

**‘RESISTANCE’ TO ‘REPRESENTATION’:
CRITIQUING ACHEBEAN IDEA OF DECOLONIZATION
THROUGH HIS ESSAYS**

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Lead In:

Postcolonial discourse is consistently preoccupied with the issues of ‘resistance’ and ‘representation’. There has always been an attempt, by the erudite intellectuals belonging to the colonized countries, to decode and defy various mechanisms of oppression by glorifying native cultural ideals and other means of resistance. Consciousness of (English) language use within literary writings and other spheres (like educational curriculum) has further complicated the counter-discourse.

The paper tries to critique select essays of Chinua Achebe for studying his engagement with the project of ‘decolonization’ and argues that he does not have a proper *modus operandi* for decolonization but only ideas. Throughout Achebe’s fictional and non-fictional prose works, there are ideas which, at one level might seem inconsistent and contradictory, but at another level reveal deep structural, dialectical regularities and unities. Though his much discussed novels depict the process and products of colonization in Africa, his essays consent him to have a dialogue with the occidental tyranny of misrepresentation. In many ways Achebe’s essays manifest crisis in postcolonial societies in restoring character and cultural identity by celebration of indigenous cultures.

In the postcolonial countries like us, any attempt to decolonization makes us conscious of three aspects: 1) an alien code system has been operating our being, individual and collective, since colonial days, 2) we must refuse to such intellectual subjugation and 3) let us revive pre-colonial ‘self’ or ‘undo’ the colonial damages to cultural realities. Well, this awareness further brings in issues of ‘contents’ (i.e. what is it that we want to decolonize?), ‘agency/institution’ (i.e. who will decolonize us?), ‘medium’ (i.e. in what language can we decolonize; in the language of imperialism or native languages?) etc. In the process, the interaction between imperial culture and complex of colonial cultural practices becomes subject to scrutiny because the very consciousness of decolonization makes it a political act and that is why the qualifications and intention of the agents of decolonization project are to be examined critically. There are various integrated ways by which we can look at the very idea of decolonization; nationalist, cultural, intellectual, linguistic, literary for instance.

The great inadequacy of the project of decolonization is that only a limited number of individuals are engaged with it and that too powerless and a secret realization about the

impossibility of the decolonization itself. As a scholar once asked me, ‘how do you *unrape* yourself?’

Representation and Resistance

‘Representations’ shape the ways by which individuals, communities and cultures are considered to be what they are. Representations, in the postcolonial discourse, are either tools or by-products in the process of accomplishing certain ideological frameworks. Any representation would have check on various aspects like ‘realness’, ‘inclusion’, ‘metonymy’, ‘language’, ‘position’, ‘stereotypes’, ‘responsibility’ etc. in the very process because these aspects would decide their proximity to the center of power. It is here that the real problem occurs i.e. representation is by its very nature a ‘simulation’ or to borrow from Said it lacks “a delivered presence”¹. Therefore, representation is nothing but a series of fragmented images of an object (here colonized) with a view to design ideological content of the subject (here colonizer). Furthermore, Spivak² classifies the problematic of representation and argues that the complicity between “speaking for” and “portraying” must be kept in mind (108). She also addresses the quandary of “speaking in the name of”: this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem” (63).

The sheer inability to come to fair terms with expectations of the colonized gives birth to questioning of ‘representation’: Who represents? Who is being represented? With what intention? What strategies are being used? In the pursuit of seeking answers to these pertinent questions emerges the issue of ‘resistance’. English education has made the first generation of colonized English-educated intellectuals aware of their legitimate rights, democratic partnership in knowledge institutions which consequently led them to resist colonizers.

‘Resistance’ is an act of ‘rejecting’, ‘subverting’, ‘challenging’ and ‘competing’ a range of diverse colonial practices, including “representation” of the colonized. Besides, it also evolves assorted alternatives to the (post) decolonized state; as the process does not end with only ‘resistance’. It proposes what is famously known as ‘revivalism’, ‘revisionism’ and ‘nativism’ wherein native cultures are celebrated over colonized institutions and languages. It is in the matrix of such solemn nuances that I would like to discuss Chinua Achebe’s idea of decolonization and his stand in the postcolonial discourse.

Achebean Idea of Decolonization

At the very outset, it becomes necessary to understand how Chinua Achebe undertakes the edifying task of decolonization by analyzing the very attempt to resistance, he opines:

To answer oppression with appropriate resistance requires knowledge of two kinds: in the first place, self-knowledge by the victim, which means awareness that oppression exists, an awareness that the victim has fallen from a great height of glory or promise into the present depths; secondly, the victim must know who the enemy is. He [or she] must know his [or her] oppressor’s real name, not an alias, a pseudonym, or a *nom de plume!*³

When we come across such an analytical statement, we seem to assume that Achebe is certainly having a systematic model of decolonization to propose but it is not actually so. The present critique on his essays argues that somehow he could not theorize decolonization the way it should be or the way other thinkers like Fanon or Thiongo have developed. It is a kind of

comparative critique wherein I would like to juxtapose Achebe with other proponents of decolonization.

We have Fanon's well celebrated *The Wretched of the Earth* analyzing cultural implications of colonization and decolonization by looking at the issues of 'cultural emasculation' and 'colonial entrenchment'. He gives an analytical model of the subtle process of decolonization through literature wherein there are three phases:

1. The *assimilation phase* in which 'the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power'. Characteristically, the literary productions of the native at stage bear resemblance to those in the literary tradition of the colonizing country.
2. The *cultural nationalist phase* in which the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity and kicks against attempts to assimilate him. But owing to his own cultural alienation, the native intellectual's attempts at cultural reaffirmation stop at romanticizations of bygone days corrected by philosophical traditions and aesthetic conventions borrowed from the world of the colonizer.
3. The *nationalist phase* which is also the fighting phase in which the native man of culture 'after having tried to lose himself in the people and with people'. This is the revolutionary and nationalist phase in the literature of the colonized in which the exposure of more natives to the realities of colonialist oppression also contributes to a democratization of the drive for literary expression. In the context of this schema, then, the relevant response of the colonized intellectual is contained in the second phase, that of cultural reaffirmation characterized by unbridled traditionalism of past glories⁴.

It is in this regard that Fanon's argument stated the basic requirement of a national culture which was sufficiently rigorous to have anticipated some of the most radical positions of our contemporary criticism. When we read Achebe's discourse in this context, Fanon warns us:

nationalist writer's preoccupation with the past must be with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope.. It is responsibility of the writer not to immerse the people in a past the have left behind but to join and inspire them to confront the present as a historic moment...(160)⁵

Thus, the issue of obsession with nativism comes into the picture and we have reasons to argue that the reasons why Achebe is celebrated are the same reasons for which he could not accomplish a decolonization model i.e. Igbo culture.

Resistance, Representation and Issues of Language:

The question of 'language' has bothered writers and critics across postcolonial countries for the purpose of creation, criticism and resistance. For, language played an instrumental role in controlling cultures. Languages like English and French have not only distanced the natives from their original culture but also infused in them a sense of backwardness and inferiority for it. Active proponents of decolonization like Ngugi Wa Thiongo argued for radical shift in the choice of language. Set on Marxist worldview Ngugi's anti-imperialist consciousness made immense contribution in generating and asserting discourse of decolonization. He is the one who has given the project of decolonization a political and ideological colour in a more systematic way than Achebe. His pursuits of decolonization even lead him to argue for the 'abolishment of the English Department' from university and replacing it with Department of African Literature and Language. He emphatically argued:

Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world... I believe that my writing in the Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples.

(Thiongo 1981: 65)

However, Chinua Achebe has a different take on the use of English as a language of his creative expressions though he was very much aware of what English has done to his native culture. In one of his essays entitled “The African Writer and the English Language”, (1975) he talks about his choice of English against mother tongue:

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... 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 communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

(Achebe 1975: 62)

Achebe, here, unlike Thiongo believes and works for manipulating the language and by that he is actually using it as a ‘subversive strategy’ for decolonization. As the adaptation of the standard language to suit the demands and requirements of the place and society (here African) into which it has been appropriated amounts to a far more subtle rejection of the political power of the standard language. In Chinua Achebe’s words, this is the process by which the language is made to “bear the weight” and the texture of a different experience. In doing so, it becomes a different language.⁶ Or to use postcolonial term ‘*abrogation*’⁷ Deviating from many, Achebe is proposing a parallel code system which though derived from the ‘Enemy’, so to say, helps in the fulfilment common agenda of decolonization. It is an act of resistance to deny the use the ‘standard’ language (‘English’) and use rather a modified/diluted language (‘english’) instead, as just to voice African experience and to oblige the language per se. However, the counter argument against such modality is that the very idea of decolonization discards the choice of English. One suspects whether Achebe’s agenda was to reach out to “a desirable fraternity” through English rather than appeasing a small Igbo community.

There is yet another aspect to the linguistic decolonization; Achebe goes deep into understanding the fundamental process of imperialism i.e. it is the process to know, to control and to exploit. His essays try to subvert it vehemently by protesting the very idea of “knowing” and “representing”. For example in his very famous essay “*Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness,*” he goes on to say:

Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God But he foolishly exposed himself to

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the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out. (17, *Hopes and Impediments*)

Here, the resistance one finds is of two kinds; one is of the very European psychological worldview and the other is the language in which such a worldview becomes a judgemental scale in order to measure the very possibility of Africa. So what he is basically saying in the essay is that for racist like Conrad:

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot... I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question (17-18, *Hopes and Impediments*).

Is it a question of ‘authenticity’ and ‘intention’ of representation in order to safely graduate from the first phase of Fanon’s cultural model to the second one? Or Can we read Achebe’s response to xenophobic Conrad in terms of subverting the very process of colonization as if saying that ‘you Europeans have not known us properly and that is why “misrepresenting us in all possible manner’!” For example, in another essay, “*Colonialist Criticism*” he argues:

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: ‘I know my natives’, a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand—understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding. Thus in the heyday of colonialism any serious incident of native unrest, carrying as it did disquieting intimations of slipping control, was an occasion not only for pacification by the soldiers but also (afterwards) for a royal commission of inquiry—a grand name for yet another perfunctory study of native psychology and institutions (71, *Hopes and Impediments*).

By and large we have two Achebean ideas of decolonization; one that he is a culturalist i.e. he is constantly going back to Igbo culture for various purposes which is a very strong attempt in decolonizing literature but the language in which he does it is problematic. The problem with Achebe is precisely this that he knows the issue of language so well but still he wants to stick to English. For example, he says “in all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress” (72).

Interestingly, there seems to be a strange colour to the criticism of postcolonial literature by the European critics. As these critics try to use a ‘touch stone method’, so to say, in order to evaluate the postcolonial literature wherein they testify these new texts with the notion of ‘universality’ of

the European literature. In the same essay, while discussing issues of Larson's comments of the absence of universality in Lenrie Perter's novel, he fervidly questions:

Does it ever occur to these universalists to try out their game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel...? Of course it would not occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things the work of Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So-and-so's work is universal' he has truly arrived. As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you make take if you travel out far enough in the road which you make take if you travel in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home. I should like to see the word "universal" banned from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include the world (76, *Hopes and Impediments*).

One likes to read such a direct approach to have a dialogue with the European criticism wherein one not only rejects the universal approach but also rejects it with a necessary rudeness and annoyance. Having said that, I must mention the paradox too, especially when we know that Achebe himself went to Washington D.C. to celebrate 50th Anniversary of his book! It is in this regard that I consider Achebe's double standards to decolonization as his contestation and getting neo-colonized for personal aspirations.

What interests me more is the passion in which Achebe engages himself with a kind of dialogue with the North. In his essay "*Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South*" he questions the idea of "partnership" as the basis of a 'dialogue':

Partnership is also the source of impediments because no definition of partnership can evade the notion of equality. And equality is the one thing which Europeans are conspicuously incapable of extending to others, especially Africans. Of course partnership as a slogan in political rhetoric is a different matter and is frequently bandied about. But anyone who is in any doubt its meaning in that context need only be reminded that British governor of Rhodesia in the 1950s defined partnership between black and white in his territory, apparently without intending any sarcasm, as the partnership between the horse and its rider! (23, *Hopes and Impediments*).

Achebe is very critical of the way Whites use language as a subtle way of imperial and racial violence. Time and again he comes back to the issues of how Whites considered blacks historically and he wants to resist to that kind of misrepresentation. For example, while discussing the impossibility of a dialogue, he mentions:

In confronting the black man, the white man has a simple choice; either to accept the black man's humanity and equality that flows from it, or to reject it and see him as a beast of burden. No middle course exists except as an intellectual quibble. For centuries Europe has chosen the beastly alternative which automatically has ruled out the possibility of dialogue. You may talk to a horse but you don't wait for a reply. (23, *Hopes and Impediments*)

He is really furious in the way he is unfolding colonizers inhuman treatment of the colonized by telling us how the white man is always talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast. So, he blames the white for not allowing the

subaltern to speak. Sometimes we wonder how Whites spread myths about what black people are. Interestingly, Achebe decodes the very content of representation when he says, “The white man sends one of his fellows to visit the land or the mind of black people and bring home all the news. This has included every kind of traveller: priests, soldiers, bandits, traders, journalist, scholars, explorers and novelists” (25). Achebe is so good at unraveling the faint aspects of misrepresentation and in the process fulfills the first stage of decolonization i.e. to be aware of various ways of colonial injustice. As he argues that “Europe’s reliance on its own experts would not worry us if it did not, at the same time, attempt to exclude African testimony”(26).

This issue of allowing black to speak goes to the extent that myth of “authentic African” has been created, in the same essay Achebe mentions a distinguished German scholar of African culture Janheins Jahn, who has reflected on this problem and put it very well:

Only the most highly cultivated person counts as a “real European.” A “real African,” on the other hand, lives in bush...goes naked...and tells fairy stories about the crocodile and the elephant. The more primitive, the more really African. But an African who is enlightened and cosmopolitan...who makes political speeches, or writes novels, no longer counts as a real African (26, *Hopes and Impediments*).

Keeping the project of decolonization in mind, what would Achebe do? It seems that he has chosen somewhat middle path wherein he tells the fairy stories to be an authentic African voice but he tells them in English which according the myth of “authentic African” is not real one. In these essays, we encounter a much more complex view of “culture” as the seed of resistance to both local and foreign domination and as a germ of renewal and transformation.

Lead Out:

It is against complex tapestry of Achebe’s narrative art of fiction that we have better understanding of broad moral and philosophical temper, and passionate political and ideological enthusiasm. Finally, I would say he kept on resisting three aspects: 1) language 2) European worldview and 3) the myths that misrepresent. In order to decolonize, Achebe seems to espouse celebration of native cultures through literature but in English and critiquing Europe’s projection of Africa as a whole. To me this idea seems to be very weak, considering the role of education and policy in the larger picture of national decolonization because it is not possible that you only have literary decolonization. Or I suspect whether he wants any decolonization at all or maybe he does not want to institutionalize decolonization like others!

Endnotes:

1. 87, In his well celebrated *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains how the questions of “representation” is delivered presence as orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. He also talked about he spoke under the mantle of two indivisible foundations of imperial authority: knowledge and power with reference to representation of the orient.
2. One needs to understand Spivak’s position on the issues of representation when she says For her, one cannot construct a category of the ‘subaltern’ that has an effective ‘voice’ clearly and unproblematically audible above the persistent and multiple echoes of its inevitable heterogeneity. Her conclusion is that for ‘the true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no subaltern subject that can ‘know and speak itself.

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3. Chinua Achebe, Nov. 16, 1930 – Mar. 22, 2013
<http://www.sabinabecker.com/2013/03/quotable-chinua-achebe-on-oppression-and-resistance.html>
4. Fanon's categories cannot be applied uniformly on all colonial experiences however it is true for the African experience in particular. As Fanon's position on culture is predicated on his essentially materialist recognition of the exploitative economic motive of colonialism as the decisive determinant of all aspects of the life of the colonized.
5. 160, 'A Dialectical Theory of African Literature: Categories and Springboards' Ch. 4 *The Theory of African Literature* London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1987
6. Ashcroft discusses the role in language in understanding the interaction between the colonizer and colonized in the production literature.
7. In *Empire Writes Back*, authors define Abrogation as a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning "inscribed" in the words.

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