

James Ogude Tribute

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Chinua Achebe

My first encounter with Achebe was in early 1970s and I can vividly recall when in my second year High School, I encountered *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's first novel. This was due to the influence of the now famous Ngũgĩ revolution, at least I would learn later, which called for the re-location of African literature at the core of our English literature syllabus. The East African Examination Council, which had just replaced the Cambridge Overseas examination, had grudgingly introduced a few titles by African writers to supplement what was predominantly an English syllabus. The introduction of African titles was left to the discretion of the school and the English teachers. It would take a young English and History teacher, freshly returned from the USA and imbued with black consciousness radicalism to carry out the experiment that was to change the lives of many of us. The difference between *Things Fall Apart* and the other texts we had read was that, unlike the other English texts which had dominated our syllabus, we could not connect with them culturally and politically coming out as we did under the shadow of African nationalism—a Pan-Africanist impulse that had defined the decade before and continued to shape our identities. Clearly, *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958 and written just two years before Nigeria's independence, had such a profound impact on African minds at its publication and continues to have a resonance for us as we negotiate the difficult aftermath of the colonial experience.

Beyond his maiden text, when one considers Africa's literary history over the last five decades, Achebe's body of work constitutes an important intervention. His works have had a tremendous impact within the academy in Africa and beyond. Achebe is read and discussed more than any other African writer. His works, to use his words, have always provided us "with a second handle on existence", enabling us to create for ourselves "a different set of reality from that which has been given to us". If Achebe's works, even those set deep into colonial history, continue to resonate with freshness of insight, it is because they often jolt us into an awareness of our own weaknesses too, as Africans, as blacks, while equally speaking forcefully to our common humanity. As black Africans, they compel us to come to grips with our history, especially our encounter with colonialism in order to understand where we lost the initiative and agency—to locate where the rain begun to beat us as he would have it.

In trying to map out a new vision in the postcolonial state in Africa, Achebe's works teach us not to fall into the trap of essentialism and political dogma. They urge us to move beyond simple binary opposition and to come to terms with how we are implicated in our own political paralysis and social decay. Like the character, Ikem Osodi, in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe insists that the role of the writer in Africa is "to widen the scope of that self-examination [...] And not to foreclose it with catchy, half-baked orthodoxy" (158). On this he remains adamant and reminds us that: "Whenever something stands, something else stands beside it", or better still, in his most eloquent proverb on change: "The world is like a dancing mask, if you want to see it, you must move with it" (*Arrow of God* 61). It is the way Achebe's vision forces us to reckon with the duality and complexity of existence, constantly urging us to look at things twice and to complicate meaning that sets his works apart from the average writers. For those who cling to political dogma or seek ideological closures, he warns them that they have no space in the complex world of mother idoto.

And yet Achebe's works also underscore the sheer power of narrative, of the story; of memory as an indispensable agent of history. This is what the old man of Abazon in *Anthills of the Savannah* means when he says that the story, memory, is our escort: "It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence" (124). The tragic death, for example, of Ken Saro-Wiwa during the tyrannical rule of Sani Abacha, Achebe would argue, is precisely because our political leadership fears the story teller because they remind them of where we come from and the perils of repeating the same mistakes that our erstwhile conquerors made.

Achebe's works also stand out because of his consummate and eloquent use of language; that ability to transform ordinary metaphors into myth and complex instruments of cognition. Through his creative use of the English language, Achebe has shown us that Africans were not mere passive victims of those institutions of Western modernity, but rather, they engaged with them, appropriated and quite often used them to fuel their own projects. He animates his works with Igbo linguistic genius through new images and idioms, and the imposition of new syntactic structures and rhythms, and quite literally forces the English language to mediate the peculiar Igbo and African universe. In this sense, he not only helped in subverting and undermining the so-called purity and the unassailable position of the English language, but he also succeeded in domesticating it to mediate our peculiar realities.

It is a sad irony of life that Chinua Achebe lived his last days and died outside Africa, the continent that has been a major source of inspiration for most of his works. The *iroko* tree may have fallen, but this giant of African letters leaves behind him a rich literary legacy.