

SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMITMENT IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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I believe that it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. Even those early novels...what they were saying, in effect, was that we had a past (...), because there were people who thought that we didn't have a past...The whole pattern of life demanded that (...) we should put in a word for our history, traditions, our religion, and so on¹

Chinua Achebe

Introduction

This essay focuses on socio-cultural commitment of Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Through the analysis of selected texts, the study demonstrates the roles and responsibilities of a writer in his society. The essay is divided into three parts. The first part defines a writer's function and responsibility from the viewpoint of O.R. Dathorne which contrasts with that of some critics who negate this perspective. The second analyzes commitment as a controversial and ambiguous expression at two levels, namely, socio-cultural and political commitment. The third analyzes *Things Fall Apart* as a novel written with the objective of recasting the stereotypical images of Africa by some biased colonial theorists and writers who have limited knowledge of Africa. Given Achebe's lasting

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¹ Cited from Sunday Adetunji Bamisile., "Literatura Africana, escritores e engajamento sócio-político" in Engajamento Sócio-Político das Literatura(s) Africana(s) através de José Luandino Vieira e Chinua Achebe em *Luuanda e Anthills of the Savanna*, Unpublished M.A Thesis, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa, 2006. p.40.

contribution in this regard, this essay encourages further comparative studies on the place of Achebe in African and Global studies towards the recuperation of African pride and dignity that were eroded by colonial distortions.

The social role of the african writer

This essay takes the premise that a writer is a member of a particular society who takes part in the observable daily experience(s) of his/her society. But s/he is not just an ordinary member of his society in the sense that s/he observes sources, examines and explores the experience(s) in an artistic and creative manner with the main objective of using these materials to interpret imaginatively his ideas and views on the state of affairs in his society. For Dathorne,² especially in his book, *The Black Mind*, “a writer is a spokesman for the society in which he lives, sharing prejudices and redirecting its dislike (in a limited form of satire) against what is discountenance.” The incidents which are selected are interpreted and recreated imaginatively,³ and many times they reflect the degree of the writer’s awareness and commitment. Essentially, the contemporary African writer borrows from the African oral tradition⁴ as well as Western influence in order to produce a hybrid text⁵. In exploring the realities around him, he combines imagination and craft to manipulate the power of the spoken word in written form. The Bible,⁶ the ultimate Literary Text sees the word as embodying life and soul. Likewise, Achebe presents *Things Fall Apart* as a reflection of the human condition in the particular instance of Nigeria under colonialism.

Since a writer is understood by the criticism of his works, the view of the critic becomes pertinent. In the case of the criticism of African litera-

² O.R. Dathorne., *The Black Mind*. Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1974.

³ Gregory G. Colomb e June Anne Griffin “Coherence On and Off the Page: What Writers Can Know About Writing Coherently” in *New Literary History (Coherence)* Volume 35, Number 2, Spring 2004, p.273 – 301.

⁴ For additional information on the features, concepts and scopes of oral tradition do see Ana Mafalda Leite. *Oralidade & Escritas nas Literaturas Africanas*, Lisboa, Edições Colibri, 1998 and Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982.

⁵ Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, “Bhahha’s hybridity” in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*. London: Pearson Education Limited, 1997, p.122-156

⁶ Genesis 1: 3, 6:9-24, 2 Peter 3: 5-7, John 1:1-5, Mathew 24:35 from The Holy Bible

ture, a number of writers and critics, namely, Kolawole Odugbesan,⁷ J P Clark,⁸ and Okigbo,⁹ suggest that the writer in Africa does not have any function. Okigbo, for example, claims that he as a writer does not perform any function¹⁰. He goes on to state that what he does as a writer is to merely express himself, and that the public has the discretionary power to interpret his work the way they like:

I don't, in fact, think that it is necessary for the writer to assume a particular function as the messiah or anything like that. As an individual, he could assume this sort of role but I don't think that the fact that he is a writer should entitle him to assume a particular role as an educator. If he wants to educate people, he should write a textbook (or go to the class room). If he wants to preach a gospel, he should write a religious tract (found a religious institution). If he wants to propound a certain ideology, he should write political tracts¹¹

By the same token, we cannot accept either the views of a critic like Ogungbesan who argues:

It is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writing at the service of a cause, even if it is such a laudable and uncontroversial cause as the education of the people¹²

⁷ Kolawole Odugbesan, 'Politics and African Writers'. *African Studies, Review* 17, 1974, p.46-52

⁸ Some Nigerian critics and writers, particularly, J.P.Clark and Ali Mazuri., (See Bernth Lindfors et al., *Palaver; Interviews with five African Writers in Texas*, 1972, p15-22), condemned Achebe and other writers who use their works as means of fighting for a cause or for educating the people. These critics didn't see any literary value in Achebe's works that focus on his experience of the civil war. They regarded Achebe as a disgrace to the profession of a writer because of his excesses.

⁹ Quoted from *Literature and Modern West African Culture*. ed., Donatus Nwoga Benin City: Ethiope Corp., 1999, p.103.

¹⁰ Curiously, due to the events and happenings in Nigeria at the particular period of time, Okigbo changed his views on the responsibilities and duties of writers in the society. In his posthumous publication, he forcefully accepted that writers have preponderant roles in the society. He sees himself as a role model and prophet. In order to defend his people against discrimination, oppression and ethnic cleansing, in 1969 Okigbo joined the Biafran army led by Odumegwu Ojukwu in a secession bid. Unfortunately, he died on the field of battle.

¹¹ Assein. S. O, "Literature as History: Crisis, Violence, and Strategies of Commitment in Nigerian Writing", *Literature and Modern West African Culture*, ed., D.J Nwoga, Benin City: Ethiope, 1999, p.105.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.7

Writers perform various roles and responsibilities in their society. They are educators, spokespersons of their people, visionaries, prophets, critics, messiahs, agents of change, historians and chroniclers, and role models.¹³ These roles are well entrenched in their works.

Commitment¹⁴ is an ambiguous word used by many who hardly understand its deeper meaning and has attracted different definitions from many critics like Jean-Paul Sartre¹⁵, Femi Ojo-Ade¹⁶, Dennis Brutus¹⁷, among others. From their perspectives, social commitment is defined as that sense of endeavour that a writer has to make his community a better place to live. To achieve this, he must be ready to contribute to solving the problems facing his community, be ready and willing to partake in the realisation of the community's aspiration and upliftment. No wonder M. T. Bestman affirms that "Ecrire, c'est une forme de participation à l'action sociale"¹⁸.

Basically, commitment can be classified into two broad categories: socio-cultural and political. African writers whose commitment is socio-cultural are those who use their works to promote and celebrate the past deeds, customs, beliefs and traditions of their fore-fathers. Their works serve as educative tools that teach their readers about the rich cultural patrimonies of the African past and also refute the unwholesome allegations made by some ignorant European critics on the African continent and its people.

Politically committed writers are those who use their works to deal with modern socio-political problems facing their societies. Through their works, they criticize bad and unfavourable government policies, proposing better alternatives on how the government should be in the interest of bettering the condition of their people.

¹³ For more on this, please see Bamisile Sunday Adetunji "Literatura Africana, escritores e engajamento sócio-político" in Engajamento Sócio-Político das Literatura(s) Africana(s) através de José Luandino Vieira e Chinua Achebe em *Luuanda e Anthills of the Savanna*, Unpublished M.A Thesis, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa, 2006. p.40-50.

¹⁴ Ibidem - Bamisile p.41-3

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Situations II*. Paris, Gallimard. 194, p.124.

¹⁶ Ojo-Ade Femi, "Contemporary South African Theatre & the Complexities of Commitment" in *New Trends and Generation in African Literature*, ed., Eldred Duro Jones et al, Vol 20, London, African World Press, 1996, p.121.

¹⁷ Dennis Brutus, "The Writer in Modern Africa" in *Per Wästberg*, ed., New York: Africana Publishing Corp. 1969, p.33-4.

¹⁸ BESTMAN, M.T.: *Sembène Ousmane et l'esthétique du Roman Negro-Africain*. Sherbrooke- Quebec : Editions Naaman., 1981, p.8.

Achebe's works give special importance to both social and political commitments. The novels that were set in the past promote African cultural heritage, while the most recent ones stress the importance of correcting the anomalies in the African society. All in all, he is purposeful and firm on making his society a better place to live.

Achebe, as a protagonist of cultural commitment, stresses the importance of educating African people about their glorious past and creating awareness for the Other¹⁹ on issues relating to Africa's cultural heritage. This is the guiding principle of his earlier novels and he is very blunt and sincere as he gives an insight into what he believes to be the duties of a writer in Africa. In one of his essays, "The Novelist as Teacher", he refers to the case of a boy in his wife's class who was ashamed of writing about the harmattan because he was afraid that the other boys would make jest of him. He writes:

It is my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry. Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse...to *help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement*. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the aspirations of my society meet... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than TEACH my READER that their past- with all its imperfections- was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf delivered them.²⁰ (my emphasis)

Further justifying his commitment, he posits that the artist, carver, composer, or dancer in contemporary African society has to perform the duties of educating his audience and helping them to reclaim their past

¹⁹ See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London & New York: Routledge, 1998, 69 – 71.; Fee, Margery "Why C.K. Stead Didn't Like Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*: Who Can Write as Other?" in *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada I*, 1989, p. 11-32.

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher", *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann, 1988, p.30.

patrimonial heritages. Consequently, he sums up the pedagogic role of a writer in this manner, “the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that needed to be done. In fact he should march right in front. For as Ezekiel Mphahlele attests to in his *African Image*, the African writer is such a sensitive point in his community that his art serves both as craft and as an instrument of educational transformation.²¹

Apart from performing the duties of educator, Achebe defends African heritages and project African society and history to the European, that all the alleged imperfections notwithstanding, the African past was not “a long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God’s behalf” came to save them. This point is well stressed in this statement:

This theme – put quite simply – is 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 now. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost²².

Achebe affirms in “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation,”²³ if there is going to be any substantial development in his society, there must be a well established link and relation with the past which in his view is the foundation for progress and growth.

Achebe advises that for a writer to be able to carry out his duties as historian of his society, he should never be an inactive eyewitness and recorder of events but should have a vision and help in the formulation of progressive ideas that will help to direct his society for future challenges.

²¹ Chinua, Achebe. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975, p45.

²² Chinua, Achebe: “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation”, in *African Writers on African Writings* ed., G.D Killam, p.158.

²³ *Ibid*, p.10.

It is an opinion shared by René Wellek in his book, *Concepts of Criticism*.²⁴ Wellek states that if the writer shows an insight into the structure of the society and the direction of its evolution, literature can serve as a reflection of reality and offer the truest mirror of society. Achebe discloses²⁵ that he became a critic largely because of his social consciousness, societal influence, the bad behaviour of some of erstwhile nationalist counterparts during the colonial regime, now politicians, his disenchantment with the Nigerian situation after colonial rule, coupled with the problems that faced Nigeria during the civil war and particularly, and the failure of the then new breed politicians and leaders to rule in conformity with honesty, dedication and the principle of rule of law and separation of powers. These factors forced him to become a strong opponent²⁶ of the government.

Things Fall Apart and social-cultural commitment

Chinua Achebe's writings could be divided into two groups. Some of his novels were set in the past, namely *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). These two novels examine the themes of clash of cultures, the beliefs, traditions and cultural practices of Africans before, during and after the arrival of the Europeans. Other novels that have their setting in modern-day African societies – *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966), *Girls at War* (1972), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) – treat the cumulative events that take place immediately after independence, problems (such as corruption, abuse of power, bad leadership, poverty, etc) facing the present-day Nigerian or any other African post-colonial society and proffer possible solution to the deadlock. The socio-cultural and political commitments of Achebe are well illustrated

²⁴ Wellek, René. *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1965. p.238-9.

²⁵ See Bernth Lindfors et al, eds, *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers*, Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972, p.7-10.

²⁶ It is curious to state at this juncture that Achebe and Christopher Okigbo joined the Ojukwu-led Biafran rebels to fight against the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The most surprising aspect is that of Christopher Okigbo who was against and had rebuked Achebe and other writers for their political roles. Lamentably, Okigbo died during the war. In October 2004, Achebe rejected the National award given to him by the Government of Nigeria on the basis that he could not receive an award from a government that failed to take care of its citizens and above all, due to the dangerous state of affairs in the country. In the past his controversial views have put him in danger. The 77 year old has survived several assassination attempts and in 1990 a serious road accident left him confined to a wheelchair.

through these literary works. But for the purpose of this essay, we focus attention on only *Things Fall Apart* where the theme of clash of cultures and socio-cultural commitments of the author are well portrayed.

Things Fall Apart is composed of three parts. The first part is set in Umuofia and it focuses on the life of the people before the arrival of the white colonial masters. The second part pays special attention to the banishment of Okonkwo to Mbata due to the grievous offence he committed against the Earth goddess. It also gives us an insight into the coming of the colonialists with their churches and commerce and the effects on the mode of life of the people. Finally, the third part is based on return of Okonkwo to his father's land, his imprisonment and death.

Achebe was influenced by several factors such as the Western literary tradition, traditional African stories, Western education and Christianity which contributed to his success as a famous, renowned and socially and culturally committed writer. Many times, he asserts that his reading of some European writers²⁷ like Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, among other works that depicted negative images of Africa, made him become conscious of the fact that the story that African writers had to tell could not be told for them by anyone else no matter how well gifted or well-intentioned²⁸.

He also reveals that he was very fortunate as a child because when he was growing up in his village, he experienced by himself and also learnt, through the assistance of his grandmother and other elders who told him stories, every night, about the undiluted / pure cultural and traditional ways of life, as a result of which he became fond of traditional African stories which led him to become enthusiastic about African rituals and the activities of the pagans that lived in his neighbourhood:

“I think I belong to a very fortunate generation in this respect, the old hadn't been completely disorganised when I was growing

²⁷ Joyce Cary alone devotes four novels to the West African setting while Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is about the most vivid portrayal of European conception of Africa's Fauna e Flora. For further details and illustration see E.C. Nwzeh's *Africa in French and German Fiction*. Ife: University of Ife Press, 1978. and G.D. Killam's *Africa in English Fiction*, Ibadan: Ibadan University of Ibadan Press, 1968.

²⁸ Chinua Achebe, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London, Heinemann, 1975, p.70.

up... it was easy, especially if you lived in a village to see, if not in whole, at least in part, these old ways of life. I was particularly interested in listening to the way old people talked and the festivals were still observed; maybe not in same force, but they were still there²⁹.”

He discloses also that when he was a child at school, all African children attending British school were made to believe that African languages and cultures were bad as a result of which they were made to learn the British cultural way of life which was a means of making them see their culture as inferior. Ngugi has a similar experience³⁰

Generally speaking, Achebe aims in *Things Fall Apart* to show the theme of clash of cultures and its negative social, psychological and catastrophic consequences on African people. The novel portrays the beginning of disunity and disintegration in the communal life of the people, for example, the aggravated relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye, his son. Achebe demonstrates this subject matter by depicting the day-to-day activities of the community and the mode or nature of relationship between individuals, villages and their respective gods. He is able to prove that it is a well-organised and pluralistic society with laws and orders, having respect for their neighbours and gods, and above all, performing social, cultural and religious activities. In the village of Umuofia where the story is set, we are able to see the villagers celebrating different socio-cultural activities such as the Egwugwu Festival (p.62-66), the Week of Peace (p.19-22), the New Year Festival (p.26-28), Marriage Ceremony (p.77-83 and 92-94), Burial Ceremony (p.84-87), Wrestling Contest (p.33-36), etc. All these activities have one objective, which is to prove that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans.

Achebe also tries to demonstrate that the villagers are kind and supportive and do help one another in time of need or trouble. Examples are many in the novel: - Nwakibie, a rich elder gave yam seedlings to Okonkwo when the latter requested for them (p.20); Obierika assisted Okonkwo

²⁹ “Conversation with Chinua Achebe”, *Africa Report*, Vol. 9, no 5, July 1964, p.19-20.

³⁰ For details on Ngugi ‘s experience see “ The Language of African Literature Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature”, London, James Currey, 1981, p.285-290 in Ashcroft Bill et al (eds): *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998.

to sell his yams when he was banished to his mother's village (p.128); even after Okonkwo's death, Obierika was there to arrange for his burial (p.185-187).

Use of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*

In Africa, the use of wise sayings and proverbs³¹ is of great importance during dialogue and conversation because they express an "absolute idea"³², recognised truth or shrewd observation about practical life, and also help to give a deeper meaning and understanding to an expression. Achebe uses them to the fullest in *Things Fall Apart*. According to Joyce Braden Harris, "African proverbs are used to summarize ancestral wisdom. Proverbs are used to guide human behaviour, describe human nature, explain natural occurrences, and teach basic societal beliefs. Proverbs can be used in the classroom for creative writing and to encourage critical thinking. The power of the word can be seen in these proverbs. Africans often use proverbs in the same way that their African-American brethren use signifying, a quick tongued response filled with wit"³³

Making reference to *Things Fall Apart*, Austin Shelton affirms that "In developing the story line, the author employs a number of proverbs which emphasize several aspects of Okonkwo's problems and behaviours"³⁴ To justify his point of view, he portrays three aspects which shows the central position in the life of Achebe's principal character, Okonkwo: 1. his reaction to the weakness and "unmanliness" of his father; 2. Okonkwo's exploits; 3. His pride and rigidity. Hence, Achebe says that "proverbs are palm-oil with which words are eaten" (p.5). Killam³⁵ states that Achebe integrates a large number of traditional proverbial ingredients naturally

³¹ Ana Mafalda Leite., *Oralidade & Escritas nas Literaturas Africanas*, Lisboa: Edições Colibri, 1998, p.11-36; Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. 102-7.

³² I use this term as it was used by Carlos Reis and Cristina Macário Lopes in the *Dicionário de Narratologia*. Coimbra: Livraria Almedina. 1987, p.344/345.

³³ Haris Braden Joyce: African And African-American Traditions In Language Arts no website <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/district/depts/mc-me/essays.shtml> do PPS Geocultural Baseline Essay Series, p.5, accessed on 3 January 2008.

³⁴ Austin, Shelton. "The 'Palm-Oil' of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Novels. In *Modern Language Quarterly* 30.1. 1969. p.88.

³⁵ G.D. Killam. *The Writing of Chinua Achebe*. London: Heinemann, 1969. p.17-18.

and with a deep sense of appropriateness. There are many examples in the novels. Some of which are as follows: “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (p.6); “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother put into its palm” (p.47); “An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned” (p.15); “Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive” (p.15); “the lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did” (p.20).

Lindfors states in “The Palm-Oil with Which Words are Eaten” that: “Achebe’s proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local colour but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying. Proverbs thus provide a ‘grammar of values’ by which the deeds of the hero can be measured and evaluated. By studying Achebe’s proverbs we are better able to interpret his novels³⁶”.

One of the numerous Achebe literary critics, Obiechina³⁷ commends Achebe on his positive use of proverbs which serve as images, metaphors, symbols, and help to give deeper meanings and formal qualities in the narratives which they occur. In his view, Achebe’s intertextual recourse to the utilisation of African proverbs is not only aesthetic and pedagogical but also for ideological and cultural purposes. According to him:

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is the best example of the use of narrative proverbs to express the distinctive quality of the African fiction. Many African novelists use the technique of narrative embedding, but in *Things Fall Apart* we have the most successful use of this technique for diverse formal, thematic and aesthetic purpose (127).

From a closer look, I discovered that it has nine embedded narrative proverbs³⁸ which are borrowed from the indigenous literary tradition; seven

³⁶ Bernth Lindfors. “The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe’s Words are Eaten”. in Catherine I. Innes: Bernth Lindfor. ed., *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, London: Heinemann, 1979. p.50-51.

³⁷ Obiechina, Emmanuel, “Narrative Proverbs in African Novel”, *Oral Tradition*,7/2 1992, p.127

³⁸ Some of the embedded narrative proverbs are as follows: the cosmic quarrel between

of these are folktales and mythic stories; one is a pseudo-history; and one is an anecdote. From the foregoing, I can say without mincing words that Achebe is very gifted and talented, and that apart from being able to convince the doubting Thomases that Africa has a rich culture and high moral standards, he also succeeded in enlightening the young and the old that Africa has philosophy, and dignity³⁹.

It is important to stress that Achebe does not portray only the good aspects of his community, he also portrays some of the negative habits such as human sacrifice (killing of Ikemefuna), the excessive demonstration of manliness (such as when great warriors of the clan drink publicly from the human skull of their victims during communal ceremonies), and superstitious beliefs (such as the throwing of twins into the evil forest because they are considered to be evil children).

From all that has been said so far, we can say without doubt that Achebe is very objective and has performed his roles creditably as a culturally committed writer. Other writers should follow his example of avoiding the temptation of idealizing their people's past but should be able to assert the worth and value of their society:

The question is how does a writer re-create this past? Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealise it – to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed.

This is where the writer's integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to create will be called to question and will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We

Earth and Sky (p.38), the Locust Myth (p.38), Ikemefuna's song (42), the Mosquito Myth (p.53), snake and lizard myth (p.59), the tales of the tortoise and the birds (p.67-70), clever thief of Umuike market (p.74), the Abame story (p.97-98), the kite myth (p.98-99).

³⁹ G.D Killam ed -"The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" in *African Writers on African Writings*, London, Heinemann, 1973, p158; Interview in Nigeria Magazine, June 1964. This topic is also treated by Obiajunwa Wali in *The Individual and the Novel, Transition ,IV*, 18,1965, p31-3, Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's words are eaten" in *African Literature Today*, N° 123, (ed) Eldred D Jones, London, Heinemann, 1982, p3-18.

have to admit that like other people's pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides⁴⁰.

In the same token, Oladele Taiwo praises Achebe for his courage and states:

Besides the strengths in the tribal society he gives the weaknesses. And therefore have a true and complete picture in which the whole background is fully realised... He realistically and convincingly presents many aspects of the village life – the feast of the new yam, the wrestling context at ilo, the display of the egwugwu on festive occasions, the religious beliefs and the activities of the people⁴¹

Conclusion

This essay has examined Achebe's socio-cultural commitment in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that highlights the themes of clash of cultures, love and solidarity among an African people and, above all, the cultural practices of the people of Umuofia before the arrival of the colonial administrators who came under the pretext of civilization and religion. Through this novel, Achebe is able to realise his major objective as a socially and culturally committed writer, which is to counteract the negative affirmations of some ignorant European philosophers like Lévy Bruhl, Charles Darwin and Gobineau on Africa and its people. As a projector and defender of African culture, he proves that the people of Africa have their cultures, civilisations, philosophies and dignities.

He demonstrates that the clash between the traditional and western cultures brought about two major tragedies. The first is represented by the personal tragedy of Okonkwo who lives in the traditional African society according to the tribal and indigenous code of conduct. The second is a communal tragedy – the destruction of the village's customs and traditions. The arrival of Europeans brings about disintegration and disunity

⁴⁰ Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", *African Writers on African Writings*, ed G.D. Killam, p.10.

⁴¹ Taiwo, Oladele. *Cultures and The Nigerian Novels*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1976, p.112.

among the African people. Based on *Things Fall Apart* and other novels written by African writers, African writers mirror their society in their works. Oftentimes, their reflection helps to give the reader an ample vision of traditional African society, which hitherto was unknown. Through their visions, writers articulate problems of their people and probably give solutions and suggestions on how to move forward. Through the use of oral traditional elements, such as proverbs, wise sayings, and short stories, among others, Achebe presents in *Things Fall Apart* an image of social stability and a rich cultural heritage, which goes a long way to reinforce his socio-cultural commitment as a writer and an ambassador of African cultural values. The novel shows that Africa has rich cultural values and, like every other society, some defects.

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