CHAPTER THREE
CRITICAL STRATEGIES OF INTERVENTION

Anglophone African literature is inevitably a post-war phenomenon emerging as a
concrete reality in the nineteen fifties and subsequently developed as a literary force with a
sizeable corpus of literary works in the nineteen sixties. It is not untrue to describe this body
of work as a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of the writers to recover Africa’s true
character and place in human history. A definitely well marked agenda of restoring the African
past from years of European greed, avarice, exploitation, subjugation and domination can be
seen vividly. The crippling impact of European colonial domination and imperialist exploitation
had damaged and ruptured the African socio-political, cultural landscape to a considerable
extent — albeit the moral, spiritual, religious and civilizational progress allegedly imported by
the European colonial enterprise — and it became a primary concern for the African writers
to engage with these fundamental African realities. To salvage the present — a ravaged
Africa — from the bitter and harsh realities of the colonial past so as to envisage a vision for
a new and meaningful African future remained imperative for these writers. The social and
political commitment exhibited by this literature makes it distinct and gives it a unique flavour
in comparison with literatures written elsewhere. Anglophone African literature has rigorously
engaged the incubus of colonialism in a manner hitherto unseen in other literatures of former
colonies. The conviction seen in the writers in their attempt to combat the crippling and
dehumanizing effects of colonialism remains unparalleled. Oblique attempts in dealing with
the colonial aftermath — the neo-colonial present — overtly and consciously with a definite
aim to resist, oppose and subvert the unjustifiable logic of inhuman exploitation perpetrated
by the dominant politico-economic power structures remain a hallmark of Anglophone African
literature.

Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa-Thiong’o are two of the most eminent, prominent
and distinguished literary figures whose creative imagination succeeded in capturing the nuances
and complexities of African life in various stages. Their contribution in putting African Literature on the map of modern world literature along with fervent academic activities to formulate a concrete African critical framework is not only a matter of literary interest but also a matter of socio-political and material concerns. Alongside their invaluable literary output, their writings — both fiction and non-fiction — exhibit a rigorous engagement with socio-political debates ranging from society to neo-colonial politics. Both Achebe and Ngugi, notwithstanding their status as literary artists, have emerged as powerful social and political thinkers with profound insights and understanding of life in the paradoxical post-colonial situation. Other than their fictions, poetry and drama, they have written extensively on prevalent issues concerning literature and the arts, culture, race, language, identity, post-colonialism and the hitherto marginalised peoples. Their essays have probed deeply into the disturbing realities of social erosion persisting in contemporary Africa inspite of political independence ushered by the wave of decolonization in the post-War period. Through their essays, they have tried to assess the problematic nature of African politics in its post-colonial phase along with issues involving literature, arts, culture and the writer. This chapter seeks to foreground some of their views on African writing and society as revealed in some of their essays. As pointed out by critics and commentators of African literature, the essays provide considerable insights instrumental in understanding their fiction, poetry and drama.¹ Ngugi himself feels that the ideas in his essays formed the basis of his fictional works.² However, it should be borne in mind that a simplistic reduction of their essays as a key to understand their fictional work is not what is attempted here. Neither does it seek to preempt the critical discussion of their fictions that form the crux of the forthcoming chapters. An attempt is being made to engage their non-fictional writings with some of the crucial issues central to debates on African writing and society. The chapter aims at placing Achebe and Ngugi in their socio-cultural milieux through an assessment of their respective backgrounds, influences and responses to certain issues crucial to their development as writers and critics of the African socio-political scenario.
II

Born of Christian parents in Ogidi, eastern Nigeria on 16th November, 1930, Achebe was originally christened Albert Chinualumogu. Isaiah Okafor Achebe, Achebe's father, was an evangelist and preacher for the Church Missionary Society who had been converted to the new religion as a young man although many of his relatives adhered to the traditional Igbo religion and belief. Before returning to his ancestral village of Ogidi five years after the birth of his fifth child he lived as an evangelist and church teacher in other parts of eastern Nigeria. Isaiah had joined the new faith in the early days of his youth and rose rapidly in its ranks to become a prolific preacher and evangelist. He married a Christian convert Janet (Achebe's mother) in 1909 at a service conducted by his friend, teacher and supervisor, G.T. Basden who happened to be an enthusiastic missionary and amateur anthropologist. Isaiah and Janet settled in Ogidi with Achebe's great uncle who never had any problems or objections with his nephew's newfound alien faith. Liberal in his outlook, he never took his nephew's Christian practices and adherence seriously. In his autobiographical essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe mentions that the family "lived at the crossroads of cultures." He talks about the conspicuous duality characteristic since his early days:

On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other, my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols. That was how it was supposed to be anyhow. But I knew without knowing why that it was too simple a way to describe what was going on. Those idols and that food had a strange pull on me in spite of my being such a thorough little Christian... I do not remember any undue distress. What I do remember is a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads. And I believe two things were in my favour—that curiosity, and the little distance imposed between me and it by the accident of my birth (Achebe 1988: 23).

As a boy in Ogidi, and later at Oweri, Achebe went to church schools where his first lessons were given in his native Igbo language with texts provided by the Church Missionary Society. He began to learn English at the age of eight after the beginner's phase of learning, whereby primers and readers discarded by the elder children became the staple diet. Along with his mother's Ije Onye Kraist, an Igbo adaptation of Pilgrim's Progress, Achebe remembers reading an adapted and illustrated version of A
Midsummer Night’s Dream, stories narrating experiences of missionaries in Africa and ecclesiastical preachings in the West African Churchman’s Pamphlet. His formal education in British oriented schools never really took away his passionate interest for Igbo stories narrated by his mothers, elder sister and old men of the village. The Igbo folk stories with vivid impressions of forests, rivers, sky, birds and animals made a deep impact during his formative years and remained throughout his life and literary career. Leaving the church school in 1944, he went to the prestigious Secondary School, Government College, Umuahia where his fellow students included men who were to become famous personalities later on — Christopher Okigbo and Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, Gabriel Okara, Elechi Amadi and I.N.C. Aniebo who are all literary stars in the African literary firmament. Shaped and structured on British lines, the Secondary School provided a syllabus modelled on those in secondary schools of England. He studied for the Cambridge School Certificate reading prescribed classics and canonical English literature. After finishing his studies in this school in 1948, Achebe went to study medicine at University College, Ibadan, then affiliated to the University of London, on a scholarship. At Ibadan, he dropped his christian name Albert and became Chinua Achebe. Medicine could not generate enough interest in him for long and consequently he left it after one year to pursue a course in English Literature, Religious Studies and History with financial support from his elder brother John. As a student of English Literature he studied Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth along with other English authors ‘relevant’ to African students — Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary and Graham Greene.

The tide of de-colonization that was sweeping across the globe in the post-Second World War era witnessed a strong nationalist current in almost all the colonies. Nationalism was the buzz-word as nationalist movements with overt anti-colonial tones became the sign of the times. Nigeria in Western Africa, which had a relatively peaceful transition to political independence sans the trauma of bloody and violent uprisings and insurrections characteristic of many colonies in the bid for freedom, had its fair share of nationalist fervour and sentiments. Along with this rising nationalist fervour was the vociferous assertion that Africa “wasn’t primitive and heathenish” on intellectual terms. Literate and eloquent, African intellectuals could no longer remain reticent about age old oppression, exploitation and domination including the heinous act of slavery.
An intellectual engagement with colonialist ideology reaffirmed the need to interrogate, challenge and subvert Eurocentric assumptions:

The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell. ‘Rule Britannia!’ to which we had marched so unselfconsciously on Empire Day now stuck in our throat (Achebe 1988:25).

The post-War political and intellectual ferment in Nigeria was intense and charged unlike the relatively docile anti-colonial sentiments in the past. Students at Ibadan were not excluded from this rising tide of nationalist assertion — active support was seen in what became a general move to “achieve internal self-government for Nigeria.” Nigeria’s first general election held in 1951-52 to choose representatives for a legislature with limited powers did not go uncriticized and subsequent political ferment brought about new elections between 1952 and 1954 under new constitutions. Debates about the nature of ethnic, regional representations and self-rule became widespread. On the literary-cultural aspect of the ferment, Nigeria witnessed its first Arts Festival in 1950 which included drama and literary contributions. Student magazines at University College, Ibadan began showing an increasing interest in Nigerian culture and arts. Intellectual efforts from students like The University Herald, a students’ union paper called The Bug and The Eagle, served as outlets for increasing student interest in salvaging African identity. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, both students at Ibadan between 1949 and 1954 contributed to these nascent efforts. In his Third year, Achebe took over as editor of The University Herald. Besides several essays, sketches, editorials and letters, Achebe published short stories like ‘Polar Undergraduate’ (1950), ‘Marriage is a Private Affair’ (1952) and ‘Dead Man’s Path’ (published without any title in 1953) during his undergraduate days at Ibadan. In 1954 he was appointed Talks Producer with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation giving him ample opportunity to scrutinize contemporary African affairs at close quarters. After a brief period of study with the B.B.C. in London in 1956, Achebe published his first novel Things Fall Apart in 1958. Hailed as a modern classic it remains the most popular and widely read African novel till today. He was awarded the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize for his contribution to African Literature in 1959. The relentless wave of decolonization generated in the post-War period, which had reached African shores, swept Nigeria as independence came in 1960 bringing forth new horizons of hopes and expectations for a bright future. In this year Achebe published his
second novel *No Longer At Ease*. He travelled to East Africa on a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1960-61, and in 1963 visited Brazil, North America and Britain on a UNESCO Fellowship. His first four novels were written while he worked for the Broadcasting Corporation as Talks Producer and later as Director of External Broadcasting.

In 1962 he published an essay “Where Angels Fear to Tread” in *Nigeria Magazine* pointing out the severe limitations and gross inadequacies in European critics and writers who came out with myopic views on African Literature. He attacked the rigidity and dogmatic nature with which western critics viewed African Literature. He stressed on the cultivation of humility appropriate to the European critic’s limited experience and knowledge of the African world, its values and cultural differences. The arrogant artificiality and denigrating assumptions about African Literature held by European critics and writers became Achebe’s area of contention as essays and lectures written between 1962-1966 registered the need for a distinct African critical framework in conjunction with the literature which reflected African values and concerns (Innes 1990:103-4). Pointing out the conspicuous separation of arts from politics and social concerns in European Literature, he attacked the myth of universalism perpetuated by western critics based on their assumptions about culture and cultural artefacts.

Achebe sees the African writer as an important component of his society, an indispensable part of his community whose art should necessarily be rooted in the upliftment of his society. Literature and the arts should generate a collective aspiration towards the transformation of society. The writer’s art should be functional, utilitarian and committed to the stark problems inflicting the society. From his early essays and lectures “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” (1964), “The Novelist as Teacher” (1965) to his later essays “Africa and her Writers” (1973) and “The Writer and his Community” (1988), Achebe shows a persisting concern with the writer’s role and responsibility towards the society. In what may appear to be a rigorous persuasion to writers in Africa, he calls for a contextualised writing aimed at making literature a socially relevant discourse in contrast to the European counterpart who, in his words, “lives on the fringe of society — wearing a beard and peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything” (Achebe 1988:27). Pointing out the reclusive nature of the
European writer as a crucial point of departure between European and African writing, he urges the European mindset to perceive the fundamental differences between the two. The relationship between writers and readers in Africa should not be seen as a mere reproduction of the European framework. The African writer's social responsibility is an indispensable part of his life as he or she carries a lot of expectations. Achebe fondly remembers an incident in which a lady teacher reprimanded him for squandering a rare opportunity of educating the people. Acutely aware of the fact that it would be foolish to entertain pretensions about a full recovery from the traumatic effects of the colonial experience, Africa's "first confrontation with Europe", writing becomes a highly charged activity loaded with the inevitable task of restoring self-confidence, dignity and pride. For Achebe, writing is not a personal or private experience but like Fanon, sees it as a necessary antithesis to fight the traumatic impact of racist domination and colonial exploitation. The writer can find his meaning in this struggle:

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. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think my aims and deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the African personality; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called anti-racist racism, to announce that we are not just as good as the next men but we are much better (Achebe 1988:30).

The African writer cannot remain detached, complacent, indifferent and oblivious to the disturbing realities prevalent in his world. A consistent engagement with socio-political issues in the struggle for justice remains imperative for writers who must be sensitive to the needs of the society. Conflicting values detrimental to social justice and development need to be exposed and analysed. Achebe cannot see any reason why the writer should be excused from the rigorous task of social upliftment and regeneration compelled by the bitter history of colonial experience. Like Fanon, he feels the writer should necessarily position himself as a cultural nationalist bent on asserting his nationalist identity so as to create a concrete and complete identity separate from the image of the "other" constructed as the European coloniser's opposite. The dilapidated rubric of the African identity, shattered and distorted
by the draconian and oppressive colonial apparatus, needs to be restored in order to evolve a meaningful understanding of African cultural history. Through the crucial act of writing, Achebe aims to reinforce the truth that African past “was not one long night of savagery.” Reiterating his intention to recover the African past, he foregrounds the responsibility of the writer:

This theme — put quite simply — is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain... The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.  

Consolidating the social aspect of African writing is the glaring uniqueness of African aesthetics which is again far removed from the individual-oriented sensibility of European aesthetics. Collective ownership of art and artefact, representative of many oral traditions, is a crucial element in the understanding of African aesthetics. A strong sense of the collective pervades in oral traditions as:

The story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendant, the writer in his study, belongs to its composer (Achebe 1988:32).

The seminal relationship between art and society, artist and audience in Achebe’s terms involve commitment to social causes. He draws upon the colorful Mbari ceremony of the Oweri Igbo as an example of an aesthetics where collectivity is accorded importance rather than individual expression of creativity. Art and aesthetics in this sense of the Mbari is not confined to certain exclusive circles but strongly demands involvement of the whole community. Mbari stresses the collective aspect of art while rejecting individualism and individual ownership of artistic works. It recognizes “no rigid barrier between makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all, and is a ‘function’ of society (Achebe 1975:22). The different natures of African and European aesthetics make it pertinent to observe the contradictions accentuated by a polarization of culture between aristocratic and marginalised structures endemic in the European world since the Greek and the Roman times.
Social concern and commitment assume critical proportions in Achebe’s scheme of literary consciousness. He is constantly working towards means and ways to enable the African writer to tackle the hegemonic modes of Western literary assumptions. A predominant concern in Achebe is the idea and criteria of ‘universality’ which Westerners conceive as intrinsic and inherent in their literary, cultural and civilizational values. This strategic assumption operates with the logic of imposing hegemonic European values and lures other writers in its seductive trap. Achebe takes the West African writer Ayi Kwei Armah as a case where the alien western values are upheld in the name of humanity. Pointing out the dominant tone of Western ‘existentialism’ in Armah’s picture of modern Ghana in his fiction The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Achebe takes note of the author’s escapist intentions, largely centered on the anxiety of being labelled as ‘an African writer’. By emulating European writers, and their attempts to depict the ‘existential’ angst a la human condition, Armah has taken the route to alienation. The inevitable question is what happens to African literature and culture if writers escape from the challenges of commitment and responsibility. Who in the African world is going to face the challenges in society remains a disturbing question. In the essays “Thoughts on the African Novel” and “Colonialist Criticism” Achebe discusses the assumptions underlying the universal and local vis-a-vis African literary criticism. He assails the critical sensibility which discerns the distinction between the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’ in African Literature. Taking cue from the functional aspect of art in African society, he attacks Eldred Jones’s evaluation of Soyinka’s The Interpreters as a novel based on a Nigerian setting with an essential depiction of a universal problem. Achebe vehemently rejects such warped polarizations by firmly asserting that a Nigerian writer need not verify the existence of any problem in America or Europe before setting out to write an African story. He is wary of these critics who uncritically accept norms of hegemonic colonialist criticism under a blind delusion of universalism. Shortcomings and flaws ascribed to African writing are taken as part of the blatant arrogance displayed by colonialist criticism which fails to understand and appreciate the existence of a distinct African literary sensibility. The impunity with which this type of criticism assesses and evaluates African literature is symptomatic of the deep rooted colonialist indifference and racist malaise. Inspite of political independence, western dominance and imperialist designs remain at the heart of western analysis of African Literature resulting in all sorts of biased and prejudiced configurations. Calling for an outright rejection of such attitudes, Achebe vehemently decries the opposition exhibited by this imperialist logic to discourage those people, including writers, working to bring changes into the world.
Political independence in 1960 did not usher in an era of peace and prosperity devoid of regional hostilities, religious conflicts and ethnic crises. Problems in post-independence Nigeria became all the more accentuated with these fissiparous tendencies reflecting a general decline into utter chaos and confusion spun by the indefatigable incubus of parochialism. Colonial policies in pre-independence Nigeria had conspicuously aggravated and exacerbated these divisions in order to maintain dominance and colonial rule. Colonialism work not only through strategies of coercion but also through dexterously devised strategies of dividing the colonised peoples on parochial lines. The crisis precipitated by regional and ethnic hostilities during pre-independence struggle for power produced a major crisis in independent Nigeria. Emergency was imposed in western Nigeria as hostilities intensified with growing rift between chief Awolowo, leader of the Yoruba Action Group and chief Akintola, premier of the Western Region. Violent clashes and rioting in the western region promptly led to the declaration of a state of emergency by the Federal Government and deployment of Federal troops in Ibadan to restore law and order. Even after formal lifting of the emergency after a period of six months, the situation remained tense with the trials of chief Enahoro, chief Awolowo and eighteen others in 1963 for treason and illegal trafficking of arms and ammunition in Nigeria. Federal elections in 1964 witnessed violence and unscrupulous political activities. The election campaign was marked with widespread rioting and violence in the Tiv region. A major stalemate, arising out of President Azikiwe’s declaration of the election as invalid and subsequent refusal to recognise the new government headed by Prime Minister Balewa, was averted by a compromise in January, 1965 on the understanding that Balewa would work towards the formation of a broad based national government. Violence in the Western Region elections in late 1965 resulted in the Nigerian army’s intervention. On 15th January, a coup d’etat staged by a mainly Igbo military officers’ group brought the first Nigerian Republic to an end with General Ironsi at the helm of affairs. The federal system was abolished with the introduction of a unitary state in May. As hostilities toward the Igbos increased, another military coup led by army officers from the north removed General Ironsi in July 1966 and General Gowon became the Head of the State. This regime restored the federal system. Many Igbo officers including one of Achebe’s cousins became victims of assassinations in the coup. Regional and ethnic tension intensified further in north and south Nigeria with widespread riots, violence and arson in the north. Thousands of Igbos were massacred and displaced. Achebe had to flee from Lagos with his family to avoid army brutalities.
Increasing hostility towards the Igbo led to the boycott of constitutional talks in October, 1966 by Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu, the military Governor of the Eastern Region. It culminated in the declaration of secession of Biafra on 30th May, 1967 with far reaching consequences for Nigeria. The Biafran War or the Nigerian Civil War inflicted untold misery. The human, political, social and economic toll was heavy. Stakes in Nigerian oil deposits invited a lot of foreign intervention with vested interests in the form of abundant money, arms and ammunition supplied to both sides by different countries. Inspite of brave efforts and some initial success, Biafran forces had to concede defeat with the fall of Port Harcourt in 1968 — its main link with the outside world. Thousands of lives perished in this bloody conflict which raged on till January, 1970.

Biafra remains a central and passionate issue not only for its people and military personnel but also for its writers who were deeply involved in the struggle. A number of prominent Nigerian writers either fought for the cause or tried to intervene in the conflict. The tragic experience of Christopher Okigbo who plunged headlong into the conflict to fight for the Biafran army is a grim reminder. He died in a bloody battle near Nsukka in 1967. Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara and Flora Nwapa were all actively engaged as ambassadors of the Biafran cause visiting several African countries, America and Europe to impress upon them the need to ascertain the truth behind the struggle. Wole Soyinka’s imprisonment for two years — recorded poignantly in his prison poems *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and his autobiographical narrative *The Man Died* — and consequent self-exile (from Nigeria) speak volumes for the conviction and the dedication. Achebe’s commitment both in political activism and scholarship can be seen in the fervent visits abroad alongside his defence against the distorted and concocted views given by people like Margery Perham and Tai Solarin. In his essay “The African Writer and the Biafra Cause”, Achebe justifies the Biafran struggle and the involvement of writers:

> Biafra stands in opposition to the murder and rape of Africa by whites and blacks alike because she has tasted both and found them equally bitter. No government, black or white, has the right to stigmatise and destroy groups of its own citizens without undermining the basis of its own existence... Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence. Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi, Onuora Nzekwu, Nkem Nwanko, John Munonye, V.C. Ike, Flora
Nwapa are all working actively in the cause for which Christopher Okibo died. I believe our cause is right and just. And this is what literature in Africa should be about today — right and just causes (Achebe 1975:83-84).

Novel writing came to a halt during the war as Achebe found it impossible to concentrate on the novel in the face of heavy strains inflicted by the conflict. During these years, poems and short stories became the predominant mode of literary expression. His collection of poems Beware Soul Brother passionately records the images of this bitter conflict.

After the Biafran war, Achebe became a Senior research Fellow at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he began editing the university journal, Nsukkascope. Ideals of the Biafran cause still lingered as he tried to salvage and recover them. An attempt to establish a publishing house with Christopher Okigbo which had to be aborted because of the war and Okigbo’s death materialised with Achebe’s persistent efforts resulting in the publication of Okeke: A Nigerian Journal of New Writing. Even during his four years stint in Massachusetts and Connecticut as visiting professor of literature, he continued editing the journal which aimed at the establishment of African literary standards and criticism. Starting with contributions from South African writer Dennis Brutus, Nigerian writers Soyinka, Obiechina, Ekwensi and Achebe himself, the journal continued with critical works by Ezekiel Mphalele, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa and Ihechekwa Madubuike. The journal was rechristened Okike: An African Journal of New Writing to accommodate and incorporate writings from all parts of Africa. Achebe’s four years in America were filled with several lectures delivered on the issues of African literary standards and society vis-a-vis Western assumptions. On his return to Nsukka in 1976, he resumed his professorship at the University of Nigeria and alongside Okike, began to work on a long cherished dream — to provide literary material for children. Both Achebe and Okigbo intended to initiate production of African stories meant for children through their publishing house called Citadel Press. The primary aim was to subvert existing school readers depicting Africans as primitive, savage and exotic. Haunting memories of the Biafran war and Okigbo’s death did not deter Achebe from this project as he worked on this mission fervently. It is interesting to recall his earlier work on a children’s novella Chike and the River (1966) published by the Cambridge University Press in this connection.

As the socio-political fabric of Nigeria continued its glide towards degeneration, corruption, nepotism and instability with regular military coups and unceasing conflicts, Achebe’s indictment of the African leadership became much more incisive. Deeply concerned with the
implications and ramifications of a self-serving political class which engineered regional, ethnic and tribal divisions, Achebe continued to expose the game of deceit:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (Achebe 1983:1).

True to his professed ideals of the African writer, Achebe remains committed to the cause of restoring Africa from years of colonial denigration which in so many ways, continues to thrive in the post-colonial era. Like many other African writers, he is acutely aware of the challenges in the present African society and aims at undauntedly facing them. The corpus of his works has produced an incisive critique of the colonial and post-colonial African landscape, dismantling many of the common places and conceits that dominate contemporary literary studies.

III

Originally christened James Ngugi, Ngugi wa Thiong’O’ was born of peasant parents in 1938 in Kamiti village near Limuru in Kiambu district, Kenya. His father was a landless squatter working for a rich farmer — characteristic of colonial Kenya where systematic transplantation of European settlers forced Kenyans to become landless peasants. Europeans — mainly Britishers — were given the best lands as colonial policy effectively projected the idea of transforming East Africa “from a liability into an asset” through the only possible means which meant the successful transplantation of “a thriving population established to add to the wealth that the world still wanted and was prepared to pay for”. Massive destruction of pre-colonial social structures, with the simultaneous legalized robbery of assets, resources and land resulted in large scale upheavals. Ngugi vividly remembers growing up in the White highlands — exclusively reserved for the colonisers — conscious of the disparity between the rich capitalist landowners and the landless peasants squatting on these farms for meagre wages:

My father with his four wives had no land. They lived as tenants-at-will on somebody else’s land. Harvest were often poor… we had one meal a day… Just opposite
the ridge on which our village was scattered were the sprawling green fields owned by
the white settlers... Every morning African workers would stream across the valley to
sell their sweat for such a meagre sum of money, and at the end of the week or month
they would give it all to the Indian traders who owned most of the shops in our area.
These workers were the creators of wealth but they never benefitted from it: the products
of their collective sweat went to feed and clothe the children of the Indian trader, and
those of the European settlers not only in our country but even those in England (Ngugi

In the face of this brutal exploitation and deprivation, the suffering Kenyan people looked
towards education as a key factor to their salvation for colonial oppression. Perceived as an
important means to achieve success in the colonised environment, Ngugi remembers his
mother’s passionate desire for her children’s education. Formal primary education started
with the Kamaandura School in Limuru where christian moral preachings and doctrines assumed
central importance. The daily dose of racist christian preachings in the schools assaulted the
young and innocent minds of the students while subserving the colonial enterprise through a
justification of the White men’s rule as a god ordained mission to ‘enlighten’ the dark continent
of Africa. Following this, his education in Maanguite and Kinyoogo Primary schools made
him familiar with English and European classics in abridged simplified texts. R.L. Stevenson’s
Treasure Island, Dicken’s Oliver Twist were among those recommended for reading
alongwith the African stories and riddles he listened in his ‘peasant mother’s house’. After
primary schooling, Ngugi attended a school associated with the Independent Schools
Movement. It was an educational movement started by Kenyan nationalists after Christian
missionaries prohibited children from the African families, rooted in non-christian practices of
polygamy and female circumcision, from attending their mission schools. Inspite of severe
financial strains, Ngugi’s mother was firmly determined to see her child’s education unaffected.

After leaving the school run by the nationalists, Ngugi attended the famous Alliance
High School — the most prestigious school for African students in colonial Kenya — as the
only student from virtually the whole of Limuru in 1955. In fact, it was Kenya’s first full
fledged school for Africans run by the collective efforts of protestants whose aim was to
provide a sound education based on christian principles, morals and practices. As he recalls
later, the school presented him with conflicting images of the Kenyan society:

.... we were presented with two diametrically opposed images: that of the Kenya
patriot as a negative human being and that of the collaborator as positive human beings.
Obviously the aim was to make us identify with the second image, to make us grow to admire and acquire all the values that go hand in hand with collaboration with imperialism (Quoted in Brown 1985:230)

Taught to serve the mighty and benevolent Queen of England and never to interrogate the legitimacy of colonialism alongside the christian teachings of salvation through christianity, Alliance High School took Ngugi deeper into the world of European and English literature where novels by Emily Bronte and other English writers became the staple diet.

When Ngugi was deeply involved with his studies in school, Kenya was undergoing the most turbulent period in the history of its struggle for freedom. Brutal repression of peaceful protests and movements virtually forced the Kenyan peasantry to wage an armed struggle against the colonisers. Known as the Mau Mau rebellion the period witnessed untold miseries inflicted on the Kenyan people. As a young boy in school, Ngugi was profoundly affected by this bloody conflict between the despotic colonial government and the guerillas. He was fourteen when a state of emergency was declared on 20th October, 1952 exacerbating and aggravating the agony of the Kenyan people. Large scale massacres, detentions, segregations, confinement and displacement of whole villages in concentration camps labelled as detention camps, wanton destruction and other modes of inhuman brutality made a deep impact on his mind:

The Kenyan colonial struggle centered round the demand for the lost lands. Suddenly in the course of demanding this, while some died and others refused to give up, the Kenyan peasantry seemed to find a new power. They rejected the missionary colonial institutions... They rediscovered the old songs — they had never completely lost touch with them — and reshaped them to meet the new needs of their struggle... Through Mau Mau, they organised themselves, in the villages, and in the towns, their vision going beyond the narrow confines of the tribe (Ngugi 1973:11-12).

Completing school education at Alliance High School, Ngugi joined Makerere University College at Kampala, Uganda — the only university college in the whole of East Africa. Here, he pursued a degree course in B.A. (Hons.) English; the syllabus being identical with British universities, he studied canonical English writers like Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth and Keats. It was at Makerere that he became aware of the ‘great wealth of African and West Indian literatures’. As an undergraduate student, he started exercising his creative talents with full length plays like The Black Hermit which was performed on the historic occasion of Uganda’s independence in 1962.
During the early period of his creative development, Ngugi wrote his first two novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*. It was propelled by a conscious desire to challenge and subvert the dehumanizing impact of colonial education and cultural imperialism. His decision to write was not dictated by whimsical fancies:

I was then a student at Makerere University College. I remembered sending a shy little note to the warden of my then Hall of Residence saying I wanted to be a writer. No doubt the note was a little hasty and rather self-conscious, because I had not written anything. I had read a number of writers, African and West Indian, and I knew that what they told, the song they sang, was different from what I had heard from the British writers who had been crammed down my throat in schools and at the University. The African writers spoke to me, they spoke about my situation (Ngugi 1973:47-48).

During the period, Ngugi took up the editorship of *Pen Point*, the literary magazine of the college and began contributing a regular column called *As I see it* to the *Daily Nation*, a leading Nairobi based newspaper. Makerere's stimulating atmosphere provided him an awareness of the racist and imperialist ideas inherent in European representations of Africa. It has been argued that the study of English writers like Defoe, Jane Austen, Conrad and D.H. Lawrence made him aware of the relationship between colonialism and literary studies. Ngugi himself points out that Carribean writers like George Lamming did not appear alien to him as the English writers.

After graduating from Makerere University college in 1963, Ngugi left Africa for England to pursue higher studies. In England, he attended the University of Leeds which provided him with a radical atmosphere suitable to his sensibility and intellectual temperament. Leeds became a fertile ground for his radical views on society, culture, politics, race and language and literature alongwith a rigorous involvement with Marxist ideas. With the eminent radical Arnold Kettle as his supervisor, he became part of the dynamic group in Leeds developing radical ideas and perspectives on wide ranging issues. Association with the radical student group led by Alan Hunt enabled him to perceive the age old inter class hostilities inherent in the capitalist system as the root cause of incessant industrial strife in the industrialized world. He found success in formulating long held views with sharp ideological perspectives. His sojourn in England provided him with opportunities to participate in several conferences and seminars in the United States, Syria and the erstwhile USSR. These conferences gave him a clear understanding of the biases, prejudices and reductive tendencies in
literary studies and criticism. Working on Carribean Literature for his post-graduate dissertation, he left Leeds without completing it but his sojourn in the university saw the publication of his most complex and powerful novel *A Grain of Wheat* in 1967. He returned to Nairobi University as a lecturer. At Nairobi, his radical views and ideas on literature and literary studies soon brought him into trouble with the authorities. Inspite of stiff opposition, undaunted efforts to make literary studies relevant to the African context continued. The radical changes he suggested in the syllabus including the incorporation of literature in African languages were vehemently rejected. Moreover, his support to agitating students earned him a great deal of disfavour amongst the authorities and some teachers. In the face of increasing hostility, he had to resign from his position in 1969. Resignation from Nairobi University was followed by one year’s fellowship at Makerere where he was instrumental in bringing about radical changes in the institution’s English department. The department was subsequently reconstituted as African Literature Department with African Literature occupying a central place with focus on World Literature rather than English Literature.

Ngugi’s understanding of literature takes into account the deeply embedded socio-cultural, ideological assumptions underlying literary production, dissemination and studies. He rigorously argued that literature can never be analysed outside the domain of history and society as it “does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society” (Ngugi 1973: XV). As such, it exhibits certain values held in the respective societies and the coloniser’s perspective lies in the attempt to naturalize their values, reflected through their literature, to the colonized peoples as being universal and human. Ngugi affirms the heinous role played by Western Literature to annihilate and obliterate the African’s belief in himself. Literature as disseminated by the colonial apparatus in Africa inevitably performed the crucial role of imposing Western ideas and values. Deeply embedded colonial values inherent in the continued perpetuation of English literature in African Universities, represented a study of literature without context. Lashing out at the anachronism and ahistorical tendency evident in the obsession with the coloniser’s literature in the post-independence phase, he argued rigorously for a contextual study of literature:

The truth is that the content of our syllabi, the approach to and presentation of the literature, the persons and the machinery for determining the choice of texts and their interpretation, were all an integral part of the same imperialism but now in its neo-colonial phase (Ngugi 1981:6:5).
His conflict with the authorities in Nairobi University underscores the undaunted struggle against cultural imperialism evident in the era of neo-colonialism.

Invited to teach African Literatures at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, Ngugi obtained an invaluable experience to encounter class and race divisions at close proximity. Racism, imperialism and neo-colonialism still loomed large in the American society with its ghettos and slums; cleavages and chasms present in the ‘land of liberty’ gave him a penetrating insight into the dynamics and *modus operandi* of neo-imperialism. During his stay in America, he started writing his fourth novel *Petals of Blood*. Returning to Nairobi University in 1971, he rejoined the English Department which was soon transformed into the Department of Literature. The following year saw the publication of *Homecoming: Essays on African and Carribean Literature, Culture and Politics* which included the Leeds dissertation on Carribean Literature. In the essays, the radicality colouring the tone and tenor of his thoughts and ideas can be seen clearly. Rejecting moderate ideologies of liberal humanism, Ngugi tries to analyse literature, society and culture from a Marxist standpoint. The anti-colonial writings of Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon influenced him to a considerable extent. The essays deal with the ‘cultural impoverishment’ of Africa and the disturbing realities in post-independence African society. Describing capitalism as the matrix of all colonial aspirations, he asserts that European capitalist expansionism, reflected in the relentless effort to export capital and control overseas markets, has affected every single aspect of life in Africa. From trade and commerce to the inhuman practice of slavery where Africans were forcibly captured and sold as merchandise to live and work in subhuman conditions in the cotton plantations in Congo, the gold and diamond mines in South Africa and subsequent conquest and colonization of Africa through a mad scramble amongst European powers, Africa has been relegated to the status of an impoverished existence. As a result of the upheavals brought by the forces of time and history, the African socio-cultural landscape has undergone tremendous changes. However, despite the changes and distinct differences among various African cultures, “art was functional and it was not, as it was in modern European society, severed from the physical, social and religious needs of the community” (Ngugi 1973:6). The transformation or changes reflect a general trend of ‘cultural impoverishment’ where Euro-American values of art were thrust upon the African mind.

After his visit to Yalta in the Soviet Union in 1975, where he was able to see socialism in actual working conditions, he published a collection of short stories entitled *Secret*
Lives. It reflects his continuing preoccupation and concerns with post-independence Kenyan society. The stories deal with the harsh realities of sordid degeneration and disintegration of life, the misery of the poverty-stricken masses, the wretched conditions of workers and increasing indifference and apathy of the comprador bourgeoisie. The following year, Ngugi collaborated with Professor Micere Mugo to write one of the most popular plays in modern African literature, *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, which revolved round the heroic character of Kimathi who sacrificed his life during the historic Mau Mau rebellion. The play depicts the insidious nexus between the colonial power and the indigenous elite who were ready to betray the land and people for their own personal gains. Ngugi’s persistent efforts to expose the myth of ‘political independence’ amidst growing dependence on the developed capitalist countries, escalating poverty, unemployment and brutal exploitation of the people earned him a lot of contempt and suspicion from Kenyan authorities. Publication of his widely acclaimed novel *Petals of Blood* along with his active involvement in a theatre movement at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, Limuru in 1977 brought him into a great deal of trouble with the authorities. The theatre project at Kamiriithu was propelled by an impending desire to make literature relevant to its actual conditions of production. He was in search for a space where his creative sensibility could actually interact with the people about whom he was writing. Kamiriithu happens to be one of the villages established by the Britishers during the Mau Mau period to snap links between the villagers and the rebels. Such villages continued to live in abject poverty even after independence in 1963. They were either brutally exploited by Kenya’s burgeoning multinational industries owned and controlled by foreign capitalists or by the indigenous bourgeoisie on whose land they toiled as poor peasants. Ngugi’s aim was to provide a functional and living relationship between the theatre and the people. The project started functioning in 1976 with the peasant and workers actually performing their lived experience in the plays. Ngugi succeeded in creating a profound awareness of the neo-colonial situation amongst the workers and peasants:

Kamiriithu was not an aberration, but an attempt at reconnection with the broken roots of African civilization and its traditions of theatre. In its very location in a village with the kind of social classes described above, Kamiriithu was the answer to the question of the real substance of a national theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama. Indeed Kamiriithu reconnected itself to the national tradition of the empty space of language, of content and of form (Ngugi 1986:42).
Along with Ngugi wa Mirc, Ngugi wa Thing' o' wrote a play entitled Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will Marry When I Want) which dealt with the gross injustice and exploitation in modern Kenya. Set in post-independence Kenya, the play exposes the relationship between the wealthy capitalists and poor peasants of Kenya. It quickly became so popular among the people that controversy sparked off snowballing into objections and ban from the authorities and finally the burning of the community centre into ashes by the government in 1977. Shortly after this incident, Ngugi was picked up by the police on 31st December, 1977, on the pretext of ‘routine questioning’, and detained without trial for almost one year. He was imprisoned in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison without trial, tortured and humiliated:

... I was daily locked in cell 16 for twenty two hours. The remaining two hours were distributed to cover the daily chores of emptying the chamberpot topful with shit and urine, of gulping down the breakfast, lunch and supper of porridge, ugali, worm infested beans and rotten vegetables; and of sunshine and exercise (Ngugi 1981a:20)

Engaged in a silent struggle to maintain his sanity, resilience and sheer determination kept him away from insanity and mental breakdown as he bitterly fought a silent battle with an unseen enemy. In a significant act of courage and resistance, Ngugi wrote down, on scraps of toilet paper, his experience in prison. Details of his prison routine, humiliation and torture fill these prison notes published later under the title Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary(1981). This crucial act of writing on toilet paper during detention also included one of his most remarkable experiments — the attempt to write a novel in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. He wrote the manuscript of his novel in Gikuyu, Caithani Mutharaba which was later translated and published in English under the title Devil on the Cross (1982). Like his intriguing arrest and detention without trial, Ngugi was released from prison without any apparent explanation and reason on 12th December, 1978. On his release, he requested the authorities of Nairobi University for restoration of his position as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Literature only to find rejection. With repeated requests turned down uncere-moniously, he decided to leave for England to settle down as a full time writer. Keeping in view, his ideals and conviction to struggle against neo-colonialism, he has written and published extensively in England — Writers in Politics, Barrel of a Pen, Decolonising the Mind and Matigari.

Acutely aware of the insidious politics of neo-colonialism, Ngugi calls for a radical reorganisation of African society in a bid to erase the sharp divisions. Debunking the myth of
Africa as a static entity devoid of culture, tradition and society prior to the advent of European colonisers who ironically conceived themselves as apostles of civilization, culture and progress, he discerns the urgent need to break the shackles of colonial legacies implicit in many aspects of African life in the post-independence phase. The quest for an authentically representative national culture should resuscitate confidence and belief in the peoples’ ability to move towards an order marked by egalitarianism and fair distribution of social wealth. Colonial attitudes persisting in the class of the elite, who in Fanon’s view had already negotiated with the colonizers during the colonial period collaborating with them for specific interests and advantages, need to be effectively erased so as to achieve a meaningful break with colonialism. Vestiges of colonialism imprinted in their consciousness become responsible for a pervasive obsession with European values and outlook. This, in turn, inversely fuels a rupture in the society whereby their dominant positions still perpetuate a culture of exploitation and subjugation of the masses. Their self-serving ideology erected on the mythical foundations of parochialism — tribe, ethnicity and race — dubiously perpetrate divisive politics while they collaborate with the capitalist countries. With the collapse of pre-colonial social structures, tribe is a virtual non-entity as he correctly assessed that there are only “two tribes left in Africa: the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’” (Ngugi 1973: XVII). In his view, to look for a truly meaningful national culture implies a compelling need to break away from capitalism whose imperialistic stages — colonialism and neo-colonialism — have produced a culture contradictory to the essence of humanity.

Deeply aligned to this practice of economic subjugation is the phenomenon of cultural imperialism. Developed, refined and propagated through various ways and means during the colonial period, neo-colonial Africa has witnessed an obnoxious influence of cultural imperialism. Calling it by the name of ‘cultural bomb,’ Ngugi views cultural imperialism as the most disturbing and potentially threatening phenomenon in modern Africa as its pernicious grip dislocates and dispossesses a people of their culture, language, tradition, heritages and history. It effectively aims to erase a people’s belief in their unity by instilling a repulsive attitude to their past. Rejection of the uncritical acceptance of Western Values implies a radical assessment of socio-cultural institutions in post-colonial Africa. The centrality of literature and education in generating this kind of sensibility eschews a rigorous critique of existing patterns deeply fraught with colonial ideologies. Literature and education need to be
placed in proper perspective as a growing sense of inferiority instilled in the African student made him clamour for more and more of Western literature and education. It presented him with images of the European as the benevolent distributor of civilization and progress to the colonised world. A Western oriented education confines the African student to European perspectives; he or she finds it relatively comfortable to assess and evaluate the world through a European viewpoint. A reductive and myopic outlook, extremely remote and alien to African realities, grips him. Ngugi calls for a critical re-evaluation of Western oriented education in post-colonial Africa:

It is time we realized that the European imperialist bourgeois experience of history as reflected in their art and literature is not the universal experience of history. Moreover, their history has largely been one of exploitation, oppression and elimination of other peoples (Ngugi 1981 b:38).

Education, literature and arts in Africa should necessarily address questions of empire and imperialism. Contrary to the European imperialist aesthetics of exploitation and domination, the African student should develop in an aesthetics which interrogate and contest the legitimacy and relevance of this cultural imperialism.

The African writer sees writing not as an activity confined to the realm of his private thoughts and feelings but as a cultural activity involved in the active process of a community’s ontological experience. Writing becomes a highly charged act loaded not merely with creative efforts to entertain readers but also to persuade. It participates in the ‘community’s struggles’ against exploitative forces responsible for the perpetuation of an asymmetrical society. For Ngugi, African Literature is characterised by an ‘anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist’ tendency aimed at restoring the African character from the colonizer’s distortions. His radical ideology takes him further in a process of delineating the politics of writing. Writers are located within the parameters of society and history, inevitably conditioned by sociopolitical, historical and material circumstances. Therefore, writing as a conscious act cannot transcend the vicissitudes of these circumstances; there is no writing which stands outside society and history. Writing as a conscious act needs to be discussed by taking into account the conflicts and contradictions inherent in society. A writer’s assumptions, the choice of his subject, the language of his imaginative expression, the liberty he exercises in expressing his
views, necessarily reflect his position. Ngugi identifies class as a crucial factor in a writer’s exercise of his creative imagination:

... literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose is one or the other side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (Ngugi 1981b:xii).

The question of class evokes a mixture of uneasiness and discomfort amongst African writers as they continue to struggle against the inhuman denigration of African culture and arts. Ngugi strikes a note of caution to the African writer who is constantly exposed to the perils of immersing wholly in the past, getting too fascinated with the rigours of history thereby overlooking or deriding the stark realities of the neo-colonial present. The African writer needs to locate himself within the neo-colonial space even as he engages with the past. Rejecting and repudiating the neo-colonial character of post-independence Africa, he should build up solidarity with other struggling peoples of Asia and Latin America. The writings should reflect the aspirations of the oppressed and exploited. With a call to show commitment to the actual struggle of the exploited people across the world, Ngugi firmly endorses the struggle against the residual effects of colonialism in Africa and elsewhere.
Notes

1. This view is supported by David Carroll. Chinua Achebe (London: Macmillan, 1980) 25.


4. The impact of this festival could be seen in the numerous journals and writings that emerged in its aftermath. An interesting account is given in Bernth Lindfors. Early Nigerian Literature (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982)

5. The seminal thesis developed in this article remains central to Achebe’s position. “Where Angels Fear to Tread”. Nigeria Magazine. Lagos No. 75 1962.


7. An exposition of Frantz Fanon’s ideas can be seen in Homi K. Babha. The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994).


9. Mention can be made of the natives in Canada, aborigines of Australia and New Zealand whose oral traditions emphasize the collective aspect of art.


12. It is interesting to note that this essay was first delivered as a speech at Makerere University in 1968 during the period of intense fighting between federal and Biafran forces.


