

# Chin Ce and the Postcolonial dialogue of *Gamji College*

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## **Introduction**

USING CHIN CE'S book of fiction *Gamji College* this paper attempts to compare the postcolonial argument in African literature with the novels of Chinua Achebe and that of his younger compatriot Chin Ce who represents the vocal generation of younger African writers. The voice of this generation rings with far more disturbing notes through the current arguments that embrace issues of environment, citizenship and leadership in Africa. We shall try to prove that Chin Ce extends the post-colonial dialogue to modern citizenship issues by noting how citizenship perception of a whole history, or the lack of it, affects the liberationist potential of the contemporary nation state.

Chin Ce employs the literary art as a discourse of alternative realities or options where the heroes or protagonists of his fiction are not casting about and failing in their attempts at their heroic expectations as in previous examples of Chinua Achebe, but active challengers of the status quo offering a rigorous dialogue for the individual reader to discard conflicting and constricting paradigms in

his redefinition of his place in society.

### **The Postcolonial novel in Africa**

In her criticism against the obsession of black South African novelists with analysing the corruption in their societies instead of resolving the fate of these societies in terms of profound social change, Nadine Gordimer did show hasty judgement when she concluded that ‘...the postcolonial political novel like the political novel of the colonial struggle seems scarcely to have scratched the surface of the African situation.’ (qtd. in Ogungbesan vii) On the contrary the postcolonial literatures *did* articulate more than a fleeting concern with Africa’s political and social changes, and where necessary understated the easy entertainment prospect of the novel in western-delineated aesthetics.

It is rather by drawing from other such generalisations as Gordimer’s that the major concern of post colonial studies in literature seems to have become a fad of ‘talking’ or ‘writing back’, a fixation on ideological revisionism, sometimes within the context of racial or gender inscriptions, rather than on internal development issues of once colonised societies of Africa. This informed the tendency to continue the reading of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as a talk-back to Conrad’s (and Cary’s) ‘preposterous and perverse’<sup>1</sup> portraiture of the black man in such European novels on Africa as *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson*. This approach has tended to dominate postcolonial literary studies particularly by Western college

departments of literature<sup>2</sup> when a better option would rather have been, borrowing Ogunbesan's words, 'in the variety of methods with which (these writers) have interpreted contemporary realities and proposed their own visions of the future' (viii).

For Nigeria, a creation of Britain, its postcolonial condition has given rise to a wealth of literatures 'profoundly influenced by politics,' which Bernth Lindfors once argued were 'shaped by the same forces that have transformed much of the African continent during the past hundred years.' And this probably explains why their works, as Lindfors remarked, 'reflect and project the course of Africa's cultural revolution' (135). For Nigerian, and indeed African writing, this revolution began with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and crystallises with contemporary (such as Chin Ce's) interrogation of present contexts with an even deeper sense of foreboding for the future.

### **Chin Ce's Postcolonial dialogue**

Few modern fictions of Africa have raised doubts concerning Africa's nation states and their future generations as have Chin Ce's Gamji and Koloko<sup>3</sup> stories. Chin Ce's consistently echoes the question Davidson asks in *Black Man's Burden*, a question posed by Africa's literati to policy makers of the nation states: 'why... adopt models from those very countries or systems that have oppressed and despised you? Why not modernise from the models of your own history, or invent new models?' (19)

This question is at the heart of the three issues that dominate Ce's fiction and some of his early poetry: the commitment to and awareness of the environment, the testing of its notions on the scale of communal good and hindsight from past history, and the artist's response to this test being the rejection of unwholesome, even if popular, paradigms that paralyse or constrain genuine social transformation.

Achebe had argued for an engaging form of artistic diligence that distinguishes African literature from its western counterpart. In his opinion,

an adequate revolution for me to espouse (is) ...to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and selfabasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. (44)

Similar ideas of the artiste's responsibility in African postcolonial settings have predominated the discourse of Ce's fiction and essays. In his critique of the Nigerian state, Ce argues that the degeneration of social educational and cultural standards is the result of political and economic chaos entrenched by colonially inherited structures and poorly assimilated traditions.

At forty Nigeria today, with especially such distended bellies of present-day democracy as Olusegun Obasanjo and company steering her, actually fit the above description of gargantuan folly. The political foppery of unimaginative minds emerging president and lawmakers

has become the country's recurring theme in the drama of its own undoing. ('Bards' 8)

Earlier in his treatise Chin Ce had remarked that "the development of Nigeria seems to be all talk and little progress" and asked: "with the obvious lacunae of imaginative thinking is it surprising at the vacuity of their leadership and at modern Nigeria's descent into an African redundancy syndrome?" (4). Ce's criticism of Nigeria is behoved from the extent of neocolonial destabilisation of indigenous society and the imposition of structures that perpetuate this destabilisation to the continued advantage of imperial powers. It is probably what Fanon meant when he states:

the violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms..., that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the very moment ...he enters into forbidden (colonial) quarters. (31)

Because they were merely co-opted by their masters, opting to remain in the neo-colonial 'closet' and accepting 'being silenced and dismissed as marginal', (Weiss 11) the local lackeys that bestride the political administration of modern nation states of Africa are unwilling to implement a program of restructuring that will return power to the indigenous base from which the tribal societies had been rocked in the first place. Of the subjugation of minority tribes at the hands of foreign powers who for centuries

fashion the economic and technological programmes that stifle their existence, Deloria Jnr, the Sioux Indian intellectual argues that with the continual threat of co-optation facing minority groups,

... it is imperative that the basic sovereignty of the minority group be recognised in order that racial minorities may be placed in a negotiating position as a group and which would eventually nullify cooptation. (113)

Deloria Jnr also parallels the Red Indian situation with black people's struggle for power negotiation in America through the emergence of the sense of community which must 'continue to struggle for justice' in a racially oppressive environment where 'minorities are 'just as invisible' as the invisible poor in Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (106).

For the committed African intellectual he too is involved in a struggle analagous to that of his kindred in America, a dialogue which requires a constant reappraisal of the African social reality through the rigorous intellectual engagement embraced by modern African writers and philosophers. In the words of Asouzu; "there is need at all times for this critical stance because in addressing fundamental philosophical issues the philosopher (-artist) relies on the ambience provided by his world...."(18).

Ce's novels reaffirm the argument that colonial entrenchments in the native state still hold African

nationalities in servitude and these un-dethroned legacies structures have guaranteed the emergence of inept leaderships around the continent. The role of the artist is therefore seen in the context of not only challenging this condition but also constantly reappraising society's progress and rejecting held notions that limit the potential of the underdeveloped world.

In the Gamji stories such a role is aptly filled by Tai, the protagonist of the first part. As a first-year entrant to Gamji College (representing the so-called democratic Nigerian nation state) his outlook offers us an objective appraisal of degenerating educational structures seen in the dilapidated and unkempt environment of the once-towering Gamji institute.

Dangerous gully erosion, like a predatory monster, had lashed through the only motorway. How was such innocent course of nature allowed to become a menacing beast? ... the neat drainage of Gamji College caved into wide gullies threatening the very foundation of the college. The hostels stank abominably and with each gust of wind came the horrible ooze of filth. (4-5)

Tai's narrative consciousness prepares our mind for the subsequent loss of faith in the generation that patterns after colonial fripperies while still suffering by its ignorance and stubborn refusal to give them up. The vestige of religious proselytising (symbolic of the dangling Christian cross whipped at that precarious angle by the elements) indicates the imbalance of the post-colonial situation. The suggestion

of imbalance continues from here through the second and third parts –in the symbolic other-world experience of Milord, and the unusually large head of young Nap that had given his mother a terrible time giving birth to him. These techniques of signification prod us to appreciate the ironic situation that while Gamji College deteriorates, the president is on a visit passing through but stops by at the behest of his nephew the rector of the institute. For president Baba Sonja it was an occasion to repeat ‘the time-worn phrase he uses to explain the ‘numerous failures of his government’ (19), an occasion for the usual political gerrymandering and public chicanery of Nigerian political leaders. In his religious motivation to tinker with the national anthem lies a cosmetic attempt at nation building if not an entirely misguided one.

Baba Sonja had given his nationals a new national anthem reconstructed from an old martial doggerel but which now put Sonja's God in the centre-spread of the national map:

*Arise children of El-Shaddai*  
*God's holy call obey... (18-19)*

Religious fervour engendered by the new democracy is indicative of the religious divide through which the colonial legacy had partitioned Africa. The post-colonial state is structured after the messianic arrogance that drove the colonial invasion and exploitation of Africa and, in the minds of the invaders, legitimised the plunder of her natural resources. This messianic aggression, suggestive of

a deep psychic and spiritual derailment, is evident in not only the tyrannical president of the Gamji nation but in their mass of followers. Chin Ce exposes such blind following in the sycophancy of Gamji citizens who support and actually carry out Sonja's directive for spiritual cleansing of the nation state, a problematic contract even for the Christian god if we consider that it is the politics of Baba Sonja and his deteriorating educational institutions that actually need cleansing.

“Alright, some other time. But we'll pray for you, okay?”

“Pray for me?”

“Well, you'll pray with us, isn't that fair?”

The prayer lasted twelve minutes during which Brother James earnestly reminded God his promise not to abandon any of his prodigal children in the wilderness of sin and damnation. And if God had forgotten, there were copious passages in His Holy Book to recall His mind to that solemn promise. But it appeared there was one beloved who (gibbering and babbling interspersed) stood at the great risk of going to hell fire. As a result, he was now seizing the power which God had bestowed upon him –the power of casting and binding both here and in heaven– to loosen the shackles and send the agents of darkness into the bottomless pit... [names of some imagined secret cults were reeled off in a spell]. (28-29)

Such a prayer during the transitional phase of African societies would show a blend of traditional animist

humility with that of an emboldened confidence in the façade of a loving Christian god –a merger of traditional complaisance and European coercive tactics. Mary’s prayer in Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease* in direct speech demonstrates this:

‘Oh God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob,’ she burst forth, ‘the Beginning and the End. Without you we can do nothing. The great river is not big enough for you to wash your hands in. You have the yam and you have the knife; we cannot eat unless you cut us a piece. We are like ants in your sight. We are like little children who only wash their stomach when they bath leaving their back dry...’ (8)

Chin Ce’s treatment of Brother James’s prayer concurs with the psycho-social reality of modern Nigeria where nationhood had ossified with years of military plunder and acts of executive lawlessness by its civilian governments. The doctrinaire religious zeal of the new nationals when contrasted with the transitional society represented in Chinua Achebe’s second novel *No Longer at Ease* cannot but show marked evidence that the modern state quite like its earlier traditional phase is clearly in an even greater danger –something uncannily similar to what is currently witnessed in the monopoly and arrogance of power exhibited by some western leaders in contemporary global politics. The second part of the Gamji story (‘The Cross’) prepares us finally for the rejection of this alternative. It is foreshadowed in Part I by Tai’s loss of patience with his proselytising band of friends who much like the colonial

missionary are intent on co-opting him to their fold against his finer wishes.

James and Peter had slithered to his bedside to rouse him up from a midday nap. It was this part that made him very angry.

“We hope there will be no other excuses today....” they laughed uneasily -a fixed dry laughter that bore no more warmth than the sound of their voices....For a moment Tai was thrown completely by what was clearly a preemptive strike. But he tried to summon some wit. These brothers certainly had a lot of unflattering traits. (31-32)

This face-off reveals the truth underlying both sides, the one a descendant of well-meaning but quite destructive colonial missionaries and the other a restive and independent African mind. This rejection is like a clearing of fields and continues in the second part where Jerry discovers, to his little amazement anyway, that his political associate comrade Nap is as irremediably plunged in the violence and brigandage of power mongering as most of his other opponents. ‘The Gun’ story here is equally predicated upon a worsening postcolonial problem of power sharing. Western democracy in Africa endangers the populace with its winner-takes-all structure that has seen African countries successively impaled in fratricidal violence and wanton struggles for control of the centre which is particularly Nigeria’s major problem as a failed experiment today. Only a few decades earlier in the Ibo nation from which Chin Ce takes his kinship, the pre-

colonial traditional society's republican outlook offered a valid and stable organisational structure than what the colonial arrangement enforced upon the people. The Nigerian historian Onwubiko parallels political organisation in Iboland with the 'assembly of Athenian citizens in ancient Greece' (where) every grown up male had the right to air his views on a matter under discussion... and decisions were reached not by voting but by a consensus'(105). While traditional consensual consultation replaced arbitrary colonial imposition by 'local British administrators who were completely ignorant of the structure of indigenous societies' (263), the western-educated elite foisted this ignorance to far worse dimensions. In refusing to restructure the colonial creation of the imperial lords in Africa the local inheritors of the created states forged more atrocious structures of corruption, exploitation and misappropriation of public resources. Political party formation and administration retained its familiar chicanery of violence and brutality. As leaders of Africa try their hands at electioneering, issues that immediately engage them are those of the palate (money and booze), of ethnicity and political irredentism seen here in Gamji politicking:

"Hey, who is your candidate, man?"

"Yes. Declare your stand! Are you Yusuf or are you Napoleon?!" (Laughter)

"Alternatively, are you north or are you south?"

"Eastern power or western vanguard?"

"No, he must be of the minority. Can't you see his

moustache and ridiculous pipe?" (94-95)

The seed of violent confrontation is sown in a bizarre interaction of competing interests. Napoleon, late contender and pretender to a progressive alternative while manipulating some members of his tribe, has a gun stowed away to guarantee some advantage over more articulate opponents. Ege ends up as victim of that advantage. Significantly Napoleon's dressing is ominously evocative of the other face of military interventionism in post-colonial Africa's political process and the mentality of the civilian surrogates that imitate it.

Dressed in rough battle gears and imitation camouflage uniform, his dark sunglasses strapped over his eyes and what looked like a wooden rifle hanging from his waist, Napoleon reeled off revolutionary slogans text after text. Why the hell he was wasting time especially now the familiar, ominous noises of boredom were becoming very audible among the audience (even a deaf could hear?) no one could tell. Napoleon was not yet done. He was like the cock strutting with exaggerated sense of its size. (84)

The rancorous competition for power and control of Gamji union seat which soon degenerates to violence is an echo of Achebe's earlier thesis of power and struggle in *A Man of the People*, his third novel of a postcolonial state which omens of political failure have been witnessed all over West Africa: Nigeria, Liberia, Senegal and Cote d'Voire. In *A Man of the People* Chief Nanga is a public

servant cast in the gregarious mould of President Baba Sonja, the Machiavellian prince whose nation states are but principalities acquired in order to rule over their people by the force of arms or the manipulation of others; by their conquering might, or by their fortune or valour (*Prince* 5). As postcolonial African leaders their smooth easy manners mask a determination to perpetuate their claws on power to the ultimate disfavour of their people. In their activities these leaders are no different from their counterparts in pre-colonial tribal warring over land or in 'the intrusive slave raiding and violent activities of the 19th century' (Asouzu 259). Very much in the manner of the colonial district officer, President Baba Sonja, like contemporary Nigerian leaders, would manipulate social events to hold themselves as objects of admiration in the eyes of their less than discerning religious fanatics. The bogey threatens initially to hold Jerry himself under the spell the herd syndrome. But jolted by the political beating of one of the contestants, Ege, Jerry's humanism snaps him out of the deceit. The tendency to snuff out the opposition (powerful only by the superiority of ideas than by control of instruments of brutality) is the survival tactic of tyrants and dictators that have blighted the face of Africa and the rest of humanity. Nigerian poet and dramatist Wole Soyinka in his prison notes recalls the incident that gave birth to the title of his prison notes: *The Man Died*

The dog of this immediate death was a journalist, Segun Sowemimo. He was brutally beaten, he and other colleagues, by soldiers on the orders of a Military

Governor of the West. The reason? An imagined slight. But at least he was fortunate –to start with. He had the help of his trade union and as his condition worsened, the Governor was compelled ...to fly him to England for treatment. But gangrene had set in and the affected leg had to be amputated...(23)

Segun Sowemimo later dies of his injury. In *Gamji College*, Ege dies from political beating by jealous opponents. For Jerry, following his monologic progress in understanding his society, it was the beginning of his moments of decision.

It made the voting and counting event of Thursday a sad one ..., thinking about Ege. He wished Ege would win the presidency. But would he survive the ordeal? Jerry wore a serious frown throughout the day. It was a frown that would follow him throughout his stay in Gamji. (111)

Finally Jerry's review of his political involvement or service is a resignation from active connivance (which the likes of the Gamji college registrar and rector are vicarious partakers) in disorganising the constituted process for immediate narrow gains.

Thus the inability of the British and French creations in Africa to become a truly nation state, a theme which Chin Ce continually grapples with, may not be laid entirely at the doorsteps of their leaders. In fact his essay 'Bards and Tyrants' while agreeing with his compatriot's position that 'the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a

failure of leadership' (*Trouble* 1) also argues that 'Nigerians seem to pitch their tents with exactly those elements that precipitate corruption and unleash a running spate of havoc in their national life' (21). There Chin Ce states, and it seems convincing enough in *Gamji College* also, that

Evidently the power-hungry elite do not long for a revolution of the society. It knows that Nigerian masses are not cut in the cloak of their counterparts of the French revolution. All they long for is a rehabilitation of their appetite for indulgence through the return of their own man to government, which seems the only fastest avenue for all coveted wealth. (21-22)

### **'The Bottle'**

The Gamji story Part Two set in a rowdy crowded corner of the village pub ironically called 'New Generation' makes mockery of the ability of the younger generation of Nigerian youths to articulate liberating ideas about nationhood and citizenship. Its social ethic is all 'to the glory of the green bottle' as inscribed in the pub. Thus the three youths tend, in the words of Amanda Grants, to 'foreshadow a general communal retardation most poignant in (Chin Ce's)...Koloko and Gamji fictions' (11). Grants rightly sees Chin Ce's works as one consistent 'movement in the major characters from one of social preoccupation to that of psychological transition in awareness and growth' (11).

In Grants's 'tripartite' delineation of the progressive

order of Chin Ce's writings Dogo, Femi and Milord would represent the northern, western, and eastern divides in which the Nigerian nation was constituted by the colonial British. But the sense of unity and tolerance that had eluded the ethnicities is achieved here in the story where the three collaborators form a camaraderie of wit and jocular humour, and the participants, as if in a game of chance, take turns at poking fun at one another. Dogo takes the dart at him in good faith when Femi taunts his Muslim religious practice of putting their women in seclusion.

Milord: You know you surprise me, Dogo, how most licentious and sacrosanct at the same time you really act. Dogo made an impatient movement. "You're talking about something you know little about."

"You think so," sneered Femi. "Now count how many daughters of this land –so much for eve though," he muttered under his breath. "Now count the many daughters of our soil you have wasted in your purdah for their whole life ... that's criminal you know?" (56)

The entry of Churchill to join the triad is an extension of their bohemian exuberance. Churchill's high sounding discoveries of the A and D syndrome of Africa's petty tyrants is in keeping with the inherited structure of Africa's post-colonial dilemma. Easily the intellectual of the four it is little wonder that the rigorous narcissism of his debate is dismissed as the charge of political idle philosophising.

Femi jeered at Churchill. "Now we have another modification of a political propaganda," and Dogo

laughed as if vindicated. “What did you expect? The philosopher has been idle since the holiday.” (62)

Exit Churchill to let the triad continue their drinking and smoking, the consequence of which we have been intimated is Milord’s occasional fractured memory or near loss of consciousness. His occasional unfocussed or sightless vacancy points to a vacuity among youths who hold no positive image of their society.

Desperate and panicky, Milord tried to rouse himself without success. In that instant time appeared to stand very still and objects motionless. And out of the haziness of his vision came a strange fellow riding a four legged creature in slow motion, a youth very much like himself except he had on a strange part on his head like some extraction from the remote past. ..None of his features seemed discernible. Only the smile: a broad open-mouthed chasm that yawned into eternity. (49)

The preternatural image of the young man (Milord’s alter-ego) like a gothic past life contraption which makes Milord resolute against sleep suggests that the youth are losing out. In this case the writer’s warning is indeed prophetic as the complete degeneration of Africa’s national universities to cult hostage-syndrome becomes a testament of this general national debauchery. Says Chin Ce again in his criticism of the nation state:

...where high-ranking society's leaders are either members or founders and patrons of campus cults...  
(t)he social impact of degenerate education in Nigeria

... (takes) its toll by the high incidence of unemployed graduates, the collapse of its economy and the erosion of cultural values. (12)

When finally the three youths make their move as last ones to leave the bar at well over midnight, their exit leaves an uneasy warning of the consequences of youth befuddled of vision and lacking a clear direction in spite of its rich endowment.

The rest ...followed suit, tidying the contents of their glasses. Then they all rose to their feet with slow deliberate movements like a committee of dons on convocation procession. ...

“Yeah, gentlemen it's been a grand frolic,” Dogo recapped in a slow drawl, nodding to Sammy who, stretching and yawning, was dutifully seeing them to the door. (71)

The writer's warning resonates through the looming collapse of postcolonial educational structures that impair African development; it affirms what Achebe had observed that the artist as a visionary, like his traditional counterpart, must remain in constant moral exchange with members of his society who may choose to neglect the voice of their writers to the eventual peril of the entire superstructure.

## **Conclusion**

Read as a postcolonial dialogue, *Gamji College* heavily indicts state power/ citizenship structures. Chin Ce reaffirms the collegiate indebtedness which Oguzie

observes of the writer in a post-colonial situation:

the writer as a member of his society , should show awareness of specific social situations. He is expected to convey historical and social truths, moreover, for taking part in the issues of his times, he may make pronouncements on questions of social and political importance. (160)

Thus where Achebe's novels, in the words of Hamilton, 'appear to demand (yet always seem to fail to deliver) a singular leader of the people' (130), Chin Ce invests the social structure with responsibility for either its retardation or redemption. And where Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease* and Odili of *A Man of the People* are products of the social realism of Achebe's artistic world view, Chin Ce's characters, by their choices and actions in defence of personal and public ethics, seem to aim at a possible transformation of consciousness. The asymmetrical interaction of creation and creator is made evident in these leaders and citizens who are engaged in the making or marring of the progressive movement toward the reorganisation of the postcolonial state.

It seems therefore that, for Chin Ce the poet-novelist, the modern state does not need heroes, but teachers; is sorely in need of wider paradigms which are being offered here by the moral leverage of characters who can distinguish between narrow interests from public good. Stephen Watts commenting on Plato's vision in *The Republic* notes that "indeed this call to clear away the

confused nonsense of current beliefs and to start out fresh from principle has occurred rather frequently in human history” (xvi). Art has been a useful tool directed to fulfil a reader’s quest for the meaning of existence, and, for a beleaguered people, to point out an alternative path to some pragmatic reinterpretation of social reality.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Achebe’s paper “An Image of Africa” published in the *Massachusetts Review* (1977) sparked the first serious indictment of western stereotypes of Africa in European novels.

<sup>2</sup>IRCALC editors, in their introduction to the *Journal of African Literature and Culture*, (JALC) No. 3, 2006 volume, comment on ‘a good number of ‘post-colonial’ discourses that appear to fascinate Western college departments of African literature.’

<sup>3</sup>Chin Ce’s first published fiction, *Children of Koloko* (2001), is a satire about post colonial African village caught in the euphoria of modernisation with its attendant neglect of the environment and lack of direction on the part of its leaders and youth.

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