CHAPTER – V

CONCLUSION

The fiction which imaginative literature offers us … does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of an orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and human conscience.

- Chinua Achebe

_Hopes and Impediments_ (1990, 153)

This study had posited certain questions at the outset about the legitimacy of critiquing the postcolonial construct through a re-reading of Chinua Achebe’s novels. In the subsequent chapters the answers to the questions have been detailed. The answers pave the way for a new reading of texts by writers who have so long been placed within the postcolonial canon. Today postcolonialism and postcolonial methods of reading appear to be out of step in a world where divisions are based on powers which control transnational transactions. Those who have access to information are also hopelessly compromised by what is known as the “digital divide.” The term digital divide is identical with the meaning knowledge divide which refers to the gap between people with access to digital and information technology and those with very limited or no access at all. The dividing line is very often determined by location, income and gender etc. In this changed scenario one cannot continue to hold on to the political history of colonisation. Ania Loomba, et al., are of the view that “…the term postcolonial studies has outlived its utility.”¹ This holds true in today’s context which has seen a widening of historical scope, expansion of subject matter and an adoption of new
analytical methods of study which no longer allow one to limit reading within the ‘postcolonial’ paradigm.

The questions raised concerning the relevance of the term and its use in literature have become even more relevant today with well known writers like Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie expressing their unease with terms like ‘Commonwealth Literature.’ Salman Rushdie in his essay “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist” says that Commonwealth Literature has been “created solely by critics and academics.” He adds that this is “partly as a result of the physical colonisation of a quarter of the globe by the British” but “its present-day pre-eminence is not solely – perhaps not even primarily – the result of the British legacy. It is also the effect of the primacy of the United States of America in the affairs of the world.”

Achebe also agrees with the view when he writes in Anthills of the Savannah, “It does not seem to me that the English can do much harm to anybody today… The real danger today is from that fat, adolescent and delinquent millionaire, America…”

Amitav Ghosh in his letter to the Commonwealth Foundation withdrawing his novel The Glass Palace (2000), from the Commonwealth Prize wrote that the phrase “commonwealth”, …anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past. His refusal to place his writing within the limits imposed by the term shows that he considers it a restrictive appellation. Though history may intrude on the present, today’s situation demands that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations to move beyond the stereotypes of postcolonial discourse, as the present-day realities do not allow literature to be confined within the restraints imposed by terms like ‘Commonwealth Literature’ or ‘Postcolonial Literature.’

The Commonwealth of Nations was formed as a voluntary organisation of former British colonies where all territories shared a history of cultural colonialism. Their shared history
included the imposition of the English language and British educational, political and religious institutions, and economic systems. The writings in English from Commonwealth countries evoke new forms of expression as a counter discourse to the coloniser’s version. However, such writings also have their limitations as they also signify a response of sorts to the event of colonisation.

More than half a century has gone by since the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, but even now the novel remains as historically significant as ever. Achebe’s novels no longer require to be placed only within the canon of postcolonial literature, just as he cannot be viewed only as a Commonwealth writer since to do that would mean to gloss over the universal vision embodied in his writings. Achebe interprets the present with reference to the humane qualities of his community and uses the powerful tool of storytelling to expose and attack all forms of injustice. The stories are peppered with current social, political and cultural vignettes without much reference to history. This asserts the validity of the African world view and cultural context in opposition to the Eurocentric claims of imperial powers.

A re-reading of Chinua Achebe’s novels corroborates Foucault central claim that knowledge is power. This is to say that literary texts have a central role to play in the construction of culture and knowledge. There is an increasing tendency among writers of today to see literature as a space and a medium to voice, account for, express and demonstrate narratives of prejudice, oppression, sufferings and survival, resulting from specific social and political dynamics of societies. Today when Foucault’s statement appears more relevant than ever before with writers all over the world seeking knowledge from various sources to possess power and assume control over far-reaching changes, Achebe’s works stand out from the rest. They are unique because they speak of the freedom of the human spirit which refuses to be crushed by any form of oppression, perpetuated either by the colonisers or the enemies
from within. This makes it viable to theorise the commonalities shared by writers who write against oppression and deprivation, for they are the new voices in world literature.

In course of re-reading the five novels, written by Achebe, he comes across as one of the foremost theoreticians of African literary criticism as well as a significant novelist. No syllabus or course on Postcolonial Literature/ Commonwealth Literature/ New Literatures in English is complete without a text from Achebe’s repertory. The presence of Achebe’s works in academic curricula highlights the relevance of his stories which are centered on contemporary social and political realities. This leads one to suggest a new paradigm on the way his works are to be read.

Achebe’s novels are often read against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). All of his novels are also viewed as postcolonial texts narrating the story of his people and his nation through the various stages of colonisation – beginning with the arrival of the first Europeans in *Things Fall Apart*; the presence of well-established religious and administrative institutions in *Arrow of God*; Nigeria on the eve of independence in *No Longer at Ease*; the prevailing corruption after independence in *A Man of the People* and in *Anthills of the Savannah*. These readings have placed Achebe within the canon of Postcolonial Literature and today he is considered to be one of the major writers within this canon. Such a limited reading through the postcolonial lens does not seem relevant anymore. They may have been relevant at the time they were written or when comparative studies of texts by Conrad, Cary and Greene had been made. But one cannot continue to limit one’s readings and ideally should look out for new ways of reading.

Achebe who was critical of Conrad’s picture of Africa as “grossly inadequate” says, “Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the
peculiar gift of his own mind to bear on it.” Achebe’s novels show that the world has “to rid its mind of old prejudices” and “look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people - not angels, but not rudimentary souls either – just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society.” Achebe accumulates the spiritual experience of his people to draw the exact picture of his own time and nation in his writings. His stories are not of great heroes but of ordinary people and are a sensitive record of the predicaments faced by them. He points out the mistakes in human history and as a writer identifies himself with the social and political movements that typify the aspirations of the African people in their fight for freedom and human rights.

This celebration of the power of literature, imagination and the significance of African culture in Achebe’s works also serves to indicate that the present generation of Nigerians no longer view the engagement with the colonial as absolutely necessary. Since the empire no longer exists, writers do not need to write back to the centre or resist imperial constructs. As Achebe says, “The time has come once more for us, artists and writers of today, to take up the good work and by doing it to enrich not only our own lives but the life of the world.” In his latest work *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2010), Achebe offers reflections on personal and collective identity on home and family, on literature, language and politics, on his life-long attempt to reclaim the definition of Africa for its own authorship. There was a time when he had held a passport which defined him as a “British Protected Person” and today his passport calls him a “Citizen of Nigeria.” This change has been due to historical and political causes about which he says, “My transition from British Protected Person to Nigerian citizen is one man’s participation in a monumental ritual by millions and millions to appease a long and troubled history of dispossession and bitterness.” This vexed and bitter
history is viewed by Achebe as a “chance encounter”13 with Europe and not as the beginning of his people’s history as he refuses to privilege that one event in history.

Not attaching too much of an importance to the period of colonial history also means that the ‘post’ situation also needs to come to an end. This period after the independence of the erstwhile colonies cannot remain an unmarked and endless period and thereby limit our reading of texts through the parameters of postcolonial theory. The engagement with theory should be an ongoing process and must allow the reader to read a text beyond the parameters suggested by one theory or the other. One may recollect what Jonathan Culler says about theory not leading to “harmonious solutions.”14 He says that theory “… offers not a set of solutions but the prospect for further thought. It calls for commitment to the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you can proceed.”15 This study shows how Achebe’s novels offer a critique of the postcolonial construct. It refers to critics from Africa like Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Leopold Senghor besides others like Simon Gikandi, Chidi Okonkwo and Emmanuel Chukwudi who through their well-informed writings of the African experience enrich our reading. Their works help us to look beyond western criticism of literature from Africa.

Africa, a vast, intimidating continent, where humanity was born, colonised and brutalised for centuries by western powers, crushed by the inhuman system of apartheid has great stories to tell about the triumph of the human spirit. The continent has been a witness to the horror and pain of the transatlantic slave trade, racism and partition ordered by the Berlin Conference. The ‘scramble for Africa’ by European powers not only divided people along boundary lines but also drained the continent’s rich natural resources. Hence, the shared history of India and African countries go beyond the colonial encounter.

Writing specifically about Nigeria, one can say that both India and Nigeria share a rich tradition of storytelling, everyday rituals, festivals and respect for communal harmony. Both
nations have a rich oral tradition and boast of equally great writers. This is something that even Achebe acknowledges when he writes in *Anthills of the Savannah*, “…the best English these days is written either by Africans or Indians” (57). Along with our connection with the written word which helps us to transcend borders to reach out and touch the finer sensibilities, our relations with Nigeria are worth a brief examination.

India and Nigeria were colonies of the British empire. India supported the independence movements of different African countries and had even set up its diplomatic mission in 1958, two years before Nigeria gained independence. Since the restoration of democracy in 1998, Nigeria like India has become the largest democracy in Africa. The two countries have a diverse religious and ethnic population, possess natural and economic resources and are the largest economies in their regions. Bilateral relations between the Republic of India and the Federal Republic of Nigeria have considerably expanded in recent years with both nations building strategic and commercial ties. Both countries are members of the Commonwealth of Nation, G-77 and the Non-Aligned Movement.

M.K. Gandhi had once said, “The commerce between India and Africa will be of ideas and services, not of the manufactured goods against raw materials after the fashion of the Western exploiters.” Achebe’s works have served as an introduction to African literature for Indian readers, as his contribution to the exchange of ideas is the most significant among African writers. His works have been translated into many Indian languages. Indian readers have been drawn to African literature because it reflects their own aspirations. The uniqueness of the African world and its universality which bridges all impediments is explained by Soyinka as:

Man exists … in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context the African world, like nay other ‘world’ is unique. It possesses, however in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity.
M.M. Mahood adds that, “A recognition of the positive values that bind a society together … has prevented the communities of West Africa – in contrast to some in the other parts of the continent – from falling totally apart.” These positive values can be found in Achebe’s novels and they serve to counter the failures of protagonists. The failure of individuals does upset the order, but the strong presence of the community does not allow it to fall apart.

Another aspect of African literature which draws one’s attention is the protest articulated by writers against issues which are both practical and urgent. Soyinka says, “Our function is primarily to project those voices that, despite massive repression, continue to place their government on notice.” Today, African writers write against the repressive policies of their own home-grown dictators. Writers in Africa no longer view colonialism as the only fountainhead of oppression. This is why Ngugi says that, “…scholars of economics and politics have recognised imperialism as a social force in Africa but literary scholars are suspicious of it.”

Many years after freedom from colonial rule, writers now focus on the present realities. Ngugi writes, “Literature is of course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and values governing human relationships.”

It is this concern with human relationships that prompts Achebe to look inwards and draw more deeply from indigenous resources, resurrecting folktales and myths to creatively interpret his world. He seems to believe that even as the world strives for economic growth it must be accompanied by a search for abiding values sustained by the creative energy of stories which offer a constructive means to cope with threats and are also the harbingers of reform and change. Achebe’s novels transform the purpose of the story, weaning it away from the aesthetic ends to consecrate it to the more concrete goal of ushering in a social change.
On being asked by Simon Gikandi as to how he imagined that telling a story could change the way Africa had been represented and what made him have so much faith in the idea of the storyteller or storytelling, Achebe replied:

…stories were very powerful because they moved me …they were not stories of war, …great kingdoms, they were folktales, stories about the tortoise and so on. I was moved by those. I was fascinated. I was drawn to them.22

This powerful tool of storytelling helps Achebe to explore the unique ability that stories have to connect people and universalise human experiences. It is not just in Achebe’s works but also in the writings of the Nigerian novelists – Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ben Okri, Gabrial Okara, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that one comes across a wealth of stories. Their stories embrace all the varied themes such as the decadence of modern Africa, imaginative journeys to the world of spirits, travails of the soul, the sufferings of women and the Biafran War.

If one is to read them only as postcolonial texts, such readings would not yield much that would be new. These works defy the “empire writes back” model. The issue of colonialism is not relevant as far as these writings are concerned and they write about other aspects of their history like the Biafran War. Their writings cannot simply be viewed as oppositional to the imperial construct but as literature from a nation which express the aspirations, fears, longings and values of their people. Their works celebrate the power of literature, the power of imagination and the power of culture and tradition of Nigeria and Africa. As Nigerian writers, they write within a particular national context and not just within the ambit of either Commonwealth or Postcolonial literature. This group of writers are involved in the task of presenting the spiritual experience of their race through the long years of struggle for survival. The ‘post’ situation appears to have ended for them as they have moved on to
themes like the notion of paradise in our modern civilisation (Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia*) which has no bearing on a colonial past.

The second chapter, “Storyteller/Writer as Mediator,” focuses on the role of writers in bringing about paradigmatic shifts in thinking and more particularly Achebe’s role as a writer. He uses the traditional African art of storytelling to mediate on the debate on location. Achebe’s cultural inheritance enables him to foreground the life history and sensibilities of his people. The theoretical self-sufficiency of African knowledge systems helps him to seek out an integrated form of knowledge of the past where to know is to possess power. The power to write the story of his people cannot be viewed as the postcolonial norm of rewriting but has to be seen as emanating from a felt need to tell a story that needs to be told, of representing unregistered voices and events and even foregrounding them.

One is tempted to observe that the power of the story and the storyteller’s role can best be studied in the African context since storytelling is an integral part of the African oral tradition. From the traditional storytellers or the *griots* to the modern day writers, the story has remained a part of African life. The importance of the story is also significant because stories from Africa have been misrepresented and distorted by outsiders who wrote them with a myopic view and a limited understanding of the African way of life. There is also the issue which Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to – “…a strongly felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa.”

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe writes, “There is no story that is not true.” And in *Anthills of the Savannah* he writes, “…storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit” (141). Both these statements express Achebe’s views on the story and the storyteller as he places great responsibilities on modern storytellers. Achebe fictionalises the condition of writers, artists
and activists under the repressive Nigerian regime. He also articulates the concern of writers from the Third World in *Anthills of the Savannah*:

…writers in the Third World context must not stop at the stage of documenting social problems but move to the higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions. (148)

There is no mention of rewriting or reasserting their past or writing back to the centre of an empire which does not exist anymore. Instead there is a suggestion of moving ahead and writing on new themes that can alter accepted views.

The five novels studied here show the close relation that Achebe has with his people as he creates a new world of experience, transcending boundaries and the limits imposed by theory. Even as he represents his nation’s realities his novels forward messages of universal wisdom. He affirms the educational function of literature and establishes a human context for understanding Nigeria. Achebe’s novels insistently connect to specific political situations. His works have kept pace with the unfolding developments of his nation’s history as he believes, “…literature must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destinies of its people.”

Achebe strives to communicate the human complexity of Nigerian existence, to establish the independence of African literature and to demonstrate the values of traditional Igbo culture. In the third chapter, Achebe’s well articulated views on the precolonial African past have already been highlighted. Through his novels Achebe attempts to restore the sense of dignity and self-respect in his people. C.L Innes and Bernth Lindfors say that the”…apparent simplicity of Achebe’s novels is deceptive and …the discerning reader may discover beneath their surface a complex and subtle interplay of values and attitudes.”

As literature is subjected to strategies of appropriation, manipulation, oppression and marginalisation, Achebe contests and intervenes in the hegemonic misrepresentation of Africa by setting up alternative images and accounts of Africa, its people and their culture.
His representation is both sympathetic and realistic. He makes a strenuous effort to reclaim the embedded history of his people. He depicts a world where his people move between allegiances to traditional beliefs and values and the values introduced by colonialism and derives an immanent African epistemological order from it. Achebe’s fictional world that highlights his nation’s past (its traditional culture, practices, religion, beliefs) and also visits the present (its corruption, ethnic clashes and political instability) provides an alternative epistemology. Achebe uses the knowledge of his people to seek out another way of knowing, which is outside the restrictive system of western methodology. He bares the politics of knowledge thus critiquing the Euro-centric position.

*Things Fall Apart* reflects the human condition in a situation ruined by internal factors against the background of great historical change. Achebe depicts the history of his people, not only through the tragedy of Okonkwo but also through his many images of man’s helplessness in the face of historical upheavals which alter human lives. The theme of colonialism is introduced only towards the end of the novel. Achebe’s narration implies that the District Commissioner will represent very little of Okonkwo’s life in his book and overlook his heroic life. Achebe subtly reveals how the coloniser’s view of Africa and Africans ran contrary to what he had narrated earlier about the Igbo community, the village of Umuofia and the lives of Okonkwo and other great men of the clan. What prevents *Things Fall Apart* from being cast as a novel that ‘writes back’ is that in this novel Achebe has narrated a story that goes back to a time long before the coming of the coloniser. It is a story complete in itself if one were to view it as the story of Okonkwo whose death would have ended the story. But the telling gesture of placing the coloniser’s version of Okonkwo’s life within the space of a paragraph, triggers a movement back to the story as if to highlight the nature of subversion in the colonialist’s version.
Achebe narrates the story of a people and their world, their social and religious structures along with their faults and weaknesses as humans. In their world there is a precarious balance effected between the spiritual and the material. There are also dark social practices such as discarding twins at birth and human sacrifice that are referred to. Through the depiction of incidents like the killing of Ikemefuna and the helplessness of the people, Achebe admits before the world that Africans themselves have the courage to know and acknowledge the scourges within their society and as for the writers, there is a willingness to write about them. Achebe does not shy away from depicting the imperfections and injustices of his society which prevailed prior to the coming of the colonisers. The traditional society with all its glory and strength had disintegrated under the formidable external force of imperialism and the self-destructive impulse of the individual from within. Achebe’s refusal to blame only the colonial rule and his recognition of the failures of his own people forces one to reconsider the postcolonial position.

Achebe’s recreation of the past presents the socio-historical crises which existed even before the arrival of the coloniser. The past is shown as neither a savage condition nor an ideal era. He does not make any attempt to present his society as conforming to the standards set by the colonisers. This sets Achebe apart from other postcolonial writers who have ended up writing hagiographies.

Okonkwo’s saga brings alive the story of a hero’s failure which is rarely found in “anti-colonial” fiction. Okonkwo like the other protagonists in Achebe’s novels does not emerge victorious. He stands revealed as someone weak and unwilling to accept changes. He is also guilty of homicide and stands strongly condemned. The incident of Okonkwo having a hand in Ikemefuna’s killing calls our attention to the dark side of Africa’s precolonial history. Ikemefuna’s killing is to be read not as a representation of Africa’s failure (as seen through the eyes of the west) but as the personal failure of Okonkwo. Achebe narrates how even at
such critical moments there are people who feel that the oracle’s verdict to kill Ikemefuna was wrong. They had warned Okonkwo not to participate in Ikemefuna’s killing. The seriousness of Okonkwo’s offence is discussed many years after the happening in *No Longer at Ease*.

Thus in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe has narrated the story of a community through its years of peace and turmoil, its festivals and village meetings, through ceremonies deciding on the bride price and funerals. Through everyday activities of the people he has shown how there are destructive impulses within the members of his community which along with the inimical external forces lead them to chaos. While the majority of the community accept changes, there are a few who rebel and met their sad ends. This is the sad saga of human society.

*Arrow of God* offers a glimpse of the harmony in Igbo culture. The twin festivals of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam characterise the interaction between the individual and the community. Achebe gives a powerful description of the historical condition that prevailed during the early period of colonisation to represent the power relations which marked the transitional period in colonial history. Power exercised as this novel shows is both religious and administrative in its orientation. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the village deity of Umuaro holds traditional authority not only in religious matters but also in secular affairs. At the same time he is open to change and sends one of his sons to be educated by the missionaries. He spends long hours discussing his religion and Christianity and even challenges his own community on occasions. Though he welcomes positive changes like education and development brought about by the British, he draws a line between his relation with them and his role as a priest.

Through Ezeulu’s refusal to eat the sacred yam (based on a real incident) Achebe delineates the spread of Christianity and the problems engendered by the colonial policies. The spread of Christianity in Nigeria has been attributed to missionary activities which were
encouraged by the colonisers. In their search for “gold, glory and God” they often indulged in forced conversions. But Achebe highlights that there were internal factors also at work which caused people to abandon their old ways of worship and embrace the new religion. Old practices like the osu, the throwing away of twins at birth had led individuals (for example, Okonkwo’s son Nwoye and Nneka in Things Fall Apart) to embrace the new religion. The priests like Ezeulu who abandoned their people at critical moments willy-nilly caused them to look to members of the new faith for succour. One can even link this to social practices in India like the caste system and untouchability which also helped in the spread of Christianity. While recognising the internal factors, Achebe does not fail to mention the incentives offered by the church such as education, monetary benefits and the promise of jobs in the British administration that also induced people to accept the new faith. Arrow of God reveals a view of how Christianity spread in colonies and presents the strengths and weaknesses of both Igbo traditional beliefs and of Christianity.

Achebe also narrates how the British administration used Igbo practices to make inroads into the traditional order. By imposing indirect rule in Nigeria, the British ruled over a people who were already familiar with democratic ways. There are administrators like Captain Winterbottom who live up to the white man’s burden theory and work for the development of the district, whereas the new officers do not make any effort to understand the people. There are also the warrant chiefs and the local supervisors who turn corrupt and exploit their own people. Achebe narrates how internal forces aided colonial oppression.

In Arrow of God Achebe depicts how colonial rule encouraged the spread of education and development and at the same time sowed the seeds of corruption. Achebe’s critique of the coloniser’s deployment of religion, education and development to further the achievement of certain goals reveal the problems within the colonial policies and also the corruption and changing values of the Nigerian people. A microscopic group of people were the
beneficiaries of foreign rule and their misappropriation of the benefits led to serious consequences even after independence. *No Longer at Ease* narrates how converting to Christianity or receiving missionary education and even western education does not change or improve the conditions of Obi’s family. It does not change the state of Ezeulu’s household either though he too had sent his son to receive missionary education.

*Arrow of God* focuses on the aspects of religion, education and development through the story of Ezeulu. A postcolonial reading would limit a reading of the novel to a study of how the British made inroads into Igbo territory. But Achebe offers another view of this stage of colonisation. He presents a view of a society which had its own god Ulu to protect the clan, was self-sufficient in its knowledge systems (the chief priest had his own ways of calculating the days of the year and days marking festivals) and was prosperous. Like all other human societies, the village of Umuaro also had people who misused power, whether religious or administrative. Ezeulu’s pride in his priesthood and his refusal to eat the sacred yams has far-reaching consequences for himself and his community.

It is this human side of the story that does not allow one to read *Arrow of God* as only a narration of the colonial era. Achebe does not write about any protest against the British or any struggle for freedom, but narrates the lives of ordinary people which are altered by the changing power equations. Unlike Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* Ezeulu is willing to accept change; yet he fails because of his pride. And like Okonkwo’s suicide, Ezeulu’s madness marks the end of another story depicting the hero’s failure.

*No Longer at Ease*, set in Nigeria at the threshold of independence, raises questions about its readiness for freedom from foreign rule. Achebe mentions Nigeria for the first time in this novel and shows its transition from the village communities to a coherent national identity. The story represents the economic and ideological nature of the transition and not the political changes. The widespread corruption in Nigeria is identified as the central problem in
course of the narrative. Corruption is seen as the fundamental hindrance to Nigeria’s development. Along with the question of Nigeria’s readiness for independence, Achebe also discusses the corruption among the educated elite and how they in turn threaten the traditional bonds of community.

Achebe’s view of Nigeria on the eve of independence is not a hopeful one. The impending crisis is felt by both the nation as well as by Obi causing the readers to wonder at the sense of commitment of the leaders and their sensitivity to the aspirations of the people. Even British officers like Mr. Green are skeptical about allowing Nigerians to rule themselves. This is what Achebe suggests – “Our people have a long way to go” (203). Even as he holds his own people responsible for the prevailing conditions, he does not fail to appreciate the role of those British officers who worked hard for the development of Nigeria. At the same time he also mentions the feeling of racial superiority in some of them. The novel shows how the only hope for deliverance lay in the sense of community symbolised by the Umuofia Progressive Union. As Achebe wonders about the fate of his nation, he makes a shift from the parameters of postcolonial discourse. He neither presents heroes who would lead the nation to independence nor does he present a united nation, for tribalism had begun to divide people on ethnic lines. Achebe’s commitment as a writer is to show the real state of things and not create an ideal world.

No Longer at Ease, Achebe’s first novel set in an urban locale is primarily read as a sequel to Things Fall Apart, as a continuation of the story from Okonkwo to his grandson Obi. There is a long gap in the sequence of events from the days before the coming of the colonisers in Things Fall Apart to the years before Nigeria’s independence in No Longer at Ease. The novel narrates an individual’s failure in his professional and personal life. Obi’s efforts to rise above the average corrupt Nigerian ironically lands him in the quagmire of corruption. His desire for individual freedom (symbolised by his relationship with Clara)
alienates him from his family and his community. Obi’s personal crisis is narrated against the backdrop of the nation’s crises. And as the title suggests, a sense of restlessness prevails in the life of the protagonist and in the nation.

A re-reading of *No Longer at Ease* enables one to move beyond the historical frame of its setting in the pre-independence years and view it as a modern novel that uses modern narrative techniques to deal with the themes of disillusionment, restlessness and failure of relationships. The novel is set at various international settings as Obi moves from Lagos to London and back through Liverpool, Madeira, Freetown and Iguedo. Achebe also mentions Obi’s visit to the market town of Onitsha. There are references to texts from English Literature which Obi has studied and loves to read. But all these do not establish him as a hero. Instead he is shown as a symbol of the failure of Nigeria’s educated youth who are unable to offer any hope for the future. Obi’s conviction brings an end to what could have been a promising life for a young man.

Through Obi’s failure Achebe presents stories of man’s struggle against difficult situations. Individual failures during times of historical changes often go unregistered. Even though the story of Obi’s failure is not one generally told when stories of a new nation are being written, yet Achebe chose to write about Obi. He wrote it from the liminal position of a writer who is not at ease with the prevailing situation of corruption and loss of values.

*A Man of the People* examines Achebe’s perspective on the future and meaning of the Nigerian nation and how the novel becomes a space to initiate debates on the success and failure of nations. The themes of corruption, electoral violence and coups make the novel contemporary. The coup described in the novel turned out to be not only accurate but prophetic as well. By a strange coincidence, Major General Ironsi’s coup took place soon after the publication of the novel and forced Achebe and his family to stay in hiding. The persecution of writers and the threat to their lives under repressive regimes is one of the
themes of *Anthills of the Savannah*. The situation described in the novel has been witnessed by many newly independent African nations in the 1960s.

*A Man of the People* gives us Achebe’s political critique on Nigeria and its future and also reaffirms his commitment to write for a cause. Jago Morrison says,

In addressing the aftermath of independence in his fourth novel, the author captures an authentic sense of desperation at the failure of the nation to live up to its own hopes, including its failure to decisively slough off the negative effects of foreign domination.27

As the Director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Achebe occupied the position of a professional observer of the Nigerian political scene and this enabled him to gather material for his novels. Armed with this knowledge and his commitment, Achebe began his representation of Nigeria’s public life. He could write about “the seven bathroom mansions” as well as “the night soil men” equally well. There are no revolutionary leaders in this novel. Even characters like Odili and Max are not shown as intellectuals who can find solutions to the state of affairs or even inspire the people. The novel does not show any political upheaval and depicts military intervention as a temporary solution to a vexed problem. The novel ends with a coup that ends the violence and the prevailing disorder.

*A Man of the People* creates a space for a debate on the issues faced by the nation. More than the failure of the new leaders, the novel reflects the cynicism of the intellectuals and the common man. The novel raises the question whether military rule can help in the major post-independence task of nation building. Achebe’s contention seems to be that power can corrupt anyone.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe mentions the term “post-colonial” when he writes that it was an “...absurd raffle-draw that apportioned the destinies of post-colonial African
societies” (168). He also mentions a few times that Kangan is a “West African state” (151) and a “negritude country”(52). Achebe narrates the African conundrum where the continuity of history is determined by the political positioning of the narrators. Even in the “failure of … rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed” (130-131) there exists “a stubborn sense of community” (131). Stories of the nation are narrated through various techniques to make space for narrators like Chris, Ikem and Beatrice. Stories are told of Braimoh, Aina and Emmanuel who help Chris and Beatrice, and in turn participate in their nation’s change of guard. They are the community Benedict Anderson wrote about, ordinary people willing to make sacrifices for their nation. Even though Chris and Ikem die, their story lives on “like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year’s bush fires” (28). Storytellers in their turn continue to remain a threat as they “threaten all champions of control…” (141).

The art of storytelling has been used as a powerful tool to mediate changes in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe stands out in his role of the “novelist as teacher” because his stories empower the people, legitimise their fight against injustice and even depict their triumph. Achebe does not engage with the politics of rancour but looks within to reveal widespread condition of the suffering of his people. This is how the narrative transcends its historical context and takes a fresh look at the nation and its problems.

*Anthills of the Savannah* is also the novel where Achebe portrays a dictator, Sam. Though he is the dictatorial head of the state of Kangan, Sam has his own fears, doubts and a feeling of helplessness. He is tortured to death after a coup. Sam’s lack of contact with the people of Kangan, his refusal to meet the leaders from Abazon reveals the callous attitude of the government that does not meet the aspirations of the people. This failure of the state is counter balanced by the deep sense of community in the people of Abazon. This sense of the community is also symbolised by the small gathering at the end of the novel to name Ikem
and Elewa’s child. As they gather at Beatrice’s house and pray for the baby and the “life of Kangan” (212), Achebe mentions the white man. He writes, “We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families” (212). This refusal to censure the colonial rule is an indication that writers such as Achebe have taken their writings beyond the conventional limits of protest literature.

In his novels set during colonial rule, Achebe did not write about any armed struggle or freedom movement, but in this novel, set many years after independence, there are stories of bloodshed and sacrifice – Ikem’s death as a victim of the military junta and Chris’s death while trying to save Adamma from being raped by a soldier. These deaths are actually the sacrifices they make to rid the nation of its internal troubles. These troubles are the offshoots of the prevailing state of indiscipline and lawlessness.

*Anthills of the Savannah* deals most extensively with the issue of gender. Beatrice and Elewa represent the traditional African community, while the men – Chris, Ikem and Sam who succumb to the power relations are no longer capable of sharing the same feeling of brotherhood. Even women like Agatha who are not so quick in adapting to new ways, finally begin to share the joy of belonging to a community. Achebe does not try to create woman characters who embody feminist positions. Instead they are shown as participating in the universal saga of human suffering. Beatrice’s senior position in the government and her academic excellence at the University of London where she “beat the English to their game” (68) is the closest Achebe gets to describing her as a symbol of the modern Nigerian woman, “one of the most brilliant daughters of this country” (68).

Beatrice and Elewa belong to different sections of society but the wide gap in their status and education do not prevent them from looking forward to a common future. This female bonding is not based on the lines of colour but on their ability to overcome the grief of losing
the men they love and sharing the responsibility of bringing up Elewa’s daughter. They share the universal experience of women left alone to survive. Achebe does not present them as helpless women, but as women who are financially independent, emotionally stable, who can stand by the decisions they make about their lives. They are capable of mourning their loss even while they are proud of the sacrifices made by Chris and Ikem. After the death of Chris and Ikem when it is left to Beatrice to take the story over, it is as though Achebe is empowering women. But this is not something that is new to his people who named their daughters Nkolika, which means “Recalling-Is-Greatest” (114).

In Anthills of the Savannah one is captivated by the innovative narrative techniques used by Achebe and the gripping stories he narrates of his own race. Through the simple act of telling stories, Achebe delves into serious and contemporary themes like tribalism, students’ unrest, regionalism, freedom of expression and the role of the press.

The academic world continues to attach much importance to the dismantling of the colonial apparatus and the legacy left behind. The aftermath has stretched to a long period and the ‘post’ situation continues and postcolonial studies is widening its field of study to include anthropology, art history, culture studies, historiography, history of law, political economy, philosophy and psychoanalysis to offer a specific critique of the imperialist subject. Though Achebe occupies a prominent position in the postcolonial canon, his writings speak out his concern for his people. Achebe’s remark about being satisfied if his novels taught his readers to respect their lives even with all its imperfections is well-known. This statement clearly suggests that he writes for his people and not “back” to the imperialist project.

Achebe also says, “Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct and pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don’t see that the two need be mutually exclusive.”28 This defines his role as a novelist who is also a teacher and a
critic. Achebe also categorises the act of writing and storytelling as a gift ordained by the gods. He writes in *Anthills of the Savannah*,

“To some of us the Owner of the World has apportioned the gift…to wait…and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story.” (113)

It is this gift which helps him to transcend all frontiers marked by politics and history.

For the general readers, Achebe has this to say in *Anthills of the Savannah* through the voice of Ikem:

No I cannot give you the answers you are clamouring for. Go home and think! I cannot decree your pet, text-book revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living … As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination. (145-146)

The writer widens the scope to enable us to move beyond the postcolonial conundrum.

There are certain aspects of Achebe’s writings which need to be explored further. While these strictly speaking do not fall within the scope of this study but they need to be mentioned here to indicate further directions of research and study. One such study could be on Achebe’s poems on the Biafran war which describe the impact of the war on people. Since Achebe did not write about Nigeria’s civil war in his novels, a reading of his poems may reveal several telling points. Another study could be carried out on storytellers from different parts of the world since there are very few of them left today and this dying art needs to be preserved. They are the *Griots* from Mali, Ghana, Guinea and Gambia; the *Ashiks* who are the singing storytellers from Turkey and Azerbaijan; and the *Halaka* from Morocco. One could also make a study of the storytelling traditions in India like the *Pandvani, Harikatha*, the *Villu-Pattu, Burra Katha, Powada*, the *Baul* and the *Rathva* communities.
These possibilities for further studies draw inspiration from Achebe’s novels, which have thrown up new stories about the human race in its journey through the tribulations of modern life. It is this recognition that inspires one to read and re-read Achebe’s novels. They uphold values regulating the ties of kinship and community which more than material wealth account for greater human happiness. He belongs to a rich and dynamic universal literary tradition which inspires readers all over the world. It must be admitted at this stage that Achebe belongs to a vital universal tradition that refuses to be categorised or boxed in. Hence he is not just of Nigeria, or Africa; he belongs to the world. It is this universal quality in his work that enables him to vault over the postcolonial standpoint and address larger human concerns.

Literature is a strong moral force that is capable of bringing about change. It helps one to think of the world as human rather than material. Although we belong to the same human race, yet history and politics affect us differently. It is literature that connects us, preserves the wisdom of world cultures and helps to explain our world and our place in it. It kindles in us the ability to think and learn creatively through the shared experiences which provide spiritual insights. Chinua Achebe’s novels recreate the sense of the community, they teach and inspire.
NOTES

[English (U.S) spellings have been used whenever they appear in citations.]


3 Salman Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth literature’ Does Not Exist” Imaginary Homelands 64. Print.

4 Salman Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth literature’ Does Not Exist” Imaginary Homelands 64. Print.

5 Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah 1987 (New York: Anchor Books, 1988) 47. Print. (All further references to the novel have been incorporated in the text.)


15 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory* 120. Print.


24 Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy – Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God* (London: Picador, 1988) 117. Print. (All further references to the three novels have been incorporated in the text.)

