

Collective Authorship and the Solitary Artist: Achebe and the Ethical Responsibilities of the Writer

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Abstract

*This paper examines Chinua Achebe's non-fictional works such as **The Novelist as Teacher and The Writer and his Community**, which are preoccupied with the role and place of the writer in the post-colonial setting, especially in the struggle for the education of the new and emerging readers of modern African fiction. The paper discusses the difficulties of Achebe's subscription to the Mbari communal aesthetic in a context in which the modern conception of authorship, rooted in individualism and the primary of the solitary artist's right to his intention and inspiration, clashes with the ethical responsibilities of authorship within an author-function driven by copyright laws and the specificity of the writer in the general print culture and commoditization of the literary text. The paper offers a literary-critical discussion, informed by post-colonial theory, of the limits, constraints, and contradictions that plague Achebe's critical-political consciousness of the role of the literary writer as both a "committed teacher", a solitary artist, a defender of the communal aesthetic of Mbari, and a writing subject defined by the post-Enlightenment values of (post-colonial) cultural critique.*

Introduction

In two brilliant essays, *The Novelist as Teacher* (1975) and *The*

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If we forget that fictions are fictive, we regress to myth... 'making human sense' is something that literature achieves only so long as we remember the status of fictions — Kermodé, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 41.

Writer and His Community (1984), Achebe discusses the responsibilities of the writer as both teacher and ethical agent in the community. In *The Novelist*, “Achebe opens the discussion with the image of the post-Renaissance Western-European conception of the writer as an *artist*, one who “lives on the fringe of society” (p. 40), wears a beard and a “peculiar dress”, and who decidedly lives as a radical antagonist to the society's traditional values. He contrasts this decidedly Western image of the writer to the African one, the one rooted in his or her community, and influenced by collective memory and a communal aesthetic.

In *The Writer and His Community*, Achebe examines the transition, at least in his Igbo heritage, from oral tradition and collective authorship in the form of the *Mbari* tradition, which he describes as an “artistic 'spectacular' demanded of the community by one or other of its primary divinities, usually the Earth goddess” (p. 148). He contrasts all that with the rise of the solitary artist or writer, one who emerged with the rise of modern society based on the notion of individualization and the supremacy of the individual. Achebe, using those insights, explores the critical choices open to the African writer, especially in the post-colonial situation in which the demands of both collective authorship of literary products and individual inspiration and ownership of art exist in constant tension and negotiation.

The Writer as Educator

In *The Novelist as Teacher*, Achebe raises a number of issues in relation to the twin demands of the responsibilities of the post-colonial writer to the ethical imperative of being an educator par excellence and those of creating the conditions that would enhance the task of the non-Western writer in redressing the historic imbalances in the colonizer-colonized relations in the post-colonial context. For Achebe, the post-colonial African writer does not have the luxury of indulging in pure aestheticism because his society expects a lot from him, namely both the education of the political imperatives of understanding the post-colonial condition and living up to that imperative—a clear understanding of what his society expects of him as a writer. In this process, the African writer should have a sense of his audience or readership, despite the

problem of this readership being small and young, or slowly rising to the occasion of reading the literary products of independent African writers, especially those committed to exploring the complex issues of their society.

In the same vein, the African writer should also have a sense of what kind of the reader's sensibilities he should either encourage or discourage. In any case, Achebe advocates that the writer should be a kind of teacher and educator within the literary real as well as in the open, cultural-political one, concerned with the illumination of the post-colonial condition. That means, Achebe argues, the writer should integrate both the collective demands on the writer and his irreducible individual autonomy in order to freely create his art without taking "dictation from his audience".

In other words, for Achebe, the post-colonial African writer must, just like the proverbial European solitary artist, "remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be" (p. 42) but, at the same time, choose his themes and battles carefully, and not waste time and energy on frivolous pursuits, even though some of them, such as the need for Africa to have some measure of "the technical efficiency" of Western culture, may be worth pursuing in literary-cultural terms, and in the education of the native reader.

To illustrate that imperative, Achebe discusses how the colonial intrusion slowly led, at least among the Igbo, to the cultural and emotional denigration of native forms of culture such as dance and material objects such as pottery and the correlative elevation of non-native or foreign items such as tins, metalware, and cylindrical biscuit tins. He also discusses how the African ecology was itself re-described in the Africans' own normative values in colonial or European archetypes such as "winter" (instead of "harmattan"). Achebe argues that it is the task of the African writer, especially in the face of "the traumatic effects" of colonialism, to teach his readership that "there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry" (p. 44).

In this essay, Achebe offers a vision of the writer as both a careful craftsman, one concerned with the best possible narrative and representational depiction of the native normativity, and, at the same

time, dedicated to the political and cultural enlightenment of the people. He calls this task or responsibility a categorical imperative that no self-respecting African writer should ignore:

Here, then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and cut away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement...it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul (p. 44).

Achebe is emphatic that it is this inherent necessity to educate, and to raise the bar of enlightenment, especially in the colonized-colonizer relations, that led even other African intellectuals to espouse such concepts as "African socialism", "negritude", and "African democracy"—all in an effort to help the Africans to get on their feet again, and that once this educating role of African writers and intellectuals gets off the ground and gains a respectable momentum, the Africans themselves would create new ways of conceiving and re-describing their normative relations with the world as a whole. To this extent, Achebe draws on the classical notion of the liberating and enlightening functions of art, namely to regenerate the best within the African cultural heritage and to draw on the best heritage from cultures of modernity, education, enlightenment and cultural edification. Achebe thus insists that the writer be an educator, a task from which he or she cannot be excused. Indeed, for Achebe, the African writer "should march right in front. For he is after all... the sensitive point of his community" (p. 45).

In the closing part of his essay, Achebe asks his readers not to even think of excusing him or his texts from the task of educating the African reader and the African community. His vision could properly be called a "Pan African" yet "pan-cosmopolitan" understanding of the role of the writer in humane learning and the creation of "sweetness and light" very much in the mold of Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1964). Achebe looks forward to a critical readership which would or could see his novels, especially those set in the past, as part of that "writing back" to the apologists of colonialism, those who would rather

see Africa as only "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." (p. 45).

For Achebe, then, we can see two related yet distinct visions of the writer: one a kind of Promethean figure in the service of universal education and enlightenment; the other a normative *doppelganger*, one who is both an "applied artist" and a "pure literary educator"— in a word, an *artist*, in the classical sense of the world, and a cultural *educator*, one committed to the liberation of his people, community, and nation— in sum, both an authorial agent in the halls of art and a risk-taker of unintended consequences on behalf of his ideal reader.

The African Writer and the Praxis of Individualism

In *The Writer and His Community*, Achebe pursues the implications of the displacement of oral tradition by individual authorship, consequent upon the rise of individualism in the cultural sphere and in the political economy called "capitalism". Although Achebe attributes this to the historical changes in the West, on the heels of commodity production and the new materiality of the book (print culture) as a commodity which can be bought and moved about in its physical form, he draws out the consequences of these developments for the African writer. That he contrasts with the oral tradition, especially with his heritage of *Mbari*, whose representatives, the *onyemgbe* "are always careful to disclaim all credit for making [that] which rightly belongs to gods" (48). In this communal tradition, cultural creation belongs to the community rather than to the solitary or individual artist.

Achebe sees his own creative practice as having been derived from the *Mbari*, a cultural tradition "in which it was possible for artists to create objects of art which were solid enough and yet no attempt to claim, and sometimes even go to great lengths to deny, personal ownership of what they have created" (48). Against all this arose the cult of the individual writer, made possible by the idea of the supremacy of the individual. For Achebe, this development led to the paradoxical situation of the post-colonial African writer: the decline of oral tradition and the communal ownership of artistic production in the modern, post-colonial period is that although the writer is part of his community, the materiality of the book, the ever-recurrent mobility of material culture

would mean that the African writer has to come to terms with the dominant culture of individualism and the material conditions behind the writer's so called "inspiration".

Indeed, as Achebe is too painfully aware, the African writer's assumed duty to his community or culture both sets limits on, and constrains, artistic freedom. The *Mbari* tradition is unconcerned with the specificities of individual creation or ownership of cultural products; and yet cultural anonymity cannot be sustained by individual ownership of the book. In an important essay on the author-function in a post-communal literary history, Michel Foucault argues that the author constitutes an important moment of what he calls *individualization* in literary history, the moment when the individual becomes responsible for his or her action, and can be held to account for a particular symbolic gesture or cultural statement. Thus, in a sense, the author figures in the history of literature as a fundamental category in and outside her work as a system of value, so that a literary work "points" to the figure of the author.

In the modern period, the *Mbari* tradition has to give way to what may be called "the consequences of writing", or those of a solitary writer writing. This is because in the post-colonial situation of the writer, he has to be called, not to a communal tribunal or to the actions of the auditors of his writing but to his *own legacy*. In other words, postcolonial writers such as Achebe must call themselves to their own "tribunal" and to the future, and not to the *past* communal tradition, the figure of the *Mbari*, that is. Thus, the African writer, despite his debt to the oral tradition, and despite a certain emotional or political identification with it, cannot court the risk of not being seen as unaccountable to both his own individuality and to his craft. Achebe recognizes this pressing predicament for the African writer in the passage below:

The phenomenal success of the West in the mastery of the natural world is one of the dominant facts of modern history. It is only natural to attribute this dazzling achievement on the ruling values of the world, and also to hold these values up to the rest of the world not as values but as the right values. By and large the rest of the world has been increasingly inclined to be persuaded (p. 50)

In the rest of this essay, Achebe goes on to vindicate the social legacy of the *Mbari* and the claim that the writer cannot be fulfilled except as a member of a definite community. For him, "fulfilment is other-centred" (p. 53) because the writer and his craft are constrained by "something external" to the self. Achebe has a vision of African literature as negotiating the conflict between the communal and the ideal of individual autonomy; between the artist's personal fulfilment in creative work and fulfilment in his "closeness to others", to something larger than the individual.

In sum, then, Achebe avoids the neo-Platonist idea of the artist as the victim of society, condemned to live inside his work and liberated as the mythopoeic centre of his creations. Moreover, Achebe counters the idea that the individual counts for nothing. He cites the example of the Igbo ethnic group among whom "there is a universal respect for the individual personality", despite their recognition that the individual is "subject to the sway of non-human forces" (p. 57), and, at the same time, insists on setting limits on the expression of pure individuality:

For whereas many cultures are content to demonstrate the value of the importance of each man and woman by reference to the common fatherhood of God, the Igbo postulate an unprecedented uniqueness for the individual by making him or her the sole creation and purpose of a unique god-agent, chi. No two persons, not even blood brothers are created and accompanied by the same chi (pp. 57-58).

Achebe closes his essay with a vision of the artist and his "people" working harmoniously together and in "close communion". In this union of artist and society, there is no adversarial contest. Achebe is unwilling to choose one over the other. Yet, we need to ask whether his vision of the modern African writer can stand the pressures of modern individualism, or the universal claim for the author's autonomy in the artistic realm.

The Writer and Writing in the Post-colonial Cultural Economy

There are two paradoxical situations in which communal ownership, meant to replace the privileged position of the writer, ends

up preserving the writer. The first is that the apparently sociological method which is designed to repress the subjectivity of the writer and direct attention instead to the external sources that intrude upon the writer's so-called motivations that led to the text eventually become the basis for a new focus on the writer as the individual standing "behind" the work. Indeed, the reader is bound to ask: "is this not what a writer has written?" In this sense, then, a sociological conception of the literary work as a communal property, which was originally designed to direct critical attention away from its individual author, secretly preserves the writer because in the modern world neither the Muse nor *Mbari* or *Chi* writes literary works.

That explains why ascribing a communal identity to the writer only leads to an intense curiosity about the maker behind the *work*, since the word "work" implies a maker, a unity that is also a design, and not an accident. This is why it should not be surprising if the following questions should be asked of the literary work: "Who wrote the work?"; "Of what elements is it composed?" etc.

Secondly, the very notion of *writing* obscures the moment of the writer's disappearance within or outside society or culture, and, by implication, ends up preserving the writer as a solitary existence. It is the nature of writing that it allows the circumventing of writers and references to biographical facts of writers, so that writing, by definition, inaugurates the dissolution of the writer as a tribal or communal identity.

More seriously, writing is "irresponsible" because it cannot control who reads or uses it; neither can it determine its readership or audience. Achebe misses this crucial point in his critique of the solitary artist. He misses, indeed, the point that writing itself exceeds its creator. Plato in *Phaedrus* presents Socrates as complaining that writing is an irresponsible structure which cannot guarantee a safe passage, even for the writer:

Once an account is written down, you will find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to (70)

Achebe does not also consider the potential misreadings that any reader can enact across the text. Most modern readers of literature

might not find it expedient to track down the meta-fictionality behind works. It might also be impossible for many a modern reader, schooled in sceptical post-humanistic literary theories such as Deconstruction or New Historicism, to seek to track those instances in which the writer's legacy implies a debt to a wider cultural context, *Mbari* or any other. This is the more so where authorial intention itself can be subjected to a radical, de-centering critique, as we can see in post-structuralist literary criticism. Sean Burke (491) has argued that compared to the oral disseminator, the writer, using the media or print and textual presentation, has no power of selection over his or her readership, nor can he correct misreadings. Indeed, for Burke, writing is a risk and, for that, inevitably leads the reader to ask, "Who is Speaking" (and not "What Culture is Speaking through the Writer?"). In addition, what can be done about the strong, ever-present possibility that some readers may develop both rational reflection (which may still lead to overly schizoid interpretations) and/or intense emotional identification with a literary work in such a way as to preclude rational reflection?

Let us not also gloss over the fact that in the modern, postcolonial period, reading or interpretation of literary works requires a clear distinction on the part of the reader or the interpreter between myth and truth, imaginative interpretation and rationalized reflection. In oral cultures, or within, by implication the *Mbari*, literary creations did not serve as critical knowledge but only as the repository of tribal myths, mythical events, and mores. The modern literary work, based on the printed word, textual materiality, and the proliferation of signs cannot serve as the repository of communal myths or mythical events. In this sense, then, the solitary artist or the supposedly autotelic literary work trumps communal ownership because the reader of a literary work has to stand back from the work. The reader, just like the solitary writer, has subjective autonomy. And it is precisely in this paradoxical situation that the writer, too, has, or acquires, authorial responsibility.

The Writer and the Author-function

In a famous essay on authorship, Foucault argues that the writer is simply the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of discourses in a society. He calls this process the "author-function":

The author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance... all discourses endowed with the author do possess this plurality of self. The self that speaks in the preface to a treatise on mathematics—and that indicates the circumstances of the treatise's composition—is identical neither in its position nor in its functioning to the self that speaks in the course of a demonstration, and that appears in the form of 'I conclude' or 'I suppose' ... in these discourses the author operates so as to effect the dispersion of these ... simultaneous selves (112-13).

The implication of the passage above is that the author-function is not a spontaneous process but develops over time; it is not the source of the text but just one of the ways in which it signifies a text within a particular literary culture, including the strategies of reading that could be used to explain contradictions in the literary work. This means that the author-function does not refer exclusively to real individuals since it indicates the possibility of the existence of several selves, several subjects, and situations that could be occupied by different groups or kinds of individuals. This means that a text is constructed from a plurality of selves, a variety of authorial positions and “functions”. A good illustration of the preceding point is Achebe himself, who is the author of novels, short stories, poems, children's literature, an academic, a father, a husband, an Igbo, a Nigerian, an émigré, a pan-Africanist, cultural critic, combative essayist, admirer of Aminu Kano, oppositional figure, anti-colonialist, etc.

On the basis of Foucault's arguments, we can lay stress on the fact that there are other structural forces, more than just the pressure of the writer's communal memory that could account for the role of external forces on the writer's motivations. These are copyright laws, social development, language, etc. All these are critical in the "formation" of "the writer". Thus the complex ideological, political, and philosophical factors behind the kind of semantic productions normally imputed to "the writer" far exceed the simple pressure exerted on the writer by communal or tribal identity.

Certain consequences follow from the preceding arguments, especially in relation to Achebe's claims for the efficacy of the *Mbari* tradition on his own artistic practice. For one, collective authorship such

as the *Mbari*, or appeals by Achebe, for example, to the *Mbari*, could potentially relieve the author of any responsibility or initiative in literary production. Literary critics need to ask questions around the consequences of what the writer has produced. In other words, who, really, is speaking—Achebe or the communal *Mbari*? Writers, African or other, must take direct and personal ethical responsibility for their own work.

And since writers, too, are, in the end, readers of their own work and those of others, they have an imperative to understand clearly that their works have unintended meaning and the potential for readers to offer misreadings of their works; or, the writer's work may itself harbour potential misreadings or misinterpretations of culture, society, and the creative process itself. Thus, contrary to Achebe's claims in *The Writer and His Community* (especially on pp. 57-58), there is not a clear, unproblematic transition from collective or community aesthetic like the *Mbari* to an individual author, or, in this case, to a proper name called "Chinua Achebe".

This is precisely why we should separate the personality of the writer from the content of his or her work by enforcing what Burke calls "a critically reflective distance between person and poem" (492) and, in our case, between Achebe and his works, on the one hand, and his works and the *Mbari* tradition, on the other. Moreover, the African writer such as Achebe has to take the *risk* of misreadings, of unsuitable readers, of a literary theory and criticism that could place a wage between collective ownership and the solitary writer, between the writer and his or her work, and between authorial intention and meta-fictional or actual effects. An example here is Achebe's irritation with John Updike's "reading" of *Arrow of God* (on page 57 of *The Writer and His Community*). Had Achebe taken into account the preceding caution or risk, he would not have complained about Updike's legitimate "misreading" of his text.

The implication of the preceding discussion is that the *Mbari* needs to be kept at bay if only to preserve Achebe's claims of creativity; or else the *Mbari* is no more than a structure of containment, one that would only provide Achebe as a writer with a questionable alibi for his own misreadings and misinterpretations of the cultural and political

milieu, including the works of other writers in general. Whether a text is intended for the *education* of its ideal readers or for reasserting its origins in a collective or individual memory-inspiration (say, the *Mbari*, the African literary text should not aspire to be a monological creed, a truth, or a fact that exists beyond the hypothetical frame, namely the realm of the imaginative and the imagined. That is, the African novel or poem should not, on this basis, construe itself as the only source of African "education" or the veritable evidence of the efficacy of African communalism, *Mbari* or any other. It must, in other words, keep reminding the reader that it is not, and does not, supply a fixed categorical imperative; it should, thus, not solidify into dogma or an alleged necessary myth beyond self-consciousness or the self.

Conclusion

Achebe's notion of the writer as teacher incorporates the active presence of the reader, perhaps the ideal reader that can be "educated" by post-colonial literary production, as a critical element in the effectiveness of the literary text and, by implication, the mission of the post-colonial African writer as a source of cultural and political education. As we have seen above, no such reader probably exists, that is, an ideal reader that may not offer, in their reading of the text, only their own misreadings or misinterpretations. In sum, there is no guarantee that any author can educate anyone. In the same vein, Achebe's conception of the writer as rooted in his community avoids the romantic notions of the African writer as the solitary individual, the genius that is accountable only to his or her creations. All in all, then, for Achebe, the writer is not beyond ethical recall, despite also granting the writer imaginative freedom. Thus, for Achebe, external motivations for a literary work are just as important as the work's subsequent cultural, social, political, and ethical effects. The two essays under discussion have, hence, shown that the responsibilities of the writers requires the primacy of the ethical recall, namely the price of accountability that any literary or imaginative writer has to pay, at least in the modern, post-colonial context. In other words, if the African writer wants to educate the reader in the enlightenment sense of "teaching" the reader, it would also be fair to ask the question, "Who is to educate the Educator?"

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