

**COMMON WEALTH LITERATURE**  
**ACHEBE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AFRICAN LITERATURE**

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In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe brought to bear upon the novel all the totality of his experience – social, personal, academic – to enrich the texture and structure of his book. Literature, history and theology would have provided him an ideal “trinity” to question and problematise received ideas in these three “areas of knowledge”. Casting a backward glance to the Igboland of the 1880s and 1890s, Chinua Achebe “simplifies” and “reduces” to “folk” idiom some of the more “sophisticated” discussions which might have taken place in the Theology class to empower the forefathers with a “carnavalesque” idiom that makes fun of the high seriousness of the missionary zealot. This little exchange gives Achebe’s first novel nearly all the “intellectual physiognomy” that it might want.

Achebe had originally planned the story of Okonkwo and his grandson, Obi Okonkwo who, like Mr. Johnson, worked for the British administration and was convicted for taking bribes. However, the novel shaped differently and, in 1958, when freedom was just round the corner, Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*, which was set in the 1880s and 1890s, when the missionaries came to Igboland. The story of Okonkwo’s grandson, Obi Okonkwo, hived off and became a separate novel, *No Longer at Ease* (its title is based on a line from T.S. Eliot’s poem, ‘The Journey of the Magi’), which was set in the 1950s as the British administration reluctantly prepared to hand over to the Nigerians the running of the bureaucratic apparatuses it had established. *No Longer at Ease* was published as a separate novel in 1960, the year of Nigeria’s independence. These two first novels of Achebe comprise a seventy-year history of the Igbo people, something expected from a sensitive African student of colonial history.

Subsequently, in *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe returned to the past and the early interaction between the Igbo and British ways of life. In Ezeulu, the tragic chief of *Arrow of God*, Achebe has drawn a character of great dignity who at least matches (if he does not better) Okonkwo.

The fourth novel of what some Achebe critics call a tetralogy on the history of the Igbos between roughly 1890 and 1965, *A Man of the People* (1966), deals with a crooked politician (a familiar third-world figure), Mr. Nanga, a young girl he is grooming as his “parlour wife”, and a young school teacher, Odili Samalu, who tells his own story. Odili is obliged to enter politics in a “democracy” when his mistress is seduced by Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P. and Minister of Culture. Odili joins a newly-formed political party and prepares to contest Nanga’s seat in the upcoming election. He also falls in love with Nanga’s “parlour wife”. In the end, Odili loses a filthy political battle but succeeds in winning the girl. Nanga, who has lived in fabulous opulence with his corrupt and self-seeking practices, loses everything because the election is rough and dirty and causes such a chaos in the country that the Army stages a coup and imprisons every member

of the Government. It is a bitter satire on modern Nigeria, in some ways prophesying the way the country would go in the future. (One recalls the political stand off, in the mid-nineties Nigeria, between the late chief Ma'sud Abiola, who had won the general election, and the late Sani Abacha, who nullified the election results and took over power, this prompting the Commonwealth to suspend Nigeria's membership.

In a way, Chinua Achebe, in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* (which reminds one of Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*, both the film and the play) deal with a history that is frequently lived and told, from Indonesia and Burma ("Myanmar") to Latin America to the Middle East to Zimbabwe and other African "republics". In that sense, at least, Achebe's novels on modern Nigeria are "representative" and authentic accounts of the way things are.

A fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savanna* (1987), heightens and furthers Achebe's ranking sense of the failure (if not downright betrayal by the ruling elite) of the post-independence Nigeria to evolve towards people's aspirations. *Anthills of the Savanna* takes up the matter of the interference and dominance of the army in a society where democracy is still in its infancy; Nigeria's recent oil-wealth might have only complicated matters, especially because of the politics of the oil. Further, the slaughter of the Christians in the Muslim-dominated Kano in Northern Nigeria quite recently shows the failure of a cohesive, people-oriented politics in a society where internecine tribal rivalries may not be as bad as elsewhere in Africa, but where ethnic and sectarian strifes are not entirely unknown. The recent murder of the writer and Omani rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa further highlights the risks that a well-intentioned, well-informed political or social activist might face in a vitiated environment. Perhaps these are the factors which have actuated writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka to live for most of the time outside their own country.

Besides the novels, Chinua Achebe has also published *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1962), *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1972) which was reprinted in America as *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1973), *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (1975), *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Essays, 1983) and *Hope and Impediments: Essays* (1987). He has also edited a collection, *The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria* (1971).

Chinua Achebe's increasing commitment to his own people in the 1960s and 1970s is clearly expressed in his stories as well as expository writing, e.g., "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" (1964) and "Africa and Her Writers". These essays emphasize Achebe's insistence on "applied art", i.e., on the writer's engagement with his own society and, secondly, his stress on a need to establish criteria – and especially African criteria – for new writing in Africa. African narratives (myth, legend, folk-tale) and proverbs (distilling generations of communal experience into a linguistically well-shaped and condensed form) belong largely to what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has called "orature", (oral form of story-telling), as opposed to European "literature" (stories written down and thus given both "fixity" and "permanence"). Although literature in West Africa has existed under Muslim / Arabic influence since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, largely written by Sudanese Muslim scholars to get down the oral traditions of the Western Sudanic empires of Ghana, Mali,

and Songhai, it was the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of missionary and government schools which gave an impetus to write down, in “secular” rather than “religious” terms, what was previously an oral form of narration. Therefore, “literature” in the written form in Nigeria is the result of an interaction, at first, with the North African and muslim peoples and later, with the Europeans. These factors place writers like Achebe at what he has himself called “the crossroads of cultures”.

Achebe himself, in *Things Fall Apart*, “revivifies” Nigerian “orature” and writes it down in English in his novel, in the form of myths and legends and proverb which, as the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* remarks, are “the palm-oil with which words are eaten”. In a way, then, *Things Fall Apart* heralds a cultural renewal (or at least hopes of one) and at least in this sense, it is a novel not only about things falling apart, but also about things being put together from what had previously “fallen apart”, under onslaught of colonization circa 1880s to 1960. In this context, Achebe, perhaps inspired by the palpable excitement in the air after the independence in 1957, of Ghana and the imminent independence of Nigeria, saw the writer under the new dispensation largely as a “renaissance” or “rebirth” figure, as someone who would write bardically about praise-songs and recall, though his writing, the ancient and subsequently lost glories (largely under the disruptive, traumatic and unsettling colonial impact) of his/her people(s). Some of that enthusiasm and optimism perhaps was dissipated by the post-independence events. (Nigeria came under army rule first in 1964). At least in this sense, *Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savanna* (1987) are discontinuous with Achebe’s two major novels about the impact of colonization on the rural and agrarian past of his people, viz., *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of God* (1964).

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