CHAPTER V: ACHEBE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

From a postcolonial perspective, narratives are thought to be contested terrains in which the discourses of imperialism and its others struggle for control over how people and places are to be represented. Edward Said has emphasized that the study of literature is a theory which accounts, on the one hand, for the ways cultural representations are affected by imperialism and, on the other, for the way imperialist notions depend upon narratives of empire for much of their control over colonial lands and subjects.\(^1\) In Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), the sequel to his foundational work of postcolonial theory, *Orientalism* (1978), he explains how the literary texts of empire and its others are rich cultural documents of the imperial interaction as it is experienced by members of both metropolitan and marginal communities.\(^2\) Of central importance to postcolonial theory are the notions of imperial hegemony, subaltern resistance, and the production of narratives which are intricately linked both to the centres of empire and its periphery. In the past, empire’s others were routinely defined in the dominant cultural discourse as primitive, lazy, mysterious or exotic. Once these individuals seized the opportunities to produce their own oppositional discourses in a variety of resistance literatures, the old stereotypes were replaced with complex representations of self and place. In her most widely-read essay, “Where
Have All the Natives Gone?” Rey Chow examines the construction of images of the ‘native’ which, despite their ubiquity, remain elusive. ‘Native’ works, bifurcated as either timeless (the art museum sentiment) or historical (the ethnographic museum), are determined in post-imperialist discourse by the search for ‘authenticity.’ Chow argues that questions about the native are questions about the irreversibility of modernity: if technological reproduction is inevitable, so is cultural displacement.³

According to postcolonial literature, culture is seen as an important vehicle for identity formation. For the term ‘culture,’ Said designates two definitions in particular. First, culture means all those practice, like the arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms.⁴ He points out, for example, that the ‘classical’ novels such as Robinson Crusoe, valued principally as aesthetic objects, are also important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references and experiences. Said’s second definition of culture is derived from Matthew Arnold’s use of the word to mean “concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought.”⁵ But because from the postcolonial perspective culture itself is viewed as a highly fluid and heterogeneous formation, constructed out of the discourse of its
dominant and subaltern groups, the fashioning of such identities was never a one-sided affair. Rather, it involves for imperialism’s oppressed other the subverting and opposing of imperialist discourse while at the same time appropriating those useful features of culture narratives and using them as strategic weapon in their decolonizing struggles:

We begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism.6

The complex and dynamic nature of identity formation can be seen in the relationship the postcolonial writers found themselves with the dominant cultures, and against which they positioned themselves to counter through their literary texts. The discourses of the imperialist and the postcolonial writers may overlap and intertwine. For instance, though Joseph Conrad condemns the atrocities of the European ivory trade in Heart of Darkness (1900), this British imperialist writer who has been justifiably accused by Achebe of being a ‘thorough-going racist’7 is at the same time actually portraying Kurtz and Marlow in a manner which in many respects run parallel to Achebe’s vision of imperialism in his novels. It is important therefore to deconstruct images of Africans and their oppressors by comparing the representations of each group in both of these works.
The postcolonial theory of representation perceived diversely by various theorists, has a common purpose – to deconstruct the stereotypes produced by colonialist texts. They accomplish this by exposing how western writers employ stereotypes to satisfy the dominant cultures’ need to define its others as inferior to whites. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) was one of the first postcolonial studies to reveal how western discourse has created the idea of the ‘Oriental’ as inferior. After studying the vast body of literature produced for centuries in Europe and North America, Said reveals that these orientalist texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produces a tradition, or what Michael Foucault calls a discourse, whose material pressure or weight rather than the originality of a given author is really responsible for the texts produced out of it.⁸ Out of the orientalists’ quest to discover the essential African mentality came a plethora of stereotypes to which westerners subsequently expected these peoples to conform. So westerners constantly invented stereotypes in their inability to understand the natives.

In deconstructing literary representations of place or people, one of the most pervasive gaps within the discourses of multicultural texts is “that which opens between the experience of a place and the language
available to describe it.” In postcolonial texts this gap is associated with the crisis of identity which develops between self and place as a result of the conditions of imperial oppression. For instance, slaves were separated from their families and from others who spoke their language and then forced, instead, to speak English in order to survive. The new Englishes such as Creole which they developed did not adequately connect them with their African past or with the strange land which they came to inhabit. Denied of equal power and status in the dominant white society, the slaves lost their feelings of connectedness to their homeland and could only express their relationship to their master’s world through their master’s language. The postcolonial perspective interrogates the various value systems that have informed the constructions of people and places found in literary texts. In this connection H. A. Giroux said:

[Representations] are always produced within cultural limits and theoretical borders, and as such are necessarily implicated in particular economies of truth, value and power. In relation to these axes of power in which all representations are embedded, it is necessary… [to ask oneself]: whose interests are being served by the representation in question? Within a given set of representations, who speaks, for whom, and under what conditions? Where can we situate such representation ethically and politically with respect to questions of social justice and human freedom? What moral, ethical, and ideological principles structure our reactions to such representations?10

The postcolonial writers, therefore, are obviously aware that their works exist in relation to religious and national mythologies, generic conventions, political tropes, etc. They, therefore, can use the rhetorical
tools of their trade to fortify dominant cultural discourse or to dismantle it. James Snead seems to be in accord with this point as he considers the ending of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*:

... expropriates and pre-empts (albeit only in fiction) the written form in which the English language has assaulted an unwritten Ibo reality. The ironic ending, in which the district commissioner decides to capture the entire tale in the book which he planned to write [The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger] recapitulates the ongoing process of cultural interpretation and redefinition which typically worked to the detriment of blacks... Yet it is Achebe who, through writing *Things Fall Apart*, pre-empts an attempted white usurpation of his story and his culture, trapping the ‘official version’ within a more sympathetic history.11

In examining any piece of literature, it is equally important to examine the author’s conception of the symbiotic relationship that exists between fiction, the society and the author. In an attempt to change the flaws within the society, the author provides a glimpse of what the society ought to be. This is especially true of novelists from the ex-colonies who presented the insider’s view of the people and their situation. These postcolonial literatures urge the people to break away from the imperial mind-set, and work on the restoration of society’s health, fully grounded on reality. Such has been the novels of Chinua Achebe who make use of the English language, Igbo cultural symbols, folklore and tradition to remind Nigerians that they had a cultural history before the advent of British domination. Achebe especially becomes the social critic of the Nigerian elite who are trying to replicate the British
social mores in an independent Nigerian society. As against the position taken by ‘New Criticism’ that literature must be analysed as an entity in itself, one must also recognize the fact that literature does not exist or is created in a vacuum. Therefore, the history of the rise and growth of African literature that form the backdrop for most of the works cannot be overlooked to make meaningful assessment of the postcolonial texts.

The term ‘representation’ has been much used and enjoys wide currency not only in postcolonial studies and academia, but in the larger cultural milieu. *The Oxford English Dictionary* variously defines ‘representation’ as:

1) Presence, bearing, air; appearance; impression on the sight. 2) An image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing; a material image or figure; a reproduction in some material or tangible form; in later use, a drawing or painting (of a person or thing); the action or fact of exhibiting in some visible image or form; the fact of expressing or denoting by means of a figure or symbol; symbolic action or exhibition. 3) The exhibition of character and action upon the stage; the performance of a play; acting, simulation, pretence. 4) The action of placing a fact, etc., before another or others by means of discourse; a statement or account, esp. one intended to convey a particular view or impression of a matter in order to influence opinion or action. 5) A formal and serious statement of facts, reasons, or arguments, made with a view to effecting some change, preventing some action, etc.; hence, a remonstrance, protest, expostulation. 6) The action of presenting to the mind or imagination; an image thus presented; a clearly conceived idea or concept; the operation of the mind in forming a clear image or concept; the faculty of doing this. 7) The fact of standing for, or in place of, some other thing or person, esp. with a right or authority to act on their account; substitution of one thing or person for another. 8) The fact of representing or being represented in a legislative or deliberative assembly, spec. in parliament; the position,
principle, or system implied by this; the aggregate of those who thus represent the elective body.\textsuperscript{12}

As *The English Oxford Dictionary* entry shows, the actual definitions for the word are also the cause for confusion. It defines representation primarily as ‘presence’ or ‘appearance.’ There is an implied visual component to these primary definitions. Representation can be images, material productions, performances and simulations. Representation can also be defined as an act of placing or stating facts in order to influence or affects the action of others. Of course, the word also has political connotations. Politicians are thought to ‘represent’ a constituency. They are thought to have the right to stand in the place of another. So above all, the term representation has a semiotic meaning, in that something is ‘standing for’ something else. These various yet related definitions are all implicated in the public debates about representation. Theorists interested in postcolonial studies, by closely examining various forms of representations, visual, textual and otherwise, have described the different ways that these “images” are implicated in power inequalities and the subordination of the subaltern.

Besides many other forms of representations, written materials – academic texts, novels and other literature including journalistic pieces – also constitutes important forms of representation. All these forms of representations, to different degrees, are thought to be somewhat realistic,
or to go back to the definitions, they are thought to be ‘clear’ or believed to state a ‘fact.’ However, Edward Said, in his analysis of textual representations of the Orient in *Orientalism*, emphasizes the fact that representations can never be exactly realistic:

In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as “the Orient”.

Representations, then, can never really be ‘natural’ depiction of the Orient. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content.

In a similar way, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a distinction between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*. She defines the former as “stepping in someone’s place…to tread in someone’s shoes.” Representation in this sense is “political representation” or a speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. *Darstellung* is representation as re-presentation, “placing there.” Representation is thus “proxy and portrait,” according to Spivak. The complicity between “speaking for” and “portraying” must be kept in mind. Elsewhere, Spivak addresses the problem of “speaking in the name of”: “It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking
for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem.” Spivak recommends “persistent critique” to guard against “constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on.”

If there is always an element of interpretation involved in representation, one must note who may be doing the interpreting. Ella Shohat claims that one should constantly question representations: “Each filmic or academic utterance must be analysed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address.” This questioning is particularly important when the representation of the subaltern is involved. The problem does not rest solely with the fact that often marginalized groups do not hold the ‘power over representation’; it rests also in the fact representations of these groups are both flawed and few in numbers. Shohat asserts that dominant groups need not preoccupy themselves too much with being adequately represented. However, “representation of an underrepresented group is necessarily within the hermeneutics of domination, overcharged with allegorical significance.” The mass media tends to take representations of the subaltern as allegorical, meaning that since
representations of the marginalized are few, the few available are thought to be representative of all marginalized peoples. The few images are thought to be typical, sometimes not only of members of a particular minority group, but of all minorities in general. It is assumed that subalterns can stand in for other subalterns. A prime example of this is the fact that actors of particular ethnic backgrounds were often casted as any ethnic “Other”. This collapsing of the image of the subaltern reflects not only ignorance but a lack of respect for the diversity within marginalized communities.

Ella Shohat also suggests that a representation in one sphere – the sphere of popular culture – affects the other spheres of representation, particularly the political one: “The denial of aesthetic representation to the subaltern has historically formed a corollary to the literal denial of economic, legal, and political representation. The struggle to ‘speak for oneself’ cannot be separated from a history of being spoken for, from the struggle to speak and be heard.”\textsuperscript{19} It cannot be ignored that representations affect the ways in which actual individuals are perceived. Although many see representations as harmless likenesses, they do have a real effect on the world. They are meant to relay a message and as the definition shows, ‘influence opinion and action’. We must ask what ideological work these representations accomplish. Representations or the
‘images or ideas formed in the mind’ have vast implications for real people in real contexts.

The rarity and the importance of minority representations yield what may have been called the burden of representation. Since there are so few images, negative ones can have devastating affects on the real lives of marginalized people. We must also ask, if there are so few people, who will produce them? Who will be the supposed voice of the subaltern? Given the allegorical character of these representations, even subaltern writers, artists, and scholars are asking who can really speak for whom? When a spokesperson or a certain image is read as metonymic, representation becomes more difficult and dangerous. Solutions to this conundrum are difficult to theorize. We can call for increased self-representation or the inclusion of more individuals from ‘marginalized’ groups in the act of representing, yet this is easier said than done. Also, the inclusion of more minorities in representation will not necessarily alter the structural or institutional barriers that prevent equal participation for all in representation. Focusing on whether or not images are negative or positive, leaves in tact a reliance on the “realness” of images, a realness that is false to begin with.

In her critical essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak emphasizes the fact that representation is a sort of speech act, with a
speaker and a listener. Often, the subaltern makes an attempt at self representation, perhaps a representation that falls outside ‘the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation’.\textsuperscript{20} Yet, this act of representation is not heard. It is not recognized by the listener, perhaps because it does not fit in with what is expected of the representation. Therefore, a representation by subaltern individuals seems nearly impossible. Despite the fact that Spivak’s formulation is quite accurate, there must still be an effort to try and challenge status quo representation and the ideological work it does. The work of various ‘Third World’ and minority writers, artists, and filmmakers attest to the possibilities of counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial subversion. It is obvious that representations are much more than plain likenesses. They are in a sense ideological tools that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination; they can help sustain colonialist or neo-colonialist projects. A great amount of effort is needed to dislodge dominant modes of representation. Efforts will continue to be made to challenge the hegemonic force of representation, and of course, this force is not completely pervasive, and subversions are often possible. Self representation may not be a complete possibility, yet is still an important goal.
Since the publication of Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, postcolonial studies have undergone a shift from the analysis of the material specificities of colonialism to a detailing of the discourses and ideas produced by the colonial encounter. The level at which the question of European colonialism really troubles postcolonial studies lies with the concept of colonialism as an ideological or discursive formation, as an apparatus for constituting subject positions through the field of representation. These concerns with representation and its material effects as they relate to the past and continuing relations between the West and its former colonies, and the parallel conceptual shifts within Western theory itself.

As used in discourse analysis, representation refers directly to the language used in a text or talk to assign meaning to groups and their social practices, to events, and to social and ecological conditions and objects. Implicit in this view of the role of language in social life is that meaning is not embedded in the reality that is perceived but rather that it is construed by linguistic representation. Of course, modes of representation will vary depending on the perspective from which they are constructed, whether biographical, historical or socio-cultural. Ideology will also influence the manner in which groups represent matters of import and relevance to the body politic, including the
achievement of a culture of peace. Moreover, inasmuch as linguistic representations determine the way in which we think about particular objects, events, situations and, as such, function as a principle of action influencing actual social practice, there will be competition among groups over what is to be taken as the correct, appropriate, or preferred representation. Thus, the competition over meaning among groups is referred to as the politics of representation. Though a not entirely different avenue, Stuart Hall discusses the relationship between politics and representation and the systems representing both. Hall takes up the politics of representation in his text entitled *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* approaching representation as the medium or channel through which meaning production happens. He assumes that objects, people, etc. do not have stable, true meanings, but rather that the meanings are produced by human beings, participants in a culture, who have the power to make things mean or signify something.\(^{21}\) Clearly, for Hall, representation involves understanding how language and systems of knowledge production work together to produce and circulate meanings. Representation becomes the process or channel or medium through which these meanings are both created and reified. Like the Poststructuralist approach, the Hall approach to representation involves looking at representation as something larger than any one single representation.
The contention that Africa has always been a mere datum in the constitution of a Western-dominated doxa or opinion has validity in so far as we accept that the colonialist enunciation which arguably always sought to posit a superior Western knowledge in relation to a dominated material arena, was a completely unified conception and completely at one with itself. But, following Homi Bhabha in his analysis of the split nature of the colonial intention and its performance, it is possible to argue that the discourse of the West has often displayed its own anxieties and contradictions even when enunciating its supposed superiority.22 Something of this can be seen even in the phenomenon of colonialist literature. Though Abdul JanMohamed argues persuasively that all colonialist texts from Rider Haggard down to Isak Dinesen and Graham Greene obey what he describes as ‘the economy of Manichean allegory’, it is often the case too that these texts stage their estrangement from the ideology of the Western metropolis. It is interesting to note that even the works of such a rabid colonialist writer as Rider Haggard simultaneously manufactured images of the African ‘other’ for European consumption and launched a critique of emergent democratic values in his home country. But even more significant is that while early colonialist writers attempted to carve a respectable heroic space for the Western male in the imperial arena, writers such as Hardy, Gissing, Eliot, and Dickens traced the difficulties of individuals set down in increasingly harsh social and
economic conditions at home. Western cultural discourse cannot be fully understood unless both modes of self-understanding are brought to bear on the issue of the constitution of the Western episteme and its relationship to other knowledge.

The differences between the African and the Western modes of knowledge can be explored as being in a restless interaction that leaves neither completely pure. Chinua Achebe’s novels may be rightly taken as a different protocol of representation that stages varying encounters to enunciate a problematic African gnosis while displaying shifting parameters of strategies and constraints. The struggle to enunciate African structures of feeling in the face of encounters with the West is often loaded with irresolvable contradictions. As a university student in 1952, Achebe encountered Joyce Cary’s much-praised *Mister Johnson* (1939) and was exasperated at the racist-colonialist representation of Africa and the African which compelled him to write *Things Fall Apart* as a response. As Achebe asserts in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), the story of Africa was something that “…could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned”. And again in *Home and Exile* (2001), Achebe stated that his

…problem with Joyce Carey’s book was not simply his infuriating principal character, Johnson. More importantly, there is a certain undertow of uncharitableness just below the surface on which his narrative moves and form where, at the slightest chance, a contagion of
distaste, hatred and mockery breaks through to poison his tale…What matters is that Cary has a very strong aversion to the people he is presenting to us. And to the towns and villages where these people live, where the action of his novel takes place…25

As such *Things Fall Apart* becomes and is recognized today as one of the most significant counter-narratives of the twentieth century. Achebe’s novels, as a whole, mark significant movements in the growth of African Writing in English. Locating Achebe’s literary production and the subsequent movement for decolonization, Simon Gikandi asserts:

> It is crucial to understand how Achebe occupies a crucial diachronic role in the history of an African Literature almost always driven by the desire to imaginatively capture the key moments of African history from the beginning of colonialism to what has come to be known as postcoloniality” 26

Alister Niven rightly suggested that Achebe’s novels provides the needed chronological order of African, and Nigerian history, from the 1890s to the present day: “Each work is wholly different in character from the other, but together they legitimately can be seen as aspects of one gathering sequence of human imperfection.” 27 Achebe’s fiction can be divided broadly into two categories: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* represent a pre-colonial Igbo culture struggling against all odds to retain its integrity against the loss of autonomy. *No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are primarily preoccupied with the post-independence crisis of neo-colonialism and the novelist’s engagement in decolonization. One can safely say with Naheem Yousaf
that Achebe’s fiction and literary criticism comprise an important literary archive for Nigeria-in-the-making.\textsuperscript{28}

The novels of Chinua Achebe offer a space for critical examination of colonialism in Africa and its aftermath, and of how the novelist situated himself as a native informant to present an insider’s view of Igbo situation. How the story unfurls in the novels appears to be a controllable domain for the novelist. But, there are limitations and traps that can easily ensnare the African novelist even if he has the desire to represent his people’s past truthfully and authenticate them in his novels. On the novelist’s choice of literary mode, Ode Ogede observes: “Satire and tragedy were originally employed by the European conquerors for dehumanizing the African subject…”\textsuperscript{29} Ogede opines that in choosing to write his novels both in the tragic and satiric modes, Achebe compromises the content to fulfil the demands of the western literary forms. For instance, in his choice to allow the hero of \textit{Things Fall Apart} to die the ignoble death of suicide, Achebe forfeits the chance to practice what he preached elsewhere in his essays. In the same page cited above, Ogede forcefully argues that satire and tragedy have never been instruments of liberation. He continues:

Once Achebe chose to implement these imperialist forms, he placed himself directly in the trap set by the conqueror, making it possible for him perpetuate some of the very imperialist clichés that he was trying to combat. As to what specific nature of his influences are, we may
never know. However, in a careful reading of his works readers can discern where Achebe decided to play the role of a simple native informant and then either resolved to recount historical and cultural events accurately or to repress and disfigure them.\textsuperscript{30}

The ambivalence of the novelist in matters which are crucial to the defence of the traditional culture makes critics question Achebe’s loyalty to his people.

One of the strongest reasons behind the reader’s easy acceptance of Achebe’s fictional representation lies in the accuracy and authenticity of Achebe’s materials. Ode Ogede, one of the foremost critics of Achebe, considers historical authenticity as one of the legitimate principles for evaluating literary works which claim to be historically based.\textsuperscript{31} No single critic has so far denied the authenticity of the tribal world of the Igbos painted by Achebe in his fiction. Without accuracy of facts and events, a novelist would simply be engaging his imagination on a world of fantasy. But Achebe goes beyond the task of presenting mere facts and figures; in his novels he imaginatively reconstructs the possibility of a vast array of individual lives lived in Igboland, both in the past and the present. In his novels, Achebe’s reconstruction of Igbo traditional culture with its dignity and autonomy (before the colonial impact undermined it) stands out as characteristically African. The substantial presence of parallel real events and facts proved the authenticity of Achebe’s narrative. Compared with Joyce Cary’s villagers who speak straightforward English prose,
Achebe’s villagers weave into the fabric of their everyday conversations and allusions from folk-tales, legends and myths, and contextualized their opinions and attitudes with appropriately chosen proverbs, traditional maxims and cryptic anecdotes. Achebe employs the space provided by the novel to refute serious misrepresentations of his people by European novelists of colonialist persuasions, and present the authentic in place of the stereotyped image of Africa and its people.

Language is an important tool in the novelist’s presentation of the tribal world which helps interrogate the contents of western literary texts and lends authenticity to the novel. Besides spoken and written language, the novelist’s messages are presented through the character’s appearance, clothes, actions, habits and inner feelings and thoughts. In Achebe’s country, the oral tradition exists side by side with the literate tradition or the written form, and this means that the language of the novel may be modified by the language of the oral tradition. These happened in the rural novels of Chinua Achebe, and to a limited extend in his urban novels. He does this chiefly by rendering the proverbs and characteristic turns of phrases used in rural communities.

The use of proverbs in the African rural novels needs special attention at least to answer to the criticism of impercipient readers that the ubiquity of proverbs, especially in Achebe’s novels, is an idiosyncrasy
rather than a natural way of representing the linguistic reality of Africa. Proverbs are a natural part of the speech of all traditional societies and contain the kernels of the wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words, and they form a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory. Of their nature, they perform an ideological function by making available the ideas and values encapsulated in these memorable and easily reproduced form. These proverbs derive from a detailed observation of the behaviour of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena, from folklore, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire system of thought and feeling. They derive effectiveness and force from the collective imagination which apprehends the underlying connection between the literal fact and its allusive amplification and which vivifies an experience by placing it beside another which bears the stamp of community’s approval. The use of proverbs is one more way in which the individual expresses the primacy of society – even in this matter of language. The man who proverbializes is putting his individual speech in a traditional context, reinforcing his personal point of view by objectifying its validity, and indirectly paying tribute to himself as a possessor of traditional wisdom. So, the use of proverbs, instead of individuating, both communalizes and traditionalizes a speaker.
The proverbs are numerous enough and sufficiently broad in scope to cover adequately the kind of experience with which the novels deal in Africa. There are proverbs for every occasion, proverbs to suit every situation and to light up every experience. Every significant affirmation can be strengthened with a proverb; every customary value, belief, attitude or outlook can be supported with proverbs, social problems and personal difficulties can be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverbs. Even contradictory views can be sustained by an appeal to different proverbs, and so on, though in form the proverb constitutes a fossilized unit of linguistic expression, in actual communication there is much flexibility, since such different viewpoints can be maintained. Proverbs can also become an artistic device for giving complicity to narrative, unity to form, coherence and pattern to action, and direction to moral and social insight. They can also indicate force and resourcefulness of character: the strong mind can manipulate the repertory of proverb to its own advantage.

Achebe conveyed the importance of proverbs as a mode of expressing and exploring reality. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, which are set entirely in the traditional Igbo village and, to a lesser extent, in *No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, in which people and events flow between town and country, his
characters speak in proverbs. In his grasp, proverbs yield easily to formal
manipulation and convey insight into character and give pattern to
narrative action. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s character can be
explained by analysis of power and personality motifs embodied in
proverbs. As Okonkwo begins to rise after the disappointments and
disaster of his early life, the prospect opening up for him are conveyed
through a proverb: “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.
Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and
elders.”32 His gross insult to a less successful kinsman is chided with
another proverb: “Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a
benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.”33 Okonkwo’s prowess
is admitted though the narrator’s comment: “When a man says yes his *chi*
says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed.”34
When fate thrust him to the ground, the reversal of his fortune is again
proverbialized: “Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great
things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of
the elders was not true – that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here
was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.”35 In their
manifold wisdom they have proverbs for all varieties of human
aspirations, successes and failures. The Igbo people believe that
“proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.”36 One of the
ployed by which Achebe smoothen his presentation of Igbo reality lies in his ability to intersperse his narratives with fitting proverbs.

Proverbs are also placed in the novels to mark the defining point of the novel’s action and so serve the dual interest of aiding plot development and heightening emotional response to the action. A good example is the cluster of proverbs at the end of *Arrow of God*:

> When a handshake passes the elbow it becomes another thing. The sleep that lasts from one market to another has become death. The man who likes the meat of the funeral ram, why does he recover when sickness visits him? The mighty tree falls and the little birds scatter in the bush... The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an ant-hill may not know it but is still on the ground... A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes... The very Thing which kills Mother Rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes... The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father’s fate... The man who belittles the sickness which Monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which his nurse got from blowing the sick fire... When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement.37

The dominant images provoked in the proverbs are death and defeat; so a sense of finality and inevitability pervades them. Ezeulu’s fate was sealed from the moment he squared up for battle against his people, but his defeat and destruction came in full force with the death of his favourite son Obika.

There are other traditional conventions of language used by the novelist. One of those most frequently represented is the fastidious art of
conversation, raised into a ritual act of social communion. The elaborate
attention given by speakers and audiences in the village setting to the
formal conventions of address, to the minute courtesies and standard
exchanges reflects the use of language not so much as a way of
communicating meaning but as a means of establishing a friendly rapport
between the speaker and the listener, or reinforcing a sense of integration,
community solidarity and sympathetic relatedness. This is highly
developed in the village setting, for ties of blood and community are very
strong and social intercourse is face to face. The need for good and
friendly relations is more strongly felt in the village than in the urbanized
setting where relations are less personalized and contact infrequent.
Conversations are smooth, slow course, full of snippets of information
with nothing really profound. Now and again, commiserating noises are
added, fresh bonds of sympathy are tied and new feelings of group
relatedness are forged. All of this bears out the comment which Achebe
unobtrusively made into Things Fall Apart that “among the Ibo the art of
conversation is regarded very highly.”³⁸ It is also said that in traditional
society, conventional conversations at the time of meeting and the final
greetings at parting are highly valued.

The rural novels ascribed mastery over language to important male
personalities in the Igbo society. Among them Ezeulu, as the leader of the
This passage illustrates a number of speech conventions practised among traditional Igbos. The three sections of the public address stands out clearly – the opening, the middle and the conclusion. The introduction calls people’s attention and appeal to their sense of social solidarity, to speak with one voice. In the middle section, he thanked the elders for responding positively to his distressed call and proceeds to apologise for his inability to provide palm-wine as convention would have required. After having prepared the atmosphere for the message, Ezeulu talks about
the core matter which is to tell the people of the white man’s order that he should come immediately to Okperi, the administrative headquarter. He then rounds off with a further apology for not fulfilling the conventional norms. He ended with a salutation.

Compared with the women characters, Ezeulu’s speech and style befits his social standing and his ritual and religious role as Chief Priest. He speaks with dignity and in full possession of the values of the tradition. He understands all the conventional modes of address and observes the inner rhythms of speech expected of him, and as an elder he calls up the appropriate proverbs at each stage of his speech. The conversations of the female characters are marked by clear informality and no dogged pursuit of subjects to their logical conclusion. The absence of structure is evident in the languages used both by the women and children. There is no decorum, no appeal to time-honoured conventions or the values of the ancestors. Language habits are not inborn but a cultural fact learned by man in contact with older men. Speech styles and linguistic assumptions determine the verbal acquisitions and accomplishments of those born into a society. The art of conversation is, like all arts, something that has to be learned. Children are too far from the central operation of this art to be much influenced by it; young people are still sufficiently removed. Women, because of the ritual inhibitions
which keep them away from politics and religion, are somewhat outside the linguistic centre. Though there may be competent speakers among them, they never really have a public platform on which to perfect this art, except of course among their own sex. The result of status orientation in language is that male elders, in a largely patriarchal society, define the linguistic norms and conventions. Ezeulu is, therefore, made to speak in the language which Umuaro will easily recognize and understand to be aroused into positive actions.

The language of the urban novels reflects the segmentation of the tribal society in urbanized setting. There is no unified linguistic outlook such as we find in the traditional Igbo society. In its place there are early signs of linguistic stratification of the society into various categories: the language of the urban tribalism, the language of the formally educated middle classes, and the language of the poorly educated and the underprivileged working class and tradesmen. Proverbs and quotations from authoritative texts were still used by the narrator or the characters. But there are significant differences between the use of proverbs in Achebe’s rural and urban novels. In the first place, proverbs are used less frequently in the urban novels, but its use more or less indicated the close contact between the villages and the towns. Proverbs and fixed expressions are used in the urban novels for the purely pragmatic reason
that many of the urban characters use them. But there is ambiguity in their uses, especially in situations which are dubious, confused or plainly misleading. The effect is not so much to enrich communication as traditionally understood, but to gain some personal, individual advantage. Proverbs are supposed to be terse; they depend on verbal economy for their effect since they were originally meant to be easily memorisable. This quality is often lost in urban novels. There is a certain porousness, an urge to explain and elaborate in a way inadmissible in traditional contexts. For instance, when Odili asks Mrs Nanga if she is going to America with her husband, she answers: “My brother, when those standing have not got their share you are talking about those kneeling. Have you ever heard of a woman going to America when she doesn’t know ABC?”\(^40\) The flatulent nature of the proverb comes out when we compare it with Unoka’s answer to the creditor who comes to ask for the repayment of his two hundred cowrie shells:

“Look at those lines of chalk…. Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first.”\(^41\)

The flabbiness of Mrs Nanga’s use contrasts with the firmness and appropriateness of Unoka’s use. Verbal mastery which was so well demonstrated in the rural novels has been missing even in the village
characters of the urban novels. For example, when Mr Samalu, Odili’s father, says “A mad man may sometimes speak in true word... but you watch him, he will soon add something to it that will tell you his mind is still spoilt.”\textsuperscript{42} There is something in this way of speaking which lacks the assurance and precision of the speech of elders in the novels set in traditional villages. There is a fumbling after fullness of communication and a tacit assumption that the audience will not be well informed, so that every scrap of information must be thrown in. this fumbling after detail is neither indulged in nor required in the traditional village, where homogeneity of cultural experience makes even ellipsis accessible to the users of a language. The use of diffuse speech indicates the degree of breakdown in linguistic homogeneity, just as this breakdown is symptomatic of the general fragmentation of cultural life. The novelist, while depicting the persistence of traditionalism in society and language, is also careful to record the fragmentary nature of such linguistic experience.

As for the western educated characters like Obi Okonkwo, Odili Samalu and most of the main characters in \textit{Anthills of the Savannah}, they speak the standard Queen’s English like the author himself. Since English was the language of education, administration, commerce, mass-communication and literature, strict adherence it its correct usage is
jealously emphasized. With the change in social setting, the urban characters exemplify immense linguistic individuation. Because of their liberation from group-determined linguistic formulae, individuals speak with greater spontaneity and respond with greater alacrity to verbal stimuli. The result is immediacy and spontaneity of verbal flow among these modern, urbanized characters.

Another English variant spoken by vast number of people in the urban novels, especially those with little formal education, is Pidgin English (artificial language used for trade purposes). It is used significantly by Achebe in recording the dialogues involving the illiterate, the socially low and economically low sections of the society. Pidgin characters were given only supporting roles in the action of his urban novels. Even European characters like Winterbottom in *Arrow of God* like to patter pidgin with his African domestic helpers. The middle class characters normally use Standard English while pidgin is reserved mainly for the words of the illiterate. However, even educated middle class do speak pidgin, especially in lighter conversational situations and among their social equals with whom they are in intimate relationship; Clara and Obi Okonkwo and those of the post-colonial Nigerian political circles, Chief Nanga and Chief Koko are good examples of this type of characters.
Art is one of the key realities in Achebe’s novels indicating the Igbo community’s artistic ambience. For them art is integral to functional culture. Not only in the symbolic expression of religious and ritual activities in the form of masks and statuettes, artistic perception is also part of the humanity of the Igbo people which finds manifestation in their innate desire to paint, mould, carve and decorate, to beautify the natural state by altering it. The religion of the people is also concretely symbolized in the sculptured images of the gods and spirits. The cult of ancestral worship also provides the scope for the creation of masks which symbolize the hidden power and mystery of their ancestors. The creation of Mbari art-houses which is sacred to the earth-mother goddess shows the Igbo’s love of art and its expression on religious themes. But apart from the formal and specialized art tradition, the tribal life of the Igbos is a continuous effort at artistic creation of beauty. For instance, the house of an Igbo will normally have its main entrance highly decorated with motifs ranging from nature and fables and legends to abstract symbols. Every traditional Igbo has his body decorated with the same motifs. Obika’s bride, for example, was painted with *Uli* and other decorative colours (143-4). Not only brides but virtually everyone and everything is beautiful and artistically prepared during great festivals, like the New Year Festival described in *Things Fall Apart*.
The festival was now only three days away. Okonkwo’s wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had drawn patterns on them white, yellow and dark green. They then set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and on their backs. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns.43

Apart from these, the *ikenga* (or a carved personal spirit or god) features frequently in the rural novels, which is also considered a key factor in the structure of the Igbo man’s personal religious and philosophical belief. It stands for good fortune and is symbolized by a man sitting upon a stool, carrying a knife in the right hand and a skull in the left. The man’s head is surmounted by two ram’s horns. Each unit of the sculpture is clearly symbolical: the right hand is the means of human achievement, the hand with which a man wields his farming implements. The machete represents all farming tools, and hence economic labour, and is an index of strength and achievement in farming, fishing, trapping, trading and warfare; the skull represents the end to which the man has applied his genius. The ram’s horns represent physical strength and drive, and reinforce the power motif which is already strongly suggested in the other parts of the figure.44 The ignorance of Captain Winterbottom was exposed when he describes the *ikenga* as “the most important fetish in the Igbo man’s arsenal…[which] represents his ancestors to whom he must daily sacrifice”45 which actually represents the man’s aspirations rather than his ancestors.
Another cultural symbol used in the novels, and which identifies the Igbo as a unique cultural group lies in the curving of various masks. The Igbo masks depicted the diversity of personality types perceivable by traditional people. There are the delicate and the gentle, the beautiful and the graceful, the fierce and the aggressive, the splendid and the powerful, the sinister and the grotesque. For instance, the Agaba mask such as that staged by the Otakagu age-group in *Arrow of God* is a fierce and powerful spirit: “The face held power and terror; each exposed tooth was the size of a big man’s thumb, the eyes were large sockets as big as a fist, two snarled horns pointed upwards and inwards above its head nearly touching at the top...It stood for the power and aggressiveness of youth.”\(^{46}\) Totally different from the fierce and powerful masks, is that of the maiden spirit which bears the embodiment of feminine beauty and is distinguished by its gentleness and grace. Of the masks surrounding Edogo’s sacred art workshop, the narrator says: “Most of them were fierce, aggressive spirits with horns and teeth the size of fingers. But four of them belonged to maiden-spirits and were delicately beautiful.”\(^{47}\) The significance of masks in the novels rests in the fact that it gives the novelist the opportunity to express the aesthetic conceptions of traditional society.
Traditional dance enjoys a place of mention in the novels of Achebe. Ritual and magical significance were attached to the dance because, apart from the need to acquire the skills, the performers have made lots of effort to magically protect themselves against the envy and malevolence of enemies. There is the possibility of magical intervention which may threaten the success of the music and dance display. In the outing of the Otakagu Agaba the presence of a notorious medicine man nearly wrecks the show:

“From what was known of him and by the way he sat away from other people it was clear that he had not come merely to watch a new mask. An occasion such as this was often used by wicked men to try out the potency of their magic to match their power against that of others. There were stories of Masks which had come out unprepared and transfixed to a spot for days or even felled to the ground.”

The situation is saved when Obika, one of the two attendants to the mask, sends the menacing dibia packing in spite of the risk. In the representation of traditional art in the novels the collective aesthetic outlook of the Igbo people is conveyed showing what constitutes the beautiful, the decorous and the sublime.

Achebe’s perception of Igbo traditional life before and after its confrontation with Western cultural influences needs detailed analysis. Villages like Umuofia, Umuaro, Anata and the Abazon province are some of places where the protagonists of Achebe’s novels live. He uses the characters of Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi Okonkwo, Odili Samalu and scores
of others to explore the twin themes of individual and group tragedy which result from the break-up of traditional life. Achebe’s presentation of these characters is not without their flaws; he intended a realistic portraiture of his society in his narratives – the fiery temper and lopsided emphasis of Okonkwo on manliness, misjudgements of Ezeulu between clan loyalty and truth, want of moral strength in Obi, the vast difference between intention and action in Odili and so on. By presenting the past of his people which many Igbo people might have forgotten, Achebe has been reminding them of their not so inglorious past as the colonialist writers had claimed. Umuofia or Umuaro is a traditional Igbo village and its culture is based on the close ties of kinship. Achebe’s ‘village’ has the attributes of a community, especially the fusion of interest and the relative similarity of activities and states of mind of the members. The group feeling and the identification of the individual clansman with the group and its social and cultural outlook form the very essence of traditionalism. Individual self-interest is always subordinated to the overall interest of the group, though provisions were made for the well being of the individual members of the village. An element of the traditional Igbo society is the belief in the supernatural and the magical as a defining element in the people’s attitude and beliefs. The religious belief in the existence of gods and goddesses pervades the whole society. For example, children were forbidden to whistle or to answer any call
directly at night for fear of evil spirits. Achebe shows that the religious sense and piety are part and parcel of the ideological structure of traditional society and so essential to the proper interpretation of experience in the traditional social context. The idea of pre-colonial tribal society as a haven of peace, a state of egalitarian self-satisfaction, idyllic bliss and sweet reasonableness is exposed as much a myth as the opposite view which sees it as a state of chronic anarchy, a bloody battlefield in which the weak and the helpless is trodden down by the strong. The tribal world of the Igbo people has their unwritten laws in matters of inter-village war and peace, equally respectable in its own right. For instance, the Umuofians follow the normal course of their law when a married woman was murdered in Mbaino. Again, the ultimatum sent to Okperi by Umuaro over a piece of disputed land, attests to the existence of traditional diplomatic procedure in tribal lands.

The catalytic European characters are not given wide coverage by Achebe as the novels are primarily not about them. But they are undeniably one of the forces impacting the cultural change of the natives in which role their ignorance of the local customs becomes a functional part of the development of the plot. Malinowski explained why even the good-intentioned colonial administrators failed to understand the people and their culture:
The average British official tries to administer justice and to be a father of his wards. But is he from his point of view an integral part of the tribe? No. He was neither born nor bred to it, nor is he very conversant with any of his ideas; he is, in fact, a servant of the British Empire, temporarily working in such and such a colony, as public schoolboy, an Englishman, or a Scotsman. He has to safeguard the interest of the empire first and foremost. He has to watch over European interests in the colony, as well as to maintain the balance of these interests as against native claims. To conceive of the part played by European political agents in Africa in terms of a fictitious well-integrated community would blind us to the very definition of the tasks, nature, and implications of colonial administration.49

Achebe assumes this ignorance in his British administrators in the likes of George Allen, Captain Winterbottom and Mr Clarke. They strictly maintained their physical and social distance form the local people in order to see or deal with their natives from a proper distance. The novelist defines them as “those in search of strenuous life…who can deal with men as others deal with material, who can grasp great situations, coax events, shape destinies…ride on the crest of the wave of time…[and] lead the backward races into line.”50 It is therefore not surprising that their understanding of local life is a mixture of stereotyped colonial prejudices and ethnographic fallacies. Achebe does not project them as objects of ridicule and contempt, but as people who in spite of their good intentions, in their ignorance brings unintentional suffering and tragedy to their traditional subjects.

So cultural change involves the decay of collective tradition caused by the arrival of hostile ‘strangers’ within the relatively homogeneous
tribal community, strangers who are not assimilable into the local population and who disseminate foreign idea, introduce foreign laws, religion, commerce and administration in the conquered land. The new religion, by providing a set of values alternative to those offered by traditional religion, and a solidarity alternative to the solidarity of the clan, undermines traditional social life. The new administration, having at its disposal the military strength to enforce its will, deprives the traditional community of the power and to defend its interests. The result is the breakdown of social homogeneity and the collective outlook, which are the two distinguishing features of traditional life in Umuofia.

In depicting the unsullied image of the pristine Igbo life-world, Achebe presents an alternative history of his own people, and this itself becomes his engagement with the colonialist misrepresentation of his people. To Achebe, his village novels constitute his conscious act of remembering ‘what it was like before’ and ‘keep talking about it’. The systematic demolition of tribal culture has made the task of decolonisation of the alienated natives an important assignment. And this recasting of tribal past constitutes Achebe’s politics of representing an authentic image of his people.

On the question of disillusionment with the pre-independent promises and optimism in Africa, Emmanuel Obiechina, in his essay
“Post-Independence Disillusionment in Three African Novels,” points out that between 1960 and 1968 there were 25 unconstitutional changes of government in Africa, of which 18 were military coups and others were militarily inspired. Nigeria too suffered a spate of not less than six military coups between 1950 and 1980. The post-independence experience of the new modern-states came to be structured by what Neil Lazarus described as “the deadly sinuosity of neo-colonialism”. Neo-colonialism, a legacy of colonialism, is a term usually used to describe the high degree of economic control over a former colony’s affair by Western business interests. In other words, western hegemonic control continued to exercise influence with both political and psychological consequences even after the flag independence. To Archie Mafege, colonialism was “an unmitigated imposition and neo-colonialism, a contractual relationship.” Infamous megalomaniac rulers like Idi Amin of Uganda and Emperor Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic were tragically propped by western vested interests. Most of the native leaders followed suit and failed to keep their independence promises; one party system with dictatorial or semi-dictatorial leaders became the fashion in the so-called post-independent Africa. The bitter political and social realities prevailing in the new nation-states of Africa compelled the writers to address issues on the nature and purpose of their art, and their responsibility to decolonize the African mind. According to
Ayi Kwei Armah, the term ‘decolonization’ means “the search or research for positive African ideas, perspectives, values.” It involves a parallel process of re-Africanization or a discursive formulation wherein the artist reconstructs an identity so long been denied or deprived of. The very act of writing thereby becomes a means of self-assertion and self-realization.

In his novels, especially those set in the modern time, Achebe contests the classical western notion that the native tribes can be ‘civilized’ through the introduction of their religious, educational, cultural and political system among them. The experience of colonialism and its concomitant activities among the Igbo people of Nigeria has been presented in the novels as in constant conflict with the idea of good for the receiving culture. For instance, Achebe’s fifth and final novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, deals a scathing attack on graft in high places. A century of the west’s civilizing mission among the African people stands defeated, and this in fact resulted in the rise of unhindered corrupted politicians and dictators in Igboland.

Writing stories that speaks for themselves is central to Achebe’s novelistic agenda. In his famous essay “The Novelist as Teacher” he wrote: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its
imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered them.” ⁵⁵ Representing an African worldview through narratives that speak for themselves meant that Achebe would draw heavily upon the Igbo oral traditions to narrate the stories of his communities while bearing in mind Richard Bauman’s exhortations that in utilizing oral traditions to engage the canons of elite Western literary traditions and texts, oral narrative must not be taken merely to be the reflection of culture or the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes in historical writing: instead oral narratives must be utilized “contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning.” ⁵⁶

The famous ending of Things Fall Apart describes the District Commissioner’s yearning to write the story of his colonized natives as a challenging ethnographic project in a moment of the colonial encounter in Africa. Having just witnessed the death of Okonkwo, one of the greatest men in Umuofia, the Commissioner fabricates an imperialist narrative and his colonial imagination prefigures the narration of the ‘interesting’ story of “this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself…. One could write almost a whole chapter on him… (at least) a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must
be firm in cutting out details.” However, the passion that the Commissioner will invest in his account of the native people is merely a seductive desire for storytelling and a “function of (his own) desires, purposes, and constraints”. His narrative is already displaced as his “interesting” story has already anticipated by the scepticism of Achebe’s insider narrative. For Achebe has already written back to contest the “reasonable” paragraphing of history by writers like Cary and Johnson, “outsiders” who devoted their accounts to similar ambitious projects as the Commissioner’s. The Commissioner’s potentially seductive story about one of the most tragic events in his administration is an almost impossible future project. His highly controversial and abrupt “reasonable paragraph” has already found adequate representation and space in the entire exchanges among Umuofians and between Umuofia and the Christian missionaries and the colonial government in Achebe’s narrative.

As Chamber suggests further, since there is a direct relationship between storytelling and the art of government, one must contextualize “storytelling as an event that presupposes a situation and mobilizes social relationships so as to give it a performative force”. Achebe, following Fanon, locates Igbo societies in the liminal space of history in which they
grapple with imperialist endeavours of colonial power by telling Bernth Lindfors in an interview that it is in “that ‘zone of occult instability’ where people dwell” that their regenerative powers “are most potent”.61 The complicated occult zone of African and colonialist history and the representation of the ideologically real and fictional dimensions of that zone is encapsulated in the Commissioner’s effort both to represent reality and to censor it.

This near appropriation of a totalizing narrative of culture finds another form of expression in the tradition and politics of Things Fall Apart. The story re-enacts phases of the pre-colonial and colonial traditional order of African history by featuring the beginnings of some significant moments of nationalist ideological crisis in the communities of Umuofia and Mbanta. Masculine traditions operate as forms of consciousness that act primarily to legitimize specific ideals and values and to distribute and restrict authority within Umuofia, one of the most powerful of Igbo communities. Umuofia is not only “feared by all its neighbours,” but is also “powerful in war and magic.”62 Achebe relates the reason behind individual and communal crises in a society in which war heroes, titled and wealthy subjects, and other celebrated figures are dominantly male.
Umuofia is already weakened by internal cleavages and it is only when the process of cultural breakdown intensify with the arrival of the white colonizers that Obierika, one of the greatest men in the society, affirms how the ‘clan can no longer act like one’ and has ‘fallen apart.’

The story of Okonkwo and Umuofia at the threshold of historical transition may be read in the first instance as the narration of an epic African masculine nationalist tradition. Achebe’s text links and identifies power and authority with masculinity. As a young man, Okonkwo ‘invents’ himself and consolidates his position within the clan by overthrowing Amalinze the Cat. With this feat Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. Okonkwo’s victorious feat in the famous wrestling match that begins the story of Umuofia is also one that “the old men” agreed was one of the most laudable exploits “since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.” The legitimization of male-centred traditions in Umuofia resonates in many ways with Raymond William’s view that dominant traditions often aspired to “an active and continuous selection and reselection” and “a projected reality, with which we have to come to terms on its terms, even though those terms are always and must be the valuations, the selections and omissions” of “men.” For instance, Okonkwo’s masculinity becomes a defensive resource and his adherence to a masculine philosophy orders his world. In articulating his identity
and justifying his actions, he cultivates his masculinity as a defence of personal honour in the face of potentially overwhelming circumstances in an antagonistic universe.

Discussing the use of African literature as a mode of restoring value within his traditional society, Achebe observes that “any presence [within his culture] which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement” may become a “focus for anxiety and disruption.”

Although Umuofia’s laws, customs, and the proclamations of its oracles communicate coercive impulses, individuals may also renegotiate themselves around the sacrosanct traditional values represented as incontrovertible and which are meant both to ensure the clan’s survival and to consolidate its traditions. The story of Obiako, the palm tapper, illustrates further the power of disruption and resistance. Obiako’s interesting story is almost self-explanatory:

Obiako has always been a strange one... I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the oracle. The Oracle said to him, ‘Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.’ Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, ‘Ask my father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive. Everybody laughed heartily...”

Retaining a stable system of values within Umuofia’s traditions is threatened by such personal accounts as Obiako’s. Umuofia’s consciousness of itself, which it articulates through ancestral veneration, is challenged by such marginal stories as Obiako’s, which in their
rebelliousness are not merely obstructive to the perpetuation of Umuofia’s traditions, but appraise the restrictiveness of tradition in ways that men like Okonkwo and wealthy and titled men like Nwakibie cannot comprehend. Implied in Nwakibie’s derisive reference to Obiako’s “strange” disposition is the insinuation that Obiako’s position is of little ideological significance within the respected traditions of the clan. Within the highly ideological and coercive ambience of Umuofia, however, stories like Obiako’s are not merely trivially subversive but are of emancipatory significance. Characterizing the ideological crisis within his traditional society uncovers the ambivalences of ideology in narrative and reorients the meaning and import of the relationships between Achebe’s texts and their reproduction of historical narrative.

Reading the other side of Achebe’s Igbo-African nationalist tradition means alternating the narrative viewpoint to radically transform the story and its underlying assumptions. As Hite argues, “the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of ‘other sides.’” Further she adds, “Alternative versions…might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphasis and values”.\(^69\) By highlighting themes and characters seen conventionally as peripheral, Achebe’s story transgresses the perception of his writing as penetratively masculinist.
The personal narratives of ‘marginalized’ individuals such as Obiako and Unoka together with those of women correlate the narrative as encapsulating a progressively consolidating framework of resistance and survival. Achebe seems interested in confirming Foucault’s interesting observation that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”. Following Foucault’s hypothesis in *Order of Things*, Achebe sets his text within a reflexive liminal phase, or “middle region,” where culture is “continuous and graduated” and “linked to [a] space constituted anew and at each time by the driving force of time”. Indeed, Achebe himself proposes an order of things not unrelated to Foucault’s: “[A]rt is what I have chosen to call my middle passage.” He adds further that if art is to be offered a “celebration of…reality,” it must involve the ‘creative potential in all of us’ and a demonstration ‘of the need to exercise this latent energy again and again’.

Achebe’s dilemma in finding an appropriately ‘democratic’ means of representing the Igbo nationalist tradition through narration is reiterated in the following statement made to Raoul Granqvist: “If you look carefully, the women were never really dealing alone with issues pertaining to women, they were dealing with issues pertaining to society”. Achebe characterizes Umuofia’s women in the joys and
tribulations of their motherhood and selects specific moments of their lives to represent some of the most meaningful cultural and historical aspects of existence in Igbo communities. Some agonizing moments that members of Okonkwo’s household undergo communicate the complications of existence and reveal how the forces disruptive of life tie Umuofians to rituals and customs central to the traditions of Igbo culture.

Achebe’s text reveals how human entities may rework and at least work through in critical and transformative fashion in their social struggles. The inappropriateness of the colonial imagination of primitive behaviour in traditional Igbo society is exposed by the stress on the ritual and custom within traditional culture and the demonstration of the power of narrative to educate about history in order to refute the idea that traditional Igbo communities were very largely one of drift and whose actions were not controlled by logic.

By presenting a worldview which is different from the West, Achebe affirms the existence of tribal communities with unique values. In Achebe’s ‘Igboland’ for instance, even crops are allotted gender. In Arrow of God, Okonkwo’s attempt at a young age at fending for his father’s house is made more difficult by the fact that although his mother and sisters worked hard enough, they only grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava which are seemingly of little importance
within Umuofia’s culture and its political economy as a whole. Since yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop, the narrative intimates that Okonkwo’s mother and his sisters can only make minimal contribution to their own lives, especially since within the Igbo economy, yam, because of its supreme importance, was given ritual and symbolic expression in many areas of Igbo life. The waning significance of yam in Igbo life augurs the instability of meanings and even the powerful symbolic economy within which yam is privileged is threatened with disruption.

It is important to note that Achebe’s use of folktales form a significant part of the Igbo ethno-text and the discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material. As forms of the ‘ethno-text’, fables, folktales, proverbs, myths, and other forms of indigenous wisdom provide modes of interpretation that discursively engage the order of traditional society and form part of what Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* has called discursive formations. According to Hugo Niño the ethno-text refers to communitarian cultural productions, known more frequently as mythologies and traditions and for Nina Friedemann ethno-text is synonymous with ‘oralitura’. Ethno-text or oralitura are also terms that serve to show cultural attitudes facing hegemonic theoretical manipulation. The “ethno text”, that text of ancestral ties, has erupted like a heterogeneous cultural production at the
same time that postmodern conditions claim for identities redefinition. Their aesthetic effects reach spaces related to the socially therapeutic. In addition, it has a strong implication in the current tendencies of knowledge’s deconstruction, cultural maps and new spaces for understanding realities. In terms of reception, the idea of texts that belong to mythological reality circulating with texts that belong to open literatures in equal correspondence is a very recent situation.  

It is evident that the ethno-text has been studied as oral literature but in the last decades has drawn the attention of social and human sciences as well. Ethno literature is a symptom of cultural transformation in the Americas as well as a symptom of the creation of new cultural spaces by migrants. In Achebe’s novels, the characters’ ability to interpret various discourses empowers them to interpret each discourse beyond something other than what it actually says. In the world of fables, as in the real world of Umuofia, speakers can therefore embrace a plurality of meanings.

In the tribal world of the Igbos, the authoritative discourses of Okonkwo and the patriarchs of Umuofia would not therefore be unchallenged. Indigenous folk wisdom would save the text and the world from repetition. Subsequently, we are led into an endlessly important process of interpretation and reinterpretation where the invincible image
of closed worlds of meaning is both contestable and transformable. Ezinma’s unfinished tale for “Tortoise and Cat” versus “Yams” encodes significant possibilities for undoing the hierarchies of power and authority within a tradition where masculine authority is supplanted by female insights and ingenious folk wisdom acquires not only subversive and residual but even dominant potential. In commenting on societal politics while masterfully contemplating the limitations of coercive masculine traditions in a society where knowledge of traditional lore and the appropriation of the ethno-text facilitate the continual redefinition of roles and statuses, Achebe dramatizes the internal tribulations of the clan.

Achebe has been known for his preoccupation with language, not simply as a communicative tool, but as a total cultural experience. In this level, language is not merely a technique; it is the embodiment of its civilization and therefore represents or dramatizes modes of perception within its cultural grouping. Accordingly, the white man’s failure to understand African customs in Things Fall Apart is bound up with his ignorance of the African languages. In other words, Achebe seizes upon the perceptual values represented by an alien European culture and its language, and then exploits these criteria to portray external conflicts between the African and the white colonialist, or to project the internal crisis of African society. Achebe expropriates the European’s literary
techniques, and related perceptual values, in order to postulate an African, or even anti-European, point of view. Hence he consistently borrows European historiography in order to explode the notorious Western myth that Africans have no history. The title of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, announces Achebe’s fairly obvious debts to Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming” (1921). In Yeats’s work the vision of human history projects a succession of gyres, of epochal cycles in which the pre-Christian era gives way to an age ushered in by Christ’s first coming, and the Christian phase must be followed in turn by a new and terrifying unknown cycle – by the new “cradle” and the new “Bethlehem” of another era or “coming.” This parallels Achebe’s idea of the nineteenth century Europeanization, with all its implied consequences for yet another stage – the future history of postcolonial Africa. Generally, therefore, whenever Achebe draws upon English literature for his titles and themes, he adheres to the familiar strategy of the ex-colonial’s cultural revolution: he uses the literary traditions of the English tongue to liberate the African’s identity and history from the ethnocentric images that have been enshrined in the psychopathology of the colonizer’s language. The ironic manipulation of Prospero’s culture has reversed the colonist’s modes of perception.
The District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* is an archetype of those numerous Europeans, particularly missionaries and administrators, whose instant expertise on Africa has contributed to the Westerner’s profound ignorance of the continent. And the ethnocentric bias of the Commissioner’s imperial handbook underlines the historical inability of the Western scholar to emancipate himself from the usual perspectives on African “primitives.” But here, too, Achebe’s handling of the colonizer’s viewpoint is influenced by the ironic ambiguity with which the African novelist invests his European tools. The white colonist lacks the capacity to perceive the human dimensions of Okonkwo’s tragedy. Thus the anthropological machinery of the Commissioner’s book will reduce the Igbo warrior to a sensational paragraph on the irrational violence of the “savage.” But Achebe’s historical novel has used this same machinery to present the “primitive” as a complex human being who reflects, and is part of, Africa’s history.

Thus the anthropological framework of Achebe’s narrative clarifies the moral and cultural significance of Okonkwo’s suicide: “It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it.” Okonkwo’s death dramatizes the dominant impulse of his life: it is the culmination as a self-destructive pride, but it is also the inevitable
outcome of the demoralizing effects of the new order. In effect, the anthropological background of Okonkwo’s death projects the tragedy as an apocalypse: the old Africa with all its beauty and power is crumbling under the simultaneous pressures of white imperialism from without, and self-destructive forces from within. But when these social data and cultural judgments are presented to the white anthropologist, he distorts them because of his narrow perspectives. The tragedy and the taboos surrounding the dead Okonkwo can therefore be seen only on the basis of some self-serving point of colonial etiquette: “a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book he planned to write he would stress that point”.78

Altogether then, the episode of Okonkwo’s death dramatizes the degree to which Achebe heightens our awareness of perceptual conflicts between two civilizations by exploiting the literary and cultural media of one group. The ethnocentric criteria of the European and the complex humanity of the African’s past are both illuminated through the once self-serving methods of Western historiography and anthropology. Furthermore, Achebe’s religious themes emphasize this relationship between conflicting viewpoints and cultural standards, especially when the latter are embodied by differences in language. Hence, in Things Fall
Apart, the hostile judgments of an alien Christianity are brought to Umuofia through African interpreters whose strange dialect becomes symbolic of their role. Achebe’s Christians are embarrassed by unintended vulgarities or obscenities whenever they use the dialect of the pagan and the unconverted: “Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying ‘myself’ he always said ‘my buttocks’…. He told them that they worshipped false gods of wood and stone”. ⁷⁹ And when the white missionary debates religion with Umuofia’s Akunna the absurdities of the interpreter’s earlier malapropisms merge into a tragicomic impasse – into an exercise in non-communication over which the suggestive figure of the interpreter presides. ⁸⁰ Achebe’s footnote to the discussion is ironic, for Mr. Brown’s grasp of the Igbo religion does not include real understanding or a sympathetic recognition of the African’s morality. The missionary’s “lesson” is merely an intellectual insight to the dynamics of a culture that he is determined to destroy. The European’s ignorance of African languages (and culture) therefore compliments the ethnocentric bias of his Christianity. And this connection between white religion and cultural perception is demonstrated by the pathological implications of the European’s language. Mr. Brown’s successor, the Rev. James Smith, “saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict.
with the sons of darkness.” The description of the Rev. Smith is crucial to the understanding of Achebe’s ironic strategy. The deliberate emphasis on “black” and “white” as the familiar cornerstones of white religion demonstrates that the maledictive patterns of the English language are integrated with the European’s racial bias and cultural perceptions. The Rev. Smith therefore conforms to the perceptual values which the French scholar O. Mannoni has ascribed to the colonial traditions embodied by the Prospero-Caliban myth: “What the colonial in common with Prospero lacks, is awareness of the world of others, a world in which others have to be respected”.

On the whole, therefore, Achebe links the ethnological implications of language to the perceptual conflicts between African and Western cultures. Smith’s maledictive English illuminates the colonizer’s white exclusivism. And the ironic manipulation of historiographic and literary traditions in the colonial language reverses the European’s ethnocentricism: the African’s “reason-by-embrace” (as Senghor describes it), his inclusive view of society and history, is articulated through media and cultural definitions which were once used to limit his humanity. At the same time, the external confrontation that is inherent in the cultural significance of language is analogous to the internal conflicts of Achebe’s fiction. In Things Fall Apart the ethnocentric European is a
paradigm of the egocentricity which initiates a moral crisis within the African community. For, in addition to his power and integrity which reflect the beauty and strength of the old Africa, Okonkwo is fiercely, and destructively, proud. In his own society he lapses into that unawareness of “the world of others” which marks the colonizer’s cultural perception. The impending disintegration of the old ways is attributable to an egocentric strain in African heroism as well as to the European’s exclusivism. And this parallel between two limited modes of perception is illustrated by Okonkwo’s relationship with his son Nwoye. The heavy hand with which Okonkwo rules his family is due to fear, the fear of resembling his father in “failure and weakness.” But in shunning Unoka’s vice, idleness, Okonkwo’s pride rejects the old man’s virtue – gentleness. This fearful preoccupation with a certain image of manhood distorts Okonkwo’s view of his son’s real personality. The self-made man confuses Nwoye’s diffidence with “incipient laziness”. Nwoye is repelled by his father’s equation of masculinity with violence and bloodshed. But he displays his own kind of courage when he elects to join the strange religion of the white Christians, for his conversion is partly in response to the shortcomings of his own society.

The question of Ikemefuna is crucial, for his death in Okonkwo’s hands is the crucial example of the destructive pride, the fearful
egocentricity, which compels Okonkwo to prove his “courage” even at the cost of sacrificing a war hostage who had become a member of his own household. The corrosive effects of his sacrilegious act on the relationship between Nwoye and his father is comparable with the impact of other forms of Igbo morality – including the superstitious exposure of new born twins. In effect, Okonkwo’s egocentric failure to recognize or respect the humanity of Ikemefuna and Nwoye is symptomatic of those weaknesses which have made his society vulnerable to the promises of Christianity. The problems of human perception which are dramatized by the colonial functions of language have been repeated, on an internal level, within African society itself.

Altogether then, Achebe exploits the English language and its cultural norms in order to explore differences in modes of perception. The European’s ethnocentric perceptions are exposed and ironically reversed in order to accommodate the African’s self-awareness. Or they are compared with the perceptual norms of divisive individualism in the African community. And even in A Man of the People (1966) where there is less emphasis on the literary and pathological traditions of English, Achebe’s basic objective remains the same: cultural norms embody modes of perception which are intrinsic to the emotional and moral experiences in the novel. Indeed, in his fourth novel Achebe rejects
European judgments even more explicitly than he does in the ironic manipulations of the earlier novels. The European’s ignorance of African customs has led to shallow and misleading generalizations. Some foreigners, for example, think “we are funny with figures.” Hence Odili’s father astonishes a British visitor because the former seems to be unaware of the size of his own family: “My father grinned and talked about other things. Of course he knew how many children he had but people don’t go counting their children as they do animals or yams”.85

Neither does Odili trust the foreigner’s critical interpretation of African art. According to an Englishman, the old African, “quite an illiterate pagan,” who shakes her fist at the modern sculpture of a god is expressing annoyance at the “un-African” art of the European-trained sculptor. But as Odili points out, the gesture with the fist “is a sign of great honour and respect; it means that you attribute power to the person or object.” Moreover, this blunder is comparable with the faux pas by a French reviewer of an African religious mask. The divine “detachment and disdain” depicted by the mask had been missed by the critic’s infatuation with the figure’s “half-closed eyes, sharply drawn and tense eyebrows, the ecstatic and passionate mouth.” The problem arises from differences in cultural perception: the critic has “transferred to an alien
culture the same meaning and interpretation that his own people attach to
certain gestures and facial expression”.86

The art of dancing is also pertinent, for the “foreign enthusiast of
African rhythm” who tends to “overdo the waist wriggle” is simply
responding to the stereotyped perceptions of the African: “It all goes back
to what others have come to associate us with. And let it be said that we
are not entirely blameless in this. I remember how we were outraged at
the University to see a film of breast-throwing, hip-jerking, young women
which a neighbouring African state had made and was showing abroad as
an African ballet”.87 Altogether, the perceptual problems created by the
foreigner’s cultural norms have been compounded by those Africans who
accept or accede to the European’s irrelevant judgments.

But above all, these problems are not limited to the relationship
between African and Western cultures. As in Things Fall Apart or No
Longer at Ease, the kinds of perception which underlie the external
conflict are pertinent to the internal crisis of the African community.
When Odili resents an American for criticizing his country he implies a
parallel between the incompetence of alien judgments on African politics:
“Who the hell did she think she was to laugh so self-righteously? Wasn’t
there more than enough in her own country to keep her laughing all her
days? Or crying if she preferred it?”88 And, as in the case of the pseudo-
African ballet, Odili’s anger is also directed inwards – at those Africans who have glibly accepted, or prostituted themselves to shallow imitations of Western politics. Chief Nanga’s “democratic” politics, like his colourful English, are fraudulent externals which are unrelated to the socio-economic complexities of African culture and nationhood. But Nanga’s charlatanism only partially accounts for the emptiness of his claim to be a man of the people. For the fact is that Achebe is not being chauvinistic in either the matter of art criticism or political systems. He is acutely aware of all those intransigent facts of modernity which compel the contemporary African to come to terms with, or accommodate, non-African values.

Yet, at the same time, he is conscious that the outsider’s non-perception of the African’s culture and identity is counterbalanced by the fact that the majority of Africans do not always perceive of themselves within the context into which the twentieth century has inevitably thrush them. Hence, quite apart from his chicanery, Nanga fails to be a ‘man of the people’ because the ‘people’ do not exist – at least, not on the level of that democratic nationhood which has been handed down by the Western colonialists. The ‘nation’ over which Nanga presides is nonexistent because most of the individuals within its boundaries do not perceive themselves as components of an organized, national whole, but as
members of specific communities described by the limits of the village or tribe. This has nothing to do with the African’s allegedly inherent incapacity to view or verbalize his condition in Western terms. It results from the colonial experience in which the African acquired dual perspectives on government and politics. The central authority was formerly an alien white power, operating on principles and within physical boundaries that conformed with the Westerner’s spatial and socio-political concepts of nationhood. But the social and political unit which related most directly to the African’s everyday experience and to his sense of tradition was defined by the village.

This duality is dramatized by the public’s contrasting reactions to dishonesty. Having been accustomed to think of a central authority in terms of powerful, alien exploiters, the people suspend moral judgments on those African leaders who have succeeded the white colonists: “‘Let them eat,’ was the people’s opinion, ‘after all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?’”. On the other hand, when the shopkeeper in the village of Anata is caught cheating his customers, he is promptly and effectively ostracized, for the continuing traditions of village life make the people both able and willing to exercise their moral authority on this level. And the effectiveness of traditional African morality in this sphere is contrasted with the “people’s” impotence in the
ghostly milieu of nationhood: “The owner {of morality and goods} was the village, and the village had a mind; it could say no to sacrilege. But in the affairs of the nation there was no owner; the laws of the village became powerless”. Hence, the “collective will” of a people was not involved in Nanga’s eventual defeat, because the perceptual values which could have created such a will are absent or underdeveloped: “No, the people had nothing to do with the fall of our government. What happened was simply that unruly mobs and private armies having tasted blood and power during the election had got out of hand”. Having exposed the narrowness or irrelevance of Western perceptions of the African traditions, Achebe now underscores the limitations of traditional African values vis-à-vis the Western criteria of the twentieth century modernity. The external confrontations of the colonial era have given way to the internal conflicts of an independent, and hybrid, nationhood. And in the process, the familiar cultural differences have persisted, in a new internal setting, together with the related conflict between modes of perception.

Achebe uses various cultural symbols in his novels to represent the Igbo traditional beliefs and practices. Besides, his indigenized use of the English language by adding Igbo folktales, proverbs and syntax, Achebe also provides room for markers of the unique Igbo experiences. The elders were projected in the novels as repository of age-old wisdom and
practical commonsense. Age and wisdom are the guardians of the Igbo tradition. The word of the village elder in the rural novels is held to be sacred, and the dismissal of that wisdom leads to a certain doom. Achebe views the elders as the true teacher of the Nigerian society, as far as cultural awareness is concerned. He holds the knowledge of the past and therefore holds the hope for the future. As the Igbo narrative progresses, the Igbo youths who were supposed to be the future hope of the community, lost their respect for the tribal culture and tradition, and have grown accustomed to the imperial mind-set as a norm. They have come to accept the British social ideals as the way to attain and maintain ‘civilization’ in Africa. They therefore looked down on their own past as ways of savagery, as something to be ashamed of. Besides the use of indigenous idioms, the novelist authenticates the content of his narratives with the employment of oral stories passed down from generations. He contends the view that oral history unless put in written form faces the danger of being lost.

Both in his novels and critical essays, Achebe seems to be particularly scathing in his attack on the western-educated political elites of Nigeria who were in large part responsible for the move towards independence but are now in many ways perpetuating British colonization by preserving the ideals of imperial society. These same
mission-educated intellectuals, who were at one time so effectively colonized that they worshipped at the altar of colonial languages and culture and despised their own languages and way of life, were also destined to be the champions of intellectual decolonization at the time of Africa’s reawakening from the deep sleep of colonial domination.92 This poses a problem about the intellectual class of the elites to which Achebe himself belongs. But for Achebe, contempt is shown on the political elite, and not so much on the literary and cultural elites. This is evident in all his urban novels. The political elites are projected in Achebe’s novels as the agents of corruption. Again Ngara writes:

Their education was bourgeois in content and their lives were dominated by the values of western bourgeois society which had colonized and dominated Africa for over seventy years. However their aim in writing was not to promote but to reject in part, western political and cultural domination… Achebe probably depicted the past of his ancestors more realistically in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, for in asserting the positive aspects of the African past, he did not conceal the dark side of the culture of the fathers of old.93

The flaws possessed by characters and communities in the rural novels were commonly found in tribal societies of Africa. These Igbo or African flaws were set in stark contrast with the characters in Achebe’s urban novels whose faults are British faults which have been transferred into the societies of Nigerian people. More importantly, they are post-colonial faults of tribal societies trying to mimic the social order and values of the imperial nation they sought to overcome. The main reason for the
downfall of Achebe’s protagonists lies in the lack of respect for the institution of elders. In a way, Achebe’s message to his people hints at the return, at least to the best in the Igbo tradition which is symbolically represented by wisdom of the elders.

Achebe has been emphatic in his choice of using the English language. In his essay, “The African Writer and the English Language,” he argued: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.” 94 Unlike Ngugi wa Thiong’o who stopped writing in colonial English in favour of Gikuyu, his mother tongue with the hope to limit the imperial influence imbedded in the English language. Achebe also adds that the English that he uses will be a different one, indigenized to be able to express African experience: “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings.” 95

Emmanuel Ngara accuses Achebe of abandoning the masses both from the political and linguistic standpoints. He argued:
By writing in a language which the broad masses can neither speak nor understand, the African writer alienates himself from the people and appears to align himself at best with his own class, the African intellectual elite, and at worst with his colonial masters…. The use of a colonial language by African writers could therefore mean a promotion in independent Africa of western bourgeois values and worldviews, which in essence means the perpetuation of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism, as Ngugi has argued.96

Achebe’s use of English stemmed from various considerations and mostly pragmatic ones. Firstly his target of attack is the western-educated political elite who speak the English language, not only of Nigeria but even beyond the limits of the country. Secondly, the English that Achebe uses is basically African in content and style though the form is western. Achebe is well aware of the limitations of using Igbo language (which really consists of many dialects and is only one of the tribes of Nigeria) in terms of readership. Thirdly, the problems of corruption and the need for tradition and values of the past are not specific to Igbo alone, but to all Nigeria, even all of Africa. By writing in English Achebe is capable of reaching the middle classes on whose shoulder rests the responsibility to guide Nigeria to true independence. Although the institution of the English language presents many problems, perhaps the one benefit to this remnant of colonialism is a language which can cross tribal, ethnic and national barriers, and presents some degree of unification to the whole of Africa and the Third World. Achebe sees the English language as a communicative tool brought by the Britishers without any stamp of
ownership by the British or American writers of today or of past centuries.

If western literary practice was instrumental in dismantling the traditional tribal society and its culture, the works of tribal writers such as Achebe intended the new literature to challenge the assumptions of the West. For this reason, Achebe assigned roles, languages and habits to his characters to paint what he sees as the truth in the history of his people. Achebe’s work represented both the inevitability of change in the tribal society as well as the possibility of directed change to prevent needless tragedy.
Endnotes:


2 Ibid., p. 20.


4 Ibid. p. xii.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. xxiv-xxv.


15 Ibid.


17 Shohat, Ibid., p. 170.
18 Ibid.
19 Shohat, p. 173.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. xi.
33 Ibid., p. 24.
34 Ibid., p. 25.
35 Ibid., p. 119.
36 Ibid., p. 6.


39 Ibid., pp. 141-142.

40 Achebe, *A Man of the People*, p. 98.

41 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 5.


43 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 32.


48 Ibid., p. 246.


60 Chambers, Ibid., pp. 4-5.

61 “Achebe on Commitment” p. 16.


64 Ibid., p. 3.

65 Ibid.


69 Molly Hite, *The Other*, p. 4.


75 Ibid., pp. 109-121.

77 Ibid., p. 186.
78 Ibid., p. 187.
79 Ibid., p. 131.
80 Ibid., pp. 162-163.
81 Ibid., p. 166.
86 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 56.
93 Ibid., p. 32.
95 Ibid., p. 8.
96 Ngara, pp. 41, 43.