23, 92). The African is transparent, probably implying that s/he is nothing. The habitat of these Africans becomes a bush; a scene in Africa. That background is more visible than the humanity, the people whom Celia cannot see even after gazing at them. Instead, it is their savagery and paganism that Cary and his characters see most. Finally, it is legitimate to see these attitudes as authorial, "drawn from Cary's own intuition" and this is a perception of African humanity enhanced by the author's experience drawn from his Nigerian years between 1913 and 1920.

The stereotypes under discussion are rooted in the Eurocentric notions of "self" and "other". The African is "a pagan and savage" because he has a culture and religion *other* than those of the English. The native pagans and savages cannot speak as far as the colonialist-narrator is concerned when the case is that they speak a language *other* than English. The passage below captures it all:

A shrill scream is heard and a little old woman comes hopping in. She is bent into a ball. Her face is all nose and chin. She is like a shrivelled embryo. She hops across the floor in a frenzy excitement, pokes her bumpy face at Johnson's wrist, gives another scream and hops out again (Cary 1952: 28. Emphasis added).

The passage shows a complete deformation of humanity seen through the "small spectacles" of a civilised colonialist. This colonialist-narrator articulates the myth that the African is in an embryonic stage and, therefore, not human yet. Colonialism, which wore the camouflage of a civilising mission, was justified as a moral undertaking to raise the primitive native to human status by teaching that native English culture and language. This may suffice to demonstrate the above descrip-

tion of such beliefs as a matter of ideology. It is this ideology that Achebe rewrites not to claim that Africans are more human but that they are "just people" - as human as Europeans.

Achebe never idealises African humanity as can be seen in the example of Okonkwo above. He only presents difference by portraying Africans and their way of life from inside and with an eye for detail in order to come up with what he considers to be a realistic image. Achebe is overwriting *Mister Johnson* by attempting to re-present the "image of Africa" because he intends readers to "re-vision" or view differently the image. To this effect, Achebe makes a few notable replacements in Cary's narrative. The character who replaces Johnson (the protagonist in *Mister Johnson*) is Unoka in *Things Fall Apart*.

Just like Johnson, Unoka is a great borrower who is constantly in debt and never pays back. Unoka is said to have owed every neighbour some money ranging from a few cowries to fairly large amounts. He is a failure, yet gifted in his own way. There is literally nothing about his failure that makes him less human for Achebe. It is normal for every society to have its successful men and failures. Unoka has some strengths after all. He knows "the art of conversation" which among the Igbo "is highly regarded." He demonstrates this art when he converses at length with his debt collector in proverbs which are "the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 1998: 20). He is also gifted as a musician who like Johnson loves drinking and merry making as well. Briefly,

[Unoka] was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* [masquerades] to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. *Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship...*(*Things Fall Apart*: p. 18. Emphasis added).

Failure though he is, Unoka is still in good harmony with his society so that there are times when the society needs him. He is so tender and humane that "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was, in fact, a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. [When his visitor brought in this subject] he changed the

subject and talked about music, and his face beamed (*Things Fall Apart* p. 19)." These are the qualities found wanting in Okonkwo. This lack becomes one of the decisive factors that push him towards his head-on collision with his tragic fate. The society needs the very qualities which Okonkwo (who steps out of his way in his stiff-necked aspiration for manliness) sees as feminine in his father and his son (Nwoye) if the Igbo cosmic outlook is to stay in a balance. Unoka is not a misfit in the society or indeed the society's cosmic outlook.

Unoka, above all, is a man with human dignity. He is not an imbecile of the town like Johnson: a caricatured centre of amusement for Whites of whom Rudbeck satirically comments, "He keeps us all merry and bright (Cary 1952: 150)." Unoka is a musician but Cary tells us Johnson is "a poet" in his introductory essay. Contrasted with the tribal musician in *Things Fall Apart*, Johnson is "a poet" portrayed from the perspective of the colonialists and their ideology. Under the influence of alcohol, for example, Johnson would be caught "walking restlessly in the compound. He has taken off all his clothes except his bright shoes." Then Cary's poet bursts into a song that reeks of colonialist ideology:

England is my country

Oh, England my home all on de big water

Dat King of England is my King...(*Mister Johnson* p. 36).

Here is an African who has never been to England but thinks *that* is where his home is. Elsewhere in the story, Johnson thinks England is a heaven. He adores his shoes just because they were made in England. When Bamu's (Johnson's wife) people ask him to surrender the shoes as part of the dowry, Johnson explodes with anger, "Shoes-how dare you? My shoes are English shoes-the very best shoes-they are not for savage people" (*Mister Johnson* p. 29). In contrast, Achebe is only portraying Africans who want to be nothing but African despite all their problems and the contradictions inherent in their culture and cosmic outlook.

Achebe is clearly unsettling the then well founded metropolitan notion of humanity. What he has done is no less than undertaking to disrupt Western foundations or "white mythologies" in an act (deconstruction) that Robert Young (2000: 189-90) lately believes to be "an insurrection against the calm philosophical and political certainties of the metropolis" which Derrida "the chief bogeyman" coming "from somewhere else" dared affront. Achebe started his mission by declaring that "*Things Fall Apart* because 'the centre cannot hold.'"¹⁰ Taking the centre as the origin, as Mathematicians tend to conflate the two on the Cartesian Plane, the failure

of the centre to hold is reminiscent of Derrida who in *Of Grammatology*, reminds us, "a mediation upon the trace should teach us that there is no origin, that is to say simple origin; that questions of origin carry a metaphysics of presence" (Derrida 1996: 46). This is a denial of the fixity of the centre that logically follows his questioning of "metaphysics of logocentrism and presence" structured around the assumption of a presence of a stable, fixed, privileged and power-invested centre.

But the centre that cannot hold in *Things Fall Apart* is both within and without. The falling apart of things is often read as the disintegration of an internal socio-cultural infrastructure. Colonial invasion has taken the causing force of this disintegration (Stock 1991). This reading can take its legitimacy from here:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our land can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (Achebe 1998: 145).

This passage rings echoes with the Yeatsian lines: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" from "The Second Coming" - a prologue to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is undisputable that the passage refers to socio-cultural disintegration within the colony. However, the disciples whom the White man won to his culture, education and religion in the process of colonialism have also proved to be a knife cutting the things that held the Eurocentric worldview together. Its privileged centre or metropolis has fallen apart as a result. English has, for instance, fallen apart into englishes as the three writers of *The Empire Writes Back* indicate (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 7). Today, the falconer (the Queen) can longer hear her falcons (speakers of different pidgin englishes of the empire). Yeats was, of course, referring to the English metropolitan power as a centre outside the Irish Republic on the eve of its independence.

Conclusion

This essay has shown the complexities of the notion of rewriting using what Achebe has done in the hope of elucidating the concept. Not all of what Achebe has done has been discussed here though. We have not, for instance, discussed what he has done with oral texts such as proverbs and folk narratives (which existed prior to his moment of writing) in his writing. But one thing that would be readily accepted as what Achebe has "really" done is to "write back to the centre" - a

postcolonial theory popularised by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*. Where *Things Fall Apart* shows us that the disintegrating centre is, however, to be viewed as residing both within and outside Achebe's world, taking rewriting as a "writing back to the centre" becomes problematic. Which centre? The centre is too elusive to locate. The linear conception of rewriting implied here further becomes deceptive because it appears to be based on the assumption there is a single target elsewhere being rewritten. The often assumed target has been a Eurocentric worldview when yet it is a foregone conclusion that Achebe has done more than answering back in *Things Fall Apart*. It is in the same novel where Achebe has taken an inward look at "his people's civilization ... with a rational and critical insight that enables him raise questions about certain assumptions and fundamental beliefs of his people" (Alumona 2003: 73)

When *rewriting* is entrenched in *intertextuality*, Achebe's text is seen as a rewrite but one that draws from multiple prior texts. The echoes of Shakespeare's characters of Cassius, Brutus and Caesar who all meet in Okonkwo are a further testimony to how other texts beyond *Mister Johnson* must have informed *Things Fall Apart* through the process of intertextuality. Besides, there are other questions that emerge. For example, was the birth of *Things Fall Apart* indeed the death of *Mister Johnson* which Achebe intended? Does the attempt to rewrite, overwrite, displace, "kill" and ultimately replace Cary and Conrad not paradoxically end up resurrecting the metropolitan writers by keeping them alive in the discussion of African writing? It appears that while rewriting of Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) was initially a political act for Achebe; a "fighting back" as he puts it, more complex issues are involved in the process. Rewriting is, above all, a highly complex and elusive term replete with nuances and ambiguities.

This essay has also attempted to make general allusions to the emergence of the African novel by implying that Achebe is a pivotal pioneer at that moment of emergence. His centrality is primarily understood within the same theory of "the empire writing back" - as a starting point. This, after all, was Achebe's artistic mission and motive when he wrote *Things Fall Apart* as confessed throughout his *Home and Exile*. We have examined "intertextuality" as a basis of "rewriting" in order to argue that the novelty of this emergence is basically the same that underlies the birth of every text.

Notes

1. This is one of my primary conclusions deduced from a discussion of intertextuality in "'The Word of the Fathers': Intertextuality and the Discourse of the Literary" (unpublished). The paper, among other things, argues that every text has a genealogy of other voices. The novelty and distinctness of the voice of the text is, however, not necessarily undermined by its being "genetically informed" by other voices.
2. *Things Fall Apart*, page references to *The African Trilogy*, London: Picador, 1998. This edition is a collection of Achebe's first three novels published together.
3. Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson*, London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1952. All page references are to this edition.
4. "The Empire Fights Back" is a title of a lecture delivered at The Harvard University in which he, among other things, discusses his rewriting of Cary's *Mister Johnson*. See Achebe, *Home and Exile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
5. See, for example, Femi Abodunrin, *Blackness - Culture, Ideology and Discourse*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 1996, p. 39, for a creation myth among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The Yoruba pantheon, the gods themselves, was scattered pieces of an old man who was shattered with rock by a trickster supposed to be Esu. In another creation myth among the Chewa of Malawi, the first man and woman as well as entire fauna are said to have walked out of a giant chameleon called Kalilombe who hurled herself from a tall tree, bursting into myriad pieces upon hitting the rock below.
6. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in *Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, p.42. For Bakhtin, both the high and the low have their own discourses. However, the term discourse can also be used to imply only of that of the high. My use of "The Word of the Fathers" is a reference to an authoritative discourse possibly coming from the highest speaker (God) and disseminated by such "sacrosanct" authorities as church priests (fathers) or the clergy in general.
7. This word, "re-/present", for example, is meant to carry several meanings at once. Cary spoke on behalf of Africans and told the world that "here is what they are like". Cary portrayed Africans in his book. Cary presented Africans differently from what they are (the problem of *mimesis*). Perhaps there are more meanings.
8. See *Collins English Dictionary*, 21st Century Edition, for the definition of "ideology" as applied in this essay.

- 9 See Achebe, "An Image of Africa", in *Home and Exile* pp. 5-7 for his discussion of a Eurocentric perception of African humanity; and see also Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London: Penguin, pp 62 & 63.
- 10 It is well known that the title is "adapted" from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" which is also a prologue to *Things Fall Apart*.

References

- Abodunrin, F. 1996. *Blackness - Culture, Ideology and Discourse*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies.
- Achebe, C. 1989. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Doubleday.
- Achebe, C. 1998. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Picador.
- Achebe, C. 2000. *Home and Exile*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alumona, V. 2003. Culture and Societal Institutions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: a Critical Reading, *Journal of Humanities* 17, 2003.
- Ashcroft, B; G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1986. Discourse in the Novel. In Y.M. Holquist and C. Emerson (eds and Translators). *Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, R. 1990. *S/Z*, (trans by Richard Miller). Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Cary, J. 1952. *Mister Johnson*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd.
- Collins English Dictionary*, 21st Century Edition.
- Conrad, J. 1995. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin.
- Derrida, J. 1996. Of Grammatology. In Peggy Kamuf (ed). *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Frow, J. 1990. "Intertextuality and Ontology". In Still and Worton (eds.). *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Graham, A. 2000. *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. 1998. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso.
- Kristeva, J. (1996) Revolution in Poetic Language. In Toril Moi (ed). 1996. *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kristeva, J. 1996. "Word, Dialogue and Novel". In Toril Moi (ed). *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Pound, E. 1961. Letter to A. R. Orage. In D. D. Paige (ed). *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907 - 1916*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Slattery, K. 19th May 1998. The African Trilogy: Writing Back to *Mister Johnson*. <<http://www.qub.ac.uk/imperial/nigeria/writback.htm>>.
- Spivak, G. 1993. Can the Subaltern Speak? In Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman (eds). *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Still, J. & M. Worton (eds). 1990. Introduction. In *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Stock, A. G. 1991. Yeats and Achebe. In Innes, C.L. & B. Lindfors (eds). *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. London: Heinemann.
- Todorov, T. 1988. Definition of Poetics. In Newton, K.M. (ed). *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Macmillan.
- Young, R. 2000. Deconstruction and the Postcolonial. In Nicholas Royle (ed). *Deconstructions*. New York: Palgrave.

Department of English
University of Malawi
Chancellor College
Box 280
Zomba
amolande@chanco.unima.mw