CHAPTER IV: THE WRITER AND HIS COMMUNITY

One of the strongest impulses responsible for the rise of the African literature lies in the cataclysmal experience of Western colonialism by the African tribes in their native soil. National movement for liberation from imperialist oppression motivated writers to theorize on the role and responsibility of writers. In many of his essays, interviews and novels, Achebe voices his concern on the need for African writer to help restore the dignity and self respect of his tribesmen. Although Achebe’s statements are primarily triggered by his concern for his own community, the means that he uses to restore confidence are those other African writers also incorporate in their works. Due to the unique nature of relationship that had existed between the individual artist and his community among his people in pre-colonial times, Achebe’s conception of the tribal writer stands as a corrective contrast to the western literary practice.

Issues relating to the Igbo community occupy the key concern of Achebe both in his life and works. The reasons is not far to seek. Achebe’s politics of literary production is tied up with the ‘injured’ image of Africa and the African personality. Achebe got his vision mainly from the faulty image of Africa presented by colonial writers and partly from the strength of national consciousness that he had imbibed with his
western learning. Because of his close ties with national politics, Achebe necessarily sounds didactic and communitarian.

Before discussing the complex relationship that Achebe seeks to establish between the African writer and his community, the sociological meaning of the term ‘community’ may be examined drawing on F. Toennies’ concept of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* or society. According to Toennies, community is characterized by the predominance of the collective will of the society, a strong ‘we’ feeling where primary relationship and the emotional attachment of the individuals to the group within a geographical area distinguishes it from an association. The term ‘community’ is being used in the study to mean human relationships that are highly personal, intimate and enduring, those where a person’s involvement to the group is near total, as in the family, with real friends or among members in a close-knit group. F. R. Toennies’ concept of *gemeinschaft* is closest to kinship. Toennies, at the same time, agreed that the term is not absolute but is given by way of an ideal type. Besides, it is important to note Marx’s distinction between a ‘class in itself’ and a ‘class for itself’ in order to throw some light on the formation of Igbo people as a tribe and their emergence as a living community. A class in itself is simply a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. Marx argues that
a social group only becomes a class for itself only when its members have
class consciousness and class solidarity, a full awareness of the true
situation, by a realization of the nature of exploitation. The final stage of
class consciousness and class solidarity is achieved when members
realize that only by collective action can they overthrow the ruling class
and take positive steps to do so. It is through the pen of writers that class
consciousness of the African community as a group for itself is expected
to be developed. Achebe for one wished the writers to play the
inexcusable role of makers of a new African nation, a realization of a
people not as they are, but what they can become. Therefore, Achebe and
other African writers ‘protest’ against the existing state of things in
Africa.

Achebe uses the word ‘community’ profusely in his novels, his
critical essays and interviews. The meaning seems to shift from the Igbo
tribe to the African nation as a whole depending on the context of his
statements. Whether Achebe uses the term ‘Igbo’ or ‘African’ culture,
they mean the same people which largely is his own tribe. There is no
doubt that Achebe’s focus apparently shifts in his works; he began
writing his early novels on the pristine Igbo communities and then shifts
his focus to the politics of the country and the continent of Africa in that
order. However, the novelist hardly steps out of the domain of his tribe in
all his writings, except when he deals with the 'fundamental question'\textsuperscript{2} – the injustice done to the black race as a whole. Unlike the individualistic West, Achebe identifies with his society, and for its survival he dons upon himself the mantle of a custodian of his people’s culture. Such a close attachment the novelist with his community becomes clear when one takes a closer look at the Nigerian historical realities which forms the background for all of Achebe’s novels.

Early European awareness of Africa grew out of the writings of Arab and Portuguese explorers and historians. Between the fifteen to nineteenth century, their knowledge was reinforced by the writings and memoirs of European explorers and missionaries who provided first-hand experience of the continent, and also through the slave trade and colonial contact.\textsuperscript{3} In the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 the whole continent was then partitioned off among European powers for the bargain. Millions of young healthy men were traded as slaves across the Atlantic sea to slave-traders and planters across Europe and America. After four centuries of suffering without a name, the western educated African elites lend their voices to their voiceless forbears. Thus, the ‘injured’ Africa was brought to her senses and made aware of their power as a people through the mighty pens of her writers. The pristine African society holds the community sacred; the hierarchy of the myriad gods and goddesses and
their worship of ancestors are veered towards the emphatic primacy of collective solidarity. Therefore, the African writers like Achebe entrusted upon themselves the task of righting the wrong, standing in the gap of the ‘in-between’ space to cause representation of their unrepresented society. The African community means different things to different people. Depending on the perspective from which they make their assessments; the colonialist writers called them savage, uncivilized, dirty or even unhuman. But the African writer looks at them with sympathetic concern, as unique people who are second to none in their humanity. The urgency of the task and the gravity of the African situation make it an imperative for the novels of Achebe to appear largely didactic and sound communalistic in his assertion of tribal identity.

In his critical essays and interviews, Achebe prescribes a multifaceted role to the writer in the new nation. Briefly, Achebe has encouraged the African writer to play many important roles in his society: – as a cultural nationalist, as teacher, a social critic, an actor rather than a reactor, and as a literary critic.\(^4\) As an involved participant in his society’s destiny, Achebe contested the western hegemonic structure and practice of novel-writing by falling heavily on the rich heritage of the Igbo oral tradition. Fireside story-telling technique is, therefore, employed to counter the ‘owners’ of the western literary tradition.
Achebe’s writings necessarily have tended to reflect the political phases of his Igbo people in Nigeria, and by extension the politics of the continent. His works record the succession of political crises which has beset his own community, his country and finally the whole of the continent of Africa. One of his outstanding contributions to African literature lies in the memorable statements that Achebe has made on the interrelationship between the writer and his community. A close examination of his creative works and critical essays reveal interesting pictures of how the quality of literature can be directly influenced by the degree of concern a writer has for the cause of his community. In an interview with Jim Davidson in 1980, Achebe talks about the accountability of the writer as the chronicler of his community’s history:

A writer has the same responsibility in all cultures, but the various elements of that responsibility come in different proportions according to the health of the community he’s trying to serve. It is determined by historical predicament. In Nigeria there’s a sense of the loss of initiative in your own history, the loss of responsibility…. And, of course, the view of the government as alien: in our traditional culture everybody was supposed to participate in the government…. Now, all that has gone. Within one generation people lose even the memory of what used to be.

The writer has a responsibility to remember what it was like before, and to keep talking about it.5

In many of his critical essays Achebe discusses how a writer is influenced by the socio-political condition of his society and vice versa. The essays that directly deal with the close relationship between the writer and his community include “The Writer and His Community,” “The Novelist as
Teacher,” “The Role of the Writer in the New Nation” and “The Black Writer’s Burden,” just to name a few. Examining these critical essays alongside his various interviews and asides, Achebe’s conceptions of a writer’s role in relation to his community can be meaningfully studied.

According to Achebe, the relationship that exists between the African writer and his community reflects the Igbo practice in the *mbari* tradition. The artist, called *ndimgbe*, in this tradition, unlike his European counterpart, lives in the midst of his people and his craft is always employed for the service of his people. Achebe writes about this complex relationship that:

Because of our largely European education our writers may be pardoned if they begin by thinking that the relationship between European writers and their audience will automatically reproduce itself in Africa. We have learned from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of the society – wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is a revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything…. I am assuming, of course, that our writer and his society live in the same place.6

In the same essay, Achebe continues to affirm his belief that the African writer does not need to always have foreign audience in mind. The theme of Africa’s tragic encounter with Europe and its traumatic effects is a thing that cannot be wished away: “Today things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe.”7 Achebe
therefore writes about Africa’s dilemmas primarily for African audience. To prove his success among his people he cites, as an example, the pattern of sales of *Things Fall Apart* in cheap paperback in 1966 in which only about 800 copies were sold in Britain, 20,000 in Nigeria and 2,500 in all other places. He said the same is true of his sale of *No Longer at Ease*. Most of his audience or readers are young Africans who looked up to him mostly as a teacher and his novel serves as advice to young people. His audience predetermines his use of the English language rather than Igbo for wider readership in multilingual African nation.

Achebe first underscores the responsibility of the African writer as a nationalist. In a lecture entitled “The Role of the African Writer in a New Nation” delivered to the Nigerian Library Association in 1964, Achebe has the role of a cultural nationalist when he specifically called attention to the fundamental debate between white and black over black humanity:

It is inconceivable to me that a serious writer could stand aside from this debate or be indifferent to this argument which calls his full humanity to question. For me, at any rate, there is a clear duty to make statement. This is my answer to those who say that a writer should be writing about contemporary issues…about politics in 1964, about city life, about the last coup d’etat. Of course, these are legitimate themes for the writer but as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme…put quite simply…is that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost
in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man can’t tell where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all, the novelist’s duty is not to beat this morning’s headline in topicality; it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history.9

First and foremost Achebe wants the African writer to assume the responsibility for restoring the African personality. He considers the recovery of the lost self-respect and dignity as the fundamental task that an African writer must accomplish for his community. The same idea was expressed in another article entitled “The Black Writer’s Burden” published in 1966 in Presence Africaine.10 He forcefully expressed his view thus:

Without subscribing to the view that Africa gained nothing at all in her long encounters with Europe, one could still say, in all fairness, that she suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both black and white. In giving expression to the plight of their people, black writers have shown again and again how strongly this traumatic experience can possess the sensibility. They have found themselves drawn irresistibly to writing about the fate of the black people in a world progressively recreated by white men in their own image, to their glory and for their profit, in which the Negro became the poor motherless child of the spirituals and of so many Nigerian folk tales.11

Categorically, Achebe stressed the need for the writer to build a firm foundation by helping his people regain confidence in themselves. The first assignment of the African writer rests in the need to “expose and
attack injustice” all over the world, particularly within his own society in Africa. According to him, African writers should be free to criticize even their own societies without being accused of supplying ammunitions to the enemies of Africa:

We must seek the freedom to express our thought and feelings, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say might be taken in evidence against our race….Africans have stood in the dock too long pleading and protesting before ruffians and frauds masquerading as disinterested judges.12

In a paper presented at a political science seminar in Makerere in 1968 entitled, “The Duty and Involvement of the African Writer,” he said that a writer is only “a human being with heightened sensitivities” and, therefore, “must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer.”13 Achebe recognized the commitment of African writers towards the goal of building a new society which will affirm their validity and accord them identity as Africans, as people; “they are all working actively in this cause for which Christopher died. I believe that our cause is right and just. And this is what literature in Africa should be about today….“14 He further argues that the African writer cannot help but be concerned with socio-political issues, not least on the concept of “racial inequality”.15 Africa has been the “most insulted continent in the world. Africans’ very
claim to humanity has been questioned at various times, their persons abused, their intelligence insulted.”16 In view of the colonialist misrepresentation of the African people which is included in the school curriculum, the writers have a duty to bring them to an end for the sake of the black race.

The poverty of African self-image have emanated largely from African’s image reflected through the mirror held by European imagination. Achebe divides the four hundred years of Euro-African contact into three periods: the time of the slave trade, colonisation, and decolonisation. During these three periods, European assumptions about Africans have changed little in substance. Whether dealing with the slave or, later, the colonised or ex-colonial, there is an assumption of “superiority” on the part of the European. As a result, Achebe contends that the African writer cannot be “unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer”.17 Indeed, he argues that it was Europe which introduced into Africa the problems which the writer was attempting to solve. He quotes Emanuel Obiechina on the subject-matter and “purpose, implicit or explicit” of African writers which is: to correct the past in the present in order to educate the West African reader and give him confidence in his cultural heritage, and also in order to enlighten the foreign reader and help him get rid of the false impressions
about the West African culture acquired from centuries of cultural misrepresentation.\textsuperscript{18} During the period of decolonisation, Achebe argues, the African writer continues to perform an educational function, this time against the forces of neo-colonialism which threaten to recolonise Africans. In particular, Achebe attacks the west’s involvement in the Biafran crisis in Nigeria in 1968 as an example of the way in which the former colonial master continues to manipulate things from behind the scene, utilising “black stooges” to do his “dirty work.”\textsuperscript{19}

Achebe next presents the writer as a social critic. The prevailing situation of political corruption, nepotism and moral bankruptcy in and around the 1960s moved him to assume the writer’s role as a social critic. He now focuses his attention on the evils inflicted on the African societies, not so much by alien rulers, but by African themselves with the fundamental belief that the writer can and must influence his society. He talks about the changing role of literature in his essay, “What has a Literature Got to do with It?,” that it should not be seen “only in terms of providing latent support for things as they are, for it does also offer the kinetic energy necessary for social transition and change.”\textsuperscript{20} As J. B. Priestley, talking about the importance of society in literature, maintains: “Characters in a society make the novel… society itself becomes more and more important to the serious novelist, and indeed turns a character
An African writer is, therefore, essentially preoccupied with his society, its history, the crumbling value system and the destiny of his people. As a social critic, the African writer follows the ancient tradition for the benefits of the society:

"Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitement of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terracotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society."

In other words, Achebe believes the role of the African writer includes his duty as the conscience keeper of his society by providing the right direction. In his novels, Achebe suitably offers a critique of his society of the past and the present to show them the vision of what they can become.

Achebe next portrayed the writer in the role of a social reformer and revolutionary. During periods of conflict, writers tend to change as much as the people themselves tend to reinterpret their lives and roles in new lights. In the circumstance of conflict, his role change to that of a protest writer, as Achebe said in an interview at the University of Texas at Austin in 1969:

"I believe it’s impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest…. In fact I should say all our writers, whether they are aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demands that you should
protest, that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, your religion, and so on.\textsuperscript{23}

Achebe believes that the writer in critical moments ought to move from criticizing his society to a more direct involvement in remoulding it. By recording the past and the contemporary revolutions and changes going on in his society, the African writer holds a great responsibility in determining Africa’s future; “This is important because at this stage it seems to me that the writer’s role is more in determining than merely reporting. In other words, his role is to act rather than to react.”\textsuperscript{24}

Kolawole Ogungbesan (who is Achebe’s political opponent, an anti-Biafran) accuses Achebe of getting intensely emotional during and after the Biafra War as revealed in his poems and of giving the example of Christopher Okigbo, a fellow Nigerian poet, as a model sacrifice for the sake of his community.\textsuperscript{25} In an interview with Kalu Ogbaa, Achebe denied it as:

…nonsense…. The trouble is, he has a problem with Biafra, like may Nigerians who were on the federal side, and their problem was compounded by the fact that they won the war. So they feel justified in whatever they thought and felt during the crisis, because it’s very easy to imagine that right and victory are on the same side. So, it’s the problem Nigerians have with Biafra which is coming through Ogungbesan’s comment… not dealing with literary criticism… (but) dealing with political prejudice, ethnic prejudice, and that kind of thing.\textsuperscript{26}
As a Nigerian sympathizing with the cause of the Nigerian Federal government, such accusation is but expected. In the same interview Achebe clarified the meaning of his use of ‘protest’ in his writings:

Protest means from someone against another. But the way I prefer to see protest is that assumed mission, that natural condition of the artist to be protesting against what he is given. As an African, I have been given a certain role in the world, a certain place in the world, a certain history in the world; and I say, ‘No, I don’t accept these roles, these histories – distorted, garbled accounts. I am going to recreate myself.’ I’m protesting against the world. But if we are talking about a novel like *A Man of the People*, the protest is clearly more localized. I’m talking about the politics of the country after independence. I’m protesting against the way we are ordering our lives. The need for protesting will never end. I don’t think it’s a question of protest against Europe or simply protest against local conditions. It is a protest against the way we are handling human society in view of the possibilities for greatness and the better alternatives which the artist sees.\(^{27}\)

Achebe is consistent in his view about the function of the writer in his society, a writer could and should influence his society.

According to Achebe, the writer is one who remembers how things used to be and passed on the same to his people. In an interview with Jim Davidson, he admits the short memory of his people when he said: “Within one generation people lose even the memory of what used to be. The writer has a responsibility to remember what it was like before, and to keep talking about it.”\(^{28}\) The village novels exemplify his stand on the need to educate the masses on their own cultural history and tell them on human terms where the rain happened to beat them. The politics of remembering also implies the responsibility of the writer to recast their
story where the native people are the main players in the events and incidents thus described. The Eurocentric worldview that was applied in governing them should be countered by educating and decolonizing the mind of the people. Speaking through Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe wants his people to think, and it is the duty of the likes of Ikem to enlighten the people on their oppressed condition and inspire them to take thoughtful actions.

According to Ogungbesan, the Biafra War (1967-1970) was a watershed in the literary career of Achebe. After the war ended, Achebe was immediately faced with the problem of reconciling his different positions which led to radical thinking about Nigeria’s past and future. He sought to establish some sort of continuity in his ideas by viewing the civil war as only a crisis which has brought out only more nakedly the dilemma between the African writer and his community. He attempted to adapt his latest position, that of viewing the writer as a revolutionary, to the situation in post-war Nigeria. In an interview with Emenyonu, Achebe said:

I have come to the belief that you cannot separate the creativity from the revolution that is inevitable in Africa. Not just the war, but the post-independence period in Africa is bound to create in the writer a new approach. This, may be, was sharpened by the war, but in my case it was already there.
African literature in its present form, he said, is really not sufficiently relevant to the issues of the day. According to Achebe, what is meaningful is what takes into account the past and the present. African writers cannot forget the past because the present comes out of the past; but they should not be mesmerized or immobilized by their contemplation of the past to the exclusion of the contemporary scene: “the most meaningful work that African writers can do today will take into account our whole history: how we got here, and what it is today; and this will help us to map out our plans for the future”.

Some critics alleged that the Biafran War taught Achebe lessons on literary production. Chastened by the war, they said that he now claims to understand the plight of South Africans who used to say that they could not afford to write novels but only poetry and short stories. During the war Achebe wrote poetry which seemed to meet the demands of time. Even many years after the war, Achebe had not felt the urge to write a novel, until almost two decades later. What happens to his society cannot be separated from the writer, especially to the African writers whose community needs are met through the uses of literature. But it should be noted that Achebe is equally successful in writing poetry, even though he may not be the best in the tradition. And on the question on his view on
the ‘just’ cause of Biafra, he told Bradford Morrow in an interview in 1991:

…Biafra was a necessity because it stood for the right of people to say no to victimization, to genocide. On the other side of the argument, there are those who think that the unity of a nation is paramount, that the boundaries are sacrosanct, that sort of thinking. For me, when you put one against the other, there’s only one position to take. The sanctity of human life, the happiness of people and the right to pull out of any arrangement that doesn’t suit them stands above all. But at the same time one lives in the practical world in which power and force are real and therefore if your desire to be left alone will lead perhaps to your extinction, lead to bloodshed like what we had…

Had it not been for millions of Igbos massacred in the war, Achebe is convinced that Biafra cause is undoubtedly fair and justified. As a leader of the tribe, he believes that the movement had to be suspended to keep people alive. In the same interview, Achebe said that Nigeria was a British creation with her vested interest in the possibilities of commercial exploitation of the country.

Achebe believes that politics and social affairs cannot be kept out of the reach of literature in Africa. Yet the writer’s approach to these issues reveals the quality of his work, as they are basically creative works. In order to be objective, and therefore do justice to his art, the writer must be detached and not become emotionally involved. But when the issue at hand involves his own community, Achebe and any writer for that matter, finds it most difficult to maintain emotional detachment. This might be one of the reasons why the literary reputation of Achebe mainly
rests on *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Achebe realizes that the writer as a teacher must watch his attitudes very carefully. Objectivity predisposes the temptation to idealize his society’s past and pretend that nothing bad ever existed. From Achebe’s portraiture of his people’s traditional past one can see his balanced view. Achebe himself said, “The credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts”. In other words, the African past will be seen, not as one long technicolour idyll, but possessing like any other people’s past, its good as well as its bad sides. Objectivity is a prerequisite in all intellectual pursuits. Indeed, the task of the writer as teacher, ‘to help my society regain its belief in itself,’ was inclusive of other intellectuals to whom objectivity mattered as much as to the African writer – historians, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and political scientists – who were devoted to the task of giving back to Africa the pride and self-respect it lost during the colonial period.

The African writer’s role as a teacher, as Achebe himself realized, could only be a temporary measure, something dictated by the political logic of the time. He talks about his idea of a teacher in an interview with Jane Wilkerson in 1987:

I was thinking of the teacher in the sense of the great teacher, like Jesus Christ or Mohammed, Buddha or Plato. These were people I had
in mind, not some little fellow who is really oppressed by life and can’t find any other job except to stand in front of the people and punish them… I was not thinking about the teacher who prescribes. A good teacher never prescribes; he draws out. Education is a drawing out of what is there, leading out, helping the pupil to discover… to explore.33

Once the lesson had been learned, the teacher’s duty falls into abeyance like the artist in mbari tradition. In line with his belief, the present-day happening become the subject of his second novel, *No Longer at Ease* and so does follows the succeeding novels, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. The contemporary social reality faced by his people becomes the subject-proper of Achebe’s later works as he himself said: “But what I mean is that owing to the peculiar nature of our situation it would be futile to try and take off before we have repaired our foundations. We must first set the scene which is authentically African; then what follows will be meaningful and deep.”34

The writer’s role as a social critic follows logically from his role as a teacher. Having repaired the foundations of his society by establishing the validity of African traditions, the writer can now afford to take an unflinching look at his society and its shortcomings. However, the writer’s role as a social critic is higher than his role as a teacher, since it can go beyond the requirements of the moment. Writers all over the world have always been called upon to play this role. But it demands more of the writer than the role of a teacher. It demands more than
objectivity; it demands considerable detachment, the writer may not have found it difficult to be detached when writing about the past, but this quality becomes doubly necessary when writing about the present. Kolawole Ogungbesan in his essay, “Politics and the African Writer,” raised his objections of Achebe as an objective or a detached novelist in his later novels. He admitted that Achebe’s righteous indignation with his corrupt society, however justified, does not permit detachment. *A Man of the People* is an authentic picture of the Nigeria of 1964-1965, as would be confirmed by the newspapers reports of the time. But the question of authenticity is subservient to the fictional representation of the tribal world that the novelist intended in his works.

During and after the war Achebe wrote poems and short stories which were considered by many critics as second to none if not the best of war poems:

I can create, but of course not the kind of thing I created when I was at ease. I can’t write a novel now; I won’t want to. And even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. So that particular artistic form is out for me at the moment. I can write poetry…something short, intense, more in keeping with my mood. I can write essays. I can even lecture. All this is creating in the context of our struggle. At home I do a lot of writing, but not fiction, something more concrete, more directly related to what is going on. What I am saying is that there are forms of creativity which suit different moments. I wouldn’t consider writing a poem on daffodils particularly creative in my situation now. It would be foolish; I couldn’t do it.  

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The political condition that confronted the Igbo nation compels Achebe to express his thought in the form of poetry as he himself said:

I believe that writing poetry is a necessary part of my being alive, which is why I have written nothing else. I hardly wrote prose. I’ve not written a novel. I’ve not written a play. Because I think that somehow the medium itself is sufficiently elastic to say what I want to say, I haven’t felt the need for some other medium.36

Many people who were anti-Biafra see it as an ironic situation when Okigbo the poet, realizing that this was not the time to say anything, forsook his medium for a more direct intervention in the war, and Achebe the novelist took to writing poetry. Achebe’s war poems, such as “Air Raid,” “Refugee mother and Child,” and “He Loves Me: He Loves Me Not,” show a closeness of observation and an intense emotional involvement in the human situation. The same could be said for the short stories “Girls at War” and “Civil Peace.” Achebe has minutely recapitulated the ugly facts of life in Biafra during and immediately after the war.

The prevailing condition of corruption and downward slide of moral values after Nigeria’s independence bothers the novelist. With a vision of what Nigeria can become, the novel as weapon of protest, in a general sense, is considered a necessity by Achebe:

…I think that protest is not a very good word, but we use it quite often, and whenever I use it, I use it in a very general sense, the sense in which we all admit that there is a lot to protest against in every life, in
every community, in every civilization. If things were perfect, there would be no need for writers to write their novels. But it is because they see a vision of the world which is better than what exists; it is because they see the possibilities of man rising higher than he has risen at the moment that they write. So, whatever they write, if they are true practitioners of their art, would be in essence a protest against what exists, against what is.37

In his essay, ‘The Novelist as Teacher’, Achebe argues that in the African encounter with colonial rule one of the first things that happened to the natives was to invest everything associated with the white man – the entire life-style – with awe and admiration as something worthy of emulation, but view everything indigenous as something to be ashamed of and snapped at the earliest opportunity. Achebe stressed the need to counter-effect the racist demeaning ideology that has infected all and permeated into every black individual and the society: “…no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul…it is the nature of things that we may need to counter racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.”38 This calls for the unreserved assertion of the dynamic African identity.

Achebe uses the space provided by the novel to assert the dignity of his community. The Igbo past depicted purposefully in his traditional novels is resonant with the authentic life lived by a dignified clan of equals who meet together in an Athenian way to make critical communal decisions. At the same time, the tribal society allows for an exceptional
man, such as Okonkwo and Ezeulu, and for an organization based on achievement. Age is respected but achievement is revered. It is a universe which embodies a traditional and living morality and an order of reference by which the actual is comprehended and judged. Its religion is both mysterious and homely, answering to the instinct for the numinous and the need for practical good sense. Its vitality calls upon the sincerity of its followers and they support it with the conviction of living action. It produces impressive and beautiful artefacts in music, dance, decoration, and, above all, in conversation. “Among the Ibo the art of conversation was regarded highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which the words are eaten.” All these and many more valuable legacies are lost in the Europeanized present. So, these distortions calls for action, the urgency of the need prompted the writer in Achebe to work and stand equal to the situation.

The emergence of the novel in the African subcontinent is a direct consequence of the excesses of colonialism. Both the native and the expatriate novelists are concerned with the plight of the disturbed colonized. While the expatriate novelist concerns himself more with the economic and political exploitation of the colonized natives, the chief concern of the native writers is with the emotional exploitation of the colonized and the assertion of his manhood and culture. From his
experience, and the experience of his community, the novelist tries to acquire self-knowledge, thereby seeking a cultural space for self-assertion. The distinctive talent of Achebe lies in his mastery to offer by way of events, a community of individual lives in the act of defining themselves. His characters, therefore, live through an ordered sequence of time. They have motives and their conduct has consequences for the entire community they represent. Even when the novelist tells the story through the consciousness of his characters, the focus remains on events or the situation in which the interaction of individuals take place.

Achebe, as a writer, traces the complex connection between language and the development of the field of African literature. He uses the given language, the language of the colonial masters, to express a content that is purely African. In his 1991 interview with Bradford Morrow, Achebe defended his choice of using English language to Igbo to reach his African audience:

My countrymen are now Nigerians. Nigeria as a whole are not Igbo-speaking. The Igbos are just one of the major ethnic groups. I’d written… in the Igbo language, only the Igbos would have had access; not the Yorubas, not the Hausas, not the Ibibo, not to mention all the other Africans, not the Kikuyas, the Luos, etc., all over the continent…”

In other words, Achebe’s choice of the English language goes in tandem with his larger vision of and concern for the African continent as a whole. On being asked if an African ever learn English well enough to be able to
use it effectively in creative writing, Achebe answered with an emphatic ‘yes’:

Certainly yes...if on the other hand you ask: ‘Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?’ I should say, ‘I hope not’. It is neither necessary, nor desirable for him to be able to do so...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weigh of my African experience. But it will have to be a New English, still in communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.41

The problem of language calls for the decolonization of the English language. This struggle is a crystallized expression of the historical process which has been going on for centuries. The Empire indeed introduced a ‘standard’ metropolitan language into its subjects through its system of education, but the subjects are now writing back with a vengeance, the ‘non-standard’, marginalized, variant English language. The language has been usurped, abrogated, and appropriated to make it culturally relevant. Discussing this phenomenon among the postcolonial writers, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) note that:

The crucial function of language as medium of power demands that postcolonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’ involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usage, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege.42
They developed a theory for this literature, which they call ‘english’ literature to distinguish it from the canonical, hegemonic ‘English’ literature of Great Britain.

African writers, including Achebe, successfully achieved a symbiosis between the features of indigenous culture and those of the western culture embodied in English. They have created an idiom which is authentic in experience, rich in meaning and yet retains its African identity. One reason for this symbiosis is the confidence with which the African writers have accepted English. Achebe, for example, believes that he has no other choice except to write in English. The African writer in fact has wrenched the language from its erstwhile colonial master and has made it bear the burden of his African experience. The experiment, of course, has not been an easy one, though it has excited many writers.

As a native writer, Achebe handles the English language competently and imaginatively; it is at once international and local. But it is not the English of Achebe’s colonial masters as it has been abrogated and appropriated. The best example of this process is found in the final section of Things Fall Apart in which Okonkwo’s suicide is reported in such a way that the two opposite views of the White D.C. and of Obierika merge into one. The White D.C. is fascinated by the refusal of the tribe to handle the dead body, as he is a “student of the primitive customs.” The
phrase makes us discover our status as readers. Gareth Griffiths notes, “We suddenly become aware that what we have been reading is an English which has reproduced through its rhythm, syntax and structure as well as its proverbial patterning and social commentary, Ibo thoughts and speech patterns.” This becomes clear when we learn that the White D.C. has not understood a single word of Obierika’s furious outburst in Igbo: “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.” But for Achebe’s successful rendering in English, we too, like the D. C. would have been complete outsiders to the Igbo culture.

To record the pulse of such society in the language of the colonial masters is full of pitfalls, especially the problem of authenticity. Achebe solves this by deliberately choosing a style, which has rightly been called ‘epic’ or ‘heroic’. It is a style based on “artistic stoicism”, a detachment both from the character and the event. It operates through the ironic mode as in Things Fall Apart, where Achebe uses a trussed-up and carefully modulated prose which successfully conveys the sense of stability and confidence that the pre-colonial traditional way of life has. Here the paragraph too is formalized. The symmetry of the style emphasizes the balance and order of that society:

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a
young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in
his father’s lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It
was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one
possessed…. 45

The sureness of touch with which Achebe handles prose can be felt when
we contrast it with the language of the White man’s interpreters whose
dialect, though Igbo, is different and sound harsh to the ears. The
interpreter’s use of the white master’s tongue produces humour, even
when the situation is tense and charged.

The post-colonial Nigeria has lost much that has to be regained,
even their age-old proverbs. To remind and re-educate the young
generations, Achebe’s early work were replete with Igbo proverbs and
Igbo maxims, achieving desired applications. But very little of such
proverbs can be seen in the later novels: through characters like Odili (in
*A Man of the People*) who live in post-colonial Nigeria, Achebe
presented the satiric language of a corrupt society. The traditional
proverbial Igbo culture is dying and its proverbs, which was once a
repository for received wisdom of generations, no more provide the
grammar of values they used to provide in the pre-colonial societies of
Umuofia and Umuaro. These proverbs had an organic function because
they arose from the communal consciousness of their people. They
contain truth, consolations, and a frame of reference for a whole people.
Griffiths asserts that “The proverbial commentary which is so central a
feature of the Igbo village is used as a device to point the meaning of
episode and character.” He is of the opinion that the proverbs must be
studied in their proper context and perspective before one can fully
understand and appreciate them. This is so because Achebe, being a
master of irony and ambiguity, places them in a specific context: once
removed out of their context, they don’t serve the desired purpose.

The emergence of individual authorship among African writers
coincides with the transition from oral to written forms of literature. In
the past, the story told by the hearth becomes public property once it has
left the mouth of the story-teller. It is from such a tradition that Achebe
attributed himself to have got part of his ‘artistic and intellectual
inheritance’ His reference to the tradition of Mbari in his essay “The
Writer and his Community,” makes the point explicitly clear:

*Mbari* is an artistic ‘spectacular’ demanded of the community by one
or other of its primary divinities, usually the earth goddess. To execute
this ‘command performance’ the community is represented by a small
group of its members selected and secluded for months or even years
for the sole purpose of erecting a befitting ‘home of images’ filled to
overflowing with sculptures and paintings in homage to the presiding
god or goddess.

These representatives (called *ndimgbe*; sing. *onyembe*) chosen to
re-enact, as it were, the miracle of creation in its extravagant profusion
are always careful to disclaim all credits for making, which rightly
belongs to gods; or even for initiating homage for what is made, which
is the prerogative of the community. *Ndimgbe* are no more than vessels
in which the gods place their gifts of creativity to mankind and in
which the community afterwards make their token return of sacrifice
and thanksgiving. As soon as their work is done behind the fence of
their seclusion and they re-emerge into secular life *ndimgbe* set about
putting as much distance as possible between themselves and their recently executive works of art.\textsuperscript{48}

In the \textit{mbari} tradition there is an absence of the attempt to claim personal ownership over the artistic creation. In fact, the traditional artist will go to the extent of denying his authorship over the work of art for it is feared that if the artist praises himself, the god or goddess who owns that work will kill him.\textsuperscript{49} While attacking individualism of the West, Achebe points out the fact that the individual artist (including priests and writers) in the tribal society is in a very real sense subordinate to his community. This does not mean the sheer neglect of respect to individual persons in the society as Achebe writes:

The Igbo are second to none in their respect of the individual personality. For whereas many cultures are content to demonstrate value and importance of each man and woman by reference to the common fatherhood of God, the Igbo postulate an unprecedented uniqueness for the individual by making him or her the sole creation and purpose of a unique god-agent, \textit{chi}. No two persons, not even blood brothers, are created and accompanied by the same \textit{chi}.\textsuperscript{50}

Having the same tradition as his artistic and intellectual inheritance, Achebe dons his mantle in the service of his community. To underscore the importance of the community in African literature, he quoted what J. B. Priestley wrote in a famous essay “Literature and Western Man”: “Character in a society make the novel….Society itself becomes more and more important to the serious novelist, and indeed turns a character
itself, perhaps the chief character." In that sense, the main characters in Achebe’s novels are but representation of the society they belonged to.

As a responsible writer, Achebe highlights the cultural changes in his Igbo society with his series of novels. In the earlier novels, he affirms the existence of tribal myths, and that they helped explain the various activities of gods and deities, and also of the origins of the natural world. Besides, they explain man’s relation to the gods in his various activities of life and death. These myths are “regarded as sacred and esoteric. Frequently, atonement must be offered before a myth may be told.” The social and cultural life of the Igbo past in the novel is governed by the belief in the numinous gods and goddesses whose message the clan tries to carry out. This faith is inscrutably set in the psyche of the culture of the people. The fate of the society rests squarely on the preservation of this tradition. Achebe’s use of cultural myths in Things Fall Apart depicts the collective psychology of the pre-historical knowledge but is still preserved by the modern man. In this connection, the function of myth may be described by taking the help of Bronislow Malinowski who writes:

Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for efficiency in ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is
not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.”

In his novels Achebe purposefully weaves the myths into his fictional techniques. Along with the depiction of the mythical world that undergoes transition, an ironic undercurrent in the novel emerges from the central character who is the champion of masculine values. The irony of the situation is that while he tries to preserve his gods and culture with the power of masculine strength his actions and realization are basically feminine. Through him, Achebe problematizes the uneasy transitions brought about by the tragic conflict between mythical tribal gods and the new Christian God. The breaking up of traditional religion in the face of the onslaught of the new religion is confirmed by the happenings, such as, the construction of a church in the Evil Forest, the bringing up of the twins, cutting off of long hair, the message of equality of all men and of universal brotherhood. The people in the culture itself see things “breaking up and falling apart.” Obierika laments: “Now he (the missionary) has won our brothers and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart.” The killing of the sacred python and the unmasking of one of the egwugwus by an overzealous convert named Enoch set the stage for direct confrontation between the native power and the white men. The storming of the church by the egwugwus and the subsequent provocation of the six
Leaders of Umuofia including Okonkwo further leads to acts of reprisals in which Okonkwo severs the head of one messenger. His action is not approved by his fellow clansmen. Rather they criticize him, which is a great insult to the hero who does not know that his culture had given in already to the new religion. Knowing fully well that the community lacks the courage to fight them, he hanged himself. Thus myths, rituals and religion show the inseparable link between the predicament of Okonkwo and the inner scheme of things in the culture.

While trying to represent the culture of his community in the most authentic manner, Achebe resorts to the oral traditions of Africa for his fictional technique. The different forms of African culture impose the form, structure and theme of the novel on its seemingly outward loose structure. His novels, in a word, are interfused with the use of African cultural materials as fictional technique. One of the most significant aspects of the Igbo culture used very adroitly in the novels is the folk songs. Folksongs are also a vigorous expression of the Nigerian culture. For example, the rain song\textsuperscript{56} expresses man’s relation to nature in complete harmony: it reflects the importance of rain in the African farming, and the unhindered happiness of the tribal people symbolized by the rain. Folksongs were also sung in praise of their past glory and heroes. Some of these may be regarded as political songs that can at the
time of national upheaval work to arouse public opinion against the
white. Achebe’s uses of these folksongs indicate his patriotism and the
unshakable tie with the contemporary political history of his country
which was fermented against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Therefore,
the use of folksongs as a political tool of mass consciousness re-echoes.
In the novel, one can see that Achebe has established a relevant cultural,
political theme of Nigeria with a sense of clear vision and deep
commitment. Besides folk songs, the novels are punctuated with tribal
maxims and proverbs showcasing the age-old traditional wisdom passed
down for generations. All these are prescriptively used for the benefit of
the whole community.

Literature has often been employed to record and express the
political, cultural and emotional change of a country. It is therefore not
surprising that most of the African literature expresses the social change
in their respective country. The writers are concerned about the past and
present history of their country, and this concern is reflected in their
work. The social change that Africa has been subjected to since the
colonization of the country – the cultural, political and missionary
influences, and its present state of achieved independence with a growing
awareness of both national identity and modern problems – finds
expression in most African fiction. In an interview at the University of
Texas at Austin, Achebe had the role of the writer in the society in mind when he said that it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest.\textsuperscript{57} In spite of his commitment to Africa, Achebe does not romanticize Ibo society nor abuse Christian European behaviour as a whole. Like a true objective writer, he lays bare both the strength and the weakness of both his society and that of the Christians. His novels show that social change was inevitable and demonstrate the necessity of adapting to the new environment. Ezeulu in \textit{Arrow of God} advised his son about the need to adapt to the changing situations:

\begin{quote}
The world is changing...I do not like it. But I am like the bird Enekennti-oba. When his friends ask him why he was always on the wing he replied: ‘Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching.’ I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying \textit{had we known} tomorrow.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

While Achebe prefers adaptation, he is indignant, however, at the loss of dignity of his culture and people. His works appear to be a plea to the Nigerian society to meaningfully review their roots and origin without sentimentalizing, and to attribute proper value where it is due, and see how far these values can be appropriately restored or reasserted in the context of the present society.
Burtrand Russell rightly observed in his book *Power – A New Social Analysis*: “The fundamental concept in social science is power in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics.”

Literature, as a reading of life, gets invariably implicated in issues concerning power, as power in the post-war period has become the source and goal of all human enterprise, the epicentre of all experience and the monitor of the destiny of millions. Sartre was only looking at this from a different angle when he said that the writer as a freeman addressing freeman has only one subject which is freedom. The truth of the matter is that one cannot perhaps write about people today without considering the role of power politics. In an interview with Tony Hall in 1967, Achebe talks about his interest as an artist in the politics of Nigeria:

> Right now my interest is in politics or rather my interest in the novel is politics. *A Man of the People* was not a flash in the pan. This is the beginning of a phase for me, in which I intend to take a hard look at what we in Africa are making of independence but taking Nigeria which I know best.

Achebe writes out of an acute social consciousness that is vitally concerned with politics and society, and focuses his attention on the function of power in the contemporary society studying closely the impact of power relationships on the moral, social, cultural and even aesthetic values of the people. Of vital importance to Achebe is the attitude to power held by different classes of the society. And ideology
rather than history appears to be the object of Achebe’s texts. Since its first use by Destutt de Tracy, the word ‘ideology’ meant different things to different thinkers, hence the need for specification. Ideology as used in the context of Achebe’s novels means “the ways in which what we say and believe connect the power relationships of the society we live in.”

In fact, he opines that the fight for true freedom and independence of Africa will be achieved in the ideological plane, by writers countering the ideological hegemony of the west behind all realities of life.

The events in the novel Anthills of the Savannah trace the necessary re-education intellectuals and writers should go through before they can assume their role as builders of Modern African community. They need to be reinitiated into the world of people, the ways of their culture, and in brief the real Kangan. The intellectuals and artists are still at the centre as keepers of ideology. The responsibility of the intellectual, as it emerges from the developments in the novel, is to replace the old hegemonic forms with new ones more appropriate to liberation and equality. For this, they should be able to get to the core of their indigenous tradition and re-form their society “around its core of reality, not around any intellectual abstraction.” The novel underscores the need for the identification of intellectuals with the suffering masses. Ikem, throwing open the realm of his revolution to women; Chris, growing
aware of the power of the poor; Beatrice breaking the barriers of bureaucracy to accept Agatha, her servant, on an equal footing, are all going through this process of ‘re-education’. The divergent ideological paths Chris, Ikem and Beatrice follow almost emerge at points when all three become aware of the urgent need to realign themselves with the suffering millions, since after all “this world belong to the people of the world not any little caucus, no matter how talented.”63 The novel opposes the centralization of power in a few hands by providing an ideal alternative of power relationships and it is at the same time the plea for the resurrection of the community-based indigenous power structures. Achebe’s achievement can be best summed up by recalling Althusser: “the peculiarity of art is to make us see, make us perceive, make us feel something which alludes to reality….What art makes us see is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.”64

Examining Achebe’s theoretical formulations in a variety of essays and interviews, there are evidence of the attempt at Appropriating literary theory as a mode of translating an idea into action, a mode of resistance and an aid to social transformation. Undeniably, Achebe can be considered an initiator and an agent of social transformation, empowered to show his community the way to a better, more promising future. As a
writer, Achebe participated in this political transformation by intervening in and contesting the hegemonic misrepresentations of Africa in colonial/imperial discourses, and by setting up alternative images of Africa. In essays written after the publication of his early three novels, Achebe focuses on the specific instances of the impact and the psychic costs of colonial values and rhetoric on the ex-colonized peoples and cultures of Africa. The utter shock and disbelief expressed by the early Igbo Christians of his father’s generation at the exhibition of Nigerian cultural dance (Maypole dance) mentioned in “The Novelist as Teacher” is a fit example of the cultural confusion of the natives. The essay harps on the continuing, debilitating existence of colonial values and rhetoric in post-independence Nigeria where students in his wife’s class prefer the word ‘bush’ to *harmattan* and find ‘the palm-tree’ an unfit subject for poetry. The issue at hand is the denigration of culturally specific Igbo words like palm tree and the reality of experience to which they refer – anything that has something to do with the colonizer is highly esteemed by the contemporary Igbos. An African writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o goes a step further and sees danger in the use of colonizer’s language. He said, “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture… and history.” Without denying the facts aforementioned, Achebe however chose to use the Master’s language to connect with readers even beyond his own people.
He said emphatically: “Is it right (for the artist) to abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.” Achebe is focussed in his resolution as a writer: “Here then an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word.” Since his society’s disgraceful situation arise from the impact of Africa’s “first confrontation with Europe” and are a product primarily of colonialist misrepresentations of Africa, Achebe intervenes to challenge and expose their racist underpinnings and hegemonic functions. And he further delimits his tasks by taking on two principal colonialist writers – Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary.

About Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe is far more detailed and polemical. In “An Image of Africa,” Achebe calls Conrad “a bloody racist,” who “chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.” The Conradian world Achebe describes is one built on Manichean dualism: “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by
triumphant bestiality”73; Africa is a “place of negation,” Europe a place (and state) of “spiritual grace”74. Of course since Achebe’s essay was published, critics like Edward Said have argued for a more complicated and complex position on the part of Conrad; nevertheless, Said’s analysis concurs with Achebe’s fundamental assertions.75 By now, Achebe’s essay has itself acquired a sort of canonical status among postcolonial writers and critics; thus, it is difficult to assess the novelty of its position or its impact on his first listeners/readers. But when it appeared in the late seventies, it was among the first critiques produced on *Heart of Darkness*, inspiring a political examination of the text which reveals Conrad’s essentially colonial view of Africa.

However, Achebe does not castigate European writers alone for the failure to accurately represent Africa. He also takes to task fellow African writers, scholars and critics like Yambo Ouologeum, Ayi Kwei Armah and Sunday Anozie for succumbing to colonial representations of Africa and its peoples. Thus Ouologeum’s *Bound to Violence* is critiqued for recycling an essentially colonial image of Africans when he invests them “with responsibility for violence and evil”76; Armah is described as an “alienated native,” who “imposes so much foreign metaphor on the sickness of Ghana that it ceases to be true”77; and Anozie is seen as a misdirected critic and scholar, who aspires to Eurocentric standards of
“universality,” and hence ends up negating the political and socially responsible fictions of African writers like Christopher Okigbo.\textsuperscript{78} Achebe then takes a dig at a fellow third-world novelist Sir Vidiadhar S. Naipaul who sacrifices his ancestry for the friendship of the Western world. In his Walter Wriston lecture “Our Universal Civilization” at the Manhattan Institute, Naipaul opines that the civilization that began in Europe and spread to America has the right to be accepted as the civilization for everyone because it has made “extraordinary attempt to accommodate the rest of the world, and all the currents of that world’s thought.”\textsuperscript{79} Achebe continues by relating the stories about Naipaul’s visit to his ancestral home which “filled him with disgust resulting into conflicts with many Indians who were not necessarily defensive but still found his attitude too insensitive, arrogant and plain ignorant.”\textsuperscript{80} In his novel, \textit{A Bend in the River}, Naipaul belittles his past history by speaking through one of the characters to trample on it: “You trample on the past, you crush it. In the beginning it is like trampling on a garden. In the end you are just walking on ground. That is the way we have to learn to live now. The past is here. (He touched his heart.) It isn’t there. (And he pointed at the dusty road.)”\textsuperscript{81} So, these writers compromise much of their cultural identity and in the process did a lot of disservice to their own people.
The terms of Achebe’s critique of Ouologuem, Armah, and Anozie are firmly bolted into his overarching concern with those functions of art and culture that can help his people regain their dignity and trust in themselves as final arbiters of their own destiny. In this regard, it is therefore, important to bear in mind the fact that Achebe’s critical assessment of these African writers is not premised on a monolithic denunciation of the West. Instead, what troubles him is how, in order to “win applause in Western circles”82 these writers, though possessing “enormous talents and energy”83 use their talents in the service of recycling what are essentially colonial myths underwriting Europe’s and the West’s power; and this at a time when the West continues to wield enormous political and cultural power over the non-western world. In such a situation these writers do irreparable damage to what should ideally be the primary concern of African writers: to restore dignity to their peoples. It, therefore, becomes imperative for Achebe to determine “just on whose ideological side they are playing.”84

Although virtually all of Achebe’s novels can be understood, at least in part, “as analyses and products of the historical problems created by colonization,”85 Things Fall Apart, published before Nigeria achieved independence and set in the latter part of the nineteenth century, deals with the coming of the English and of the English political control; it
presents Igbo society both before and after colonization, and examines the steady erosion and overwhelming of Igbo culture so that by the end of the novel things have literally fallen apart. Critics have noted that the book is Achebe’s attempt to counter some of the egregious misrepresentations of Africa by Europeans. Set against the backdrop details of Igbo village life, *Things Fall Apart* presents a well-ordered society in which individual achievement is honored, hard work is expected, close ties are maintained to ancestors and spirits, and government is a form of participatory democracy. This novel is a sympathetic insider’s account of the inner workings of Igbo society, its complex springs of actions and motivations. What is particularly distinctive about *Things Fall Apart* is that Achebe is not interested simply in what Edward Said has called a “politics of blame”. The culture and society of Umuofia break down under pressure from both within and without. This is not to suggest that these pressures are examined and evaluated in the same way. But, it seems that Achebe is more interested in probing and opening up for inspection the processes that lead to the disintegration of this society. At the centre of Achebe’s narrative is the protagonist, Okonkwo, a man of “inflexible will” who tells his children “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed,” and whose definition of what constitutes manhood is crucially tied to controlling “his women and
his children (and especially his women).” To this society the English missionaries bring the promise of a “true” God and bicycles technology. 

Achebe’s description of the onslaught of colonialism aptly focuses on the violence of the colonial encounter and the colonizer’s duplicity:

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 clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife that held us together and we have fallen apart.

Thus, the colonizers succeed both because of their duplicity and their willingness to use brute force and because the disenfranchised of the indigenous society, having been denied a place in their society, become their willing converts. On balance, however, the inner contradictions and problems of Umuofia society are judged less harshly than the colonizer’s brutal intervention in this society. And though the last word of the novel – belong to the colonial Commissioner (a sign that colonialism has come to stay), they are chilling, heavily ironized words, incorporating as they do a familiar colonial stereotype of the African “primitives” vs. the “enlightened” English: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

The difficulties in striking a clear balance in parcelling out responsibility for the denigration of Umuofia are index of the treacherous
discursive terrain Achebe must negotiate. In a 1972 interview with Earnest and Pat Emenyonu, Achebe points out:

There were certainly faults in the Igbo system that was depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. There is no reason, for instance, for twins to be thrown away. But if you take a position for or against, then you find yourself defending the throwing away of twins, or else you say that Africa is barbarism, which appear to be the new trend among some black writers, and they are immediately applauded by the whites because it gives them an easy conscience again after all this period of doubt.  

Achebe’s comments get to the heart of the problems the African writer faces while attempting to restore dignity and self respect to his peoples. To invest them with full humanity, he must present them as complex beings, capable of good and bad, capable of making mistakes, possessing both strength and weakness. Yet the writer must carry out his task in full awareness of the fact that his people’s responsibilities can be and (wilfully) are re-appropriated under the familiar colonial/western conceptualization of everything African as “primitive” or “barbaric.” Thus, while arguing for his people’s humanity, he must resist as well such attempts at renewed cultural imperialism. In his sympathetic, but realistic, representation of Igbo culture, Achebe negotiates these problems carefully and responsibly.

The post-independence experiences of the erstwhile colonial country tend to bring about a change in the writer’s approach. In his 1972
interview with Ernest and Pat Emenyonu Achebe accounts for the shift in emphasis from his early three works, by remarking that:

The post-independence period in Africa is bound to create in the writer a new approach…. The disenchantment with the fruits of independence was already there in the early sixties. *A Man of the People*, which came out in January 1966 and which I wrote in 1964 and 1965, shows clearly this new preoccupation with the reality of post-independent Africa.\(^9^2\)

The shift in emphasis produces also a shift in what Achebe sees as his responsibilities as a writer. His attention is now fixed solidly on the indigenous ruling elite, the Nangas and Sams and their acquiescent, grovelling henchmen, whose only ambition, after independence, seems to be to move into the spaces vacated by the colonizers, without reconstructing the political, social, and cultural arrangements left behind by the colonizers. Odili, the narrator in *A Man of the People*, draws our attention to Minister of Culture Nanga’s “princely seven bathroom mansion with its seven gleaming, silent action, water closets!” while the rest of his countrymen must settle for squalid and unsanitary bucket and pit latrines – “The surprises and contrasts in our great country were simply inexhaustible.”\(^9^3\) And though Nanga dons the mantle of nationalism and adopts its rhetoric to acquire power and position as Minister of Culture,\(^9^4\) his real power and wealth are underwritten by British Amalgamated. Similarly, Sam (“His Excellency” of *Anthills of the Savannah*) “imitates the English”;\(^9^5\) “his major flaw,” according to him, is
“that all he ever wanted was to do what was expected of him especially by the English whom he admired sometimes to the point of foolishness”, and he preserves their rituals, the “sophisticated” cocktail/dinner party, held in the Presidential Retreat, “perched like a lighthouse,” above and away, much like the colonizer’s living spaces, from the living spaces of “the very people who legitimize [his] authority.”

Achebe has become one of the most reviewed writers in African literature by literary critics both within and outside Africa and from various disciplines. Achebe considers the African literary critics as the most crucial link between him and his readers – he commits to them the task of interpreting the novelist’s message to the people. One being asked in an interview if his Igbo literary critics had done enough to interpret the messages borne in his novels, Achebe told Kalu Ogbaa:

I think some of them have… I think I should mention that there are people like Emmanuel Obiechina and Donatus Nwoga who have done very serious work on my novels or more generally on Igbo culture as seen through our literature. But there have been others who have been somewhat casual or even negative in their attitude.…. I do think that what you need is a fair number of indigenous critics who are on the ball because they see literature as a serious matter (our people do not take it seriously enough; I think we are still too complacent). And the next thing you know we will be complaining about Americans, about the British, running around telling us about our writers. And yet there is not enough dedication and diligence among our own critics. I’m looking forward to a change in this for it is absolutely important, and we should get more and more people who are ready to read the books. Read the books first. It’s not enough to
According to Achebe, the postcolonial critic must be equipped with sufficient reading because only a multi-disciplinary holistic background reading will allow for a better comprehension of the link between socio-economic conditions and literary production. A fellow third-world critic is in a better position to exercise a finer sensitivity towards this crisis of consciousness because of a shared colonial legacy, which not only permits a closer sense of identification with post-colonial texts but also the negation of western apolitical expectations of the text as an autonomous aesthetic manifestation. A cultural ontology different from that of the west governs the relationship of art to society in the African context, and traditional conceptions of functional and committed art cannot be excluded from any attempt to critically evaluate the act of writing specifically employed as a narrative of liberation.

Achebe made many and diverse statements about the responsibility of African writer towards his community. Although Achebe’s statements are anchored firmly in his concern for his own people, the means he suggests whereby a writer can help restore confidence in his people are means that other postcolonial writers can also incorporate in their works. These include an effort to reclaim initiative in their own histories, rewrite
and make themselves the subject of their own histories and write, as well, ‘alternative’ histories, thereby righting their misrepresentations by European colonialists. Therefore, the following chapter will deal with Achebe and his politics of literary representations.
Endnotes:


10 *Presence Africaine* was founded in 1947 by a group of African and West Indian black writers to defend and propagate African culture.


12 Ibid., p. 139.


14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 164.

18 Ibid., pp. 165-66.

19 Ibid., p. 167.
Achebe, Hopes and Impediments, p. 115.


Ibid. p. 25.


Achebe, Hopes and Impediments, p. 30.


43 Ibid., p. 18.


47 Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 32.


49 Ibid., p. 33.

50 Ibid., p. 39.


55 Ibid., p. 156.

56 Ibid., p. 31.


63 Ibid., p. 232.


65 Achebe’s ‘The Novelist as Teacher,” in *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 29.

66 Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 44.


69 Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 44.

70 Ibid., p. 44.


72 Ibid., p. 3.

73 Ibid., p. 2.

74 Ibid.

75 See especially Said’s “Intellectual in the Post-Colonial World,” in *Orientalism*, pp. 48-49; 52.


78 Ibid., pp. 13-14.

80 Ibid., p. 86.

81 As quoted in Achebe’s *Home and Exile*, pp. 90-91.

82 Achebe, *Home and Exile*, p. 27.

83 Ibid., p. 25.

84 Ibid., p. 12.


88 Ibid., p. 46.

89 Ibid., p. 130.

90 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 158.


92 Ibid., p. 25.

93 Achebe, *A Man of the People*, p. 46.

94 Ibid., pp. 6-7.


96 Ibid., p 49.

97 Ibid., p. 81.