CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The present study is entitled “Politics of Cultural Identity: A Study of the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Rudy Wiebe”. In this study the investigator has taken up two contemporary postcolonial writers, Chinua Achebe from Nigeria and Rudy Henry Wiebe from Canada, for analysis. Renarrating ones identity has become the essential prerogative whose ingenuity pertaining to its culture has been jeopardized by the colonizer. Needless to argue, the identity of the ethnic communities of Nigeria and Canada are firmly rooted ones. However, both the nations have borne the brunt of the colonial onslaught. The two writers selected for the present study have evinced great interest in reconstructing their respective national identities out of the respective deconstructed ones. It is in this context that the researcher has evinced an interest in investigating the novels of Achebe and Wiebe.

Achebe belongs to the invaded colony and Wiebe belongs to the invader/settler colony. An attempt to draw fruitful comparisons between the literatures of an invaded and a settler colony is often a difficult task,
for the differences at first seem far greater than the similarities. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* point out some of the differences in their book. First and foremost, the literatures in these colonies exhibit wide thematic variations. Themes of dispossession, cultural fragmentation, colonial and neocolonial domination, post-colonial corruption and the crisis of identity dominate the invaded literature, whereas the settler themes are of migration, exile, finding and defining 'home', and physical and emotional confrontations with the 'new' land and its ancient and established meanings. Second, the invaded writer and a settler writer have different tasks. The invaded writers' task is to retrieve or reconstruct their culture for which the material was already available in the form of folk tradition, but the settler writer has to 'create' the indigenous, to connect themselves in relation to the new land. The invaded writer imports an alien language to fit his own social and cultural inheritance, while the settler writer brings his own language to an alien environment and a fresh set of experience. With such basic differences, the benefit of a comparison of Nigerian and Canadian writers may not be altogether obvious. However, a deeper observation reveals that the same would help to understand and focus on the distinctive qualities of each national or
regional literature towards a redefining or constructing a national or cultural identity on the same grounds.

In spite of the varied dissimilarities in the literatures of the invaded/settler discourse, the writings of Achebe and Wiebe display certain commonalities. Achebe belongs to a subculture of Nigeria and Wiebe, being a Mennonite, like Achebe belongs to a marginalized subculture. Achebe writes about his indigenous Igbo culture of Nigeria, while Wiebe appropriates the indigenous cultures of Canada. For both the writers English is a non-indigenous language – Wiebe’s language is High German while that of Achebe is Igbo.

Achebe and Wiebe are contemporaries. Achebe writes on the indigenous Igbo culture and Wiebe strives to relate the native culture through intense research work and personal contacts with the First Peoples. Both the writers have been shaped by strong religious perceptions. Their writings exhibit the social, cultural and political history of the indigenous cultures of their respective nations. Both are equally committed artists in the sense that their writings involve “the conscious choice to express a specific point of view and to place enough tactical pressure to persuade the reader to re-examine social realities” (Pandurang 6). Achebe and Wiebe show immense interest in their nations’ socio-political scenario and have associated themselves with the
Broadcasting Corporation of their respective countries which intended to promote culture and national unity. They both happen to choose University teaching as their profession. Both Achebe and Wiebe have been honoured with their nations’ highest awards and several other honours for their commitment towards literature. Though these are certain coincidental similarities, the works of these two writers certainly evoke diametrically opposite experiences and impressions relating to their position within their nations’ socio-political frame.

Achebe’s post-colonial novels reflect the highly politicized environment in Nigeria. His five novels Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at Ease (1960), Arrow of God (1964), A Man of the People (1966) and Anthills of the Savannah (1987) recapture the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods that marked the changes in the history of Nigeria.

Things Fall Apart is a fictional account of the clash between the new influences of the British and the traditional life of the Igbo, and an exhaustive work on the pre-colonial culture of the Igbos. Arrow of God is yet another work which elaborates on the ethnic tradition of the Igbos and it displays “all the key elements of ethnic fiction” (King 5). Both the novels narrate the rich tribal cultures which were once existent in Nigeria. By way of narration, the novels also trace the anthropological details of
the Igbo people in Umuofia and the villages of Umuaro. Arrow of God also captures the cultural tensions and conflicts within the society of Umuaro and the subsequent assimilation process with the colonial world. In No Longer at Ease, the scene presented by Achebe is a culturally uprooted Nigeria. He mocks at the cultural disintegration that happens under the guise of modernization and civilization. The novel ends as “the strong smell of rotting flesh produces a feeling of disgust” in the readers; and it “becomes a symbolic hint at the satirical exposure of corruption that is to follow” (Jha 28) in Nigeria. A Man of the People analyses Nigeria’s post-independent political instability. The novel ends with a military coup in Nigeria that seems to offer a temporary solution for the society in which “traditional and imported constitutional methods are both ineffective” (Killam 7). Anthills of the Savannah reveals Achebe’s strong doubt regarding Nigeria’s current political affairs because every new political set up turns out to be barren. All of these novels condense the Igbo pre-colonial cultural history and its period of transition under colonialism and its post-independence illusions.

Among Wiebe’s eight novels, taken for the study, the first three novels, Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962), First and Vital Candle (1966) and The Blue Mountains of China (1970) are woven with Mennonite religious convictions. In First and Vital Candle, the First Nations peoples
such as the Indians and the Inuits receive representation. Among the three novels mentioned above, the first and the third show Wiebe as an insider while relating his personal experience as a Mennonite.

The Temptations of Big Bear (1973) is assertive of the native Indians as the true descendants of Canada. The Scorched-Wood People (1977) falls in line with The Temptations of Big Bear in voicing the indigenous peoples in Canada. The earlier novel deals with the Indian history and the latter with the Metis history. In A Discovery of Strangers (1994) Wiebe juxtaposes two entirely different cultures of which one is primitive (the Tetsot’ine Indian) and the other is modern (European). My Lovely Enemy (1983) primarily exposes Wiebe’s convictions and perceptions as a historian. There are references to the Cree warrior Maskepetoon, the Mountain and River people, and the Blackfoot in the novel.

The Mad Trapper (1980) is an elaborate research on the Canadian wilderness. By portraying the geographical details of the Canadian landscape covered with snow and thick forest, Wiebe familiarizes the harsh landscape to the alien readers. This novel has not been taken into the fold of the study, as the novel concentrates more on the geography than on the culture of Canada.
In 2002, Wiebe published a novel entitled *Sweeter Than All the World*. The novel was not available to the researcher and hence it is not brought into the fold of the present research. However, on reading secondary materials, it has been understood that, in this novel Wiebe crystallizes the Mennonite experiences as well as the Indian and Metis life. The novel seems to explore the story of Mennonite migration from 1529 Holland to present day Canada. He takes up the issues related to Mennonite faith and life. He also extends his concerns to the Indian and the Metis and their sufferings at the hands of the colonials.

The argument of the thesis is that inspite of the commonalities and differences in the writing of both the novelists, Achebe and Wiebe take similar strategic positions to deconstruct the grim myths about their respective nations and there by promote fresh images of the same.

Culture is one of the key terms in the present analysis. It is a comprehensive term. Edward B.Tylor, an anthropologist, defines culture as that, “complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society” (*The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* 248).

Tylor defines culture in terms of the learned aspects of human thinking and behaviour as opposed to the biological aspects. Clifford Greetz gives importance to the inherited aspects of culture and defines
culture as a “system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards, life” (qtd. in Shorter 5). B. Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, understands culture as the “cumulative creation of man”. To him, culture is the “handiwork of man, a medium through which he achieves his ends” (Introduction to Sociology, qtd. in Rao 78). Sociologist Robert Bierstedt is of the opinion that culture is a complex whole consisting of “all the ways we think and do and everything we have as members of society” (qtd. in Rao 78).

In his book Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1976) Raymond Williams elaborately dwells on the mutations of culture. Tracing the etymology of the word culture, he identifies its immediate forerunner in the Latin word cultura. Its root is the Latin word, colere which has a range of meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect and honour with worship. In the early fifteenth century, the term came into the English language and it meant husbandry, “the tending of natural growth” (87). This meaning is extended to a process of human development in the early sixteenth century. This usage continued to be the same in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In Marxism and Literature (1977), Williams goes on to define culture as the “Growth and tending of crops and animals and by extension
the growth and tending of human faculties” (11). This simple idea forms the basis for the appropriation of the other definitions of culture. However, both in definition and comprehension, the term culture remains elusive, and at the same time, generative.

Culture in the early twentieth century was associated with “the way of life of a society, the totality of the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic attitudes shared by a group” including its traditions, habits, social customs, morals, laws and social relations (The World Encyclopedia 942). Culture mutates and develops over time. Besides colonization, the Great Industrial Revolution, the two World Wars, the various political and economic upheavals throughout the globe, and the emergence of neo-colonialism and imperialism have moved culture into a wider and complicated field of discourse.

Cultural studies as an institutionalized, academic discipline emerged in the late 1950s and three of the significant names associated with this development are Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. Hoggart and Williams hold a common view of ‘culture’. They share the view that culture involves a whole way of life and it does not pertain only to the intellectuals or elite of a particular society. Williams in his work Culture and Society 1780-1950 (1961) establishes that culture in the modern world is a complex concept to comprehend in its totality.
Culture is fragmented and for the most part complicated. Micheal Banton views this complication in the conception of culture thus: [Culture] is a system of meanings and customs that are blurred at the edges. They are unstable. When individuals come to terms with changing circumstances, they also change their ways and shared meanings according to the changes (Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations: 92).

With postcolonial investigation, culture emerges as a new form of politics. Culture is analyzed not only from the traditional – sociological, ethnological, historical and geographical – perspective, but from a political perspective as well. It involves continuous adjustment and redrawing. Culture is not homogeneous – especially contemporary culture. The reason, as suggested by Kwame Anthony Appiah, is that present day culture “operate[s] sometimes in synergy, sometimes in competition” (59).

The postcolonial critic Edward Said, in his book, Culture and Imperialism also offers two pertinent perceptions of culture. The first definition of culture is the common one. According to this definition, culture means all the practices that can be described as the art of distribution, communication and representation, which have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms. This definition is also related to the learned disciplines like ethnography, sociology,
historiography and literary history. The colonized countries search for their identities in these cultural plains. Secondly, culture appeals to him as a refining and elevating element. In the second sense, culture is associated with the nation or the state, which differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them’. This perception of culture provides the postcolonial strategy to etch the identity of a nation since culture vouches the presence of literature.

Postcolonial enquiry challenges institutionalized hierarchy and hegemony of any form. It celebrates difference, plurality and multiplicity. This move introduces the politics of ‘difference’/‘diversity’ in the concept of culture. Postcolonial writers reject homogeneity and venerate ethnicity to prove that ‘their’ i.e. the hegemonic, fixed culture is not ‘our’ culture. Postcolonial writing “[. . .] attempts to expose the politics that are at work in representations and to undo institutionalized hierarchies, and it works against the hegemony of any single discursive system [...].” (Conner 8). Culture is politicized on every ground, and this results in the pervasiveness of cultural politics. It operates through the terrains of identification, signification and ideology.

The next term that is crucial in the present context is ‘identity’. The problem of identity is not only an ontological one but draws serious political implications as well. In traditional literatures identity of an
individual is affirmed through his being a member of a community. The beginning of the twentieth century modelled new meanings of identity. The search for identity became more personal and consequently, ‘self’ attained significance, and the individual sought representation as distinct from the society. In the mid twentieth century, ‘identity’ became still more problematic and it disassociated itself from the “human being itself” and associated itself with the “political man” (Littrup 7). This conceptual transformation is evident in postcolonial writings.

In the present day context, the notion of identity is as comprehensive and complex as that of the term culture. When both are politically loaded, they reiterate new codes of meanings and definitions.

The third term that is significantly involved in the present investigation is ‘politics’. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary gives the meaning of ‘politics’ as “political views or beliefs”, and also as “manoeuvring the power or advantage within a group or organization”. The first sense relates to the political field. It is with the second definition that the use and application of the term politics widens. V.K.Gokak, the former Secretary of the Sahitya Academy, the apex literary body in India, views politics to be a higher goal of human activity: “Politics is the aspect of human activity based on instincts, desires and ambitions” (23). Subadhra Channa, a noted sociologist and cultural analyst, in her book
titled Understanding Society, Culture and Change argues that politics may be defined in terms of “activities relating to focusing of power, process of competition, manipulation and achievement of power” (141).

Politics is that efficiency of one to gain advantage or power over others. In connection with this, Micheal Haralambas and Robin Heald in an article “Power and Politics” write that power is embedded in social relationship. An individual or a group does not enjoy power in isolation; they wield power only in relation to others: “Power is therefore power over others”(98). In the social context, politics involves power relationship among various social categories. In the postcolonial socio-cultural context, it becomes necessary for the writers to place the identity of the marginalized among the dominant categories. Therefore, the postcolonial focuses on the achievement of power by the periphery over the metropolitan centre.

The three crucial terms of the present investigation namely culture, identity, and politics were analyzed individually in the foregoing paragraphs. Now it becomes imperative to conceptualize the title of the investigation.

Lawrence Grossberg in his essay “Identity and Cultural Studies – Is That All There Is?” explains that politics of identity “involves questioning how identities are produced and taken up through practices of
representation”(90). Stuart Hall in his essay “Who needs ‘Identity’?”(1996), also views the matter in a similar manner and explains that identities

are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where do we come from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (4)

Identity politics, as Hall observes, is a matter of “becoming” besides one of “being”. Living a particular way of life by attaching to its customs, modes and traditions means “being” in a culture. “Becoming” is the way one is represented in relation to the outside world. In the foreground of Hall’s observation, a Nigerian or a Canadian means sharing a particular identity consciously and deliberately.

“Becoming” a Nigerian or a Canadian foregrounds political mediation. The struggle to gain a prominent place amidst the various social categories is the politics concerning identity. “Becoming” identities operates through the “resources of history, language and culture”, and involves in politicizing these concepts in the process. There are several issues beneath identity politics. Ethnic, social, cultural, national, political
and individual are some of the issues. In the postcolonial context, identity politics is mostly concerned with the revaluation of the cultural past, which was destroyed during the colonial rule and other indulgences of the western imperialism.

In an influential essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1997) Hall provides two ways of conceiving cultural identity. The first position is defined in terms of a shared identity, a sort of collective “one true self” hiding behind many other superficially or artificially imposed “selves”. To quote his words,

[. . .] our cultural identities reflect the common historical experience and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meanings, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (111)

Postcolonial societies are essentially hybridized, and as a result a homogeneous identity or an “artificially collected self” evolves. Hall suggests that apart from these artificially imposed identities there is “one true self”. It could be identified by unearthing the hidden continuities of the past. Identity involves tradition and that it is most essential in creating cultural identity. As Sitakant Mahapatra had said,
History has shown that in times of stress and challenges, of darkness and a feeling of loss of direction, or rapid changes and traumatic transformations men become more aware of their roots [...] Then begins the talk of a search for roots, a return to the roots. (The Role of Tradition in Literature 79)

One of the aspects of postcolonial cultural identities is marked by ‘returns’ to tradition in search of a rooted identity that would ensure the survival of the respective culture by “re-telling of the past”.

It may be deduced from the foregoing discussion that identity, as Hall stresses is a matter of “becoming”. While discussing cultural politics, he suggests that both “becoming” and “being” are essential to identity. To quote Hall,

Cultural identity [...] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (112)
In other words, cultural identities visibly transform their positions according to history and power. This second position suggested by Hall is helpful in understanding the traumas of colonial experience and the ways in which the colonized countries claim themselves to be the centre. In the postcolonial situation identities are articulated with the change in power relations, through which the postcolonial writers seek to claim their visibility by placing their cultures at the centre and thereby reversing the hierarchy of the colonial cultures. Hence, identity is not static but dynamic. Identity is a process operating under ‘erasure’ and constant reconstruction and redefinition. It is strategic and positional.

This thesis entitled “Politics of Cultural Identity: A Study of the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Rudy Wiebe” proposes to establish the hypothesis that in the works of Achebe and Wiebe there is strategic positioning of their respective nations’ cultural identities. In support of this, the novels of Achebe and Wiebe are to be examined critically in the light of their nations’ pasts. The investigator hopes to examine in detail the sociopolitical and religious implications of the ethnic cultures of Nigeria and Canada, as part of the narrative strategy of Achebe and Wiebe, respectively. The thesis intends to study the colonial contact in Nigeria and Canada and the consequent ambivalence of cultural mixing and its significance in the narration. Thirdly, it attempts to establish that
the two writers have definite political intentions as they construct strategic historical narratives through questioning of the received narratives and images of the cultural pasts of the respective nations; that they have established definite cultural identities and thereby created a possibility for the survival of the pasts for the benefit of the future generation.

The discussion of the thesis topic would use relevant critical tools for interpreting the select primary sources of Achebe and Wiebe. As primary sources, the five novels of Achebe and the eight novels of Wiebe are taken for the present study. References would be made to their short stories and essays whenever they are relevant. Secondary materials on the writers and their works would also be used in support of the argument.

The thesis consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter is followed by three main chapters and the summation. In the first chapter, introduction of the topic taken for analysis and a brief discussion of the key terms related to the investigation has been attempted, which is followed by methodology and plan of study. The second chapter discusses the ethnic cultures of Nigeria and Canada as portrayed in the novels of Achebe and Wiebe. The next chapter deals with the colonial influence that affected these ethnic cultures. In the fourth chapter the
struggle of the ethnic cultures for survival is studied. The last chapter is the summation of the study wherein the findings are consolidated.

The documentation in the thesis is in accordance with the MLA Handbook for writers of Research Papers (Fifth Edition). The original spellings of American editions are retained in quotations. Apart from the list of books cited, a list of books consulted has also been provided. These books have been consulted to form the theoretical framework of the argument of the dissertation.

The thesis intends to have no separate chapter to examine the literary techniques and styles of the two novelists. However, they would be discussed to explicate the point which is under consideration, if necessary.

The second chapter which follows the present one is entitled “Ethnic Cultures”. In this chapter the novels of Achebe and Wiebe are discussed with the focus on the ethnic cultures of Nigeria and Canada. This discussion is an attempt to establish that this return to the roots in both the writers is part of the postcolonial politics to establish the cultural identity of the erstwhile colonies of Nigeria and Canada.