

## Rereading Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka: A Critical Analysis of African Postcolonial Literature and Religion

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### Abstract

Behind the backdrop of today’s Africa and its history of struggle against colonial discourses that have mythologized Africa as ‘dark’ and ‘savage’ set against Western ‘civilization,’ the readers of African postcolonial literary works shall always find religion in different forms and modes of operation. Far from being naïve, religions have always been the door to get out of and/or get into another world with different values, beliefs and practices. Cultural, historical, and theoretical readings of African postcolonial literature are good to explore and identify the *what* and *how* of Africa and the Africans. This paper argues that the study of religion, a kind of study which is often overlooked, in African postcolonial literatures may answer to many *whys* as it deconstructs Enlightenment-influenced reasoning because, the Gods of Africa are always there to confront the *other* God(s) for power, authority and knowledge. Developed through a library research, the present paper reads representation of religion in some select postcolonial novels including Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*. The paper shows that postcolonial writers treat religion not simply as a spiritual gateway to and thus an agent to revive indigenous belief system but also as a geopolitical force to strengthen or withstand cultural and political aggression.

**Key-words:** Post-colonialism/postcolonialism, religiosity, power, politics, hegemony, and colonial discourses.

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### What is *Literature and Religion*?

In fact I have formed this word – for the first time in English – to refer to: the literary works that include religion and/or religious aspects implicitly and/or explicitly; the study of the politics of different religions in the context of different literatures in regard of different times, places and individuals; the representation of religion/s in literature/s; and the harmony as well as the conflict between religion and literature. Basically, I used the term first in my M.A. Dissertation entitled “Representation of Religion in African Postcolonial Literature”.

### Introduction

This paper intends to throw light on the reasons that have reasoned its focus on the representation of religion in African postcolonial literature. Cultural, historical, and theoretical readings of African postcolonial literature are good to explore and identify the *what* and *how* of Africa and the Africans. This paper argues that the study of religion, a kind of study which is often overlooked, in African postcolonial literatures may answer to many *whys* as it deconstructs Enlightenment-influenced reasoning because, the Gods of Africa are always there to confront the *other* God(s) for power, authority and knowledge. Developed through a library research, the present paper reads representation of religion in some select postcolonial novels including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*. The paper shows that postcolonial writers treat religion not simply as a spiritual gateway to and thus an agent to revive indigenous belief system but also as a geopolitical force to strengthen or withstand cultural and political aggression.

### The Whys and Wherefores

The whys and wherefores behind such disturbing step of exploring the critical study of religion in African postcolonial literature echo with the primary functions of literature, i.e., presentation, representation, suggestions and approaches, that is to say, the way a piece of literature communicates with the readers indeed.

Regarding the "Whys and Wherefores", Achebe has defined his role as a writer "to help [his] society regain belief in itself" (O'Reilly 32) through voicing the experience of Africans whereas Wole Soyinka makes his choice to glorify and idealize traditional African culture and experiences, and to explore fundamental spiritual and historical issues with/through the use of elements of religious rituals.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Ngugi's exertion is for a new world under the rule of true gods, where all will be equally served and taken care of along with the equal distribution of money, wealth and land. The representation of religion in his writings helps himself to depict African traditional customs along with the analysis of colonial impact after the independence to reflect the experiences of Kenyans. His approach stays between literature and politics.

The critical study of religion in African postcolonial literature created a meeting place for the past with pagan belief and the present with zealous Christian belief in order to defend the attack and to offend the misrepresentation about their essence of existence, everyday life and experiences.

The second significant reason is the necessity of creating a space for the readers who are targeted for the observation, analysis, evaluation and justification of the uneven impact of religion in the world of black people and that of the rest: who is comparatively better and/or more correct/moral position, and to what extent? In order to give a wider range to think on the part of the readers, Achebe, in his *Things Fall Apart*, mentions the prophecy of Oracle about the locust-like white people that "the elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man [riding an iron horse] would break their clan and spread destruction among them" (97). The possible responses to this statement may range from 'simple and easy assumption' to 'foreseeing with divine aid'. Similarly what happens between Agbala and Ekwefi in the moonless night also throws light on the way the African writers deal with supernatural and religion. The people outside Africa may call it a kind of telepathy or – which is questioning as well – the fear of the very priestess of other supernatural or human being(s) and/or their sudden attack: Agbala says

“Somebody is walking behind me! [...] whether you are spirit or man, may Agbala shave your head with a blunt razor! May he twist your neck until you see your heels” (Achebe 74) whereas one mind of Ekwefi said to her, “Woman, go home before Agbala does you harm” (Achebe 74).

In case of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*, the readers get a space to think whether Professor Munira – who rejects the passivity and practices the active obedience to the will of God – was right to step forward with the plan to burn the whorehouse of a prostitute called Wanja. At the same time, whether Karega was wrong believe in individual’s effort instead of religious rituals and practices like sacrifice to get rid of problems.

Similarly, from the reading of Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*, we must acknowledge the fact that religion has lost, in the context of the text, its religiosity and *metareality*, and received a very material approach. Jeroboam has chosen the career of a Prophet as his calling which is highly competitive.

So, what comes accordingly is the uneven impact of religion – both indigenous and Christian – on Africans including the authors and their characters representing the entire Africa. For example: what it stands for Munira (his active obedience to God to clean the earth by burning a whorehouse), in *Petals of Blood*, is not similar to that of Karega (his thought of individual effort instead of hoping for divine aid for public sufferings). Similarly, in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, regarding the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo opposes Obierika’s passive approach. If we rewrite the conversation in the style of a play, it will be as follows:

Okonkwo: You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die.

Obierika: But the Oracle [has] not [asked] me to carry out its decision.

Okonkwo: [...] but someone [has] to do it [...] and what do you think the Oracle [will] do then?

Obierika: But if the Oracle [says] that my son should be killed I [will] neither dispute it nor be the one to do it. (Achebe 46)

## The Hows

The “Hows” apropos of the representation of religion in African postcolonial religion throw light actually on the tone or the very way of authors’ speaking, presenting, representing, suggesting and doing their other businesses.

The arrival of new religion in African lands, in most cases, has been considered as a great cause of disappointment. That is why, African postcolonial literature seems to be attacking, mocking and criticizing as response to the discourses accomplished by the virtue of Christianity.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* reveals that the new religion took the effeminate men, twins bearing women, men without title under its shelter in the name of universal brotherhood, the will of god. Thus this new abominable and lunatic religion shakes the bond of kinship and one voice, and gives birth to the final disorientation mainly because it was too late and their own people started to echo Nowye’s “I am one of them” (101).

But the paradox is that James Smith, the second white priest, “condemned openly Mr. Brown’s, the first one, policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white” (Achebe 130).

Prepared for massacre, Smith prays to Lord to save the people in the “holy war” (Achebe 132) which is “war of blame” (Achebe 141) or something worse according to the Igbo people

since “it is not [their] custom to fight for [their] gods” (Achebe 113). O’Reilly identifies that the arrival of Christianity, a double-edged sword, is not simply religious but political, cultural and, most significantly, economic.

Mockery is apparent in all works of African postcolonial writers. In *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo people want to know about the father of the Son of God. In *Petals of Blood*, Rev. Jerrod Brown, a man of God, seems to be very busy with praying to God and preparing his lectures for Sundays indeed. Instead of satisfying the hunger of masses of people coming from drought-ridden Ilmorog, he opens the Bible and tries his heart and soul with all his knowledge and wisdom to soothe them. Wole Soyinka has mocked at the practice of the Prophets in his *The Trials of Brother Jero* just as he has done the same thing in his *The Road* where removes the road signs both to feed his *AKSIDENT STORE* and to feed his soul for the search of the meaning and essence of life.

To counter the colonialist discourse that Africa is having an absence of order, this *representation* challenges the colonialist myth about Africa that it is inhabited by uncivilized and savage cannibals and “its inability to create order out of chaos” (Parker and Starkey 165). It depicts that the indigenous and traditional beliefs and values kept them in a balanced order which was rather disturbed and disoriented due to the arrival of Christianity. A quotation from Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* is essential to depict that Africans were civilized before the historical civilizing mission that the white people consider as to *save* and *redeem* the “exotic Other” (Barry 77):

*Arrow of God* opens with Ezeulu performing one of the lunar rituals for taming chaos and responding to history. At every new moon, he eats one of the thirteen sacred yams selected from new yam offerings made by every adult male after the yam harvest, and then offers a sacrifice to Ulu. This is a calendar system through which the clan regulates its collectivized life. The yam offering itself ensures an accurate annual census, since each man offers just one yam to Ulu. Through this ritual, Achebe employs the symbolism of numbering and measuring to develop an argument about the clan’s development of a civilization without any help from Europe’s civilizing mission. (Parker and Starkey 86)

Even, the rules and regulations of the African indigenous religion is so strict that a titled man like Okonkwo has also to confront the “justice of the earth goddess” (Achebe 88) when he commits a crime against the earth goddess. But the strictness of the status of religious and social values falls apart radically with the arrival of Christianity.

Besides, the readers meet another term called re-interpretation of myths and/or religious beliefs and values. They re-interpreted myths or even Christianity as much as W. B. Yeats re-interpreted Greek myth. Achebe knocks on the door of Christian colonialists by declaring that things fall apart and “there is no story that is not true” (Achebe 97) whereas Ngugi re-interprets Trinity as “Bible, Coin and Gun” (Ngugi 106).

Most significantly and interestingly, African postcolonial writers have used Christian belief(s) in African context. As for instance, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has got its title along with its introductory four lines from W.B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming”; Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* has taken its first three of four “paradoxically symbolic” (Parker and Starkey 128) as such subtitles from the Bible as “Walking”, “Towards Bethlehem” and “To Be Born Again” and so on.

The use of irony, satire and paradoxes is another element of the section, “Hows”. The ultimate irony of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is that Okonkwo, one of the greatest men of the clan, is going to be buried like a dog, that is to say, *the god becomes a dog*. Through this irony, Achebe has satirized Igbo religious and social values as well. Professor, in Wole Soyinka’s *The Road*, removes the road signs both to feed his *AKSIDENT STORE* and to feed his soul for the search of the meaning and essence of life. Priests, in *Petals of Blood*, try to satisfy the drought-ridden community with their biblical feasts. Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* is full of ironies, satires and paradoxes as well.

Questioning the religious beliefs, sometimes considered as superstitions by many writers, has also been placed with proper notification in the writings. For example, Okonkwo questions the war of blame<sup>2</sup> in *Things Fall Apart*. In Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*, Karega having a touching faith in people and individual attempt opposes the sole dependence on rituals like sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, what can be said as conclusion of the second chapter is that the objective of this chapter is to include the reasons behind the exertion of the African postcolonial writers for the critical study of religion with enough exemplification. The next chapter, “Postcolonial Literature/religion”, has been designed to focus on different literary works of African postcolonial literature in detail with masses of examples indeed.

### Postcolonial Literature/religion

The indigenous belief system is having masses of weakness in terms of logic, rationality and validity whereas the arrival of Christian faith is accompanied by similar number of paradoxes. The white people came with the Bible in one hand and magic power (deadly weapons to destroy individuals, community etc. if necessary) in the other.

Religion is intimately related to the demonstration of knowledge and exercise of power. Neil Ten Kortenaar, in his “How the Centre is Made to Hold in *Things Fall Apart*”, says that Achebe believes that “West’s knowledge of the world is as culture-based and time-bound as any other mode of knowledge.” (Parker and Starkey 34)

Similarly, Don C. Ohadike, in his “Igbo Culture and History”, has vindicated Achebe’s stance about the African own age-old history of defined authority and organized (secret) society to throw light on the enlightened Africa having its own language to speak with, own culture to define itself and own way of life to challenge the colonialist myths about order, disorder, peace, savagery and many more illusions and oversimplification.

Achebe has depicted Africa as it is indeed. While dealing with religion, he has developed some particular issues in his *Things Fall Apart*: Africa is not what colonialist myths and discourses say about it. History says that Igbo people also believe in mysterious nature of one God, Chukwu the Supreme. Their religion talks about the first human being, Eze Nri, and his wife. As Ohadike says that “[l]ike some other belief systems, the religious system of the Igbo people revolved around the idea of birth, death and reincarnation” (Achebe xxxv).

The weaknesses found in the Igbo religious belief system further the achievement of Christianity with chances to be close to the Igbo people with new doors with new hopes. God is to be feared, not to be known but to be adored – these are the Igbo phenomenon indeed. The weakness of Igbo religion starts with defining the characters and their role in the society. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, religion creates shadow lines between the social status and role of men and women:

These women never saw the inside of the hut. No women ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No women ever asked questions about the most powerful and the secret cult in the clan. (Achebe 63)

Achebe's characters, sometimes, question the authority by their thoughts (what Nowye does, Igbo women do etc.), words (what Obierika and Nowye does) and/or actions (homicide by Okonkwo, Okonkwo's breach during the Feast of the New Yam, killing of python etc.) of course, in that they have the scope to follow.

The role of the Oracle has been developed in the novel through two major pronouncements – death sentence of Ikemefuna and warning about the strange white man with iron horse. It may mean their unending fear of the outsiders, their lack of power of resistance, or their ignorance.

Alongside the strictness of social, political and religious values, Igbo lacks something which is rather more significant; and, it is their ignorant eyes that avoid looking at what they think is harmful for them.

Religious attack, more or less, is also one of the elements that help it find its mark indeed. The white people say that the Igbo people worship the false gods of woods and stone, that results in derisive laughter of the men of Mbanta. As usual, religion at its advent seems to follow the tastes and interests of people to a great extent although it wants people to look at its own tastes and interests later. In the guise of universal brotherhood, it embraces the outcasts, twins' mothers, untitled and effeminate men and so on although it, again paradoxically, creates another new world of outcasts in the guise of *holy war* to save and convert human being.

The stay of the missionary for a few days in a portion of the Evil Forest, the real battlefield as Igbo considers, gives them a handful of converts not long after. To get deep inside into what Christianity is, the young Christians get school to learn reading and writing which are next to further the ideological orientation of individuals. Christian O'Reilly, in *Post-colonial Literature*, identifies Christian churches as the allies of (British) empire. It also proves that the arrival of the white Christians was not simply religious but political and cultural as well.

Every single move of Igbo people is determined, dedicated, maintained, observed and evaluated by the indistinct eyes of religion. Attributing gods with adjectives related to power and authority seems to be another phenomenon of Igbo people. Thus, god Agbala has got him in a multitude of names like the owner of the future, the messenger of earth etc. Even the naming of Igbo children shows their beliefs as well. For example: Amaogechukwu (God's time is the best), Chukwukelu (God is the creator), Chukwunyelu (God gave me this wonderful gift), Nnamdi or Nnadi (Father is back) and so on.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* is written in a religious framework with the matrix of socialism and religion<sup>1</sup>. When Munira is a man of God with Christian orthodox family background, Karega questions the way we attribute God with multitude of power instead of trying ourselves. Besides, more importantly and significantly, Ngugi has established a relationship in between religion and Marxism. Money constructs everything in the way of the world as if it were the Second God in that it can manage holiness, heaven etc. Karega has a poignant confidence in people and their exertion – “The voice of the people is truly the voice of God.”<sup>4</sup> When everyone else thinks of the sacrifice and other rituals around Abdulla's donkey

and their hunger and thirst, Karega insists on their own efforts instead of great expectations like divine aid to get rid of disaster(s) that await(s) them.

Ngugi talks about the God of Africa and Gods of other lands who are engaged in wrestling with one another to survive. Most significantly, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is one of the unique works because of its re-interpretation of Christian religious issues and incidents in African context. Ngugian Trinity is sure to be first example in this case: "Christianity, Commerce, Civilization: the Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity" (Ngugi 106). The law of God, the law of the state, and the socialist goals belong to the thematic principles of the novel.<sup>5</sup>In course of the story, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* says that "[p]overty is sin" (337), and "[w]e are all prostitutes [...] we are all prostituted" (286) in new Kenya with less happy circumstances inasmuch as nothing is free here anymore except some experiences like "it's a game... of money... You eat or you are eaten" (348) that one can have freely.

Similarly, Ngugi makes a comparison among money, history and religion. The Coin of the Trinity reshapes the ideological orientation of the individuals, the Bible shows that the arrival of the newcomer is not harmful for humankind, and the Gun is to ensure the cessation of resistance and other possible difficulties to reach the goal. And so, Abdulla thinks that "history was a dance in a huge arena of God" (Ngugi 404).

In Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, the writer has presented the practice of a Prophet as a profession to earn his livelihood. In the text, the prophets fight for their converts and customers. The social status along with the identity and role women has been distorted in the guise of religious beliefs and values. Women have been named as the Daughters of Discord who cause the divine transformation of the male-bodied persons for their fickleness of women. Religion has been used as a weapon here in the play. Jeroboam, a man of God, is having a pseudo-face with his velvet cape and dress. The paradox that has made the text really enjoyable to the audience is its treatment of women. Jeroboam the Prophet tells Chume, an unhappy husband who always wants to beat his wife to teach her a good lesson, that the "Lord says that you may not beta the good woman whom he has chosen to be your wife, to be your cross in your period of trial [...]" (Soyinka 8). But no sooner has he heard that Chume's wife is the person to whom he owes a particular amount of money, and for which the woman is disturbing him than he suggests Chume to beat her. He says, "Remember, it must be done in your own house. Never show the discord within your family to the world. Take her home and beat her." (Soyinka 12) The play ends with an irony of 'the miraculous disappearance of a Prophet'. Similarly, in *The Road*, the mysterious and mystic character, Professor becomes the parasite, on the users of the road, just like a spider. Getting out of the church with lots of complaints against it, he chooses the *AKSIDENT STORE*, and finally he furthers his step by opening a bar. Besides his many other actions characterize him as a mad individual. Soyinka has taken him "as a parody of the academic and learned professional"<sup>6</sup> who is in quest of the spiritual and mysterious Word.

## Conclusion

Starting with the whys and wherefores and the tone of the authors, narrators, the paper has developed the concept of African "Postcolonial *Literature* religion". The sole focus is religion. This paper shows whether a religion has any chance to act on its own, it is strongly geopolitical, and the weapon/shelter with certain purposes or notions, or NOT. Alongside the controversial facets, religious beliefs, values and practices get a significant touch of re-interpretation which not

only questions them but also mocks at them with satirical impulse. Policy of compromise and accommodation in case of the 'good riddance' becomes paradoxical for the Africans and the white newcomers with the Bible in one hand and the Gun in the other to reach the Coin, the true secret of the white men's power. The religious framework of the literary works of Achebe, Ngugi and Soyinka has included masses of weakness in terms of logic, rationality and validity whereas the arrival of Christian faith is accompanied by, at least, similar number of paradoxes.

Finally, we can say that religion is never a purposeless world, and it is very simple to understand. It is political, cultural and economic. Again, purposeless action is absent in the world of religion where one must kiss one's reward – no matter whether it is heaven(ly) or hell(ish). Religion is weapon to rule through a proper combination of knowledge and power whereas it is the shelter to not only save oneself but to be united as well. The arrival of Christianity in Africa is cultural, political and economic, wherein religion is the shelter for the colonizers to label them as harmless although the very religion do the most remarkable harm for the African, that is to say, their ultimate disorientation.

Last but not least, a space is always fixed and reserved for the readers to consider everything otherwise under the shadow of "NOT", maybe, the great expectations, to satisfy the hunger and thirst for further and deeper findings regarding the critical analysis of African postcolonial literature religion.

#### Endnotes

1. *Post-Colonial Literature*, p. 35
2. *Things Fall Apart*, p. 141
3. *Petals of Blood*, p. 151
4. *Petals of Blood*, p. 152
5. "Religion and Rebellion", p. 85
6. "Soyinka, the Man and his Background", p. 94

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