

The Relevance of Chinua Achebe, Langston Hughes and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O to the African Renaissance

Francis Ibe Mogu, Ph.D.

Dept. of English and Litetrary Studies
University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni , Swaziland

Abstract

Recently, there has been much focus on the notion of an African renaissance. What really does the concept entail? What form of renewal are we Africans advocating? This essay explores the unique and sustained regeneration of the African ethos and psyche which dominates the writings of Chinua Achebe, Langston Hughes and Ngugi wa Thiong'O. It argues that the three writers have always symbolized genuine African sensibilities and are therefore profound Pan Africanists. Their writings portray the best of Africa to the rest of the world. They are therefore among Africa's best contributions to the world.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* Achebe reverses the colonial trend of demonizing and denigrating the African past. Hughes actively propagates African sensibilities in the Diaspora and successful links up with the continent to renew his commitment and strengthen his quest for racial uplift. This is amply evident in 'The Big Sea' and his other writings. Ngugi, on the other hand, demonstrates his rich African heritage in virtually all of his works. Texts such as *Weep Not Child* – which portrays Africans as a child 'weeping' over the European colonization and plunder of the continent, and *Petals of Blood*, clearly crystallize this.

'**Renaissance**' is a French word for 'renewal'. It was mainly applied to the period between 1450 to 1650. It was also when European scholars discovered the works of ancient Greek and Roman scholars, commonly referred to as '**Classical Scholars**'. The discovery of scholastic works of ancient writers and theorists such as Plato,

Aristotle, Dante, Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Horace, and Longinus aroused great interest among European scholars in the 16th to 17th centuries. ‘**Renaissance**’ suggests a return to an earlier, usually exciting way of life, subject or topic of interest which may not have been exhausted.

In the Twentieth Century the terminology was also applied to the activities and works of African-American artists and scholars in the Harlem suburb of Manhattan, New York, U.S.A. who actively redefined and relieved the black peoples’ experience in the United States and the world at large. Thus, we had the ‘**Harlem Renaissance**’ of the 1920s. Recently, in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Centuries, we are being confronted with what has been described as the “**African Renaissance**”. This is a concept enunciated and actively propagated by a few African leaders such as Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Abdoullai Wade of Senegal. It envisages the renewal of regeneration of the African continent. This in turn entails a massive turnaround of the continent’s political, economic and social fortunes which have been less than salutary in the past not-so-few centuries and decades. In a single phrase, the **African Renaissance** promises a re-invention of the continent to make it practically prosperous in the socio-economic and political fields not unlike what is being manifested in the far East by the so-called ‘Asian Tigers’.

This concept of course, takes into account the unique needs and aspirations of African peoples in their various geographical locations on the continent. According to president Mbeki:

When “we speak of an **African Renaissance**, we project into both the past and the future. I speak here of a glorious past of the emergence of Homo sapiens on the African continent. I speak of African works of art in South Africa that are a thousand years old. I speak of the continuum in the fine arts that encompasses the varied artistic creations of the Nubians and the Egyptians, the Benin bronzes of Nigeria and the intricate sculptures of the Makonde of Tanzania and Mozambique. I speak of the centuries-

old contributions to the evolution of religious thought made by the Christians of Ethiopia and the Muslims of Nigeria. I refer also to the architectural monuments represented by the giant sculptured stones of Aksum (Axum) in Ethiopia, Egyptian sphinxes and pyramids, the Tunisian city of Carthage, and the Zimbabwe ruins, as well as the legacy of the ancient universities of Alexandria of Egypt, Fez of Morocco and, once more, Timbuktu of Mali,. When I survey all this and much more besides, I find nothing to sustain the long held dogma of African exceptionalism, according to which the colour black becomes the symbol of fear, evil and death. The conviction, therefore, that our past tells us that the time for Africa's Renaissance has come is fundamental to the very conceptualization of this Renaissance and the answer to the question: whence this confidence? Unless we are able to answer the question "who were we?" we will not be able to answer the question "what shall we be?" this complex exercise, which can be stated in simple terms, links the past to the future and speaks of the interconnection between an empowering process of restoration and the consequences of the response to the acquisition of that newly restored power to create something new. (Mbeki 1998:1-7)

From the foregoing, it is amply evident that Africans have to recall their past in order to confront the present and at the same time, plan or chart the future. This is where literature plays a vital and unequivocal role. For the African Renaissance to succeed in its quest for a more positive image of the continent, a progressive and affirmative populace and a bright and truly independent future, works of literature by sons and daughters of Africa which promote positive cultural values must be integral. In this regard, literary works by three renowned African writers are being referred to as possible examples or models. These writers – all male and black, coincidentally – have strived gallantly to redefine European misconceptions of Africa and Africans. The writers are Chinua Achebe of Nigeria. Ngugi WA Thiong'o of Kenya and Langston Hughes, an African-American.

Tellingly, there are other great Pan-Africanist writers, male and female alike, who are equally central to the emerging concept of an **African Renaissance**, but the aforementioned three are major representatives of what is affirmative, beautiful, good, great, lovely and unique about Africa.

Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian writer who through works like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, retrieved, redefined and repositioned an Africanist view of Africa as opposed to the European colonialist approach exemplified by Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary and similar Eurocentric writers. European colonialist writers had portrayed Africa in a negative, condescending manner in their texts. Prominent among such works were Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson* which denigrated Africa and offered no hope for her continued existence and future. Generally, Cary and Conrad appear to gloss over Africa's positive attributes, while thoroughly ridiculing her so-called lapses.

In response to such negative Eurocentric writings, Achebe wrote, among others, the two aforementioned texts. In *Things Fall Apart*, he imaginatively recreates an Igbo community in what is today, Nigeria, at the threshold and early phases of both European colonialism and the advent of the twentieth century. Contrary to the lazy, weak, naïve, disorganized and incoherent people and communities depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson*, Achebe in his two books recalls the African past as it truly was in both positive and negative attributes. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the Umuofia and Umuaro communities with their leaders and such as Okonkwo and Ezeulu are shown in their daily communal endeavours. People are cultured, well organized and led through a hierarchy of elders. They work hard in their farms and other agricultural activities. There are age grades which enhance the organization and orderliness of the communities. There are cultural events like wrestling, dances, festivals and religion worship. Disputes are internally resolved. The spiritual realm looms and presides over entire communities not unlike in the modern day Christian and Islamic settings. Indeed, it is the arrival of the presumptuous foreigner – the European colonizer that ushers in chaos and disruption of the status quo. This view is amply sustained by Achebe in the two novels as well as in his book of critical

essays, *Morning Yet, On Creation Day*. Achebe therefore is the moral voice for Africa; the custodian of what is genuine and unique about the continent and a dispeller of falsehoods about African people, no matter where such originates from.

Basically, Achebe has been a fighter on all fronts for African revival – a core ingredient of the **African Renaissance Concept**. He vociferously opposes corruption. He is humble, but blatant enough to admit to its existence in all strata of our social fabric. He loves African culture and strives relentlessly to ensure its survival among African people, but he does not hate other cultures. Instead, he appreciates what is beautiful and enlightening in those cultures and is willing to allow a cross breeding or marriage of diverse positive cultures with African experiences so as to engender the best values among our people. He therefore neither expresses a lopsided opinion nor paints a negative picture of Africa to the rest of the world. In other words, Achebe, like a trusted Pan Africanist and custodian of his people's moral values, realizes and acknowledges the good and the bad in his local culture. He equally recognizes positive and negative attributes in alien cultures. He cannot therefore tolerate foreign pontification over African affairs. He would rather encourage mutually beneficial experiences which acknowledge the presence of strengths and weakness in African and non-African cultural expressions.

Consistently, however, Achebe tends to imply that Africa was relatively orderly, peaceful and self-sufficient in many areas of need prior to her colonization by Europe. This suggests that it is the advent of the Europeans in African affairs that compounded matters on the continent. Thus, Achebe's pre-colonial novels manifest great moral fervour which orders the community ethos. That moral order vanishes completely in the contemporary, postcolonial texts. This is the situation found in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* (Mogu 2000:4). According to Gordon Douglas Killam (1980), Achebe argues that:

A Man of the People is a rather serious indictment – if you like – on post-independence Africa. But I don't despair because I think this is a necessary stage in our growth... if you take the example of Nigeria, which is

the place I know best, things had got to such a point politically that there was no other answer – no way that you could resolve this impasse politically. The political machine had been so abused that whichever way you pressed it, it produced the same result; and therefore another force had to come in. Now when I was writing *A Man of the People* it was clear to me that this was going to be necessarily military intervention. It could easily have been civil war, which in fact it very nearly was in Nigeria. But I think the next generation of politicians in Nigeria, when we do have them would have learned one or two lessons, I hope, from what happened to the first republic. This is the only hope I have and if it turns out to be in vain, it would be terrible... (85-86)

Achebe's hope was, however, shattered with the realization that Nigerians had not learnt from their past mistakes. A spiral of coups and counter coups truncated democracy and heightened instability. These, in turn, amplified corruption and fostered despair, disillusionment, violence and bloodletting. The foregoing reality is portrayed in his *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Conversely, despite the nasty scenario painted above, Achebe has remained a vociferous apostle of transparency, sanity, justice, equity, and good governance in all of Africa, but especially Nigeria. Indeed, he is a strong advocate of endearing and humane African cultural attributes which distinguish us from the rest of mankind, while linking us directly to it. Africanist scholars like Achebe and the others are therefore building blocks for our continent. For the **African Renaissance** to translate into genuine, people-oriented programmes, a think-tank to tap and utilize the wealth of experience of erudite and renowned intellectuals within the Continent and in the Diaspora like Chinua Achebe should of necessity be put in place. This should be undertaken as a matter of utmost urgency. There is no longer any room for procrastination on the matter.

Ngugi WA Thiong'o on the other hand, is "a Kenyan writer of Gikuyu descent who began a very successful career writing in English before

turning to work entirely in Gikuyu.” (Jennifer Margulis, Spring 1996). According to Margulis:

In his 1986 *Decolonizing the Mind*, his “farewell to English”, Ngugi describes languages as a way people have not only of describing the world, but of understanding themselves. For him, English in Africa is a “Cultural bomb” that continues a process of erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and as a way of installing the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism.

Writing in Gikuyu, then, is Ngugi’s way not only of harking back to Gikuyu traditions, but also of acknowledging and communicating their presence. Ngugi is not concerned primarily with universality, though models of struggle can always move out and be translated for other cultures, but with preserving the specificity of his individual groups. In a general statement, Ngugi points out that language and culture are inseparable, and that therefore the loss of the former results in the loss of the latter:

Specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written Literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. Languages as communication and culture are then products of each other... Language carries cultures, and culture carries, particularly through Orature and Literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific relationship to the world. (15-16)

In his early work, *Weep Not Child*, Ngugi portrays an African child, Njoroge, decidedly ‘weeping’ over the havocs and atrocities visited on his people and heritage by Europeans – their colonization and plunder of the continent which is mirrored in the novel by their seizure of arable lands, farms and estates owned by Ngotho (his father) and other Africans. In his book, Ngugi reveals that some Africans connived with

the Europeans to colonize and plunder the continent. Chief Jacobo – the father to Njoroge’s friend, Mwhaki, is one of such traitors. However, there are others like Njoroge’s brothers, Boro, Kori and Kamau and the renowned Mau-Mau nationalist fighter Dedan Kimathi who mount a resilient opposition to Europeans colonialism. Characters like Stephen Howlands epitomize the primitive and uncouth nature of Europeans’ imperialism in Africa. As vividly manifested in *Weep Not Child*, Njoroge the dreamy and promising protagonist, is jolted into reality from his dream world as it increasingly dawns on him that his long-cherished ambition to attend school and help to eradicate ignorance among his people by enlightening them, would not materialize owing to the disruptions resulting from the colonial process and the African resistance to it.

In *Petals of Blood* as in his other works, Ngugi actively re-enacts the resilience of the African peasants as they embark on a nationalistic struggle to recover their lands and independence which had earlier been stolen from them. In the course of reclaiming lost territory, the African peasant encounter stiff and brutal resistance from European colonizers and their neocolonial African elite who relentlessly orchestrate nefarious policies which, among others denigrate, dehumanize and lampoon them in their motherland. However, the Africans manifest strong determination to succeed in their bid to regain what they had lost and, as Ngugi shows, they succeed ultimately in defeating the colonizers and their surrogates. Villagers in the tiny community of Ilmorog are confronted with the horrible and stark possibility of losing their most prized assets – land and culture to some neocolonial industrialists who succeed in constructing a road which links their village to the rest of Kenya. Following the construction of the road through Ilmorog, the industrialists, with the active connivance of agents of the Kenyan Government, embark on a scheme to deprive the villagers of all that they treasure – especially their land. Led by peasants and workers like Wanja, Abdullah, Karega and Munira, the villagers march to the nation’s capital, Nairobi, to lodge their protest. After a series of reversal of fortunes in the course of their trek, they finally succeed in thwarting the evil schemes of the industrialists. The industrialists – Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo, who represented the newly emerging African bourgeois oppressors, are

subsequently murdered in the New Ilmorog Town as the struggle escalated.

According to Killam (ibid), Ngugi's Pan Africanist themes which are declared in *Weep Not, Child*, are further explored in *A Grain of Wheat* and deepened in *Petals of Blood*. He observes that these include:

Themes related to education, both formal and informal; religion, both Christian and customary; the alienation of the land viewed from the historical point of view and as a process which continues in the present; the struggle for independence and the price paid to achieve it. And to these themes he has added artistic representation of the betrayal of the independence movement and its authors, the nature and cost of modernity as this coincides with the emergence of a Kenyan middle class, and of the need for the creation of a cultural liberation struggle fostered by peasants and workers. (96)

To Killam, therefore, Ngugi writes from a humanistic perspective and expresses resentment and utter condemnation of the effort by the African middle class to replace white European colonialism with black African neocolonialism visible through the aforesaid surrogates:

For Ngugi the independence movement has been betrayed and the peasant and worker for whom the war was fought have been further alienated from the land – the source of life – duped and made pitiable by a growing Kenyan middle class of entrepreneurs in league with international finance capitalism. Ngugi is on the side of the peasants and workers. (97)

Langston Hughes belongs to the **African Diaspora** category. He is an **African-American** who gained and sustained prominence from 1920s during the **Harlem Renaissance** and remained highly prominent through his death in 1967. He is still very renowned even today. In his preface to *Langston Hughes- a biography*, James A. Emanuel (1967), remarks that Hughes's chief goal as a writer was to "Explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America"(9). This herculean and

noble endeavour becomes all the more unique when viewed from the period he began to write actively to further the cause and aspirations of people of African descent, especially in the United States. It is revealing that Hughes's quest and involvement in efforts aimed at emancipating African peoples from White European oppression are not accidental because it is common in his family. According to Andrew P. Jackson – Sekou Molefi Baako (2005):

James Langston Hughes was a member of an abolitionist family. He was the great-great-grandson of Charles Henry Langston, brother to John Mercer Langston, who was the first Black American to be elected to public office, in 1855(1).

Hughes is also noted for his 1926 essay “**The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain**”, a strong, controversial and blatant statement which affirmed basic humanity and pride among African people, while denouncing racial discrimination and identifying major obstacles to black creativity and fulfillment in the United States:

We younger Negro artist who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased – we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful and ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased – we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure does not matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Mogu, 2002:29)

In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes expresses his deep and unabashed love for Africa by visiting and intimating himself with the continent and its peoples and cultures. Prior to this visit – which proves to be one of his most outstanding and profound, he affirms his initial volume of poems – *The Weary Blues* as his everlasting beacon and signpost which, according to James Emmanuel (1967) is an “expression of his – and every Negro's (African person's) ‘soul world’:

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa (17)

Between 1923 and 1924, Hughes traveled widely and had a most intimate and poignant communion with Africa, his long sought-after continent. He was adventurous and worked in a ship, *The Malone* which took him through thirty odd ports along the West coast of Africa, from Dakar in Senegal down to Luanda in Angola (25). Emmanuel (1967) observes that this first visit to Africa impacted greatly on the young Hughes as recorded in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*:

.... When I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing (The next day farther south).... It was more like the Africa I dreamed about – wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm tall, the sun bright... (ibid)

Emmanuel adds that, “Hughes’s attachment to Africa, largely expressed in nonfiction, worked its way into a dozen or so poems, written mostly in the next few years. The earliest public fruit of his voyage was the article “**Ships, Sea, and Africa**”, published in *The Crisis* (December, 1923).

A mere glimpse at the works and viewpoints of the three writers amply reveals them as committed Africanists of the highest rank. They all agree that the African is as good a human being as any other on the face of this earth. They vehemently oppose the European colonialism of Africa and Africans. Consequently, they have harnessed their creative potentials effectively to fight for the restoration and recognition of the rights of Africans taken away through European Trans-Atlantic Slavery and imperialism. The redeeming voices of these three children of African have spelt freedom, equality, truth, goodness, beauty, honesty, and humanity, wherever they have been uttered, whether on the continent, in the Diaspora or in alien lands. The atrocities and havocs unleashed by

European and Arabian slavery, colonialism and other forms of imperialism, including the economic and political annihilation of Africa and Africans, have not succeeded in muffling the heroic voices of Langston Hughes, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi WA Thiong'O. Instead, they have been custodians and oracles of the goddess and humanity of African peoples worldwide. Alive or dead, these artists represent what is best and germane in Africa. They therefore occupy the moral universe of the continent and effectively preside over it like charismatic, committed and dynamic priests in an altar before their redemptive god. Happily, this god is humane, listening, merciful and patient to Africa and even to her detractors.

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