

Chinua Achebe and hybrid aesthetics

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It is a crime that I should use your language to tell you
how I feel that you have taken mine from me.

—Shani Mootoo: “Hybridity and Other Poems,” in
Performing Identity

Abstract

This essay examines the question of hybridity in Chinua Achebe’s fiction and essays with a view to bringing to fore the inherent contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences that typify writing in the colonial language. It hinges on the premise that Achebe’s choice of English as a language of literary expression is fraught with rejection and acceptance, aporia and agony, and Anglophilia and Anglophobia. Therefore, in his articulation and projection of the postcolonial narrative, Achebe implicitly grapples with the issue of identity in trying to make sense of his world as well as the world of his fictional characters.

Key words: hybridity; syncretism, language; aesthetics, African literature, Achebe

In this essay, I examine the question of hybridity in Chinua Achebe’s fiction and essays with a view to bringing to fore the inherent contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences that typify writing in the colonial language. I argue that Achebe’s choice of English as a language of literary expression is fraught with rejection and acceptance, aporia and agony, and Anglophilia and Anglophobia. Therefore, in his articulation and projection of the postcolonial narrative, Achebe implicitly grapples with the issue of identity in trying to make sense of his world as well as the world of his fictional characters. As Robert Stam, correctly remarks for “the oppressed people, artistic syncretism is not a game but a painful negotiation, an exercise...both of “resistance” and “surrender.” (Stam, 1999, p. 61) The hybridity or syncretism inherent in Achebe’s literary oeuvre is thus a process of painstaking even painful

negotiation and navigation. This paper is predicated on what I perceive as the inexorable link between the writer and his writings and therefore the need to critically examine both the writer and his creative work, as a precondition to a truly perspicuous interpretation. Addressing the seemingly superfluous question; “Why Achebe?” at this point is by no means injudicious and incongruous with the purpose of this paper. It seems to me that although there is a plethora of critical essays and books on Achebe and his writings, some of which point to the idea of hybridity, most of them are inattentive to the inner crisis that gnaws at Achebe’s soul as a result or in spite of his protracted flirtation with hybrid aesthetics.

Robert Young makes the startling but almost axiomatic remark, “Hybridity is... itself a hybrid concept.” (Young, 1995, p.21). Using the Bakhtian paradigm of the dialogic as a basis for his explication of linguistic hybridity, Young defines hybridity as “the condition of language’s fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same but different” (p. 20). But he remarks further that Bakhtin uses hybridization to describe the ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance. (p. 20). “While hybridity denotes a fusion,” states young, “it also describes a dialectical articulation, as in Rushdie’s ‘mongrelization” (p. 20). As young argues this doubled hybridity has been distinguished as a model that can be used to account for the form of syncretism that characterizes all postcolonial literatures and cultures (Young, 1995, p. 20).¹ This paper gives primacy to the location of hybridity within literary production and culture in postcolonial Africa with particular emphasis on the hybrid aesthetics of Chinua Achebe. Further, I borrow the expression “hybrid aesthetics” from Stam to refer to the sense of beauty or artistic sensibilities characterized by consideration of the fusion and synthesis of diverse linguistic and literary elements.

Achebe is a towering figure on the African literary landscape. His works have stimulated considerable critical acclaim on a global scale. African literary critic Simon Gikandi credits Achebe with the invention of African literature (Gikandi, 1996). In his analysis of Tayeb Salih’s epic novel *Season of Migration to the North*, Walil S. Hassan invokes the content and form of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and reiterates the status of Achebe as the “great pioneer of African fiction”(Hassan, 2003, p. 87). British literary scholar G. D. Killam proclaimed that *Things Fall Apart* was the first Nigerian novel to have “serious claim consideration as literature” (Killam 1977, p. 1). American literary scholar Bernth Lindfors’ description of Achebe in glowing terms encapsulates the esteem in which Achebe is held in Africa, the Western academy and beyond and deserves quoting at length:

Chinua Achebe is a writer well known throughout Africa and even beyond. His fame rests on solid personal achievements. As a young man of twenty-eight he brought honor to his native Nigeria by writing *Things Fall Apart*, the first novel of unquestioned literary merit from English-speaking West Africa.... If ever a man of letters deserved his success, that man is Achebe. He is a careful and fastidious artist in full control of his art, a serious craftsman who disciplines himself not only to write regularly but to write well (p. 47).

Lindfors' assertion that Achebe's "fame rests on solid personal achievement" is borrowed almost word for word from Achebe's own description of his tragic hero Okonkwo in the opening paragraph of *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe writes; "His [Okonkwo's] fame rested on solid personal achievements" (p. 3). It is interesting that Lindfors the consummate critic describes Achebe the accomplished writer with words that mimic Achebe's description of a character in his own creative work. Achebe's words find expression in Lindfors to vindicate the Bakhtian concept of heteroglossia. Bakhtin argues that an individual's speech is an extension and an expansion of another person's speech. There is a sense, posits, Bakhtin, in which an individual uses another person's speech, in the novel (as in the real life), but in the process individuates and transforms its earlier meaning or nuances. Thus, Bakhtin views heteroglossia as another's *speech in another's language* (Bakhtin, 1998, p. 40), recognizing the duality and transformation of meaning and context.

I see in Lindfors' mimicry the conflation of Achebe, the postcolonial African author and his pre-colonial protagonist, Okonkwo. If like his creative hero Okonkwo, Achebe's fame rests on solid personal achievement, it has to be admitted that the path to "success" is not been without pitfalls and barricades, principal among them being the crisis of identity that hybrid aesthetics brings to bear on the artist.

First and foremost Achebe's crisis is predicated on having to capture the African experience in the English language, a contingency that stems from the ontology of the colonial experience. Achebe concedes that his use of a language other than Igbo, his mother tongue, as a medium of literary expression was determined or even predetermined by the colonial experience. He further remarks that indeed the use of English "has engulfed most African states through a conspiracy of socio-political and historical factors" (Achebe, 1975). It is instructive that Achebe's Nigeria is a creation of Lord Lugard whose girlfriend Margaret suggested the name 'Nigeria' as a veritable label for the imposed

nation-state for more than 200 ethnic polities which had hitherto little or nothing in common with one another. When Achebe mentions that Nigeria is where God in his infinite wisdom chose to plant him, in his collection of essays vilifying leadership and endemic corruption in Nigeria, he is not simply making an innocuous statement on his place of birth (Achebe, 1984). It may well be a thinly veiled protest at Providence for the circumstances and place of his birth. It is a statement in which both acceptance and repudiation are intertwined. I cannot agree more with Stam's postulate that for Achebe and other Europhone African writers, the meeting of Africa and Europe in their works is a not a game but a painful negotiation involving both "surrender and resistance."

Forced to operate within the framework of imposition of language and nation-state, Achebe, like most African writers has had to wrestle with what to write, to whom, and how, questions with which the language chosen as a medium of expression is imbricated. This self-interrogation has entailed deciding what to take and what to discard from the myriad of offerings available in a continent whose convergence with colonization and Western values has made it fertile ground for hybridity. To underscore the centrality of imposition and compulsion in the whole concept of hybridity we turn to Jennnifer Natalya Fink who aptly observed; "hybridity is compelled rather than chosen"(Fink, 1999, p. 249). Paradoxically, the imposed state of hybridity provides endless options for one to articulate and rearticulate their location and identity in the universe. For Achebe, which name to go by has presented an unspoken crisis of identity but also opened avenues for him to exercise the limits of creativity quite akin to the trickster character in oral tales and written literature (Barbcock-Abrahams, 1975, p. 148). In his essay "Named For Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe states that as a child he was baptized Albert Chinualumogu (Achebe 1995, p. 190). What happened to Albert the Christian name and Chinualumogu the Igbo name? The simultaneous existence of both names as labels identifying the writer is metonymic of a hybrid representation of cultures, a representation that, for Achebe, confounds and complicates rather than comforts and confirms identification. Achebe reacts to this convergence of cultures by dropping the Christian name altogether as well as deleting some syllables in the Igbo name. In this respect Achebe differs from his Kenyan counterpart Ngugi who drops his Christian name James and adopts wa Thiong'o instead. During his detention for political dissent in the late 1970s, Ngugi embarked on writing *Ciataani Mutharabaini* (*The Devil on the Cross*), in Gikuyu and dropped the English language as medium of literary expression. Achebe on the other hand has masqueraded as an ardent defender of the English language so successfully that few can read Anglophobia in his dropping of the name Albert.

Shakespeare's famous question "What is in a name?" takes on ponderous significance here. The name is not simply a label of identification; embedded in Achebe's attempt at self-baptism or better still self-naming, is the symbolic acting out of aporia, ambiguity, creativity, and trickery. Achebe concedes that he is caught up in a cultural labyrinth when he laments, "We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do" (Achebe, 1995, p. 190). We can surmise that he is forced to weigh what it means bearing a name that is neither completely African nor completely Christian. "Chinua" is not a name recognizable even among the Igbo, at least of the Okonkwo pre-colonial generation. It's a distortion and a concoction, a fabrication and betrays trickery. Achebe is keenly aware of benefits that may accrue from a name. Barbara Barbrock-Abrahams has posited that, "Literature's "heroes" are always those that depart from the norm"(Barbrock-Abrahams 1975, p. 148). Achebe is obviously not a "literature hero" in full Barbrock-Abrahams' trickster sense. However, it is possible to discern trappings of trickery in his negotiation over the question of his name and its attendant paradoxes. In dropping the English name and dropping syllables of the African one, Achebe breaks the norm and fulfils in real life the trappings of a trickster in fiction. One of Achebe's own Igbo trickster narratives, which he infuses in his novel, illustrates the trickery behind the assumption of names (Achebe, 1958, pp. 68-70).

In this trickster story, the birds are invited to a feast in the sky. Tortoise wants to join them but the birds are initially suspicious of his cunning ways. Tortoise however, succeeds in convincing them that he had reformed. They "each gave him a feather, with which he made two wings."(Achebe, 1958, p. 68) Tortoise now sets his cunning trap by suggesting to the birds; "When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honor this age-old custom"(Achebe, 1958, p. 68). So each bird took a new name but Tortoise called himself *All of you*. At the feast, Tortoise asks the hosts; "For whom have you prepared the feast?"(69). When the hosts reply "all of you" Tortoise he eats all the food alone because he is the one that bears the name. Naturally, this piques the birds. Tortoise had used the name to full advantage. The narrative ends with Tortoise breaking his shell to pieces after falling from the sky without wings and landing on "hoes, spears, guns, and even cannon" (Achebe, 1958, p. 70). Needless to say the ability of Tortoise to use borrowed feathers to fly speaks to the necessity for transformation and innovation, in the hybridity demands of art and life.

Inherent in the assumption of a name in the trickster story as in Achebe's real life, is the sidelining of others. The Tortoise sidelines the birds to his advantage. Similarly, Achebe in dropping the English name, appears

to sideline or sidestep his Englishness and to hold tenaciously to his Igboness. But within this apparent rejection of Englishness and partial rejection of Igboness there is also an acceptance of both. It would seem expedient and prudent for Achebe to pose as a vindicator of Africanity by bearing an African name as a label of identification, even if that name is Igbo-like and not necessarily and authentically Igbo. The African or Africanlike fabrication of a name is valuable in the political economy of letters. In the same vein Achebe realizes that the political economy of letters also dictates that one uses an international language as a vehicle of expression to reach as large an audience as possible. He therefore wears the two hats of defender of the English language and what Kwaku Korang calls “vindicationist of Africanity” (Korang, 2004). Achebe is therefore engaged in cultural gymnastics and somersaults that are the hallmark of hybrid aesthetics. But why does Achebe write at all? For an answer to that we turn to Walil S.Hassan who states:

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe’s main objective is to counter the racist and derogatory representation of Africa by writers like Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary with an image of a highly developed society destroyed by colonialism. Yet at the same time that he rehabilitates it, he shows how certain social ills weaken a culture’s resistance to foreign intrusion (p. 87).

Achebe is said to have admired Conrad when he first read his *Heart of Darkness* as a young man growing up in Nigeria. Conrad was born in Ukraine, grew up in Russia, Switzerland like, Achebe was not a native English speaker, but learned the language well enough in adulthood to master the language so much that his works have been canonized in the arena of English literature. Another parallel between the two is that Conrad too, changes his name from Jozeph Konrad Korzeniowski to Joseph Conrad, presumably to be in line with his mostly English audience. It is thus ironic that Achebe would later modify his reading of the novel and consider Conrad his nemesis. Achebe’s bitterness is exemplified by his famous essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” in which he protests vehemently against the need in “Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace” (Achebe, 1977). The question of whether Conrad is a racist or not has dominated literary debate for decades particularly after Achebe’s subsequent reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* against the mainly Western grain. Achebe’s essay became what Richard Kimbrough refers to as “something of a touchstone” in critical analysis of Conrad’s text (Kimbrough 1988). I have no intentions of opening a can of worms by dwelling on the justification or its lack thereof of Achebe “righteous indignation” in the essay.

Suffice it to say, as Hassan remarks in the excerpt above, countering the prejudice leveled against Africa forms a huge chunk of Achebe's literary agenda. Moreover, it bears mentioning that perspectives differ from person to person and sometimes prejudices taint visions as Percy Adams notes on the 17th and 19th century travel writing in which "prejudice was a widespread motive for distorting the truth, both for the voyager who reported the distortions and for the reader who accepted them" (Adams, 1962,p.186). De Pauw conclusion on the nature of travelers is particularly telling when he state that when they travel their "prejudices travel with them and acquire a sort of authority..."(quoted in Adams 1962, p. 186-7).

Achebe's mission as "vindicationist" is what drives him to counter the presumed prejudices perpetrated by the Conrads of this world. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe gives us one such Conrad in the character of a European colonial District Commissioner, who in the fashion of a traveler is working on a book titled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The body of Okonkwo, Achebe's tragic hero of 148 pages is dangling on the tree after committing suicide. The district commissioner muses over how much space to grant Okonkwo in his book: "The story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. Once could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph "(Achebe, 1958 p.148). The disingenuous brevity of Okonkwo's potential mention in the European writer is contrasted with Achebe's dedication of 148 pages to Okonkwo, the African hero. However, Achebe's African narrative is told in a borrowed tongue and is conceived in a borrowed form (the novel), which adopts and adapts the borrowed characteristics of Greek tragedy, just like the flight of Tortoise involves using borrowed feathers. These hybrid aesthetics correspond to the borrowed feathers with which Achebe flies the literary skies; thanks to what he calls a "conspiracy of socio-political an historical factors".

At any rate victims of Achebe's "conspiracy of socio-political and historical factors," attempt to utilize the language of the colonial master to illuminate the African experience. Alluding to the rubric of West African Europhone literature to which Achebe belongs, Chantal Zabus opines, "[I]n the process of decolonizing the language of literature, the West African Europhone writer has used, misused and abused the European language and fused it with other registers" (Zabus, 1991 p.6). Zabus calls this transmogrification of European languages, "domestication," Kwaku Korang calls it "nativizing" or "transsubstantiation"(Korang 2004, pp.119, 129). As for Emmanuel Obiechina "domestication" is the most germane description of this phenomenon (Obiechina, 1975, p. 1). It is

not my intention to adjudge the most appropriate term here. Suffice it to say that all these terms attempt to capture a phenomenon that is commonplace in hybrid aesthetics of African literary productions. The result of this phenomenon is the emergence of hybrid cultural products that are to my mind neither authentically African nor authentically European or Western. It is perhaps safe to conclude that the product of this synthesis of language and culture lies between and betwixt Africa and Europe.

As Korang lucidly demonstrates through the work of John Mensah Sarbah, the African writer is presented with the task of both *nativizing* the modern and *modernizing* the native (Korang 2004, p. 119). Korang is keenly aware of the changing state of African modernity and points to a “transsubstantiation” which assures the place and presence of Africa on the world stage. Korang seems to concur with Achebe’s admiration of the Japanese “cannibalization” of western culture to the point that it took on a completely Japanese character bereft of its original occidental essence. Korang cogently concludes that it is necessary to, “breath[e] life into the older order of nativity as a matter of its material and conceptual transmogrification into, and of guaranteeing its intelligibility within, the new modern-colonial world order” (Korang 2004, p. 113). It would appear “breathing life” into nativity is a tenable means of ensuring that African nativity assumes and maintains the capacity to “consume” alien cultures and still retain its authenticity in the reciprocity immanent between cultures. But it could well be that the essence of Achebe’s Igbo culture and language is the one that is eaten up by the dominant and domineering European culture. Achebe recounts the narrative of one Professor Kinichiro Toba, a Japanese, which sums up the presence of cultural cannibalism in Japan and its implied absence in Africa:

My grandfather graduated from the University of Tokyo at the beginning of the 1880s, his notebooks were full of English. My father graduated from the same university in 1920 and half his notes were filled with English. When I graduated a generation later my notes were all in Japanese. So... it took three generations for us to consume western civilization totally via the means of our language (1989, p. 160).

In his commentary on the Japanese cultural “cannibalism” narrative, Achebe appreciates the capacity of the Japanese peoples to ‘journey back to regain a threatened past and selfhood (Achebe 1989, p.160). But underneath this appreciation one can glean the inner realization by Achebe of the lack or absence of the same “creative alchemy” amongst the African peoples. It is not lost to Achebe that Africa has not had the equivalent of the Meiji Revolution of the 1860s in Japan. The contradiction that inheres in Achebe’s position is that he has been

in the vanguard for the promotion of English as a medium of literary expression in Africa and yet is quick to laud the Japanese for “consuming western civilization totally via the means of *their own language*” [my emphasis]. Nevertheless, that does not mean that Achebe has not tried to *modernize* the native and *nativize* the modern, however partial and incomplete his success has been (Korang, 2004, p. 127).

How has Achebe *nativized* the modern and *modernized* the native? In responding to this question we have to take into consideration the relative brevity of the history of the written word in general and the novel as an art form in Africa. There is general consensus among scholars from various disciplines about the preponderance of the oral tradition in African antiquity, and colonial Africa and even postcolonial Africa. The earliest African novel dates back only up to the early and mid twentieth century. The examples that come to mind include Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) and Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkards* (1952). These novels contrast significantly with, for instance European writer Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), which some have credited with being the first modern novel. The appearance of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 therefore, places it among some of the earliest novels in Africa. In a sense, Achebe joins Hayford, Plaatje and Tutuola in Africanizing literacy and the novel as an art form, besides embracing English as a vehicle of literary expression. It is true that Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkards* whose broken grammar is suggested in the title, was a seminal attempt at Africanizing the novel. But Achebe seems to have gone one better, exhibiting more sophistication, ingenuity, profundity and subtlety and still retaining remarkable aesthetic value.

It bears reiterating that Achebe *modernizes* the native by adopting the novel, a written art form and English, a world language. But it is the “fashioning [or refashioning] an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience,” that enables Achebe to *nativize* the modern. Generally speaking, Achebe's English is fairly simple and straightforward compared, for instance, to Wole Soyinka's somewhat obscure, dense, and complex English. To my knowledge the language Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart* would hardly tax the reader's intellect in the manner that Soyinka's *The Road or Death and The Kings Horseman* would. But there are several instances in which Achebe's “use of English is different from the ‘norm’” as Brainwaite would put, where “norm” here refers to the so-called Queen's English. A few examples from the text will suffice. Describing Okonkwo's sojourn among his mother's kinsmen after inadvertently killing a clansman in what today would be termed “friendly fire,” Achebe writes; “ For two or three moons the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to

breathe a breath of fire on the earth” (p. 91). Also in the trickster tale featuring Tortoise and the birds, Achebe writes; “Tortoise had not eaten a good meal for two moons” (p. 68). Achebe’s use of ‘moons’ instead of ‘months,’ is a deliberate attempt to Africanize English. It has to be noted that in a number of African languages including Swahili, Kamba, Zulu, Gikuyu, and Bukusu, the term “moon” has a multiplicity of connotations such as a period of time and a celestial body, and the menstrual flow. Achebe therefore remodels the English language in order to carry the African experience.

Another example of this remodeling of English can be deduced from the words of Okonkwo’s third wife Ekwefi after narrowly escaping death at the hands of her irascible husband. Ekwefi responds to a woman who inquires about the incident; “I cannot find the mouth with which to tell the story” (p. 34). The statement not only captures the essence of Ekwefi’s shock and angst, it conveys the embedded Igbo linguistic structure, with its freshness, its novelty. In actuality it is not that Ekwefi literally needs another mouth to narrate the ordeal, she has her own mouth and she indeed uses it to communicate her seeming inability to speak about the incident. In normal English Ekwefi would have simply said, “I am too scared to even speak about what happened.” But such plain statement lacks the spark, figurativeness and exactitude that Achebe’s *nativized* English provides.

Let us examine another example of the unfamiliar deployment of familiar English words in Achebe’s prose. “If the clan,” writes Achebe, “disobeyed the Oracle and they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call the *fight of blame*” (p. 9). Achebe’s reference here to a “fight of blame,” bears a highly contextualized and particularized usage, which may otherwise make little sense outside the Igbo or Umuofian social environment. Needless to say an explanation of the meaning of ‘*agadi-nwayi*’ (an old woman associated with the Oracle) may further help the reader to grasp the full import of “the fight of blame”— the participation in unjustified and unjustifiable war. But the point I am trying to stress is that abstracted from its context, the expression “the fight of blame” is unintelligible since it is alien to the English idiom.

Achebe’ strong defense of the “use, misuse and abuse” of the English language—to borrow Zabus’ words—may be construed at once as an index of his contentment, plenitude with English and a measure of discomfort with the language. At any rate, there is a huge contradiction in spirit and in principle regarding the act of dropping a name and hanging on to a language symbolized by that name. After the historic conference for African writers of English expression at Makerere University, Uganda in 1962, Obi Wali mounted one of the most stinging

assaults on Africans writing in European languages in his article “Dead end of African literature” in *Transition*. Achebe was at pains to justify the painful decision to embrace European languages as media of literary expression and attempted to exonerate himself and others from the charge of lack of patriotism:

I do not see any signs of sterility anywhere here. What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language. So my answer to the question *Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?* is yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can we ever learn to use it like native speakers? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience (p. 975, 433).

In projecting English as a “new voice” for Africa, Achebe echoes Indian commentator KRS Iyengar who expressed similar sentiments by stating that, “Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as others” (Iyengar, 1962, p. 3). It would seem making English a new voice for the African experience entails refashioning it according to the nearly normless norms of hybrid aesthetics. As Achebe explains the English of the African writer need not be similar to that of the native speaker. Neither should it be completely unintelligible to the overall English-speaking world. I want to reiterate that the result of the Africanization of English is a kind of palimpsest that occupies an interstitial space between and betwixt English and the African language whose idiom is imposed on English. In the case of Achebe, the African language is Igbo. Between the universal and the peculiar of this English in Achebe’s prose, I find the peculiar dominating, a jarring dominance that proclaims its Africanity and Igboness. To this end Ato Quayson states:

‘Sedimentation’ of oral discourse on the written one does not reside solely in the mimesis of verbal speech and in the forms of oralization as arguably in the case of poetry. It lies at the level of the reproduction of cultural codes and signifiers which may be shifted not just between an oral frame and a written one within the same language but may be seen as transferable between different languages. It is not for nothing, therefore, that the traditional culture portrayed in a work such as Achebe’s *Things*

Fall Apart is never mistaken for a Japanese one. It is not just that the novel mimetically invokes Igbo forms of oral discourse, it also imitates a general discursivity (pp. 14-15).

The canopy of orality is both an aestheticizing and identifying characteristic of Achebe's works as being African and has won him acclaim among a whole array of literary critics. Most critics have been quick to praise Achebe for his ingenious fusion of forms, the oral and the written. Gikandi writes: "Achebe is the man who invented African literature because he was able to show...that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in a fusion of such forms with oral traditions (Gikandi, 1996). Like Gikandi and Isidore Okpewho, Obiechina welcomes enthusiastically this marriage of the oral and written forms concluding that it culminates in something "new and exhilarating in its novelty" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 28). To exemplify Achebe's success Obiechina remarks that Achebe's "Nigerian villagers weave into the fabric of their everyday conversations allusions from folk-tales, legends, myths and back their opinions and attitudes with appropriately chosen proverbs, traditional maxims, and cryptic anecdotes" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 26).

Achebe's literary merit is beyond dispute. However, there has been a deafening silence over the presence of copious footnotes that threaten to burst Achebe's books at the seams because of his Africanization of the English language. These footnotes are necessitated by the possibility of incomprehensibility particularly of Igbo in its association with its strange bedfellow English. When English and Igbo have met as they do in Achebe's fictional world, they create a cacophony that Robert Stam would call "miscegenated grammars and scrambled metaphors" (Stam, 1999, p. 60). The same could be said of Wole Soyinka's opaque and obscure depiction of the enigmatic Yoruba cosmology. Soyinka's assertion about the artistic "recreation of a pre-colonial African world-view [through] eliciting its transposable elements into modern potential," seems in a way to be in tandem with Achebe's indigenization project. In a sense, the poetic license that Achebe other Europhone African writers embrace enables them to use Zabus' words to "use, misuse and abuse English." Most critics laud Achebe deployment of words such as "moon" for "month" as ingenious or something that satiates their neophilia. But they have failed to recognize moments of indecision and unintelligibility in Achebe's literary oeuvre. Let us consider for the song of Ikemefuma which is a supreme example of Achebe's aporia and indecision:

Eze elina, elina!
Sala
Eze ilikwa ya
Ikwaba akwa oligholi
Ebe Danda nechi eze
Ehe Uzuzu nete egwu

Sala (p. 42).

What sense are non-Igbo readers supposed to make of Achebe's decision not to give the song an English rendition? It is possible to read this as the author's attempt to delineate the local flavor of Igboland and thus conform to the dictates of verisimilitude. But in a sense this is more than simply "miscegenated grammars." Miscegenation is a term fraught with negativity and it is with its negative connotations that I invoke Stam's expression here in respect of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Igbo stands here in dialectical and defiant opposition to English, implicitly declaring Achebe's hidden Anglophobia, which is embedded in his outward Anglophilia expressed in his defense and selection of English as a medium of indigenous expression. The same can be said of the many untranslated words littering his prose. Conversely the tendency to explain others and provide English counterparts within the texts stands in the way of the forward flow of the narrative.

I have argued in this paper that Achebe is caught up in a painful negotiation in performing the drama of hybridity and miscegenated grammars. Any doubt that Achebe is engulfed in a crisis can be dispelled by examining his own admission regarding the motive behind writing *Things Fall Apart*. In the essay referred to earlier, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe concedes:

Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return of a prodigal son. But things happen very fast in Africa. I had begun to bask in the sunshine of reconciliation when a new cloud appeared, a new estrangement. (1973, p. 191).

The excerpt above vivifies Achebe's unsettled and restless soul in the sea of hybridity, grappling with identity, attempting to define and redefine his literary and literary world. He has had to negotiate with himself about who he is, how he wants to be identified, who he wants to write

for and about and in what language. These are not easy decisions as I have tried to illustrate. Achebe has wrestled in anguish with this painful negotiation process. But he is not alone. Nobel Literature Prize winner J.M. Coetzee points to the identity crisis that has dogged Indian-born writer Salman Rushdie. States Coetzee: "Identity... has hovered as a problem to Salman Rushdie's head for most of his life." (Coetzee, 2002, p. 169).

Achebe, like most African writers finds himself torn asunder between English and his native language, between his African self and his Anglicized 'mask' of modernity.' Ania Loomba's reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* is within the framework of a nation and how Othello's hybridity turns out to be an oxymoronic mixture lends credence to our conclusion on Achebe's hybrid aesthetics. Loomba states; "Shakespeare's Othello...had died testifying to an impossible split between his black, African self and his Christianized, Europeanized 'mask'. He had described his suicide as the killing of a 'malignant and turban'd Turk' who acts against the Venetian State: thus in his own words, Othello is both defender of the state and the rebel, insider and outsider." It is possible to extend this analogy and conclude that Achebe is both a defender of the English language and a rebel, an insider and an outsider. Achebe accepts English with a grain of salt and turns it on its head to question things, to question representations, and misrepresentations to define and redefine a new palimpsest for the recreation of African realities. Therefore when he proclaims, "the English language has been given me and I intend to use it," he is not entirely blind to the cultural imperialism that the language engenders and hopes to subvert and invert that imperialism with his domestication antics (Achebe, 1964, p. 6).

Nota bene

There is an apparent dispute as to who should be lauded for being the Christopher Columbus of "hybridity" as a concept. Robert Stam berates the enthusiastic adoration of Homi Bhabha which confers him with pioneering the use of the term. States Stam; "For those of us in the area of Latin American culture, where "hybridity" and *mestizaje* have been critical commonplaces for decades, it is always a surprise to learn that Homi Bhabha through no fault of his own has been credited with the concept of hybridity" (Stam 1999: footnote 1 on p. 76). I do not consider it necessary or desirable to attempt a resolution of this conflict at this point since such a venture is beyond the scope of this paper.

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