

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORICAL REALISM

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Abstract

The philosophical hermeneutics of this paper is to examine the historical realism of the experiences depicted by Afro-Caribbean prose stylists in their fictional explorations. To this end, we shall contextualize the literary enterprises of two great writers from Africa and the Caribbean – Chinua Achebe and George Lamming respectively. Essentially, we shall look at the historical material available to both writers as well as the philosophies of the peoples and times they portray in their fictional works generally accepted as historical realism or a history based on true, actual and verified experiences of a people or place. Using the theoretical tools of history, post-colonialism and comparison, this paper attempts to establish how each writer fares when the narratives of his novels are put to the philosophical historical test. Accordingly, we are led to the question of the realism of novelists' historical consciousness as well as the philosophical debates and answers they proffer in their novels. Thus, while this paper tries to unravel the writers' sense and use of history, it nevertheless invites fresh perspectives by highlighting the overall affectation, the colonial historical experiences of their people have on the African and Caribbean writers as well as on their people that qualifies it to be termed historical realism.

Keywords: Historical Realism, Afro-Caribbean, Chinua Achebe, George Lamming

Introduction

The history of post-colonial criticism, strange enough, could be traced to the philosophical writings of the Martiniquean psychiatrist, Franz Fanon, an anti-colonial, liberationist critic whose two major works *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) are great treatises of the philosophy and indeed psychology of racism and colonialism. According to Ascroft et al: "in these texts, Fanon brought together the insights he derives from his clinical study of the effects of colonial domination on the psyche of the colonised and his Marxist derived analysis of social and economic control" (Ascroft, Bill., et al., 2007:91).

Describing Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth* as attempting to write a new history for the philosophies of the blacks and oppressed (colonised) people of the world, when the only discernible history is white (Césaire, 1972:54), Robert Young says, "the book is both a revolutionary manifesto of decolonisation and the founding analysis of the effects of colonialism upon colonised people and their culture" (Young, 1990:119-120). And commenting on colonialism and its effect on both the colonised and the coloniser and their world views, Fanon in this book states that:

The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus, the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves. The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonisation - the history of pillage - and to bring into existence the history of the nation - the history of decolonisation. (Fanon, 1968:40)

Western cultural humanism originates from ancient Greco-Roman rational and empirical traditions. It is the precursor of modern European history of violent appropriation of foreign territories as well as the dispossession of peoples and their resources. This philosophy not only pillages and dehumanizes its victims physically and mentally, but goes the extra mile of retelling their history as a none-entity before the magnanimous and humanistic coming of the white man. The trauma of the colonial experience invariably condemns its victims and transfixes them to a state of ennui. And this is where Fanon comes in. In other words, the first step for a colonised people is to get a clear philosophical perspective and forge an identity to reclaim their own past which has been devalued over time by their colonial masters. Accordingly: “if the first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past has been devalued” (Barry, 2013:186).

Not a few persons have said that Edward Said's philosophies encapsulated in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), more or less kick-started the study of post-colonial literary criticism on a loftier and certainly more philosophical platform. In this work which has become a veritable *magnum opus* in post-colonial criticism; Said, a Palestinian writer, credited to have moved colonial discourse into the front burner of formal western literary and cultural theory, did a:

... specific exposé of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western and the inferiority of what is not. Said identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', which is a particular and long standing way of identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West. (Barry, 2013:186)

According to him, there is a subtle, calculated, consistent and sustained European prejudice against everything (thoughts, cultures and philosophies) that does not emanate from western civilization. In other words, the colonial powers and their apparatuses view issues solely through their own culturally determined philosophical prisms, which is often clearly myopic and therefore jaundiced. For them, everything white and western is beautiful, desirable and urbane, while everything from the 'others' is considered ugly, undesirable and mundane.

In all however, Achebe histories is predicated upon the opposition he feels the colonised has to wade through to make the voice of his (story) heard loud and clear. And on this position, he says he owes no one any apology or explanation. Perhaps his views in the 1969 interview in Austin-Texas would best highlight his position when he vents that:

One big message of the many I try to put across is that Africa was not a vacuum before the coming of Europe, that culture was not unknown in Africa, that culture was not brought to Africa by the white world. You would have thought it was obvious that everyone has a past, but there were people who came to Africa and said, “you have no history, you have no civilization, you have no culture. You are lucky we are here. Now you are hearing about these things from us for the first time.” Well, you know, we didn't just drop from the sky. We too had our own history, traditions, cultures, civilisations. It is not possible for one culture to come to another and say, “I am the way the truth and the life; there is nothing else but me.” If you say this, you are guilty of irreverence or arrogance. You are also stupid. And that is really my concern. (Lindfors et al., 1972: 7)

Problems of Political Philosophy describes philosophy as: “the critical evaluation of beliefs which we normally take for granted without thinking of any grounds for justification” ((D. D. Raphael, 1970:4). Thus, philosophy apart from being the simple study of thoughts and thinking, metamorphoses into the deliberate and the conscious effort of man to both come to the understanding and application of same to his existentialism. This is in order to give substance and value to his world view by way of the solutions he proffers to life's exigencies and the totality of the human experience.

However, because the world views of man and society which invariably include his environments differ across the world, the philosophically historical materials available to each culture and people are greatly divergent and may even be in opposition to one another. For instance, marriage dowries in almost every culture of the world are paid for by the family of the groom; but in the Indian sub-continent, it is the family of the bride that largely pays this dowry. Interestingly, even in the same Indian sub-continent there are sub-cultures where the family of the groom pays the dowry. Consequently, philosophy becomes an open-ended discipline that relies on the originality, sublimity and humanity of arguments to be established among particular peoples and cultures. However, what should guide the line of arguments should be the principle of one man's mean is another man's poison or what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. Essentially, all philosophies are on an equal pedestal whether literate or illiterate, written or unwritten.

Indeed, whichever way one looks at it, philosophy is a self-critical discipline because man, society and nature which are its core foundation are themselves dynamic and flux entities. Evidently, one of the more important features of philosophy remains its heterogeneity and diversity. This diversity of philosophy it is, that has given rise to its various forms, shapes

and concepts. Thus, we can talk about gender, racial, continental, regional, national, group and even personal philosophies; including African, Western, Oriental, American, and Caribbean philosophies with each one having a plethora of sub-philosophies under it.

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that the philosophies that Achebe and Lamming are exposed to are those of the white European which only seek to propagate its beliefs systems and downgrade any other, especially those of their colonial subjects. Thus, the reality of their philosophical situations is what propelled Achebe, Lamming and several other Afro-Caribbean writers to rebel against the western ideologies to ferret out the true histories of their peoples in order to make it real before the whole world. This is what gave serious rise to the philosophy of post-colonialism which basically is the response of the colonized to their colonialism by way of the literary and audio-visual arts.

The Philosophy of Historical Realism

In his “Introduction” to Sir Walter Scott's novel *Waverley* (1814), acclaimed to be the first truly historical novel, Ian Duncan drawing from Georg Lukacs' idea writes that:

... with it Walter Scott founded the 'classical form of the historical novel' and made the novel itself historical, ensuring its global ascendancy as a representation of national life... New historical conditions, the vistas of mass experience and national consciousness opened by the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, made the new form of representation possible. (qtd. in Scott 2011, pp. xi – xxx).

The above suggests that a form of tribal, national or even historical philosophical assertion and/or commitment becomes a necessary ingredient in the general make-up of historical realism, a re-assembling as it were of the historic realities that explain the present circumstances of a people and/or situation. Chinua Achebe puts it succinctly in his interview in *Palaver: Interview with Five African Writers in Texas* when he said:

Yes, I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. Even those early novels that look like very gentle creations of the past – what they were saying, in effect, was that we had a past ... Commitment runs right through our work. In fact I should say all our writers, whether they're aware of it or not, are committed writers. (Lindfors, 1972: 7)

However, the question remains valid as to when a given text becomes historical realism or just mere story. This is in the light of the fact that ultimately, all stories and philosophies emanate from one form of human experience or the other – real or imagined.

The subject of historical narrative is a major forte of African and Caribbean writers, not excluding Achebe and Lamming, but according to Hayden White:

how a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's (writer's) subtlety in matching specific plot-structure (including characterisation and language) with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. (White, 1978: 85)

However, literary historical discourses as opposed to factual historical representations operate through the illusion of an imposed concatenation of events and cannot but enforce a rigorous regime of selection of spatial and temporal elements to authenticate the stories they tell. Consequently, submits Robert Young: “the use of chronology in historical writings, or in literary history, gives the illusion that the whole (narrative) operates by a uniform, continuous progression, a linear series in which each event takes its place. History is thus a process of a continuous unfolding” (Young, 1990: 45) and not just a story of the past. In other words, there is a mutual and robust giving, taking and receiving between the past and the present in their inexorable march towards the future. Expectedly, the historical materials Achebe and Lamming have to work with differs slightly given that while the latter worked more from a sense of history with remembered and taught historical materials, the former had both oral traditions and remembered history to appropriate from. This basic difference becomes both a point of convergence as well as a point of divergence for both writers when we place their works side by side.

According to Gikandi:

Colonial historians argued we (Africa) had no history because they did not consider our stories to be history ... Thus, Achebe's archeology of the African past; apart from trying to make the crucial connection between the real and discourse (imagined), is an attempt to evoke stories to contest the claims of their (European) history. And yet, it is within the confinements of colonial history that Achebe's narrative revolution has to take place. (1991:21)

Corroborating the above line of thought, Valentin Mudimbe avers in his book *The Invention of Africa* (1988) that:

Although in African history the colonial experience represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since, to say the least, it signifies a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses (philosophies) on African traditions and cultures. (Mudimbe, 1988: xi)

Clearly, historical realism is a direct reflection of humanistic dialectics, which is an offshoot of Hegelian dialectical materialism with a discernible sense that the past is as historical as the present. Achebe got this right when he posits that: “I am writing about my people in the past and in the present, and I have to create for them a world in which they live and move and have their being” (Ogbaa, 1981:13). In other words, argues Lukacs, historical realism gives “poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it” (*Realism in Our Time*, 1962:53).

Evidently, Africa and most of the colonised world, including the Caribbean have had to endure the worst kind of oppression and emasculation faced by any section of the human kind. This sad state of oppression is not only of the physical and psychological variant, but

one that openly questions the very essence of their humanity and philosophical existence. Literally, the colonisers see them as an 'unhistoried' (outside of history) and 'historyless' (having no history), non-human entities without culture or dignity.

The historical novel in Nigeria of which Achebe's works are one of the most readily available examples seeks to explore, probe and explain the collective historical experience of a people with the goal of both initiating and achieving tribal/communal or national recovery of a bruised and largely misunderstood past. In his works, Achebe invokes the inevitable inexorability of history in all of its (in)glorious happenstances to both assert, tell and retell the story of his people - the Africans. Specifically, his novels are in the first-place rebuttals of the derogatory philosophical perceptions the colonial masters has both propagated and perpetuated about the devalued 'otherness' of the Africans and all non-white races. In his portrayal of historical realism, Achebe allows us to weigh and evaluate in our own perception the transactions of history experienced by the peoples in the spatial and temporal dimensions of his novels. He allows us wade through his histories and swim to the classical thinker Cicero earlier assertion that “not to know what took place before you were born is to remain forever a child” (qtd. in Marwick, 1970: 12).

On his own part, Lamming advocates a rigorous plan to unearthing the past histories of the Afro-Caribbean in order to fully appreciate the present circumstances of the people. In this regard he identifies fully with Achebean histories that essentially entail a retelling of the life and times of the people from available oral, taught and written traditions. Advocating a vibrant collaboration between Africa and the Caribbean in forming a common front to systematically revisit, unearth and retell the past of their people through historical realism, Lamming writes in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960):

We need an institute of African and oriental studies right in the heart of Port-of- Spain (Barbados). In this institute, we will ask for some light on what has been discovered of the African civilisations before the European arrival. For West Indians, as a whole, still have to learn that Africa existed – not simply as deserts, river and malaria – but as a home where men were alive and engaged in a human struggle with nature. (Lamming, 1960:155)

At the philosophical level of historical realism therefore, Chidi Amuta argues that African can be better understood and appreciated mainly through the exploration of African history “because of the incontrovertible socio-historical determination of African literature in general” (Amuta, 1989:77). Further, Amuta suggests that since literary texts are an artiste's attempt to explore and expose socio-historic experiences through oral, written and visual works including performances; a dialectical and philosophical theory of literature “primarily underlines the inexorable socio-historical predication of literature ... (which becomes at once) ... a product of social experience” (and ultimately) ... an active producer of meanings, values and aesthetic effects” (Amuta, 1989:79). And all these are within the purview of philosophy.

Perhaps the first European to give serious (?) thoughts to the African continent and its inhabitants is the German thinker Friedrich Hegel who erroneously writes in *The*

Philosophy of History (2001) that Africa is:

... no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. ... What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (Hegel, 2001:117)

Indeed, a respected European Professor of Modern History at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, as recent as three score years ago remarked in a televised interview in Britain that “perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ...and darkness is not a subject of history” (qtd. in Killam, editor. 1969:74).

Sentiments as the ones above, which are very rampant even till this day, are what an African writer like Chinua Achebe and a Caribbean writer like George Lamming have to both contend with and negotiate a path through which to state their own side of the story in a simple, believable, yet effective manner that gave birth to the philosophy of historical realism. Ogaga Ifowodo asks a pertinent question and immediately proffers the answer along this line when he writes:

Did colonialism, a world-historical catastrophic event, inflict only material-physical damage on the colonised, or did it cause mental-psychological injury as well? ... identities are a matter of life and death to those whose culture are threatened by (social) death under imperial domination – whether in form of chattel slavery or colonial and neocolonial exploitation under the sign of globalization. (Ifowodo, 2013:xvi)

The call to philosophical arms becomes the rally cry for the colonised in order to break the yoke of this physical and psychological bondage occasioned by this tragic historical accident. To quote an appropriate African proverb here in further establishing our line of thought: until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Consequently, Achebe remarks in a 1994 *Paris Review* interview that I “realised that I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It is not a one man's job. It will also reflect the agony, the travail – the bravery, even of the lions” (theparisreview.org/interviews/1720).

Adding his voice to the debate, eminent writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his well-received collection of essays *Homecoming* (1972), remarks that: “the writer is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been', a struggle as it were to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history. (Wa Thiong o, 1972: 39)” Consequently the philosophy of historical realism has had a reactive, even a reflexive response to the Afro-Caribbean's major historical transactions and as well as the experiences of her people. This reality has led to the preponderance of books and articles on the African people and the Africa experience written by Africans and o-Africans alike.

Philosophy and Therapeutic Historical Realism

In his “Introduction” to *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (1977), Bernth Lindfors submits that Achebe's distinctive African voice in telling the African story is unmistakable in the sense that:

Almost single-handedly he helped Africa to find its own voice and to speak so eloquently that its message could resonate both locally and throughout the rest of the world...His stories have been our escort, our most reliable guide to that continent's troubled past and troubling present. He has made it impossible for us to remain blind to African realities. (Lindfors, 1977: x-xi)

Over time, it has become standard to consider Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* as a direct response to Joyce Cary's philosophical excursions and submissions in *Mister Johnson* (1939); an assertion Achebe confirms even though he later remarks “I wish I hadn't said that” in an interview with *The Paris Review*. According to Achebe, Joyce Cary thoughts and thinking in that book: “helped to inspire me, but not the usual way. I was very angry with his book *Mister Johnson*, which was set in Nigeria,” (Lindfors, ed.13). Consequently, he remarks in an *Africa Report* interview: “I said to myself, this is absurd. If someone without any inside knowledge of the people he is trying to describe can get away with it, perhaps I ought to try my hand at it” (qtd. in Lindfors, ed., 1972: 13).

Joyce Cary's negative philosophical inspiration aside, Achebe nevertheless sees Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) as the foremost ecclesiast of western humanism in the colonial set up. According to him in his essay collection *Hopes and Impediments* (1990): “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe, 1990: 3).

Speaking in a year 2000 *Atlantic Unbound* interview, when asked what purpose colonial writers' portrayal of Africa and Africans achieved? Achebe replies that:

It is really a straight forward case of setting us up, as it were. The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery.... Even after the slave trade was abolished in the nineteenth century, something like this literature continued to serve the new imperialistic need of Europe in relation to Africa. This continued until Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story. (theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/interviews/ba2000-08-02.htm)

Generally, Chinua Achebe's views on history and the writer is perhaps one of the most obvious and least kept secret among the coterie of African writers. Indeed, his thoughts along these lines have been in the public domain since the days the earliest critique of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* emerged. From his books, seminars, articles and interviews,

he has been most unabashed, extremely honest but uncharacteristically aggressive with the fact that a writer, especially one from the colonised societies, must necessarily go back into the past by himself and not rely on the narrative viewpoints of others if he must render a true, balanced and unbiased record of his people's experiences. To quote copiously from his article "The Role of a Writer in a New Nation":

It is natural for a people at the hour of their rebirth to cast around for an illustrious ancestor...It is necessary because we must begin to correct the prejudices which generations of detractors created about the Negro...African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is that they must now regain. That the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost...In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. (Killam, ed., 1969: 7-8)

Vividly illustrating his point in the same article on the extent to which colonialism has affected the psyche of the colonised to the point of self-denigration, Achebe uses a direct reference to how the emerging Nigerian society view his kinsmen, the Ibo people – even till this day. He laments the situation but nevertheless points the way forward out of this predicament:

In fact, to say that a product was Ibo-made was to brand it with the utmost inferiority. When a people have reached this point in their loss of faith in themselves their detractors need do no more; they have made their point. A writer who feels the need to right this wrong cannot escape the conclusion that the past deeds need to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. Because, as I said, the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity. (Killam, ed., 1969: 9)

To achieve the above objective, Franz Fanon suggests that the first step for a colonised people is to get a clear philosophical perspective and forge an identity to reclaim their own past which has been devalued over time by their colonial masters, who has propagated a belief system that the history, culture and advancement of the colonised was only heralded at the wake of the arrival of the European. Indeed, "if the first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past has been devalued" (Barry, 2013: 186). Indeed, it becomes a case of one altar of philosophy against another altar of philosophy.

However, even as he crusades for the past history of the colonised to be given its pride of place in debunking centuries old denigrations put out by the colonisers, Achebe nevertheless cautions that the writer must not err by giving way to "a strong temptation to

idealise it – to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed” (Killam, ed., 1969: 9). For Achebe, merely mouthing nationalistic sentiments to put down the colonial masters would amount to beating the air and he recommends that the writer must educate both the coloniser and the colonised, especially the latter, by:

... leading them through the positive, if painful, process of self-evaluation and criticism. Achebe considers it wrong for Africans to blame foreigners for all their problems. In his view, both the aggressor and the African are implicated in the despoliation of Africa. Achebe also expects African writers to be involved in the reshaping of their people's history instead of thinking that all they need do is observe and describe. (qtd. in Enekwe, 1988: 32)

For the afro-Caribbean writer therefore, history must become our therapist and escort as the people attempt to navigate through their living and active past that throbs in the present. However, like all escorts, it must not become the focal point, but an impartial aperture through which this past is brought to the fore. This being the case, the integrity of the writer and his writings becomes a very delicate and important matter. Thus, for the Afro-Caribbean or any writer from a colonised society to be taken serious even as he attempts to recreate the past of his people; his honesty, literary as well as philosophical integrity must be impeccable.

CONCLUSION

To conclude our study, it is clear that we have been able to establish the fact that the philosophy of historical realism is a strong point in the philosophy and world view of afro-Caribbean writers who have had to contend with a deliberate distortion and obfuscation of their philosophical foundation by their slavers and colonizers. These writers or in our representative context, Chinua Achebe and George Lamming, had to first of all debunk and demystify the erroneous philosophies about their people by their western traducers by replacing them with their own homegrown philosophical realities predicated on verifiable oral and written histories. By so doing, these writers in the realism of their creativity revealed the wealth of Afro-Caribbean culture and tradition. Indeed, their handlings of history rely heavily upon the correct assumption that philosophies of their people are first and foremost very tenable as well as being very historical. Bu-Buakei Jabbi succinctly captures the totality of this philosophical essence when he remarks in *ALT* vol. 11 that Achebe's novel *Arrow of God* is:

... an insightful study of power, leadership and their interplay with history and community. And it is informed by a rudimentary philosophy of history that is thoroughly and authentically African, a philosophy which determines the terms of the people's perception and integration of the vicissitudes and challenges they encounter in their general experience of history. The pivot of that philosophy is their central priesthood of Ulu. (Jabbi, 1980:147)

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