TOWARDS A NEW HOME

In the foregoing pages I have attempted an in-depth analysis of two recurrent themes, namely, 'exile' and 'homecoming', which are discernible in the literary works of the significant colonial writers. I have maintained throughout the present study that the terms 'exile' and 'homecoming' basically denote psychological states and are the product of a certain socio-cultural situation. As far as the present study is concerned they are, from a literary point of view, imaginative constructs of a felt experience. It is obvious that the state which I have called 'exile' is more tangible and its expression in literature also is accordingly more palpable. It usually manifests itself in terms of irony, sarcasm - gentle or scathing and satire. These literary means suggest a restlessness in the soul of the writer - a certain dissatisfaction with the self and the world and a desire to dismantle everything without perhaps a very clear idea of what should replace it. The ease with which the sense of exile, and the loss of respect for the self enter the colonial psyche is easy to understand. The literary works in which this sense of loss is sought to be overcome, in which a vision of an alternative future for the individual and through him for the whole humanity is held out are, in comparison, fewer in number. They are formally marked by the way such literary devices as irony, sarcasm and satire are used in a considerably mellowed down form and
particularly by the use of traditional modes of expression, that is the use of legends, myths, folk tales, narrative and dramatic devices peculiar to folk cultures. The vision expressed in these works may well seem utopian but as I have tried to show in the discussions of the individual authors, it seems to have some very striking features in common with the alternative models of a viable wholesome future for mankind that have been formulated by thinkers all over the world.

It is this aspect of the literature of 'exile' and 'homecoming' that compels the students of these writers to reformulate the accepted notions of the nature and role of literature, of the creative writer and of the 'world of a literary work' and 'the world outside it'.

Since the turn of the present century there has been a very dominant school of critics who have insisted that a literary work is autotelic, requiring no reference to anything outside it for its comprehension and enjoyment. It is an autonomous entity and not a handmaid to either history or sociology or psychology. In retrospect it is possible to see this position itself as an outcome of certain cultural changes that took place in Europe and America and it is also possible to perceive an ideological stance which underlies this attitude to literary works. Judged by these norms a vast majority of the literary works produced in the ex-colonial countries would be dismissed as merely of sociological interest and their literary value would be minimal. Yet to take such a stance vis-a-vis this
literature would be very unfortunate. For one thing, the function of literary works in these ex-colonial countries is not perceived to be the same as in modern European culture (or for that matter, even in American culture). The dominant image of the artist/writer in the Western culture is that he is an alienated soul and a voice in the wilderness. The artist is one who has very often opted out of the society and does not share the values of the mainstream of the society. He is, in short, an outcast. It is interesting to note that when the writers in the ex-colonial countries write of their own sense of 'exile', the loss of identity or the loss of roots, they resemble this image and consequently their works are accorded special consideration by the Western critic. But the cultural situation in Africa or the Caribbeans is very different indeed. In these cultures the writer is expected to be a teacher and a visionary who can show the way to his people. This is very well expressed in one of Chinua Achebe's famous and influential addresses 'The Novelist as a Teacher', where he says:

Here then is 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. (1)

In 1978, in the Convocation Lecture given in the University of Ife, Achebe, while accepting that 'art cannot be a carbon copy of life; and thus, in that specific sense, cannot be true' still insists that 'we invent different
fictions to help us out of our peculiar problems we encounter in living'. Further on, he says 'The life of imagination is a vital element of our total nature. If we starve it or pollute it, the quality of our life is depressed or soiled'. And he ends his lecture with words that eloquently bring out his commitment to life:

The fiction which imaginative literature offers us... liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of an orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience.(2)

In the Nigerian National Merit Award Lecture given at Sokoto on 23 August, 1986, Achebe makes a spirited case for literature in the overall process of modernization in Nigeria:

But we must not see the role of literature 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.(3)

In the cultural context in which most African and Caribbean writers produce their work, we see that both literature and the author are invested with special roles. They are, therefore, more committed to their people and to a better future for them. They hold that literature is not meant for passive enjoyment or passive enlightenment. It must prepare the readers mentally 'by alluding to reality' through fictional constructs to be amenable for change in the right direction. Literature thus becomes a means in the hands of the 'wretched of the earth' of fighting not only
the oppressors but also the tendencies which produce the evils of oppression and exploitation. In doing so, the literary works serve a very significant humanitarian cause.

It is quite evident, therefore, that this literature should gradually show a departure from the accepted Eurocentric attitudes vis-a-vis aesthetic norms. In Decolonizing the Mind Ngugi describes how Devil on the Cross was received in Kenya:

It was read in families. A family would get together every evening and one of their literate members would read it for them... workers would also gather in groups, particularly during the lunch break, and they would get one of them to read the book. It was read in buses; it was read in taxis; it was read in public bars.(4)

He further says:

The process I’m describing is really the appropriation of the novel into the oral tradition. Citaani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross) was received in the age old tradition of story telling by fireside; and the tradition of group reception of art that enhances the aesthetic pleasure and provokes interpretation, comments and discussions.(5)

Other novelists also share Ngugi’s views though their formulations may differ. The novel and other narrative forms still retain considerable energy for both African and the Caribbean novelists. But here also a most significant development is that after ‘borrowing’ the novel form from the West, novelists like Ngugi, as the quotation above suggests, have ‘appropriated’ it to serve their ends. Therefore, in assessing the value and significance of the work, the sympathetic critic must first set aside such
notions as 'art for art's sake' for they are utterly irrelevant for the African and the Caribbean writers.

The success of such literature - that is, how effectively it performs the function which the Afro Caribbean writers ascribe to it - can be gauged by its impact on the intended readers or audience. Here again we witness an extraordinary phenomenon. Brathwaite's poems have been recorded by Argo company. The works of many other poets - living as well as dead - have been recorded, either by the poets themselves or by competent readers of verse. But whereas the works of other poets have been heard individually, in the privacy of the listeners' study-rooms, Brathwaite's poetry is heard collectively, like a recorded sermon. Indeed, there have been numerous public recitations of his poems which have drawn very huge crowds. This direct reaching out to the audience 'on a mass scale' would not have been possible unless the poetry touched a deeper chord in the hearts of the listeners. When Brathwaite presents a poetic account of the spade from his utterly degraded and humiliated condition to his turning towards a beatific vision of the future with confidence, his rhythms, cadences, tones, images and the archetypes subtly work on the collective psyche to release unsuspected and untapped psychic and spiritual resources. The success of the recitations of Brathwaite's poetry forcefully reminds us that poetry was originally a performing art and until three hundred years ago, the poet was heard rather than read. Brathwaite thus presents an admirable example of how a
committed writer with a 'homecoming' vision can instinctively and imaginatively reconstruct a New World from relics of the once vital tradition. At the thematic level Brathwaite establishes the connection between the past and the present, between 'the roots' and the search for a new dawn by his superb use of the image of the winds carrying the sands from the deserts in Africa to the Caribbean islands. We have already noted how Brathwaite squarely faces the 'history' of the 'spade' - the humiliated black slave, retracing all the steps clinically but never without compassion. We have also noted how the art form such as Jazz which the black man had evolved out of the shattered fragments of cultural decadence, was unerringly and sensitively picked up by Brathwaite and employed in his poem. It is worth noting here, that the idiom of Jazz is employed to bring about a further creative achievement and is not used merely in a jingoistic fashion to bolster the black man's ego. Indeed Brathwaite's strategy in employing the Jazz idiom and the rhythms of the art form eloquently testify to his homecoming vision, which creatively assimilates the past with the present. In the impact that the recitations produce on the black audience, we see Brathwaite restoring to the poet the role of 'vates', the seer once again. This I believe is a very significant development in the context of the new universal community of 'human beings', which the writers with the homecoming vision envisage in their works.
Ngugi wa Thiong'o's experience of working with the community on a collective project has been referred to in Chapter 4. Ngugi himself has recorded how his perception of his role and the significance of the act of writing for the oppressed brought about a profound change in him. This change can be mapped neatly from the moment he decided to drop 'James' from his name to his refusal to use English as the vehicle of self-expression and even further to his refusal to translate into English what he had written in Gikuyu for his people. Ngugi had 'dispossessed' himself of what the colonial master had bestowed on him through 'education'. Corresponding to his increasing involvement with the community, which ultimately led to his imprisonment and evolution of his convictions, there is a change in Ngugi's perception of the novel as an art-form. He gradually lets go the realistic mode and such devices as interior monologue or symbolism in Lawrencean manner and uses instead the narrative modes which spring from his native culture. The most significant shift in this respect is to be found in Ngugi's decision to stop presenting an action from the point of view of the characters involved in the action and to use a storyteller, for example, a Gicaandi player in Devil on the Cross. What such a 'teller' of the story says carries the weight of authority. The meaning and significance of the experiences that the novel deals with are firmly conveyed by the Gicaandi player - almost like a divine oracle for the community. It is interesting to note that while working with a group of 'artists' drawn from all
humble walks of life, Ngugi found that the community modified 'his' play according to the meaning the community wanted to invest it with. The novel, according to the accepted sociological version, is the product of the middle class in England in the early decades of the 18th century and its rise, according to this formulation coincides with the rise of 'privacy' as a typical middle class value. Novels are books to be read by an individual in privacy. But the public readings of Ngugi's novels clearly demonstrate that when a great writer with a vision 'appropriates' a form he makes many of the 'received' assumptions about it stand on their heads. In this we see Ngugi arriving at the same point vis-a-vis the community as Brathwaite, though via a different route. The message is quite clear. The homecoming vision when it unites the positive elements in the past with the positive elements in the present forges a new vision for humanity and infuses a new spirit of hope and confidence into the community.

In the case of Brathwaite and Ngugi we notice that there is a growing emphasis on the writer's role in healing the psyche of the degraded and the oppressed ones. Indeed, it is a common feature amongst a number of alternatives for the future that they begin with a new perception of 'community' in which the individual will find himself at home. In the new community man will derive a sense of his life being meaningful and the community will bring out his latent humanity in a co-operative endeavour with his fellow human beings.
Along with the emphasis on the role of the community another feature - particularly notable in the fiction of Ngugi and Achebe - is the growing importance given to the 'woman' as a creator. It is a characteristic feature of the homecoming vision that it envisages the future as emerging, metaphorically speaking, from the womb of the woman. The role of a Universal Mother is bestowed upon her. This is worth noting, for to me, it forms, along with the emphasis on the community, an important aspect of the aesthetics of this literature. In Ngugi's novels the picture of the woman as the worst sufferer clearly emerges. In novel after novel women are lured, cheated and left to fend for themselves. Whenever there is strife in the patriarchal structures women are the worst sufferers. This is an old tale. Bertolt Brecht, for example, brings out the plight of women afflicted by the disease of war in his Caucasian Chalk Circle and in his Mother Courage and her Children but what is striking in Ngugi is his perception and his imaginative rendering of the extraordinary resources women possess for compassion and understanding. We see again and again that for all the wrongs done to them, the women resiliently take the situation in their stride, bear the children they must bear and nurture them with care and love. Ngugi by making a repeated use of this pattern gives 'motherhood' and 'child' a symbolic force. The 'Child' is the hope of the future.

Even more astoundingly perceptive is Ngugi's realisation that under the patriarchal set-up, of which
colonialism is a particularly evil manifestation, the woman is the eternal 'have-not'. Ngugi may profess Marxism or modified Marxism but here he goes to the very root of the problem. He releases the categories 'haves' and 'have-nots' from their accepted economic domain and invests them with considerably greater and wider significance by bringing them into the domain of human cultures. In presenting the woman as the oppressed of the oppressed and the worst off, of the have-nots Ngugi goes beyond the usual class-based analysis of the human condition. In this transcendence of the Marxist vision Ngugi once again gives proof of his ability to assimilate what he has taken from the West and fuse it with the ancient wisdom of his race. This, as I have maintained, is the essence of his homecoming vision.

In Chinua Achebe's novels, too, there is a steady progression towards such a vision. After having given a 'historical' (that is, in terms of history of his people since the advent of the white man) account of his people in the first three of his novels, Achebe, like Ngugi, was greatly perturbed by the fact that all the promises held out before Nigeria became independent had proved illusory. Neo-colonialism only perpetuated the horror of the earlier regimes. After a long gap of twenty one years he wrote his novel, Anthills of the Savannah in 1987, in which we see Achebe, like Ngugi, turning from the individual action to the action at the level of the community and regarding the 'woman' or 'mother' as the hope for the future. From this point of view, the touching scene in Anthills of the
Savannah where, Beatrice deciding to adopt Elewa's child arranges to perform the name-giving ritual. Elewa's dirty and seedy looking old uncle presides. The girl has already been named 'Amaechina' – may the path never close. The whole scene reads like a dream for a better 'tomorrow'. The present reality is grim and Achebe does not offer a direct solution to the woes of humanity but his vision of peaceful, non-violent and unselfish life at the level of the community is closer to the Gandhian vision of homecoming.

From 'exile' to 'homecoming' is a long journey. Not all reach the cherished goal and some do not even wish to go away from the state of the exile. The literature of homecoming is produced by a writer who is at heart, a man with a vision of the future. Such a writer refuses to be trapped in the cocoon of the past. He undertakes a bold and daring journey into the deep recesses of their own psyche and brings to the surface the fragments of many pasts and many possible futures. The presence of a body of literature in which the homecoming vision is communicated in an authentically literary way is peculiarly assuring, for many of the themes that this literature deals with are connected not with just the black and the oppressed people. They affect many more groups of the oppressed and downtrodden such as the women (the largest oppressed class in the world), the tribals, the aborigines and so on. In their perceptive fictional analysis these writers put the finger precisely on the evil of power structures as they exist now.
and suggest a way out too. In this, these works possess an
element of universality and an element of greatness. In
their confident and buoyant return to the ‘community’ they
assure us that literature can still play a vital role in the
cultural life of man.

NOTES

1 Chinua Achebe, ‘Novelist as a Teacher’, 1965 in African

2 Chinua Achebe, ‘The Truth of Fiction’ in Hopes and

3 Ibid; p.115.


5 Ibid; p.83.