

Challenging Universalism: Chinua Achebe's Re-worlding Africa

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Abstract

The present paper provides an overview of the nature and inherent assumption of universalism in literature and explicates the reasons why it and its usual signifiers have been incongruous with some of the most powerful literary movements such as Post-colonialism, Feminism, Marxism, and Post-modernism. These theorists argue that the term has a subjugating influence on the marginalized people and has carried an arbitrary significance. The paper has also highlighted the anxieties of the theorists regarding the pitfalls they might face if their own readings emerge as new metanarratives. The study has subsequently narrowed its focus on the oppositional narratives of major postcolonial critics demonstrating the reasons why it is an indispensable task to 're-world' the postcolonial territories to map out a way off the self-denigration and the self-abasement of the postcolonial societies. The paper, most importantly, had tried to demonstrate how Chinua Achebe, drawing both from his critical and creative writings, attempted in (re)presenting Africa's past and re-worlding Africa's socio-cultural identities based on their latent traditional power and wisdom albeit in the international literary-critical scholarship. The key postcolonial issues, for instance, history, language, the role of women, otherness, multiculturalism and African dynamism in Achebe's writings, have provided the undercurrent for this study.

Key words: Africa; Chinua Achebe; Decolonization; Post-colonialism; Re-worlding; Universalism

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INTRODUCTION

The study begins with a brief review of universalism and its diverse implications in the marginalized peoples and literatures. As a part of the literature review, the paper then identifies how the concept of universalism has been received in the various literary theories over a period with special reference to Marxism, Feminism, Post-modernism and Post-colonialism. The article then narrows its area of research into the postcolonial literature. To shed light on the implications of accepting western universalism in postcolonial cultures and societies, the article had reviewed the standpoints of Franz Fanon, Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak before embarking on an intensive study on Achebe's creative and critical works to identify his poetics and practice of reworlding Africa. In doing so, some of the major postcolonial issues, for instance, history, language, the role of women, otherness, multiculturalism and African dynamism in Achebe's writings, have provided the undercurrent for this study.

Methods: This research explicates Achebe's attitudes and attempts in creating a cultural space for Africa in the twentieth century intellectual readership by opposing the parameters of the universalism that negates Africa. It also focuses on how Achebe initiates to re-world Africa to foreground its distinctive identity and culture. For that, it has explored both his critical and creative writings. To analyze the complex criss-crossings of diverse socio-cultural issues, an interdisciplinary method of research—

to use the modern critical research terminological jargon—has been used. The advantage of this method in this research is that it helps me interpret the deep resonances of various colonial issues on each other and their diverse after effects in the postcolonial societies without any constraints.

1. CHALLENGING THE UNIVERSALISM

1.1 Nature and Assumption of the Universalism

"*Universalism*" in literature implies that some literatures are great and assumed to be beyond commonly posed questions of authenticity, acceptability and applicability attaining a certain "universal" status for all time and people. This trend had received a new significance after the invention of the printing machine. It quickly gave birth to national literatures in Europe thereby creating a wider readership. With the spread of colonization, literatures of European countries alongside got circulated across the world. The formation of "the great traditions" and "literary canons" was done in the belief that they were the best at enhancing universal liberal humanistic values. That is how some of the "meta-narratives" around literary themes/structures or a set of grand perspectives came to be accounted. The central tendency of these grand narratives, as it looked like, was to create a totalizing, universalizing, unifying and globalizing effect in the societies for the progress and prosperity of the world.

1.2 Marxist, Feminist and Post-modernist Responses to the Universalism

The rise of the literary approaches and critical theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Post-modernism, Post-Colonialism etc. in the second half of the twentieth century challenged the very tenets of liberal humanism and the universalism. However, soon they themselves began acquiring massive attention and subsequently attaining new denominations as grand narratives albeit in the realm of the reading/reception of literature.

Peter Barry (2002) argued that since a book is a product of a specific socio-cultural situation, it cannot be regarded as "great" and "universal", especially when human nature is not the same everywhere. He warned that believing in "universal human nature" might lead "in practice to marginalize, or denigrate, or even deny the humanity of women, or disadvantaged groups" (p.32). The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser believed that literature, along with the other "state ideological apparatuses" played a major role in generating an ideology in favor of the ruling class to maintain their "hegemony" over the ruled. Anthony Brewer (1990) cited Karl Marx's belief that societies should not be generalized; every society should be studied in isolation to observe the working of its traditional and cultural abstractions. However, "a single set of abstract concepts

will not serve for the analysis of all societies" (p.12). Moreover, Feminist critics had been protesting at how the male writers naturalized the roles, goals and aspirations of the women in the society by depicting the ideal "feminine" ways of life thereby essentializing the female subject. Jackson and Jones (1998) challenged what they thought was "male-centered knowledge" which depicts women more often as objects. To accept this knowledge as innocent and value neutral, they contested, is to promote and propagate the "gendered hierarchy of society and culture" (p.1). However they interrogated their own feminist comprehensiveness as it might be "marginalizing women not like 'ourselves', casting them as 'other'?" (p.1). The postmodernists reject any kind of grand, universal narratives or perspectives, as these narratives ignore the context from which the meanings are generated. Even if they accept them as grand narratives, it is a self-defeating process as the stories will gain the "hegemonic" position over them. Instead of facilitating the societies to develop their unique and distinctive identities focusing on the "mini-narratives", meta-narratives, Barry (2002) appropriately elucidated, "are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality" (p.64).

2. THE STANDPOINTS OF THE MAJOR POSTCOLONIAL CRITICS ON UNIVERSALISM

The rise of the political movements and the national literatures—which were often complementary in their struggle—in the twentieth century in the former colonies of the West gave birth to colonial, and in the post-independence era, the postcolonial literatures. They created oppositional narratives against the imperialistic ideologies protesting against the supposedly universal parameters of the West in evaluating their native cultures and literatures as it put them in a disadvantageous position. With a view to generating their own distinctive identities to stand as dignified people, they have emphasized to recover their indigenous knowledge systems and to see their history in their very own cultural perspectives. They believe that is the ideal way to grow out of their self-denigration and self-abasement.

2.1 Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe, undoubtedly one of the most powerful postcolonial writers in advancing African perspectives, declared: "I should like to see the word "universal" banned altogether from discussions of African literature(s) until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe..." (Achebe, 1975, p.7). In the same vein, he disapproved "the great traditions" by accusing them of marginalizing literatures of the rest of the world. In an interview with Rowell

(1989), Achebe persuasively argued that he would not accept any one's "Great Traditions" because they had been prepared in ignorance with the other peoples' traditions (p.173). He took to writing to defend his continent against the "prejudiced" writings of the West. He protested against the European depiction of Africa as a "dark continent" and assumed the responsibility as a novelist to re-inscribe Africa's history, culture, tradition and society in fictional term to recover their real identity and prominence.

In a similar vein, Achebe (1983), in his famous essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", demonstrated the attitude and approach of the West in depicting Africa. He cogently argued as to why it was done so: "Quite simply it is the desire, one might indeed say the need, in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe...*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization..." (pp.2-3). Besides, counterattacking Europe's pejorative view of Africa and its misrepresentation in fictional work, Achebe (1990) tried to "re-educate" his society and the world about the true history of the pre-colonial Africa. He asserted he would be satisfied if his books teach his readers "that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery..." (Achebe, 1975, p.45). The slave trade and colonization caused inconceivable self-abasement and self-denigration in the psyche of the natives. The quest for the root and identity, cultural regeneration and nationalism, and the challenge for the reconstruction based on their cultural past had become the indispensable responsibility of the African writers.

For a prolonged period of colonizing and dominating Africa and "indoctrinating" the world against the black race had caused irreparable damage to the image and civilization of the Africans. In his noted essay "My Home Under Imperial Fire", Achebe (2000) regretted, "that we were ignorant of the hundreds of years of sustained denigration we and our home had been subjected to in order to make our colonization possible and excusable" (p.33). Achebe believed that an African writer cannot escape from the task of "re-education and the regeneration" of their societies with their rich cultural past as the trauma of the colonial experience and the tradition of dehumanizing Africa was still there.

2.2 Franz Fanon

Franz Fanon, in his noted book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), insisted that the postcolonial societies must recover their knowledge systems because "Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring people in its net or draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (p.149). The most urgent and crucial responsibility of the postcolonial writers was to recover their subdued history and cultural heritage.

2.3 Edward Said

Edward Said, in his pioneering book *Orientalism* (1978), illustrated how "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (p.3) and how they depicted the Orient with negative images to assume/assert their own superiority. He further explains that Europe painted the Orient as 'the other' and branded it with all those images that they did not like to be associated with. Therefore, the most pressing engagement at hand for the postcolonial writers was to rewrite their past and celebrate their cultural heritage to grow out of the inferiority complexes.

2.4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first used the term "worlding" while analyzing the colonial discourse in Indian context in her famous book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999). She suggested that "the condition of possibility of worlding of a world generates the force to make the 'native' see themselves as 'other'" (Spivak, p.212). Spivak (1999) stressed the significance of (re)inscribing the history of Indian colonial period against the "colonialist presupposition of an un-inscribed earth" (p.228). She expressed her anxiety, "what is at stake is a 'worlding,' the re-inscription of a cartography that must (re)present itself as impeccable" (Spivak, p.228). She believed this rewriting of one's past is needed to defend oneself against the colonial allegation of not having any culture, tradition and history.

3. CHINUA ACHEBE'S RE-WORLIDING AFRICA

After refusing to accept the western perspective as an appropriate choice in evaluating their indigenous ways of life, it became imperative for the postcolonial writers to rewrite their cultural past from their own perspectives to see things from inside, to learn wisdom from them and to get new directions for their future.

3.1 History

Achebe explored the roots and history of Igbo people to reconstruct African society through the lens of their cultural past. In his five novels, he recreated the distorted histories of its people from the pre-colonial period to the present day Africa. Achebe remarked, in his 1980 interview with Kalu Ogbaa, that African writers were "engaged...on a journey through history" (Ogbaa, p.66). In recreating their history, which had been written from Western perspectives so far and many a times misrepresented, Killam (1977) quoted Achebe that African writers could not pretend that their past was "one long, technicolor idyll" (p.10). In rewriting Africa's socio-cultural past, he attempted to show how an outsider might

go wrong in understanding the complex ways of Africa's traditional society. Achebe minutely depicted a traditional Igbo society to convince the world "that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must regain" (Killam, 1977, p.8).

Achebe evaluated African life, culture and society in the light of their traditional perspectives. He argued that anyone willing to seek "an insight into their world must seek it along their own way. Some of these ways are folk-tales, proverbs, proper names, rituals and festivals" (Achebe, 1975, p.94). In an interview with Feroza Jussawalla, Achebe explicated the complex and contradictory attitudes available in the Igbo oral literatures. "Where one thing stands another thing must stand beside it", he said (Jussawalla, 1992, p.63). In the same vein, he once stated, "For every proverb you produce I can give you one that says the opposite. This is the way it seems to me that the world is made to run" (Mugo, 1978, p.34). While depicting Africa's socio-cultural history, Achebe transmitted these attitudes in the characters and point of views demonstrating multiples times of each era. So one can generate histories of the past rather than one single History.

3.2 Language

In re-worlding Africa, Language is one of the major issues to address. The question is if one should reject one's own mother tongue for the language of one's colonizer as language is not just there as a value neutral and passive means of communication, rather it functions quite actively in constructing realities. English, the language of the colonizer, was well on its way of bringing further alienation in the relationship between the native people and their cultural heritage and world-view. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O of Kenya is one of those radical decolonizers who wanted to liberate each and every aspect of life and culture from the colonizer's clutch in reworlding Africa. To realize this end, he rejected the coloniser's language. He believes,

Language was the most important vehicle through which that (colonizer's) power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation...I believe that my writing in the Gikuyu language... is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. (Ngugi, 1995, pp.287-290).

Chinua Achebe, on the other hand, advocated the recreation of a new English to suit the socio-cultural milieu of Africa. He argued, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience" (Achebe, 1975, p.62). Achebe has addressed

this issue of language in his third novel *Arrow of God*. When the novel opens, Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, was seen very much conscious about his own position in the society and the position of his society in the world. When he made sure that the white man had come to stay in Africa, after waiting for three years, only then did he send his son, Oduche, to learn the whiteman's language so that he could see and understand things better than his native brothers and guide that society in the midst of disintegration and turmoil. When he sent his son to the missionary school, he reasoned "I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it, you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share (Achebe, 1989, p.46)". Although Achebe intended to use the English language, he made it clear that African culture and identity would remain distinct from that of Europe, "Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them that destiny does not include a future European identity..." (Achebe, 1975, p.7).

3.3 The Role of Women

In his fifth novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Achebe foregrounded the voices of women in his attempt to influence African world in the making. At the beginning of the novel there were only male voices leading and dominating the scene. Soon Beatrice Okoh, the fiancée of Chris, emerged as a powerful voice for the women. The experiences that went into the making of her personality were much complex and the novel gives a delicate hint of the poignant position of women in a patriarchal society when she described her world as "world inside is a world inside a world, without end" (Achebe, 1987, p.85). She seems to be highly sensitive to penetrate the various layers of male chauvinism in her society, and protests against all those aggression as and when she felt so. She grieved to Christopher, "Well, you fellows, all three of you, are incredibly conceited. The story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you..." (Achebe, 1987, p.66). She was keen on narrating women's contribution to the national freedom struggle and independence a fact which had been suppressed and marginalized by male protagonists in the post-independence era. Christopher immediately agreed: "Actually you are quite right....we sometimes tend to forget that our story is only one of twenty million stories, one tiny synoptic account" (Achebe, 1987, pp.66-67). Her struggle for female identity—distinct and dignified—was reflected from the very beginning of her life. At one time, she asserted, "That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit. I had completely rejected, before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib" (Achebe, 1987, p.88). Beatrice's struggle for the emancipation of the women of her nation was visible when she accused Ikem Osodi, a poet and editor of the National Gazette, of not granting any "clear

role for women in his political thinking” (Achebe, 1987, p.91). Ikem grew with the suggestion of Beatrice and made it a part of his struggle to unfold the voices of the suppressed and to bring justice to them. Enlightened and envisioned, he noted this new commitment: "The women are, of course, the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world and, if we are to believe the Book of Genesis, the very oldest. However, they are not the only ones. There are others—rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialized countries, Black people everywhere including their own continent, ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries” (Achebe, 1987, p.98).

3.4 Dynamism and Multiculturalism

The west depicted Africa as a stagnant continent, for instance, Joseph Conrad, in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, describes a journey into the heart of Africa as wandering "on a prehistoric earth” (Conrad, 1972, p.37). Against this background, Achebe created a world in his fiction to demonstrate the change and dynamism of Africa’s traditional societies to instill confidence in his people about the civilized values and discourses of their cultural past. Achebe emphasized that an African writer would have to first recover their rich cultural heritage and then learn wisdom from it to give new direction to the society in conjunction with their latent traditional values. Achebe believed that African oral tradition and society did not believe in one homogenous way of it’s (re)presentation. Thus, while interpreting the past, it was imperative on the part of writers to be divergent in generating multiple and often contradictory ways of their past for their future generations to learn from. In his critical and creative writings, Achebe had never given any prescription for the society to follow. He always left his works unyielding to conclusive preaching and unveiling inherent complexities to create new trajectories for further exploration and diverse paths to follow.

3.5 The Otherness

Chinua Achebe’s mission of re-worlding Africa to secure an acceptable position and recognition in the world became an uphill task. In this effort of reconstructing Africa, Achebe did not regard the West as ‘the other’ as is evident from his critical and creative writings. He once regretted that Africa, after her contact with the West, had a regrettable direction. Instead of accepting good things from both the cultures, the (African) society has unfortunately retained "some of the worst elements of the old . . . and some of the worst of the new were added, and so on. So if it were for me to order society, I would be very unhappy at the way things have turned out" (Killam, 1977, pp.4-5). During the colonial era of Nigeria, Achebe wanted to convince the world regarding the evils of colonialism and so depicted that in his first three novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and

Arrow of God (1964), which were set during the colonial period. However, after the independence, he wrote two novels *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) to guide his society to focus on their socio-cultural fabric to strengthen itself from inside by fighting against its evils.

3.6 Re-Worlding Africa in the Post-Independence Era.

In the post-independence era, when the world had been increasingly getting interdependent, and multicultural co-existence had become almost a necessity, the nationalist/postcolonial theorists of most of the erstwhile colonized nations, started shifting their attention from their colonial past, seeing the colonizers as ‘the other’, towards the celebration of ‘hybridity’ and multiculturalism. Achebe wanted to widen the space of literature and the discourses it creates to incorporate all the marginalized literatures. He dreamed that the world will be a better place if " people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest and mankind will be all the more richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings” (Achebe, 1990, p.89). In the post-independence era, Achebe also changed his focus from demonstrating the evils of western colonization to the enemies inside his own country. He felt Nigeria could not grow as a strong nation if it did not fix its own problems. He reflected, "We started off... showing that there was something here—a civilization, a religion, a history...I realized after independence that... they (the political leaders) were not doing what we had agreed they should do” (Lindfors, Munro, Priebe, & Sander, 1969, p.30). Therefore, the protest of Achebe, over the years, had changed to protect the nation from the grip of the inefficient and corrupt leaders. He diagnosed that the problems with Nigeria is not with the people but with their leaders, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (Achebe, 1983, p.22). Both his post-independence novels *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* depict the multifarious socio-political evils especially the corruption and malpractices in the highest political bodies. The corrupt politicians, bigots, political murderers, political opportunists, and election riggers were now enjoying the fruit of independence. They had been weakening/breaking the country from inside. The result consequent upon this was the social and economic injustice, inter-tribal rivalry, anarchy, extreme poverty and ethno-religious rifts.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe demonstrated in fictional terms how the politicians have accepted tribalism "at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another,

and finally smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice" (Achebe, 1983, p.25). When the novel opens, the Minister of Culture, Mr. M. A. Nanga was seen to be in a political meeting. He was advising his former student Mr. Odili Samalu to come to the capital for a strategic post in the government. The real motivation of the minister was the emancipation of his tribe rather than the development of the nation. He cunningly incited his tribe for getting political mileage, "We shouldn't leave everything to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there; our people must press for their share of the national cake" (Achebe, 2001, p.11). He is one of the most opportunistic politicians of the country. He exploited the people, rigged the election, and took commission from contractors for granting government works etc. Having no hope for survival in an honest way, the common people had developed cynicism in life and management, and started doing wrongdoings at their disposals. Achebe commented, "Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are not what they should be" (Achebe, 1983, p.31). The root cause of this political decadence of the country had been depicted in the novel where the uneducated Prime Minister sacked two third of his party members, who "were all university people and highly educated professional men", to consolidate his hegemony in the party and governance (Achebe, 2001, p.4). This leads to, Achebe suggested in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, "an absence of objectivity and intellectual rigor... It inclines the fledgling state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency" (Achebe, 1983, p.31).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the paper had tried to argue, drawing lessons from various literary/critical theories, that western universalism cannot be a universal model. The study has gone some way towards understanding how imitating others' ways of life has a negative impact on one's own self-concept and personality resulting self-denigration and self-abasement. This leads to the reasonable conclusion that Africa cannot develop itself completely without going back to regain its lost languages and identity, tradition and cultural heritage. This underlines the importance of finding ways of re-worlding Africa. It is an essential step in re-worlding Africa to keep Africa's indigenous tradition into confidence in building a possible future. To bring home this argument, Achebe asked, "How far can you develop without dealing with certain humanistic problems, such as who am I, why am I here, what is the meaning of life, what is my culture? I believe that the relationship is close, important and crucial" (Rowell, 1989, p.172). To generate a relevant context against which such questions may be answered, a number of key issues for instance, history,

language, the role of women, otherness, multiculturalism and African dynamism in Achebe's writings, have been addressed in the study. The research has demonstrated Achebe's strong faith on traditional wisdom to get new directions for Africa's future.

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