

Multiple Perspectives in New Literature in English with Reference to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Gajendra Dutt Sharma

Last few decades of the previous millennium and the starting one of this century have witnessed a boom in world literature, particularly in English, both in British and non-British communities. As far as non-British literatures in English are concerned, there have been some of the more nationally or culturally specific labels or rubrics such as 'the new literature in English', 'Commonwealth literature', 'black-British literature', or 'post-colonial literature'. However, the phrase 'new literature in English' covers the rest of others. Though it has no canonical definition yet it can be suggested to be an umbrella term which refers to modern experiment in style, narrative techniques, linguistic experimentation and a wide variety in the contents. It unduly emphasises on 'newness'. The experiences in new literature are new as they deal with variety of literatures having plethora of themes exclusively to different countries, such as being on the hinges of borders, in-between cross-cultural existence, ethnocentric perspectives and a recurring shift in past and present disposition (colonised and decolonised displaced identity). It also marks a manifesting deviation from the canonical English Literature which is about English sensibility, historically, geographically, culturally and ethnocentrically. The only commonality between the two types of literatures is the medium i.e. English as the canonical English literature is typical British in all its nuances and instincts while the new literature depends on the litterateurs belonging to particular countries. Various national and cultural experiences, sentiments and their delineation also vary. It implies an exclusionary periodization as significant literature written in English in the countries which formerly belonged to British colonies such as parts of Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, islands in the South Pacific, and Sri Lanka etc.

The writers of these countries, such as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and many others, have tried to situate their literature in terms of the historical circumstances that have engendered it. Their works integrate local and global social conditions, literary forms and conventions. They deal with the social issues like race, violence, religion and communalism, land, sex and gendered identity, nation and state, memory, trauma and prolepsis, English as a world language and English as a language of cultural imperialism. There is an evident impact of association of self versus membership in a society, and the rewards and dangers of migrating from tradition towards individualization. They showcase a lucid tinge of contemporary angst and various existential dilemmas in clash or contrast with traditional ways of life and customs.

They search for more authentic and vital forms of self-definition, in order to overcome experiences of alienation under colonialism; the retrieval and the excavation partially lost buried histories and spaces (for example, sacred sites), for the same purpose; and the adaptation and regeneration of local language and indigenous myths. (Birch 796)

Moreover, their study is resourced by the concepts like Post-structuralism, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Linguists. Going slightly historically the new literature in English has its roots in the emergence of Commonwealth literature, a term used in 1950s to describe literature being produced from the countries which had a history of colonialism and were in the process of gaining independence from British Rule. It included the works by the litterateurs as R.K.Narayan (India), George Lamming (Barbados), Katherine Mansfield (New Zealand) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) etc. This was an attempt to reach beyond national frontiers to “identify and locate this vigorous literary activity, and to consider via a comparative approach the common concerns and attributes that these manifold literary voices might have” (McLeod 11).

Similarly in relation with new literature in English the term ‘black-British literature’ also received currency in 1970s about which Salman Rushdie once remarked that black British literature does not exist. It may however be sometimes contrasted with ‘white British literature’ and suggested a marginalisation in its relation. It describes the writings by authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Qureishi of Asian origin, Kaazuo Ishiguro with roots in Japan, Ben Okri from Nigeria and Linton Kwesi Johnson from Jamaica and many numerous others. It is characterised by variety and originality, and thematic and formal renewal of a variety of literary traditions. It may be, for example, crime fiction as in Mike Philips’ *The Late Candidate*, 1990, children’s fiction as in Benjamin Zephania’s *Refugee Boy*, 2001, fantasy fictions in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, 2006, or horror fiction as in Courttia Newland’s *Music for the Off Key: Twelve Macabre Stories*, 2006. It was specifically interested in “history, often combined with an especial concern for ‘otherness’, not only racial, but also sexual and sometimes religious.” (Birch 19) It also included the celebratory and affirmative acknowledgement of women’s experiences following painful legacies of ‘double’ or ‘triple’ colonization under empire. The novelty of the black British literature, apart from its having various thematic concerns, was its being formal tinged with radical linguistic ingenuity and structural inventiveness. Authors look for ‘a self-constituted identity and independence. The formal disruption goes well beyond vocabulary and grammar. It-

concerns the shape of the narrative itself, as well as the way the text often fundamentally transgresses generic or other conventions. It tends to display fragmented narrative, developing the innovative models of modernism in order to express the discontinuity and the ambiguity at the heart of the black British condition but also the post imperial nation (Birch 21).

Following the multidimensional rubrics of new literature ‘post-colonial literature’ implies the study of, as is the case with commonwealth and black British literature, the reading texts produced in the countries with a history of colonialism and is concerned with its legacies in past or present. It concerns disparate forms of representations and reading practices circulating across the border between colonial rule and national independence. It recognises both historical continuity and change. Rethinking and reshaping the traditional mode of literary practices is fundamental to it. It also centres diasporic experiences of the writers that directly descended from migrant families, and possess the sense of living in one country but look across time and space to another. These people acknowledge that-

the Old country" – a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions ... a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with the past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background (Cohen 9).

Elucidating all the aspects of new literature in English few tenets are quite clear such as: nation's delineation, the issue of the usage of English language and the double colonisation of women etc. which have been represented in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as well. Be it projection of nation as a distinct entity through its specific culture, rituals and tenets, evoking of national consciousness, colonisation of men and women, or usage of English language amalgamated with native Nigerian terminology, every aspect has been truly justified by the author.

Before these representations are probed, the myth of nation ought to be explained as such. A nation depends upon the discovery of certain traditions which are evident through repetition of various symbols and icons that help foster a sense of its idiosyncratic identity in which the people invest their emotions. These symbols can be national anthem, national flag, certain rituals and cultural legacies which as a whole bind all the people into a single national body. The people possess a sense of ownership, and cherish the feelings of belongingness, home and community. Taking it into the reference of anti-colonialism this led to the national representation as well. Retaliating against it the colonised faked the literary tradition of the coloniser in copying genres and tropes; however, they ignored the sentiments of the coloniser, and tried to evoke only their native whims, fancies and trends. They tried to create national consciousness even in delineating it in an alien language and form.

The concept of *Negritude* in Africa, the Caribbean and America can be cited as an example of this type of representation. Its aim was to unite peoples living in different nations through their shared ancestry and common origins. It was viewed as the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values.

Similarly, Frantz Fanon developed the concept of 'national consciousness' through which the writer becomes a radical instrument in people's struggle for independence, charged with the responsibility of both drawing inspiration and compacting a sense of the people's national unity through his work. Here the works assert the rightful position of the colonised people to make their *self-definition* by treasuring the cultural inheritance in defiance of colonial discourses.

Therefore, as for these representations in *Things Fall Apart* the world of Ibo (Igbo) tribal community has been delineated with its distinct features, rituals, gods and cultural perspectives. National representation included grand conduct of wrestling matches and their being watched and celebrated in frenzy was one of the main events of the clan. Drummers would beat the drums as if they had been possessed by the spirits of the drums.

The drums rose to frenzy. People surged forwards. The young men who kept order flew around, waving their palm fronds. Old men nodded to the beat of the drums and remembered the days when they wrestled to its intoxicating rhythm (Achebe 34).

Celebration of any event with tapped palm wine and cola, flavoured with the dished of yam foo-foo had its separate charm. Breaking of cola nut by some elder was an honour to him on the one hand and formal commencement of the celebration on the other. New harvest of yams (main crop of the region) could not be eaten without offering it to the Powers at New Yam Festival. "the new year must begin with tasty, fresh yams and not the shrivelled and fibrous crop of the previous year" (*Things Fall Apart* 27). Vultures were the messengers of rain people looked to when it did not rain for a long time. The arrival of locusts (locusts came once nearly every seven years) in the area was considered good omen for the harvest and for a new tasty crunchy food to relish.

Their religious sentiments were driven by fear of their many gods and the spirits of their dead fathers rather than the love of god. The forest, its darkness and all its creatures were associated with evil, which predominated most of their actions.

Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was not called by its name because it would hear. (*Things Fall Apart* 8)

Everyone had his *chi*, personal god, and abomination to whom would result in physical afflictions. In that way he was not let die at his house and carried to the Evil Forest and left to die there.

The disputes, calamities and important actions were settled and contrived by Oracle of the Hills and the Caves and the dead spirits of their fathers. Oracle was called *Agbala* who had her *awful shrine*, a round hole at the side of a hill. People came to consult the Oracle when 'misfortune dogged their steps'. No one ever saw *Agbala*, save his priestess.

The family matters were heard by *egwugwu*, nine representatives of nine villages of the clan and their leader was Evil Forest. Some of them were very dangerous while some were harmless. Committing some sin or crime during Week of Peace would demand appeasement only in the form of sacrifice of some animal, some length of cloth and some *hundreds of cowries* at the shrine of the respective god, *chi*.

When there were recurring deaths of the children according to *Afa Oracle* the child was *ogbanje*, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mother's wombs to be born again. Accordingly the woman, when pregnant next time, was to sleep in her own people's hut so as to break its evil cycle of birth.

The funeral of some great warrior and a man who had many titles was an event of grand honour. He was to be buried after dark with only a glowing brand to light the sacred ceremony. "The ancient drums of death beat, guns and canons were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roofs" (*Things Fall Apart* 89). And if any person happened to kill anyone by mistake, the deed was first *female* and as a result he had to be victimised by the wrath of the people as he had spoiled the honour of the dead man. Besides, he had to suffer exile as well. The same happened with the

protagonist, Okonkwo, who along with the members of his family had to remain in exile for seven long years.

This was a land of warriors and the cowards had no respect and place in the clan. Bravery of any kind was the salient feature of men of the clan and 'the man was judged according to his worth not according to the worth of his father'. Any act of cowardice would make the people forget all about you. Okonkwo committed suicide in the end to avoid mortification at the hand of the white men but this was against their custom. "It is abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his kinsmen. His body is evil" (*Things Fall Apart* 151).

As far as igniting national consciousness is concerned it has been delineated in the second part of the novel when the advent of the white men in *Umuofia* shook the very existence of the people, and posed a question mark on their national sentiments and steadfast beliefs. It was defied but not with that daring instinct and courage which would drive away the white men from their native land. Consequently it ended quite dramatically.

Having arrived with the view of a missionary, simply to promote their religion and tell all its good to the people of region, they started encroaching on their pre-established typical religious beliefs. "The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to surrounding town and villages" (*Things Fall Apart* 105). Initially the white men were taken for granted and assumed to be lasting only for a short while but it was a misconception. The Umuofian called them *efulefu*, a coward and worthless person, considered the converts the excrement of the clan, and thought that 'the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up'. Nevertheless, nothing pleased them as the white men not only stayed there but also settled in Umuofia making there their headquarter. They now started communicating with them through an interpreter who was an Ibo man. They struck the sentiments of the native denouncing their gods as 'false gods, gods of stone and wood'. They even offered many kinds of enticements like 'iron horses' if they followed their religion. The blasphemy went on as-

all gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who will tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one God and He has made the earth, the sly, you and me and all of us (*Things Fall Apart* 107).

They had another strategy with them to increase the number of converts and this was to welcome the outcasts, the lepers, twins and their mother. This way they won many other people of the clan. Even Okonkwo's son himself became a convert. All this was more than enough to cause a national or a communal rising, which was led by the protagonist, Okonkwo. But his this mission was initially thwarted by the manifold arguments between some of the natives and the missionaries. He could make a sound full of disgust, and exclaimed that they should not talk like cowards and asserted, "if a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does" (*Things Fall Apart* 117). To the dismay of the Umuofian the white men brought a government as well. They built a prison which was full of the people who offended against the white men's

authority. They were beaten and made to work like fetching wood and clearing the government compound from morning to evening. Besides, the trade in Umuofia witnessed a new definition as the white men built a trading centre and "for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed" (*Things Fall Apart* 130). But with this the so called missionary objective transformed into chauvinistic pursuit. The former sophisticated missionary Mr, Brown was succeeded by Reverend James Smith, who openly condemned the native ways of life.

He saw thing as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares (*Things Fall Apart* 134).

This chauvinism continued further as in one of the annual ceremony organised in the honour of Mother Earth, Enoch, a white man, tore off the mask of *egwugwu*, the ancestor spirit of the clan, and desecrated him. In return the group of these *egwugwu* assembled and destroyed the church in fury. This was followed by Okonkwo's resolving to do something substantial to fight these men and drive them from the land. He accordingly assembled all the men of Umuofia and told his mind warning all of them to be fully armed, "An Umuofia man does not refuse a call. He may refuse to do what he is asked; he does not refuse to be asked. But the times have changed, and we must be fully prepared" (*Things Fall Apart* 140) Anticipating some bigger danger the Commissioner offered a kind of peace talk and the fury of the native subsided. Six men of wisdom and prestige including Okonkwo went there, however, deceitfully, they were captivated and tortured, and released only after the ransom was paid. This clearly resulted in the treacherous terror of white men in the mind of the men of Umuofia. Last desperate attempt of resolution was tried in the form of yet another meeting so that they could avenge upon the white men for this deception. But here too the messenger of white men interfered and Okonkwo lost his temper. The result was the brutal beheading of the messenger. Nevertheless, the national rising did not yield any fruit and with the fear of being caught and humiliated by the white men, Okokwo committed suicide by hanging himself. He deglorified his entire prestige and renowned existence in Umuofia which can be best concluded by Okonkwo's Friend Obierika's addressing the Commissioner at his death. "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog ..." (*Things Fall Apart* 151). This was how the freedom struggle availed nothing. For the coloniser the story of the colonised was simply worth writing a paragraph or, at most, a chapter. The words of the Commissioner clearly suggest his point when he says, "the story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make an interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him" (*Things Fall Apart* 152).

The re-working of English language under new conditions, changing it from its standard version into something new and more suited to the new surroundings turned out to be the specific feature of new literature. Not only the writers forsook the coloniser's language in order to rediscover their roots but also they used English for the fusion of cultures as for them the amalgamation of two cultures in which an indigenous order was usurped by alien and intrusive values offered a new canvas for exploring multiple themes. Regarding English language as a medium of power the authors employed a

national variety in order to reconstruct and deconstruct the English language. Therefore, new literature abrogates the privileged centrality of 'English' by using language to signify difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood. The reason for this deconstruction process is the imperial power's control over the means of communication rather than the control over life and property. Authors tried to express their difference and used writing as an instrument of power to establish a position against the imperialists, because writing is one of the most important instruments of communication.

In his essay 'Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-Colonial Theory of Literary Writing' Bill Ashcroft has theorised the process and explored how language-utterances ('texts' in his words) are produced and received in specific contexts, and emerge from unique situations.

Meaning depends upon the *moment* of textual production and the *place* where they are produced. Each limits and determines the range of meanings available to a text. So, when English is used in a once-colonised location, the specifics of the site of textual production will necessarily force its meaning to *change* (Selmon and Tiffin 58-73)

The same idea was projected by Salman Rushdie when he says that language needs to be decolonised and remade in other images. For the writers like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, or Indian novelists Upmanyu Chatterjee and Amit Chaudhuri, English has been a means of uniting peoples across continents and of reaching a wider audience which would hardly be possible if they tried it in their mother tongues. Following the same Caribbean writers like Derek Walcott and V S Naipaul evolved techniques of switching in and out of Standard English and local Creoles to emphasise that their cultural worlds are irrevocably multicultural and hybridized. Knowledge of the English language gave them access to a lot of hitherto unknown information which they attempted to remove through their writing and awakened their countrymen to the ground realities of their situation.

The simplicity, ease, accessibility, command and the indigenous flair (the amalgamation of Ibo phraseology) which Chinua Achebe has rendered to language in *Things Fall Apart* have been so remarkable that it created a considerable scope for the upcoming writers to express their native sentiments and experiences in a language which could make them international. Here the sentences are short, lucidly constructed and tinged with proverbs that it became his distinct style and representation of Ibo community as "among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 6). Moreover, Ibo terminology (e.g. *agad-inwayi*- old woman, *ndichie*- elders, *obi*-personal chamber, *ilo*-the village playground, *jigida*-waist-beads, *umunna*-kinsmen, *chi*- personal god, *efulefu*-worthless and empty man, *osu*- outcasts, and *nno*- welcome etc.) has been so dexterously used and strung together that it seems quite natural to serve his purpose and at times, blends itself into English language. Achebe's handling of the language in the novel not only seemingly belies the claims of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o that one's native culture can best be produced and expressed in one's indigenous tongue but also proves the saying that 'any peg will do to hang your hat, hat is the thing'. Here are some of the beautiful proverbs and idioms used in the novel: " 'From cockcrow till the chickens

went back to roost.’, ‘A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches.’, ‘When mother-caw is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth.’, ‘If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others.’, ‘Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.’, ‘To live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle.’, ‘As a man danced so the drums were beaten for him.’, ‘Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life’ “(*Things Fall Apart* 6).

Looking at these expressions one thing can safely be concluded that animal imagery works predominantly in his language. Moreover, animal imagery suits the tribal instincts and the typical life in forest giving it an image and expression of its own on the one hand and animal spirit in men of the Ibo community on the other. Here are these images: “ ‘He trembled with desire to conquer the enemy and subdue. It was like the desire for woman.’, ‘She stood gazing in the direction of the voice like a hen whose only chick has been carried away by a kite.’, ‘The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.’, ‘She had her moments of depression when she would snap at everybody like an angry dog.’, ‘Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run.’, ‘The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting’ ”(*Things Fall Apart* 6).

As has been mentioned above, quite similar to contemporary European thought, feminism is also at the crux of new literature in English. Sigmund Freud regarded the sexual life of women as a ‘dark continent’. The female body was used metaphorically for colonies and the discovery of conquered land. Female authors, whether postcolonial or not, have always been marginalised and excluded from the canon. They are treated as colonies in a male-dominated value system because mainly men decide which authors - usually male writers - gain access to the canon. This gave rise to many discourses like *double colonisation of women*. Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase ‘double colonisation’ to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. They argue that,

Colonialism celebrates male achievements in a series of male-oriented myths such as ‘mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers and missionaries, while women are subject to representation in colonial discourses in which collude with patriarchal values. ... and a male ethos has persisted in the colonial and post-colonial world (Peterson and Rutherford 9).

So to speak the phrase ‘double colonisation’ refers to the situation that women are twice colonised – by colonialist representations and realities on the one hand, and by patriarchy on the other. Taking the indigenous gender roles many writers have explored the oppression of women within native communities.

In this novel, though there are fewer references to show that the women of the clan have been colonised by the white men yet a typical patriarchy or male chauvinism is at work at the very centre of Ibo society. Women were relegated to merely giving birth to child and its rearing. They hardly had any say in the in any important meeting of the village, and if they were referred, it was to ever done, they were associated with weakness. Okonkwo wanted his son Nwoye to grow like a man, and felt an unwonted

pleasure when he heard him grumbling about women as is was a sign of his capability of controlling the women folk in future. "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (especially his women) he was not really a man" (*Things Fall Apart* 38). He encouraged his boys to like the stories about the masculine violence. He liked his daughter very much, however, at times he could not help wishing her being a boy.

The clan had the tradition of marriage in the form of purchasing the bride, and whenever any suitor came the male members of the family wished to 'clinch the matter of a bride price'. A woman was merely an object of sale-purchase. The suitor came and, "surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe" (*Things Fall Apart* 51). and then haggled and bargained as if they were purchasing a cow or a goat from the market. Besides, she was interrogated about her private life as to with how many men she had lain before the marriage proposal came to her. Anyway, once the deal was finalised the parents of the bride promised the best kind of fertility in the clan. "We are giving you our daughter today. She will be good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town" (*Things Fall Apart* 86). Any woman who happened to beget twins was criticised unanimously and people had low opinion of such a lady. Moreover, she was not buried in her in-laws' place, rather she had to be buried in her own people. Many times she had to face severe domestic violence. "No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan" (*Things Fall Apart* 65).

To conclude it can safely be said that the referred novel truly represents and justifies some of the very important tenets of new literature. In the span of just one hundred and fifty pages it deals with multiple issues pertaining to the pre-colonial and post-colonial phase of Ibo community in Nigeria. Besides, the importance lies in the representative delineation of universality of these issues among almost all the colonies under British domain. The sensibilities of the colonised people and the multiple facets of their literature certainly make it unique on the one hand and on the other leave a distinct impact in the whole range of world literature.

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