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An African Voice

Chinua Achebe, the author of one of the enduring works of modern African literature, sees postcolonial cultures taking shape story by story

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HOME AND EXILE

Chinua Achebe's emergence as "the founding father of African literature ... in the English language," in the words of the Harvard University philosopher K. Anthony Appiah, could very well be traced to his encounter in the early fifties with Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson,* set in Achebe's native Nigeria. Achebe read it while studying at the University College in Idaban during the last years of British colonial rule, and in a curriculum full of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, *Mister Johnson* stood out as one of the few books about Africa. *Time* magazine had recently declared *Mister Johnson* the "best book ever written about Africa," but Achebe and his classmates had quite a different reaction. The students saw the Nigerian hero as an "embarrassing nitwit," as Achebe writes in his new book, *Home and Exile,* and detected in the Irish author's descriptions of Nigerians "an undertow of uncharitableness ... a contagion of distaste, hatred, and mockery." *Mister Johnson,* Achebe writes, "open[ed] my eyes to the fact that my home was under attack and that my home was not merely a house or a town but, more importantly, an awakening story."

In 1958, Achebe responded with his own novel about Nigeria, *Things Fall Apart,* which was one of the first books to tell the story of European colonization from an African perspective. (It has since become a classic, published in fifty languages around the world.) *Things Fall Apart* marked a turning point for African authors, who in the fifties and sixties began to take back the narrative of the so-called "dark continent."

Home and Exile, which grew out of three lectures Achebe gave at Harvard in 1998, describes this transition to a new era in literature. The book is both a kind of autobiography and a rumination on the power stories have to create a sense of dispossession or to confer strength, depending on who is wielding the pen. Achebe depicts his gradual realization that *Mister Johnson* was just one in a long line of books written by Westerners that presented Africans to the world in a way that Africans didn't agree with or recognize, and he examines the "process of 're-storying' peoples who had been knocked silent by all kinds of dispossession." He ends with a hope for the twenty-first century—that this "re-storying" will continue and will eventually result in a "balance of stories among the world's peoples."

Achebe encourages writers from the Third World to stay where they are and write about their own countries, as a way to help achieve this balance. Yet he himself has lived in the United States for the past ten years— a reluctant exile. In 1990, Achebe was in a car accident in Nigeria, and was paralyzed from the waist down. While recuperating in a London hospital, he received a call from Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, offering him a teaching job and a house built for his needs. Achebe thought he would be at Bard, a small school in a quiet corner of the Hudson River Valley, for only a year or two, but the political situation in Nigeria kept worsening. During the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, who ruled from 1993 to 1998, much of Nigeria's wealth—the country has extensive oil fields—went into the pocket of its leader, and public infrastructure that had been quite good, like hospitals and roads, withered. In 1999, Olusegan Obasanjo became Nigeria's first democratically elected President since 1983, and the situation in Nigeria is improving, albeit slowly and shakily. Achebe is watching from afar, waiting for his country to rebuild itself enough for him to return.

Achebe, who is sixty-nine, has written five novels, including *Arrow of God* (1964) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), five books of nonfiction, and several collections of short stories and poems. Achebe spoke recently with me at his home in Annandale-on-Hudson, in New York.

—Katie Bacon

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Chinua Achebe

You have been called the progenitor of the modern African novel, and *Things Fall Apart* has maintained its resonance in the decades since it was written. Have you been surprised by the effect the book has had?

Was I surprised? Yes, at the beginning. There was no African literature as we know it today. And so I had no idea when I was writing *Things Fall Apart* whether it would even be accepted or published. All of this was new —there was nothing by which I could gauge how it was going to be received.

But, of course, something doesn't continue to surprise you every day. After a while I began to understand why the book had resonance. I began to understand my history even better. It wasn't as if when I wrote it I was an expert in the history of the world. I was a very young man. I knew I had a story, but how it fit into the story of the world—I really had no sense of that. Its meaning for my Igbo people was clear to me, but I didn't know how other people elsewhere would respond to it. Did it have any meaning or resonance for them? I realized that it did when, to give you just one example, the whole class of a girls' college in South Korea wrote to me, and each one expressed an opinion about the book. And then I learned something, which was that they had a history that was similar to the story of *Things Fall Apart*—the history of colonization. This I didn't know before. Their colonizer was Japan. So these people across the waters were able to relate to the story of dispossession in Africa. People from different parts of the world can respond to the same story, if it says something to them about their own history and their own experience.

It seems that people from places that haven't experienced colonization in the same way have also responded to the story.

There are different forms of dispossession, many, many ways in which people are deprived or subjected to all kinds of victimization—it doesn't have to be colonization. Once you allow yourself to identify with the people in a story, then you might begin to see yourself in that story even if on the surface it's far removed from your situation. This is what I try to tell my students: this is one great thing that literature can do —it can make us identify with situations and people far away. If it does that, it's a miracle. I tell my students, it's not difficult to identify with somebody like yourself, somebody next door who looks like you. What's more difficult is to identify with someone you don't see, who's very far away, who's a different color, who eats a different kind of food. When you begin to do that then literature is really performing its wonders.

A character in *Things Fall Apart* remarks that the white man "has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart." Are those things still severed, or have the wounds begun to heal?

What I was referring to there, or what the speaker in the novel was thinking about, was the upsetting of a society, the disturbing of a social order. The society of Umuofia, the village in *Things Fall Apart,* was totally disrupted by the coming of the European government, missionary Christianity, and so on. That was not a temporary disturbance; it was a once and for all alteration of their society. To give you the example of Nigeria, where the novel is set, the Igbo people had organized themselves in small units, in small towns and villages, each self-governed. With the coming of the British, Igbo land as a whole was incorporated into a totally different polity, to be called Nigeria, with a whole lot of other people with whom the Igbo people had not had direct contact before. The result of that was not something from which you could recover, really. You had to learn a totally new reality, and accommodate yourself to the demands of this new reality, which is the state called Nigeria. Various nationalities, each of which had its own independent life, were forced by the British to live with people of different customs and habits and priorities and religions. And then at independence, fifty years later, they were suddenly on their own again. They began all over again to learn the rules of independence. The problems that Nigeria is having today could be seen as resulting from this effort that was initiated by colonial rule to create a new nation. There's nothing to indicate whether it will fail or succeed. It all depends.

One might hear someone say, How long will it take these people to get their act together? It's going to take a very, very long time, because it's really been a whole series of interruptions and disturbances, one step forward and two or three back. It has not been easy. One always wishes it had been easier. We've compounded things by our own mistakes, but it doesn't really help to pretend that we've had an easy task.

In *Home and Exile,* you talk about the negative ways in which British authors such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary portrayed Africans over the centuries. What purpose did that portrayal serve?

It was really a straightforward case of setting us up, as it were. The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery. The cruelties of this trade gradually began to trouble many people in Europe. Some people began to question it. But it was a profitable business, and so those who were engaged in it began to defend it—a lobby of people supporting it, justifying it, and excusing it. It was difficult to excuse and justify, and so the steps that were taken to justify it were rather extreme. You had people saying, for instance, that these people weren't really human, they're not like us. Or, that the slave trade was in fact a good thing for them, because the alternative to it was more brutal by far.

And therefore, describing this fate that the Africans would have had back home became the motive for the literature that was created about Africa. Even after the slave trade was abolished, in the nineteenth century, something like this literature continued, to serve the new imperialistic needs of Europe in relation to Africa. This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story.

You write in *Home and Exile,* "After a short period of dormancy and a little self-doubt about its erstwhile imperial mission, the West may be ready to resume its old domineering monologue in the world." Are some Western writers backpedaling and trying to tell their own version of African stories again?

This tradition that I'm talking about has been in force for hundreds of years, and many generations have been brought up on it. What was preached in the churches by the missionaries and their agents at home all supported a certain view of Africa. When a tradition gathers enough strength to go on for centuries, you don't just turn it off one day. When the African response began, I think there was an immediate pause on the European side, as if they were saying, Okay, we'll stop telling this story, because we see there's another story. But after a while there's a certain beginning again, not quite a return but something like a reaction to the African story that cannot, of course, ever go as far as the original tradition that the Africans are responding to. There's a reaction to a reaction, and there will be a further reaction to that. And I think that's the way it will go, until what I call a balance of stories is secured. And this is really what I personally wish this century to see—a balance of stories where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts. This is not to say that nobody should write about anybody else—I think they should, but those that have been written about should also participate in the making of these stories.

And that's what started with *Things Fall Apart* and other books written by Africans around the 1950s.

Yes, that's what it turned out to be. It was not actually clear to us at the time what we were doing. We were simply writing our story. But the bigger story of how these various accounts tie in, one with the other, is only now becoming clear. We realize and recognize that it's not just colonized people whose stories have been suppressed, but a whole range of people across the globe who have not spoken. It's not because they don't have something to say, it simply has to do with the division of power, because storytelling has to do with power. Those who win tell the story; those who are defeated are not heard. But that has to change. It's in the interest of everybody, including the winners, to know that there's another story. If you only hear one side of the story, you have no understanding at all.

You're talking about a shift in power, so there would be more of a balance of power between cultures than there is now?

Well, not a shift in the *structure* of power. I'm not thinking simply of political power. The shift in power will create stories, but also stories will create a shift in power. So one feeds the other. And the world will be a richer place for that.

Do you see this balance of stories as likely to emerge in this era of globalization and the exporting of American culture?

That's a real problem. The mindless absorption of American ideas, culture, and behavior around the world is not going to help this balance of stories, and it's not going to help the world, either. People are limiting themselves to one view of the world that comes from somewhere else. That's something that we have to battle with as we go along, both as writers and as citizens, because it's not just in the literary or artistic arena that this is going to show itself. I think one can say this limiting isn't going to be very healthy for the societies that abandon themselves.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the poet Ikem says, "The prime failure of our government is the ... failure of our rulers to reestablish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being." Does this hold true for Nigeria today?

Yes, this is very much the Nigerian situation. The British handed over the reins of government to a small group of educated people who then became the new rulers. What Ikem is talking about is the distance between this new class of rulers and the other Nigerian people. What needs to be done is to link the two together again, so that those who control power will see the direct relationship to the people in whose name this power is wielded. This connection does not happen automatically, and has not happened in many instances. In the case of Nigeria, the government of the military dictator General Abacha is a good example. The story coming out of his rule is of an enormous transfer of the country's wealth into private bank accounts, a wholesale theft of the national resources needed for all kinds of things—for health, for education, for roads. That's not the action of someone who sees himself as the servant of the Nigerian people. The nation's infrastructure was left to disintegrate, because of one man's selfish need to have billions. Or take what is happening today, now that we have gotten rid of this military dictator and are beginning to practice again the system of democratic rule. You have leaders who see nothing wrong in inciting religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. It's all simply to retain power. So you find now a different kind of alienation. The leadership does not really care for the welfare of the country and its people.

What's your opinion about the new President, Olusegan Obasanjo? Are you less optimistic about him now than you were when he was elected, in May of 1999?

When I talk about those who incite religious conflict, I'm not talking about him, though there are things maybe you could leave at his door. But I think he has a very difficult job to do. What has happened to the country in the past twenty years or so is really grave, and I'm reluctant to pass judgment on a leader only one year after he's assumed this almost impossible task. So the jury is still out, as far as I'm concerned. I think some of the steps he's taken are good; there are some steps he still needs to take, perhaps with greater speed, but then it's easier to say this from a distance than when you're actually doing it. Leading a very dynamic country like Nigeria, which has a hundred million people, is not a picnic.

In an *Atlantic Unbound* interview this past winter Nadine Gordimer said, "English is used by my fellow writers, blacks, who have been the most extreme victims of colonialism. They use it even though they have African languages to choose from. I think that once you've mastered a language it's your own. It can be used against you, but you can free yourself and use it as black writers do—you can claim it and use it." Do you agree with her?

Yes, I definitely do. English is something you spend your lifetime acquiring, so it would be foolish not to use it. Also, in the logic of colonization and decolonization it is actually a very powerful weapon in the fight to regain what was yours. English was the language of colonization itself. It is not simply something you use because you have it anyway; it is something which you can actively claim to use as an effective weapon, as a counterargument to colonization.

You write that the Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo is on the "right side, on behalf of the poor and afflicted, the kind of 'nothing people' V. S. Naipaul would love to hammer into the ground with his well-crafted mallet of deadly prose." Do you think a writer from a country like Nigeria has a moral obligation to write about his homeland in a certain way?

No, there's no moral obligation to write in any particular way. But there is a moral obligation, I think, not to ally yourself with power against the powerless. I think an artist, in my definition of that word, would not be someone who takes sides with the emperor against his powerless subjects. That's different from prescribing a way in which a writer should write. But I do think decency and civilization would insist that you take sides with the powerless.

There are those who say that media coverage of Africa is one-sided—that it focuses on the famines, social unrest, and political violence, and leaves out coverage of the organizations and countries that are working. Do you agree? If so, what effect does this skewed coverage have? Is it a continuation of the anti-Africa British literature you talk about in *Home and Exile*?

Yes, I do agree. I think the result has been to create a fatigue, whether it's charity fatigue or fatigue toward being good to people who are less fortunate. I think that's a pity. The reason for this concentration on the failings of Africans is the same as what we've been talking about—this tradition of bad news, or portraying Africa as a place that is different from the rest of the world, a place where humanity is really not recognizable. When people hear the word Africa, they have come to expect certain images to follow. If you see a good house in Lagos, Nigeria, it doesn't quite fit the picture you have in your head, because you are looking for the slum—that is what the world expects journalists covering a city in Africa to come back with.

Now, if you are covering America, you are not focusing on slums every day of your life. You see a slum once in a while, maybe you talk about it, but the rest of the time you are talking about other things. It is that ability to see the complexity of a place that the world doesn't seem to be able to take to Africa, because of this baggage of centuries of reporting about Africa. The result is the world doesn't really know Africa. If you are an African or you live in Africa, this stands out very clearly to you, you are constantly being bombarded with bad news, and you know that there is good news in many places. This doesn't mean that the bad news doesn't exist, that's not what I'm saying. But it exists alongside other things. Africa is not simple—people want to simplify it. Africa is very complex. Very bad things go on—they should be covered— but there are also some good things.

This is something that comes with this imbalance of power that we've been talking about. The people who consume the news that comes back from the rest of the world are probably not really interested in hearing about something that is working. Those who have the ability to send crews out to bring back the news are in a position to determine what the image of the various places should be, because they have the resources to do it. Now, an African country doesn't have a television crew coming to America, for instance, and picking up the disastrous news. So America sends out wonderful images of its success, power, energy, and politics, and the world is bombarded in a very partial way by good news about the powerful and bad news about the less powerful.

You mentioned that literature was used to justify slavery and imperialism. What is this negative coverage of Africa being used to justify now?

It's going to be used to justify inaction, which is what this fatigue is all about. Why bother about Africa? Nothing works there, or nothing ever will work. There is a small minority of people who think that way, and they may be pushing this attitude. But even if nobody was pushing it, it would simply happen by itself. This is a case of sheer inertia, something that has been happening for a long time just goes on happening, unless something stops it. It becomes a habit of mind.

You said in a *New York Times* interview in 1988, "I would be very, very sad to have to live in Europe or America. The relationship between me and the society I write about is so close and so necessary." What was it like for you to write this book outside of your own country?

Maybe I make it sound as if it's impossible for me to write outside of Nigeria. That's really not true. I think what I mean is that it is nourishing for me to be working from Nigeria, there's a kind of nourishment you get there that you cannot get elsewhere. But it doesn't mean you cannot work. You can work, you can always use what's available to you, whether it's memory, hearsay, news items, or imagination. I intend to write a novel in America. When I have done it, perhaps we can discuss the effect of writing a novel from abroad. It's not impossible.

Now a related question, which is not exactly the one you've asked, is, Why don't you write a novel about America? The reason for that is not simply that I don't want to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, it's just the practical issue of this balance we've been talking about. There's no lack of writers writing novels in America, about America. Therefore, it seems to me it would be wasteful for me to add to that huge number of people writing here when there are so few people writing about somewhere else. So that's really my reason, it's nothing mystical. I have no intention of trying to write about America because it would be using up rare energy that should be used to produce something that has no chance of being produced otherwise.

Has living here changed the way you think about Nigeria?

It must have, but this is not something you can weigh and measure. I've been struck, for instance, by the impressive way that political transition is managed in America. Nobody living here can miss that if you come from a place like Nigeria which is unable so far to manage political transitions in peace. I wish Nigeria would learn to do this. There are other things, of course, where you wish Americans would learn from Nigerians: the value of people as people, the almost complete absence of race as a factor in thought, in government. That's something that I really wish for America, because no day passes here without some racial factor coming up somewhere, which is a major burden on this country.

Could you talk about your visit to Nigeria this past summer? What was it like for you to go back there?

It was a very powerful and emotional experience. Emotional mostly because I had not been there in many years, but the circumstances of my leaving Nigeria were very sad, and many people who were responding to my return had that in their mind, and so it was more than simply someone who had not been home in quite a few years. And then you add to that all the travails that Nigeria had gone through in the rule of General Abacha, the severe hardship and punishment that the country had suffered in those years. And the new experiment in democratic rule was also just a few months old when I went home, so it was a very powerful experience.

Do you hope to be able to go back there to live at some point?

Yes, I do indeed. Things would have to be better than they are now for me to be able to do that. Things like hospitals that used to be quite good before have been devastated. The roads you have to take to get to a hospital if the need arises, not to talk about the security of life—both of those would have to improve. But we are constantly watching the situation. It's not just me, but my family. My wife and children—many of them would be happier functioning at home, because you tend to have your work cut out for you at home. Here there are so many things to do, but they are not necessarily the things you'd rather be doing. Whereas at home it's different—it's clear what needs to be done, what's calling for your special skills or special attachment.

What hopes do you have for Nigeria's future?

I keep hoping, and that hope really is simply a sense of what Nigeria could be or could do, given the immense resources it has—natural resources, but even more so human resources. There's a great diversity of vibrant peoples who are not always on the best of terms, but when they are, they can really make things happen. And one hopes that we will someday be able to realize that potential.

Could you talk about your dream, expressed in *Home and Exile,* of a "universal civilization"—a civilization that some believe we've achieved and others think we haven't?

What the universal civilization I dream about would be, I really don't know, but I know what it is not. It is not what is being presented today, which is clearly just European and American. A universal civilization is something that we will create. If we accept the thesis that it is desirable to do, then we will go and work on it and talk about it. We have not really talked about it. All those who are saying it's there are really suggesting that it's there by default—they are saying to us, let's stop at this point and call what we have a universal civilization. I don't think we want to swindle ourselves in that way; I think if we want a universal civilization, we should work to bring it about. And when it appears, I think we will know, because it will be different from anything we have now.

There may be cultures that may sadly have to go, because no one is rooting for them, but we should make the effort to prevent this. We have to hold this conversation, which is a conversation of stories, a conversation of languages, and see what happens.

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