AFRICA IN CONRAD AND ACHEBE

Africa has been both an object of derision and curiosity in the European mind. It has both created repulsion and desire in them. In either way it wielded immense power over the white man’s imagination. Hence from the fifteenth century to the present, Europe has found Africa both alluring and loathsome a terrain. Out of this ambiguity there has developed a stereotype which is still very powerful. It is most familiar as a form of landscape as in this description of a journey into Africa in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, and sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine... you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off ever from everything you had known once –
somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps.

There were moments when one’s past came back to one,
as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare
to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and
noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the
overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and
water, and silence. (81)

This is Conrad’s Africa with its impregnable forests, throbbing
drums, and primitive customs. It is the Africa of sudden sunsets,
vultures, and black water fever. So alien that it can only be described in
paradox, it is a desert in which vegetation ‘riots’, a gloom on which the
brilliant sun burns down. Conrad describes an Africa where rational
human beings would burst into confusion and get lost by the depths of
its obscurity and wilderness. The physical nature described here is
incomprehensible and maddening which instills a kind of numbness in
the minds of its explorers. This is an Africa without a meaning,
coherence and order. It is in fact the ‘heart of darkness’ – the purpose of
such a description in the novel is to provide an appropriate environment
as a setting for portraying the various kinds of conflicts which the
European characters undergo in the process of colonial exploration. The	natives in the novel are portrayed as irrational and terrible beings doing
horrible things according to the author. The Africa seen here is one without any trace of ‘humanity’ let alone ‘culture’.

Most significantly, this is a landscape without people, an Africa without Africans. There were slaves who were very much docile and certainly the natives who beat the drum and dance in a frenzy manner. Conrad is utilizing the dominant stereotypes about Africa to its fullest extent. In a way he is dehumanizing the Africans by the extensive use of such stereotypes. As the narrative in the novel goes on one can meet such ‘beings’ and these appear a few miles further up the Congo in Conrad’s novel:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell.

. . . We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. (83)
For Conrad who is exploiting the stereotype to its fullest extent, these are not people; they are a conglomeration of limbs, bodies, and eyes, as meaningless as the forest, the river, the silence. As Marlow begins to realize: ‘Well you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of them being inhuman’ (63). He is denying the African natives ‘humanity’ so that he can project Africa as a landscape without people and thereby describe it as a place without human beings which makes easier the legitimization of the colonial encroachment.

Thus we have a clear picture about the European concept about the African continent. This kind of a stereotyping may sometimes seem harsh. Rather than an attempt at describing reality, such stereotypes give shape to European experiences about the African continent or rather European ignorance about the cultures that existed in Africa. This particular stereotype has, however, a very long history and considerable influence. The kind of symbols used by Conrad to describe African landscape and its people reflects a need in the European mind to structure their experience of a land which is alien to them in terms of culture and topography. One has to acknowledge that symbolism and mythology are culture specific and are highly relative entities. It becomes clearer when one learns that if the colour attributed to devil in Europe is black, in Africa it is white.
The idea that Africans lead a beastly kind of life, without the nobility of reason, wit and are essentially wild had been very deep rooted in the western psyche. This literary image is simply one of the many which gather around the idea of the Dark Continent. Also it forms the background against which Africans themselves are writing. There are some reasons behind these harsh stereotypes that existed about Africa in the European mind. The first of it has been the fact that Europe’s tryst with Africa has been one of slight and short duration. The second reason being that, even if, the coastline has been known; the interior of Africa remained closed for European intervention upto the close of nineteenth century. The colonial domination of the continent has been for the most part for a brief transitional period. There was no great desire to penetrate into the interior. Traders were in a way satisfied with their establishments built on the edge of the vast continent because from these depots they could gather the gold, the ivory and above all the slaves brought by their African middlemen. To the north was the Sahara which separated the civilizations of Europe and Africa for centuries. It was upon the foundation of this deep ignorance that ambiguities and contradictions thrived. By all means the African was denied an identity which is based on rationality and civility. The African was always placed lower than the White races in the ladder of human progress.
On the one hand, the degradations to which millions of African’s were subjected, especially during the fearful transportation from West Africa to the New World, were justified by the theory of ‘natural inferiority’ that the racists propagated. Another group of colonisers, on the other hand played down the differences between Europeans and Africans, stated the case for the Negro as a ‘fellow creature’. He may be ‘fallen’, but he was therefore in greater need of help. The slave trade had certain indisputable and devastating effects upon African communities. The widespread acts of slave-raiding fostered by the demands of Europe and America created mistrust and warfare among the tribes over wide areas. These conflicts were exacerbated by the introduction of firearms which were widely exchanged for slaves and which disrupted traditional tribal power structures. The slave trade, finally, perpetuated the isolation of the African interior well into the nineteenth century. The European merchants were anxious to keep Africa closed to honest trade and European influence in order to prevent any interference with their supply of black cargoes, while the African middlemen, their agents, were aggressively jealous of any intrusion into their lucrative markets.

The overall effect of this devastation and isolation was inevitably to strengthen the stereotype of the continent of Africa and its ‘depraved’ native. Even when the exploration of the interior began, the myths of
African inferiority were so deeply rooted and hence almost unshakable. If any traces of past civilizations were found, it was readily argued that they could not be African. This was combined with the common form of culture shock in which the intruder projects upon the alien society his own fears and insecurity and then condemns it. Each failure of the alien culture to respond to recognized European values is further evidence of its inferiority.

Another factor which kept the European back from exploring interior Africa was the fear of Malaria. The combating of the carrier of this disease, the anopheles mosquito, is a saga in itself. The mosquito joined forces with the slave traders in keeping Africa almost unexplored for the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century. Adding to the image of the Dark Continent, Africa was also made to be called ‘the White Man’s Grave’. One of the unexpected effects of this in the twentieth century has been to speed up political independence for those African countries whose high mortality rates discouraged the settlement of privileged white minorities.

The close of the nineteenth century saw the confirmation of the imposition of alien rule upon Africa. That was the period when the European powers divided Africa between them for the purposes of their own political advancement. They needed markets and raw materials for
their expanding economies, but above all they needed ‘spheres of influence’, stretches of African territories which could be used in Europe as bargaining objects of power. The Europeans in the colony rewrote what they found there in terms of the paradigms they had brought from the metropolitan country where most of the important decisions about the colony were being made. The colonised viewed the local situation in terms of their traditional African cultural perspectives into which they seek to translate the mysterious ways of the European intruders. This is how the colonial condition got institutionalized in Africa by the Europeans. The meeting of two cultures and the power structures in this way gave rise to a confusing spectrum of problems and misunderstandings. The African as he comes out from the order of the tribal life which is being destroyed needs someone powerful to depend upon; he finds such a person in the European who is wealthy, powerful and has got immunity from all kinds of traditional magic of the locality. This dependency corresponds exactly to the psychological need of the colonial European. Since coming from a highly competitive society, the European is determined to win respect at any cost. The subservience of a dependent is the easiest way of satisfying that need. The problems arise when either this dependency or subservience collapse.
Faced with these confusing dependents in a strange environment the European could adopt one of the two opposite attitudes. This actually corresponds to different forms of colonial policy. He could insist that all men were equally civilized and that, despite extraneous misunderstandings it was still obscure why Africans should not be fully assimilated into the European culture which he represented. The danger here is that genuine differences of culture are either ignored as irrational or are scornfully corrected. When this fails the colonial power imposes stricter parameters for accessing the metropolitan culture. Another strategy is to assume that the two cultures involved in the colonial situation are mutually unintelligible. The first strategy satisfies the psychological queries of the rational mind, while the second facilitates the projection of one’s obscure unconscious self upon the subject people. This second view gave support to the idea that Africans should be allowed, up to a certain point, to rule themselves; then the ‘native administration’ headed by the chief would be linked up to the colonial superstructure. This was the system of indirect rule associated with the name of Lord Lugard and expounded by him in *The Dual Mandate of 1922*. The dangers of this policy were less obvious than the dangers of incorporation. Administrators tended to prefer authoritarian and hierarchical African societies because these could be fitted more neatly
into the colonial structure. When kings and chiefs could not be found they had to be invented, often with disastrous results. In Nigeria this policy meant that the British supported and admired the status quo in the feudal and Moslem North while despising the increasingly westernized Christian South. Often the colonial power found itself backing feudal emirs in opposition to the wishes of the subjects. Despite Lugard’s warning, Indirect Rule sought to create and sustain tribal culture in the midst of a rapidly changing situation in the continent. In this way European superstructure of power would always be in general control. Only when ideas of national self-assertion began to gain support was it realized that feudal fiefdoms could not be assimilated easily into a modern state.

The disorder and confusion caused by the imposition of foreign rule was the space for the missionaries to work in. They were the most effective intermediaries between the two cultures and, as traditional values were destroyed, they supplied answers to the new questions that were being asked. These answers in turn sabotaged the indigenous cultures even further by attacking and disparaging the tribal deities who fulfilled significant roles in society. Also there was little understanding of tribal religions and a tendency where things which are incomprehensible are branded as meaningless. The missionaries, like the
administrators, had an occupational need to consolidate the image of the savage Africa. The attempts to reform barbaric rituals and to convert them into noble ways were held to be praiseworthy by these missionaries. The educational system instituted by the missionaries consolidated their power. Those who were converted thus parted ways with traditional African ways of life. Such converts were given vital roles in the new form of society which the missionaries created out of old ones. The colonisers realized that Africans were to be educated in European skills so that colonial rule might be perpetuated. Thus we get a picture of the vulnerable Africa which the European tries to control, colonise and subjugate.

In order to get an inside view of this continent, an Africa described by an African, not as a scenario for an exploration of the black side of the European mind but as a place where people live noble lives demands a quote from Achebe’s *Arrow of God*:

When Obika’s bride arrived with her people and he looked upon her again it surprised him greatly that he had been able to let her go untouched during her last visit. He knew that few other young men of his age have shown the same restraint which ancient custom demanded. But what was right was right. Obika began to admire this new image of
himself as an upholder of custom- like the lizard who fell down from the high iroko tree he felt entitled to praise himself if nobody else did. The bride was accompanied by her mother, who was just coming out an illness, many girls of her own age and her mother’s woman friends. Most of the women carried small head loads of the bride’s dowry to which they all had contributed –cooking pots, wooden bowls, brooms, mortar, pestle, baskets, mats, ladles, pots of palm oil, baskets of cocoyam, smoked fish, fermented cassava, locust beans, heads of salt and pepper. There were also two lengths of cloth, two plates and iron pot. These last were products of the white man and had been bought at the new trading store at Okperi. (22)

Here one can see the exotic figures missing from the African landscape and following a way of life which does not need questioning or justifying. The irrationality of the frenzied lot is replaced by a calm and ennobling dialectic between the individual and the ancient customs of a cultured society. In this passage one can have a fine matter-of-fact prose which records a fine sequence of events in an African social group. The appearances of novels like this in the twentieth century, written by Africans and set in Africa, were not an isolated phenomenon.
The liberation of Africa from the literary stereotype is indistinguishable from the much larger movement towards African independence which extends beyond politics to all aspects of culture and society. The most exciting aspect of it has been the rediscovery of Africa’s past, the breakthrough in historical studies which is gradually creating order out of the confused remnants the great African empires.

Since the colonial situation strongly influenced the upbringing and education of most of the novelists, it also became the subject for their fiction also. Same is true in the case of Achebe as can be seen in the vivid account of his life as it appears in his essay, ‘Named for Victoria, Queen of England’. Achebe’s father had joined the church as a young man and become a church teacher, while his maternal grandfather was the titled dignitary who first allowed the Christians to operate from his compound until their singing became too melancholic.

Instead of the melodramatic versions of ‘spiritual void and mental stresses’ that the educated Africans are expected to suffer from, Achebe acknowledges that he lived at a time of where the modern and the traditional vie with each other in a way which gave a peculiar quality and atmosphere to life. On one side he was a devout Christian and on the other side his close relatives were leading a ‘pagan’ life. But at the age of ten Achebe could participate in both worlds without being torn by
spiritual agonies. He was fascinated by the traditional rituals of Igbo life, but that too in a detached and perceptive way. His education in the 1940s underscored the European values, customs and achievements. The African way of life was deemed inferior so that an English kind of dance would be preferred to traditional Ibo dancing at an important ceremony. The change came with the nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War which tried to reconnect Africans with their own value systems and heritage. Achebe saw his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, both as an act of a revisit to his past and as an assertion that Africa’s story could be told by Africans themselves. Achebe’s novels deal with a certain group of people in a certain part of Africa from pre-colonial days to the present.

Nigeria, the country where Achebe’s stories are located, is one of the largest and most populous nations of West Africa, and stretches from the forests and swamps of the coast in the south to the edge of the Sahara in the north. At the time of independence in 1960 the country was a loose federation of three strong regional governments. Though none was completely homogenous, each of the regions was the centre of one of the major tribal groups – Hausa in the north, Yoruba in the west, and Igbo in the east. The territory of the Igbo in south-eastern Nigeria stretches from the low-lying swampland of the Niger Delta through the
tableland of the centre of the region to the northern hill country of
Onitsha. Although the region is divided into two unequal parts by the
river Niger, it has retained a certain cultural uniformity. The Igbo are a
single group of people speaking a number of related dialects with many
social features in common.

The most important fact about the Ibos, as described by G.T
Basden in his ethnographic account Among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria
and also his Niger Ibos, is that until very recent times they have lacked
any well defined tribal consciousness. There has been no such thing as a
large Ibo ‘tribe’ with centralized institutions and powerful chiefs. Power
has traditionally been divided among numerous small groups, and the
tendency is invariably toward the dispersal of authority rather than its
concentration in the hands of a few people. This is reflected in the social
structure which consists of countless small local communities. The basic
social unit is a small patrilinial group which usually occupies a single
hamlet made of several homesteads or compounds. Each compound
consists of the houses of a man, his wives, and some of his sons; it is
surrounded by a mud wall which separates it from its neighbours. Inside,
each wife has her own room where she lives with her small children and
unmarried daughters, and her store room and kitchen where she prepares
the staple yams and cassava and other food. Each family is under the
moral authority of a senior member of the patrilinial community, the okpara, whose staff of office symbolizes the authority of the ancestors with which he is invested. A number of families occupying a group of hamlets make up a village which is autonomous in most matters. In a typical settlement of its kind the hamlets are scattered along the paths which radiate from the central meeting place of the village where the shrines of local deities are located, the government of the village carried out, and the markets held. Several of these villages make up what is the highest political unit among Igbo, the village group. Such a cluster of villages would share a meeting place and be linked by common shrines and common myths of descent. There is no one who can be described with any confidence as a chief in the village or group of villages; nor is there one hierarchy of power rising like a pyramid from a democratic base to a central office. The dispersal of power among small units means that the whole bodies of villagers are able to participate in the running of their society at the public meetings, where all adult males in the community have the right to express their views. Within the village itself power is dispersed among various groups, and social equilibrium is maintained in a unique manner, which is essentially a pluralistic rather than a unitary a system.
In the absence of strong rulers, as pointed by V. Uchendu in his sociological account *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, it is rules which regulate this social order. These are not rigid and codified but in a continual process of change and examination. A law only establishes itself gradually by village consensus, or equally it may be slowly eroded by evasion and disuse. The growth and decay of the rules, the reciprocal obligations of Igbo society, are determined by ubiquitous discussion carried on at all levels. For it should be stressed that behind the continual balancing of claims and the readjusting of social equilibrium there is an assumption of human interdependence. Relationships within society are accepted so long as they fit into the network of reciprocity which is the texture of Igbo society. The importance of such mutually beneficial relations and the corollary that no individual is self-sufficient are constant themes in Igbo folklore.

This is a very flexible and non-authoritarian system fostered by the emphasis on the individualistic temperament. This open form of society is also very susceptible to outside influence, and is always ready to examine new ideas. Also it must be said that this society is adaptable in the extreme if it finds these outside ideas acceptable. But it should be added that there are in this system certain unifying strands quietly at work linking the politically independent villages. The most pervasive of
this is the marriage system which dictates that women must marry into a
different village from the one in which they are born. Exogamy in this
way creates a system of affiliations and communications larger than that
of the autonomous village. A second unifying factor is provided by the
system of titles which bequeaths social status in the competitive,
egalitarian Igbo society. These titles are not badges of rank and authority
conferred by a chief or ruler as in other parts of Nigeria; they are
acquired in a certain order of prestige by the payment of initiation fees
which are then shared among existing members. Title societies play a
dominant role in the affairs of the community, lay down rules of conduct
for their members, and above all create a source of unity by accepting
the title from other villages. A third means of integration is found in the
oracles and shrines where appeals to the gods can be made and disputes
settled. The renown of these oracles stretches across many communities,
and the especially famous ones at, say, Awka and Arochukwu are
known throughout Igbo territory.

As R.M. Wren observes, Igbo religion transcends local boundaries
(78). The Igbo believe in a supreme God, Chukwu, who lives in the sky
from where he controls fertility and creation. He is a withdrawn god,
without shrines or priests, who watches over his creatures from a
distance and never receives a direct sacrifice. He is, however, the final
receiver of all sacrifices made to the minor deities who are his intermediaries. Although these lesser gods characteristically do not form any kind of hierarchy, Ala, the earth goddess, is usually considered the most powerful; she is the queen of the underworld and ‘owner’ of men both dead and alive. Closely associated with the cult of the ancestors, she is also responsible for Igbo morality and her priests provide a powerful integrating force in society by guarding her laws and punishing the offenders. In addition to Ala there is a great variety of minor deities, spirits of the sun, water, wealth, farms, and many others. The ancestors are under the control of Ala and, represented on earth by masked men of the Mmo society, they act as her agents in the control of morality. The dead are a part of the Igbo social world; they continue the lineage system invisibly in the spirit world and are treated as if they are still alive.

The third category of belief is the cult of the personal god or \( \text{chi} \), and each person is believed to be granted by Chukwu at the moment of conception a \( \text{chi} \), a soul or spiritual double to which his fortune and abilities are ascribed. The \( \text{chi} \) fulfils the destiny which the Creator has determined and at the moment of reincarnation bargains with him on behalf of the individual for improved status in the next life. One can see here in the spirit world the Igbo desire for status and success. The
individual is controlled by his *chi*, but since his role in society has been bargained for he is encouraged to make success of it.

As if to emphasize its importance, Achebe has himself written an essay on “Chi in Igbo Cosmology” in which he defines the idea and its centrality. For him it points to the notion of duality in Igbo thought. A man lives here and his counterpart, his *chi*, lives in the realm of spirits and must be taken into account. But the *chi* is not given complete power for that would be abhorrent to the Igbo imagination; and so – with the well-known saying, ‘If a man agrees his *chi* agrees’ – some of the initiative is handed back to man. It is to this idea also that he traces the strong egalitarianism among the Igbo, deriving as it does from everyman’s feeling of his original and absolute uniqueness. He is a unique creation, the product of his *chi* who is a unique creator. But again Achebe modifies his statement by saying that in Igbo thinking nothing is totally anything and so the individual cannot be allowed an absolutism which is denied even to his *chi*. Man’s uniqueness and independence is curtailed, in fact, by the will of his community, an idea which is expressed in his novel *Arrow of God* that no man however great can win judgment against all the people. For every force which seeks to disturb the achieved equilibrium there is a countervailing force by which a compromise or bargain can be arranged. And invariably there are a
variety of ways in which the human, spiritual, and material forces can be manipulated to this end.

This careful balancing of claims is not always easy and Achebe explores its implications in all the major novels. He is particularly interested in situations and epochs when the balance is threatened. This is why the town of Onitsha on the Niger near his birthplace has a special significance for him, as he shows in his essay, “Onitsha, Gift of the Niger”. Sitting at the crossroads of the world and famous throughout Africa for its huge market, Onitsha has seen everything, and the thing it mistrusts most is single-mindedness. It was both a cradle of Christianity in the Igbo land and a fortress of paganism. Onitsha attracts the exceptional, the exotic and the bizarre. It is a place of instability where people become their opposite, like the zealous Christian convert who was sent for training to England only to return as a fierce opponent of the missionaries who had supported him. It is a dangerous but exciting place where the oppositions and contraries of life are dramatized in a startling way as Achebe shows in several of his fictions. Onitsha seems to epitomise sharply for Achebe the basic features of life which traditional Igbo society acknowledged and sought to accommodate within its own structures and *mores*.
This was the society with which the Europeans made sustained contact in the nineteenth century. There had been earlier penetration by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and, during the eighteenth century, tens of thousands of Igbo slaves were collected on the coast at Bonny for transportation to the New World. But the first Christian missions were not established in Igbo country until the middle of the nineteenth century, and the British did not intervene politically until the end of the century. The Oil Rivers Protectorate was established in the area of the Niger Delta in 1885, while in 1900 protectorates were declared over Northern and Southern Nigeria. It was only then that the way of life of the Europeans began to influence the country, and several years before effective government was working in the south-east; the last independent areas were not absorbed until 1914. In that year the whole country was brought under one administration and began its history as Nigeria under the rule of Lord Lugard.

As can be imagined, the British colonial administration at the beginning of this century was baffled when it failed to find in this decentralised, segmented Igbo society the powerful chiefs it needed to exercise authority. A system of direct rule was consequently imposed in 1900 by dividing the territory into areas to be controlled by ‘native courts’ presided over by British district commissioners with certain
chosen Igbo members – warrant chief, court clerk and court messengers.
In 1918 direct rule became indirect when the District Commissioner was
removed from the native courts and the warrant chiefs given more
power; but the abuse of power by the native officials which followed led
to further reorganisation in 1930. The native courts were modified to
conform to existing institutions; their zones corresponded more nearly to
social groupings, and authority was given to communities rather than
individuals. There were problems and changes during the following
years, but still there was greater flexibility and adaptability to local
conditions. This system of local government which survived with minor
changes up to Independence in 1960 fostered political integration
without usurping the authority of the traditional village group.

There is a final and most shattering episode in the recent history
of the Igbo people. The Nigerian Civil War which was fought in Igbo
territory for over two and a half years profoundly affected the lives of
the people about whom Achebe wrote. It began as unrest in the Western
region of Nigeria following the regional elections in October 1965 when
an Igbo dominated group of officers sought to stamp out the growing
political corruption by assuming control of the country. They staged a
successful coup in January 1966, in which the federal prime minister
and two regional premiers were killed, and shifted the power over to
General Ironsi. Ironsi abrogated the Federal Constitution, established a military government and, having appointed military governors in each of the four provinces, began his attempt to achieve national unity by removing the last vestiges of intense regionalism. In May 1966 he announced the abolition of the former Regions and replaced them by four groups of provinces. There were immediate protests from the emirs and demonstrations against the central government in the Northern Region. At some point in these confused events, the drive to abolish political corruption being into intense tribal conflict; the demands for succession turned into clashes between Northerners and Igbo, who in the face of violent persecution, began to return to their homeland in the east. Eventually, in July 1966, mutinous units of the Nigerian army made up of dissident Northerners captured Ironsi at Ibadan to prevent any further moves toward a strong unitary government and replaced him by Lt.Col.Gown, the army chief of staff, who formally restored the federal system of government in August.

Between this account of the Igbo society and the stereotype of the Dark Continent sketched earlier, there is great a disparity. The stereotype about Africa is a cluster of images and myths which has been imposed upon Africa by Europe usually from a distance and invariably in profound ignorance. The historians and anthropologists have in recent
years questioned and undermined the stereotype which for so long has provided simple answers to complex questions. The African writers like Chinua Achebe rebelled against the forces of literary colonialism and won through their novels the desired recognition they deserved. The status of a novel like *Things Fall Apart* in the world of literature bears testimony to this fact. But the thing which confuses this picture of success is the fact that the West African novelists are invariably writing in English or French, the language of the colonialist. One confronts here the paradox of a people describing and identifying themselves by means of a foreign language which embodies the values and categories from which they are seeking to free themselves.

It is possible to suspect this of being the most sinister of all colonial plots. Jean-Paul Sartre sees it in this way in his essay, “Black Orpheus” and recommends to African writers an equally sinister reprisal –take over the alien language and do violence to it. This may sound melodramatic and self-defeating; there are several more obvious reasons why these African writers use and need French and English. The chief of these is that all formal education has been conducted in these languages for decades and they provide a reading public larger than any of the vernacular languages. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for the African writer in English, and there is the problem of literary
convention, that is the question whether an African who writes a novel in English about Africa will adopt the conventions of the English novel. These conventions have developed from the eighteenth century in response to certain ideas and presuppositions about the nature of society and the individual in England and Europe. Imported into the African novel and applied to very different societies and contexts, they can appear strange and eccentric. But African writers cannot escape this dilemma, for they are expressing their vision of reality in a foreign language, through alien conventions. So novelists like Achebe often find themselves describing situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life. It is interesting to note that Europe and Africa comes face to face not only when Marlow sails up the river Congo but also in the very form of the African novel.

It is to be noted that the African writer is working within a society to which he has a responsibility. In this he is continuing the long tradition of the African dancer or sculptor whose role is essentially communal, functional and utilitarian. To illustrate this Achebe in his essay “Africa and her Writers” describes the mbari ceremony among the Igbos when a festival of images is created by a whole community in honour of Ala, the earth goddess. The lesson he draws from this is that art is not the exclusive concern of particular castes or individuals; art
belongs to all and is an essential part of communal activity. Achebe attacks, often bitterly, views which are opposed to this African aesthetic. He finds the idea of art for art’s sake repellent and the concept of the alienated artist almost a contradiction in terms. And he is worried that African writers will be influenced by these models which spring from European societies where over many generations a real differentiation occurred between aristocratic culture and the common culture. On the same grounds he attacks critical concepts which seek to divorce the writer from his community and the reality he knows best.

In essays and interviews Achebe has been forthright in describing his own particular task as he sees it. While his basic position has remained consistent there has inevitably occurred a change of emphasis from the days of colonialism through independence to the period of political disillusionment and civil war. Achebe saw his task as essentially that of restoring dignity to his own people. He acknowledged in a lecture titled “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” in 1964 that a writer should be involved with contemporary issues in addition to writing about the past as he does in his fiction. Achebe advocates a proper sense of history for rejuvenating his people’s pride in them. By leading his own people back into their past the writer can show them that their society has had a philosophy and, above all, dignity. In this
way the writer can heal their psychic wound and thus prepare them for future.

It is clear that the future looked far less promising for Achebe by the time he came to write *A Man of the People*, a novel described to as a rather serious indictment of post-independent Africa. It is to be noted that, within six years of independance, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. In an essay titled “The Black Writers Burden”, published in the year 1966, Achebe seems to accept that the African novelist should address himself to current problems which are complicated by two factors. First the fact that he is more pessimistic about the deep seated harms inflicted on Africa in its encounter with Europe. The writers’ educative function is less easy in a world progressively re-created by white men in their own image and for Achebe this did not end with political independence. Secondly in the period of political corruption and disillusionment it is increasingly difficult for the writer to identify himself completely with his own society. Then his task must be to criticise and expose injustice wherever he finds it. When the civil war started, Achebe as an Igbo nationalist became a roving ambassador for the Republic of Biafra, acting as a political spokesman. In an interview he gave at the University of Texas in 1969 he assessed the writer’s role, seeking to place in perspective the
changes that have occurred in his views. He maintains that the
rediscovery of Africa’s past was necessary (22), but it went on too long.
While the African intellectuals were obsessed with past culture and its
display the people were creating new cultures which were essentially
revolutionary as a result of their difficult situations. The artists and
intellectuals have been left behind in their cultural museum and must
now catch up with the people who make culture. Achebe is of the
opinion that the true regenerative powers of the people are manifest in
what he calls ‘the African revolution’ in his essays mentioned here, a
revolution that strives for true independence that leads to the creation of
modern nations in place of the colonial formations, a revolution that is
powered by African ideologies. Before independence, Achebe thought
this was not necessary and hence he was with professional politicians.
But after independence, Achebe realised that he and the professional
politicians were taking different directions because they were not
fulfilling what they had actually agreed to. So Achebe became a critic of
them by joining sides with the people. The interesting thing is that the
leaders that he now fights against are black people. The culmination of
this movement resulted in civil war. Achebe feels that the writer should
also help determine the future of his society. He has moved, from the
status of historian to critic, and finally to a social reformer.
Achebe’s reputation rests upon works which he saw as part of a revolution; but this was actually a cultural revolution whose purpose was to rediscover the African past through the undermining of colonial stereotypes. Against the dogmatic assertiveness of the Europeans Achebe placed with great skill the complex, balanced, and tolerant Igbo communities in his novels. If Africa is not to be seen as the negation of Europe then it must offer genuine alternatives to European values and assumptions. In the essay “The Igbo World and Its Art” published in 1984, the *mbari* houses of the Igbo culture are utilized to challenge certain European aesthetic assumptions: art as product, art as private, art as collectable, and art as preferably antique. In contrast, he points to the fact that these houses with all their art objects, after their painstaking and ritualistic creation, are allowed to suffer purposeful neglect in conformity with the Igbo belief that no condition is permanent. In addition, the central importance of the masquerade is seen to underline the kinetic quality of Igbo culture, with the *abia* dance seeking to transform even the final immobility of death into an active rite of passage.

Another European assumption challenged in a more sophisticated form is the Western view of individual autonomy. In an essay titled “The Writer and His Community” published in 1984, Achebe finds the
origin of this in the Cartesian *cogito* which underwrites the view of society and of culture as a prison-house from which the individual must escape in order to find space and fulfilment. But fulfilment, he believes, is not the absence of control but a presence and an aspiration by the self. Certain tenets of Igbo belief are a useful corrective to the view that the individual and society must be defined in oppositional terms. The uniqueness expressed through the personal god, *chi*, is balanced if not cancelled, by the rights of the clan and by the moral taboo on excess which sets a limit to personal ambition. One can see here how Achebe’s own culture provides him with a subtly probing instrument which not only dismantles many European values but also provides a living and tested alternative.

This analysis of the dichotomous representation of Africa in Conrad and Achebe reinforces the idea that reality, after all, is a construct made possible by the discourses validating it. The fictional account of Africa by Conrad and Achebe could be placed in two opposite poles, one feeding on the dominant colonial stereotypes of the continent and the other trying to liberate it from the colonial vituperations to which it was a victim for a long time. This was necessitated by the political need of the coloniser to conquer and the colonized to get liberated. The way Achebe uplifts and repairs the image
of Africa is really commendable. He does this by showing that Africa is heir to a rich cultural heritage as detailed by him in his novels, especially *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe could reasonably uplift the pride of Africans [the colonized] in them which had been tarnished by the colonial perpetrators. This kind of a boost in the morale of the oppressed or colonized is the true object of any postcolonial endeavor.