Introduction

... European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. It was a question about how thought was related to place. Can thought transcend places of their origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories? ... ¹

- Dipesh Chakrabarty

Thoughts are deeply rooted in place. Chakrabarty’s rhetorical question: “Can thought transcend places of their origin?” emphasizes how place plays a predominant role in determining one’s thoughts, which eventually gives birth to stories of one’s place. Place shapes thoughts, and therefore, differing thoughts, in trying to revive lost histories, open up a cornucopia of perspectives. Each of these perspectives has diverging points of view, which gives rise to multiplicities of voices with varying stories to tell.

Postcolonialism has repeatedly questioned the claim to supremacy made by Europe and its tendency to consider one story as the only single narrative, the European culture as the one universal culture, during the colonial era. This propensity to establish the superiority of Western culture has led to the denial of varied stories and cultures of the colonized pockets of the world, and has privileged the ideas propagated by Europe as universal. The postcolonial epoch, in countering the existence of one homogenous universal culture, stands
witness to the fact that: “Against this arrogant, intolerant, self-aggrandizing rational subject of modernity, critics in recent years have been trying to resurrect the virtues of the fragmentary, the local, and the subjugated in order to unmask the will to power that lies at the heart of modern rationality and to decenter its epistemological and moral subject” (Chatterjee xi). Thus, plurality of stories originating from diverse cultures, and silenced voices all over the world, break out into distinct utterances. The attempt to impose European culture over other groups and build up a single homogenous culture, is threatened.

It is significant to understand that societies are not tabula rasa. One has to come to terms with the idea that: “Our historical differences actually make a difference. This happens because no human society is a tabula rasa. The universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently” (Chakrabarty xii). This is true not only in the case of India but also in the case of “any other place as well, including, of course, Europe or, broadly, the West.” (Chakrabarty xii) as well as of the countries in Africa. Every society—be it India, or England, or Nigeria—has its own narratives which cannot be supplanted by those from other cultures.

The intriguing questions arise: What happens when disparate stories encounter each other? How do these diverse narratives with discordant thoughts interact with each other in the postcolonial world? What transpires at those discordant moments of encounter? This dissertation explores these questions, rethinking the moments of discordant encounters in the postcolonial era, and focusing on the issues highlighted by the Nigerian author Thomas Obinkaram Echewa, whose works have been subjected to neglect till date.
Calling into context the opening quote by Chakrabarty, it is significant to underline the inherent relation among “thought” and “place.” The role played by place to engage thoughts in rethinking histories of its place, gives birth to multifarious stories. Therefore, stories told by an Englishman is widely divergent from those told by an Indian, or a Nigerian. Every cultural group has its own histories which build up a distinct structure of thoughts, traditions, practices - linked to the place. Postcolonial writings bring out the distinctive voices of people from disparate places, cultures, ethnic groups; but when these discordant narratives encounter each other, do they attempt to create a space for dialogue, a space where each other understand and respect the distinctive cultural particularities, or, is there a propensity to be judgmental? Histories of civilizations stand witness to prolonged periods of violence, of imposition and domination, of discord giving rise to acrimonious conflicts. What are the nuances of perspectives which underlie the juncture of these discordant encounters? How do the divergent thoughts of people across civilizations with diverse histories, define and redefine themselves in retaining and reconstituting their identities, at the moments of their engagement with each other? It is this world of cross-civilizational encounters in which I wish to engage in rethinking the existence of discordant multiplicities, exploring the plethora of questions marking cross-cultural, cross-generational, and cross-gender encounters, focusing on the disturbing concerns highlighted by Echewa in his novels.

Postcolonial theorists have engaged themselves in giving voice to the marginalized sections of people. However, what has led me into this research project, is the problem which intrigues me to think: Despite attempts made by postcolonial writers in questioning the binary of “us” and “them” propagated by colonialists, one still finds a hierarchy ruling
the world, a hierarchy in languages, in cultures: a hierarchy maintained among civilizations. Postcolonialism has worked a long way in reviving the voices of the neglected, the suppressed, the extirpated, thereby questioning the claim to supremacy of Europe, and has opened up an avenue where multiple voices speak out their stories: but is there a mutual recognition of each other, a recognition of the diverse specificities of cultures, without any attempt to maintain a hierarchy? These questions engage my thoughts to rethink the still existing binaries, still dominating hierarchies, not only across cultures but also between people sharing the same cultural roots: taking into concern encounters among the European colonizer and the colonized African, a Western woman anthropologist and African indigenous women, indigenous Igbo women and their husbands, and the older and younger generations; in relation to Echewa’s fiction in particular.

The main contention of my research is to question the moments of discordant encounters, to question the propensity—among cultures—to suffocate an adequate space for dialogue, laying emphasis on the cornucopia of concerns which Echewa unfolds in his novels. In this context, it is important to direct one’s attention to the Igbo proverb: “Egbe bere! Ugo bere . . .” (Echewa, The Land’s Lord 45) which spells out an Igbo worldview: “Let the kite perch!/ Let the eagle also have a perch . . .” (46) as highlighted in the title of my thesis. It brings out the need for mutual understanding of differences. Echewa’s novels have not been ascribed the importance they deserve. I make an attempt to focus on the ideas highlighted in the works of Echewa—“a neglected novelist,” as Derek Wright calls him, in his essay “T. O. Echewa: A Neglected Novelist”—for, he does not merely re-write the encounter of the colonized and the colonizer, of the older generation preserving indigenous traditions in Nigeria and the younger generation challenging certain customs, of native Igbo
women and their roles as wives and mothers; he rethinks these concerns in unveiling certain questions which open up new avenues to explore.

The issues which he brings up, have been relatively untraversed terrains in West African literature: the issue of encounter among a Western woman anthropologist and indigenous Igbo women, the issue of prostitution, the issue of a single woman who denies to marry again—against African Igbo customs—after her husband dies at an early age, the issue of the grandmother narrating stories with great historical relevance to her grandson. Echewa, in bringing up all these completely amazing episodes in his novels, opens out perplexing questions which engage me to think upon. The stereotypical portraiture of Europeans in African novels is not only challenged but transcended—bringing to the fore dilemmas of black and white characters alike—in *The Land's Lord*. Also, some Igbo indigenous traditions which need to be swept aside and not glorified, for the welfare of the community, are repeatedly subjected to questioning in *The Crippled Dancer*. The Western anthropological view of cross-cultural encounters, the accepted tradition to treat prostitutes with contempt, the customs of wife-beating, and making re-marriage a compulsion for widows, are challenged in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*.

The author accords voice not only to indigenous Igbo characters but also to white characters. He questions native beliefs which need to be done away with, and lays emphasis on the need to imbibe new cultural traits from other cultures for a healthy development of any community. His novels question the want of an adequate space for mutual dialogue, taking into concern the perspectives of black as well as white characters, of older and younger generations within indigenous society, of women native to Igbo community and a Western woman anthropologist, of prostitutes and indigenous village women, of women in
native society as well as men: attempting to rethink the nuances of these conflicting encounters.

In this dissertation, I make an attempt to critically take a look into the moments of discordant encounters across cultures, generations as well as gender, in reading the novels of Echewa—The Land’s Lord, The Crippled Dancer, and I Saw the Sky Catch Fire. I also take into consideration certain other novels, like the Guinean author Camara Laye’s novel The Radiance of the King, and the Cameroonian author Mongo Beti’s novel The Poor Christ of Bomba, in the third chapter of the thesis, due to the thematic resemblance of these novels with Echewa’s novel The Land’s Lord. Eustace Palmer has labeled Echewa’s novel to be merely a re-writing of the concerns which Laye and Beti have dealt with; which I have contested in the concerned chapter.¹

Having read quite a considerable number of black African novels, I find that authors highlight the atrocities which the colonized have suffered, and they give a voice to the oppressed to speak out. Looking back at the past of a country which has experienced the pains of colonization, they uphold how its history has been defined by indigenous culture, then re-defined by the imposing presence of colonial rule, and further defined by histories of decolonization and resistance, leading to independence. Also, novelists have dealt with issues of corruption in native society after colonization, leading to re-colonization by its own men; and bring to the fore corrupt practices of politicians.² But, even after fifty three years of Nigeria’s independence, writers from West Africa still talk about the issue of a “single story” ruling the world, about the hierarchy still prevailing. The Nigerian authoress Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has addressed this issue in her lecture “The Danger of a Single Story.”³
Echewa, in his novels, questions the existence of hierarchies. He challenges the suffocating space for dialogue, and rethinks histories in order to understand the nuances of encounters among discordant voices and conflicting perspectives, thereby raising certain serious concerns which need to be explored. Also, his use of strategies like intergenerational transmission to highlight divergent perspectives of women from different social and cultural backgrounds—in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*—calls one’s attention to issues which have not been explored in West African literature before.

To build a nation which can serve as a better living place for her people, it is very essential to realize the fact to which Chinua Achebe calls one’s attention to: “It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us” (“The Novelist” 44). Also, it is very essential to acknowledge the values in other cultures which can be imbibed within one’s own culture for the welfare and development of people.

In this doctoral dissertation, I feel inclined to engage in exploring certain intriguing questions, traversing on a relatively unexplored domain, focusing on a Nigerian author whose novels have been subjected to neglect till date. Wright’s concluding words in his essay “T. O. Echewa: A Neglected Novelist.” form the point from which I start my reading of the novelist: “Echewa’s psychological analysis and stylistic accomplishments, by themselves, warrant an extensive critical attention to his writing that is long overdue” (263). This thesis, in rethinking serious questions which mark the intriguing moments of encounters, opens up a number of concerns to indulge into. Having interviewed a stong writer, Echewa; and having listened to his words about world civilizations, world cultures,
I embark on this project which speaks about my reading of his narratives. An excerpt from the interview and the author’s biographical background—in brief—is given in the Appendix.

Taking recourse to postcolonialism and the diverse theoretical writings in the field as research method, I have been introduced to thoughts related to my place, which have engaged me to connect my thoughts with similar concerns in West Africa as well. Echewa’s social background becomes quite important to take into consideration here. The author, being Nigerian himself, has brought out a realistic portrayal of his society and customs, giving prominence to the dilemmas of indigenous people facing cultural imposition as well as fighting the evils of their own society. Conducting an interview of the author has given me new insights on the issues explored in his novels, and has also furnished me with information regarding his background. My research questions, as to why does one need to critically focus on Echewa, what happens when discordant perspectives encounter, why is there a hierarchy still prevailing among cultures, get addressed when I unravel concerns which have been relatively untraversed in the study of African literature.

The chapters uphold the argument of my thesis, questioning the lack of a space of dialogue at moments of discordant encounters. The first chapter discusses some of the issues which have been dealt with, in postcolonial theory. I have taken up some of the concerns related to cross-cultural encounters in this chapter, and then have addressed the question as to why I have been provoked to look into the delicate moments of discordant encounters in the postcolonial era. Drawing inspiration primarily from Fred Dallmayr, Hans Köchler, and Ronald Niezen, this chapter talks about the idea of mutual dialogue and co-existence among cultures.
In the second chapter, I have made a study of certain African novels, and have highlighted how novelists challenge certain stereotypical notions propagated by eurocentric discourse about Africans. However, at the same time, the strategies of their portrayal present white characters as stereotypes, and though the dilemmas of black characters are highlighted, there is a gap in raising questions about the inability of cultures to understand each other. The position of native women is relegated to an inferior status in the hands of male authors. The chapter looks into Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, from Nigeria (West Africa), Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child*, from Guinea (West Africa), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child*, from Kenya (East Africa), and Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala*, from Cameroon (Central Africa).

The third chapter of my thesis concentrates on Echewa’s novel *The Land’s Lord*, and draws a comparison with Laye’s *The Radiance of the King*, and Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, and questions the stereotypical portrayal of black and white as servant and master.

In the fourth chapter, I have taken up the novel *The Crippled Dancer* by Echewa. The lens is turned on native society itself, and the chapter highlights how Ajuzia as a young man challenges those old indigenous beliefs which need to be done away with, for the development of the community. The next chapter explores the encounter between a Western woman anthropologist Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, and indigenous village women, in the novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. The Western worldview and the African (Igbo) worldview are placed side by side, forcing one to rethink the questions underlying the propensity to dominate.
The fifth chapter focuses on the wars which women continuously wage against men, challenging patriarchy, in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. Indigenous women question men regarding ill-treatment of their wives, interrogating the absence of mutual respect and understanding, without the tendency to demean each other.

Apart from focusing on the principal characters in the novel, such as Nne-nne, Stella, and Stella’s mother, the sixth chapter extensively deals with the episodes of Oyoyo, Ahunze, highlighting the importance of women’s independence. This chapter also questions some of the accepted notions regarding the dishonour which prostitutes are associated with, and subverts them.

The Conclusion of my project attempts to answer the research questions which the thesis highlights, discussing the gap in addressing certain concerns in the field of postcolonialism, and in the study of African literature.

My modest attempt to deal with issues which demand critical attention—as discussed early in the Introduction—have led me to embark on this research project, and has opened up new questions for me to delve into. The West African writer, Echewa, directs one attention to concerns which claim a critical engagement with histories related to West Africa: and are not mere human documents inviting empathy. Looking into the moments of discordant encounters, my project raises pertinent questions and directs one’s attention to the absence of an equalized terrain where discordances can be located, to the still existing hierarchy in the world, to the existence of divergent narratives which fail to nurture co-existence.
Notes


2 See Note 1.

3 See Milbury-Steen.

4 See Chapter 3.

5 I do not attempt here to summarize the entire body of black African literary works. It is with the intention to establish an argument that a brief comment on African fiction is made.

6 Here, I refer to a lecture delivered by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, on July, 2009. See Adichie.


8 Fred Dallmyr is a political theorist specializing in modern and contemporary European thought with an additional interest in comparative or cross-cultural philosophy. He is an Emeritus Packey J. Dee Professor in the Departments of Philosophy and Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. He holds a Doctor of Law degree from the University of Munich (1955) and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Duke University (1960). He is a past President of the “Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy” (SACP). He is currently the Executive Co-Chair of “World Public Forum - Dialogue of Civilizations” (Vienna Moscow) and a member of the Scientific Committee of “RFSET-Dialogue on Civilizations” (Rome).

9 Hans Köchler is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He graduated at the University of Innsbruck with a doctor degree in philosophy (Dr. Phil.) with highest honours (1972). He is the President of the “International Progress Organization,” a non-governmental
organization in consultative status with the United Nations. Since the early 1970s he has been promoting the idea of inter-cultural dialogue which has become known under the slogan of “Dialogue of Civilizations.”

10 Ronald Niezen is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology in McGill University. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from University of Cambridge (1987). He is currently the Chair of the Department of Anthropology, McGill University, and Canada Research Chair in the Comparative Study of Indigenous Rights and Identity.
Works Cited


