
Jago Morrison. *Chinua Achebe*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2014. Pp xi, 272. £30.00.

Terri Ochiaghia. *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite*. Rochester: James Currey, 2014. Pp ix, 218. US\$80.

Chinua Achebe has been recognized as the founding father of African literature for his internationally acclaimed novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). His essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (1975) also established him as a leading postcolonial studies critic. Two posthumous studies of Achebe, Jago Morrison’s *Chinua Achebe* and Terri Ochiaghia’s *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia*, re-examine and challenge the conventional and widely held notions about Achebe’s scholarship. Morrison revisits the notion that Achebe is a “cultural nationalist” whose literary writing promotes Nigerian anti-colonial nationalism. For Morrison, far from endorsing Nigeria, the trajectory of Achebe’s novels questions the very premise of Nigerian nationalism. Ochiaghia reviews Achebe’s status and relation to his closest contemporaries, including the poet Christopher Okigbo and the novelists Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Almadi, and Chike Momah, arguing that Achebe should not be treated as a “founding father” of African literature and thus his contemporaries should not be regarded as his “followers.” Against the notion of “the Achebe School” that has been used to understand Achebe and his contemporaries, Ochiaghia foregrounds the “companionship” and “friendship” among them (9).

Chinua Achebe begins by elaborating on Achebe’s career as a broadcaster and an editor in the 1950s and 1960s, both occupations which were developed in the context of Nigerian independence. Achebe’s position as the director of the broadcasting program “Voice of Nigeria” required him to promote the ideal of “One Nigeria” (Morrison 11). In the meanwhile, his position as the general editor of the African Writers Series for Heinemann Educational Books aimed to promote the national literature of Nigeria and many other African

countries. Achebe's public image as a promoter of Nigeria and Nigerian literature thus ties him to the notion that his literary writings provide examples of Nigerian national literature. Morrison highlights contradictions between the contexts of Achebe's career and the texts he composed (mainly his novels) and argues that Achebe was ambivalent about Nigeria as a political and cultural concept. Morrison's analyses of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964) show paradoxes of Achebe's representations of British colonization of Igboland in different time periods and his Igbo characters' resistance against it. Morrison argues that Achebe's novelistic critiques of colonialism are often oblique and his representations of British colonization of Igboland are, to some extent, not true to history. Instead, Achebe's novels, Morrison emphasizes, focus more on weaknesses and conflicts existing within Igbo culture—including the Igbo's passive resistance against British colonialism, the obsession with masculinity (as dramatized by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*), the clannishness and corruptions associated with this obsession (as in *No Longer at Ease*), and the excess of intra-tribe competition (as dramatized by Ezeulu and his rival Nwaka). Those problems, Morrison argues, highlight Achebe's reflection on the self-destructive nature of Igbo culture rather than his rebellion against colonial oppression and conquest. In foregrounding Achebe's portrayals of the internal problems of an indigenous culture, Morrison does not intend to question Achebe's anti-colonial attitude. Achebe's novels demonstrate the richness and complexity of the Igbo cultural system in opposition to colonial representations of African indigenous cultures. However, Achebe's identification with the Igbo does not make him a "nationalist." Morrison's analyses of Achebe's novels about post-independence Nigeria, including *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthill of the Savannah* (1987), highlight the author's pessimism about the validity of the Nigerian Federation. Morrison shows how in these two novels Achebe targets the corruption of the Nigerian (male) national and educated elites—a ruling class the author represents as being unable to change the status quo due to their obsession with masculinity, tribalism, and personal grudges. Morrison concludes his book by referring to "the balance of stories" to look at the trajectory of Achebe's literary texts (225). "The balance of stories," a concept promoted by Achebe, emphasizes the importance of "a balance of opposing perspectives" (226) in stories. For Morrison, Achebe's last novel, *Anthill of the Savannah*, reaches such a balance for its "bridging the ethnic divides that had defined (and wrecked) the nation's politics since independence" (231).

Ochiagha's *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia* begins by connecting Achebe's literary achievements to the secondary education he received at Government

College, Umuahia in the 1940s. Instead of seeing Achebe and his friends' experience at Umuahia as a "biographical coincidence," Ochiagha treats Umuahia as an "enabling environment that sparked off their careers as creative writers" (7). Ochiagha thus uses the Umuahia connection to re-examine the extent to which the experience of the authors there influenced their literary achievements later in life. In the following chapters, Ochiagha elaborates on the evolution of Government College, Umuahia, particularly "its changing ideological and intellectual nature" under various administrations from the 1930s to the 1950s (7). Ochiagha emphasizes William Simpson's administration (in the 1940s) during which Achebe and his friends studied together, because this specific period, Ochiagha argues, contributed to the emergence of literary elites in Nigeria in the 1960s. Umuahia, under Simpson's guidance, tried to cultivate the students' "Englishness," be it at the physical level or the cultural level, and emphasized the students' humanities studies, including English literature, history, and creative writing. Ochiagha concludes her book by suggesting that we should abandon "the idea of an Achebe School of writing" (178) and pay more attention to a "shared view" and "shared bond" (179) among Achebe and his friends.

Morrison's and Ochiagha's books on Achebe came out at a significant moment, when postcolonial literary studies lost its iconic figure. Both authors make a breakthrough in rethinking the status of Achebe in postcolonial studies. Focusing on Achebe's ambivalent attitude toward the Nigerian nation, as Morrison argues, urges us to re-examine postcolonial literature and its relation to the nation. While early postcolonial literature is recognized largely as a type of "national" literature, Morrison reminds us that "nation" in Achebe's novels serves not as a political signifier used to reclaim Nigerian sovereignty but as a problematic phenomenon that exposes the ambivalence of Achebe's anti-colonial writings. Looking at Achebe's "friendship" with his closely-related contemporaries, as Ochiagha reveals, enables us to recognize the paradox of British colonial education with regard to its making of Nigerian literary elites in the 1960s. While colonial education is commonly criticized as oppressive in postcolonial criticism, this same education cultivated the literary sensibility of Achebe and his friends. Ochiagha does not whitewash the imperialistic nature of colonial education but uses colonial education as a perspective from which to look at the emergence of African literature in the 1960s. Consequently, Achebe should be seen more as a contributor to than a founder of African literature. His work emerged from the already cultivated literary tradition in Nigeria—a tradition to which Government College, Umuahia also contributed.

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Works Cited

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