

African Literature and the question of decolonization: *Achebe, Ngugi, and Others*

Chinelo Ezenwa

February 2, 2022

Arts & Humanities, Western University

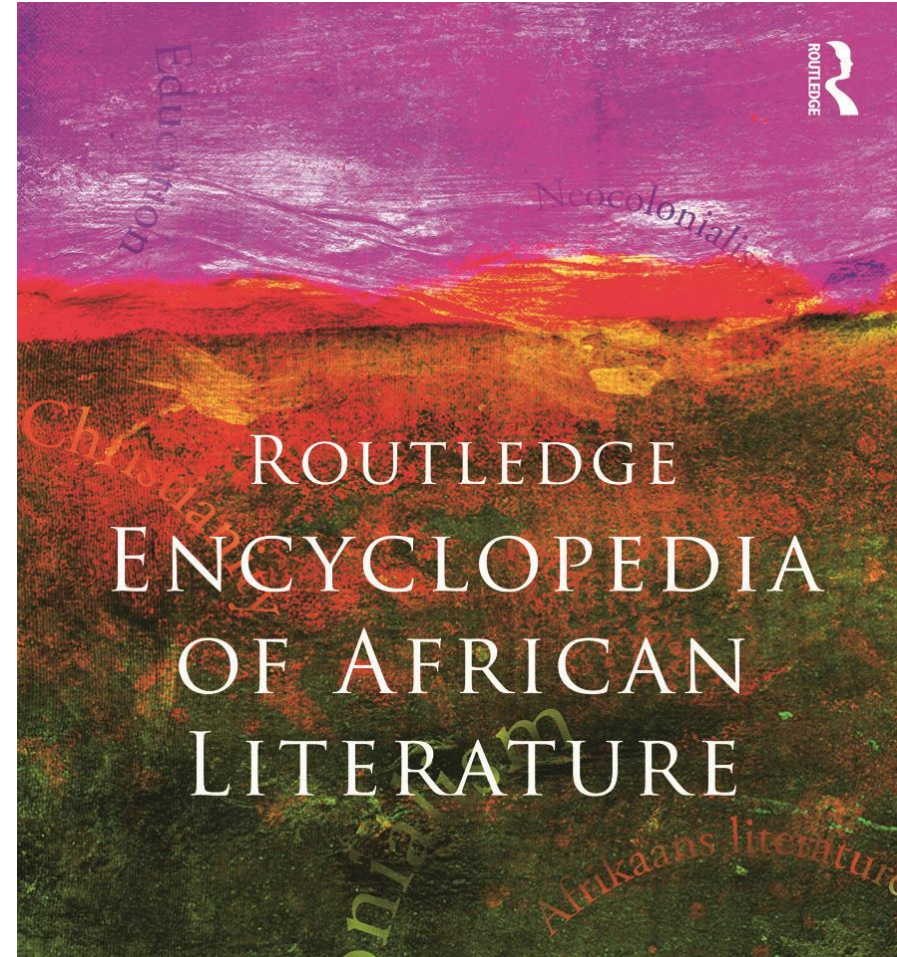


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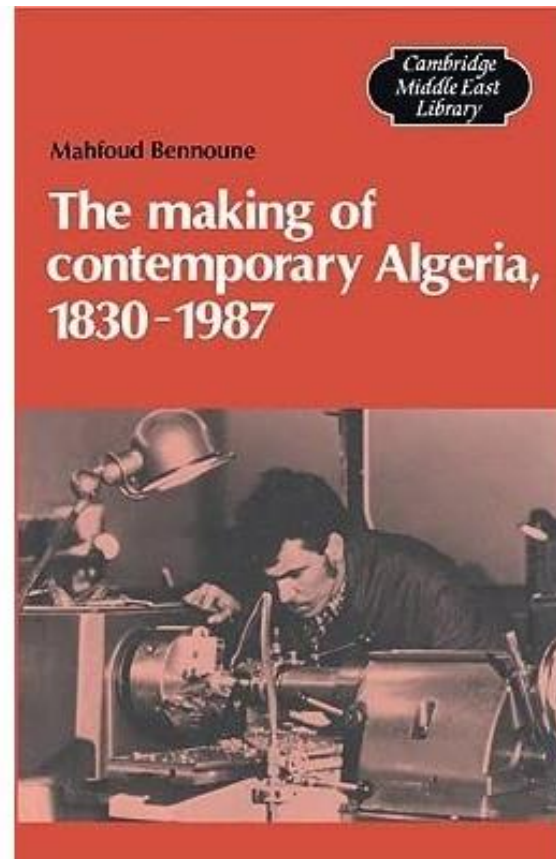
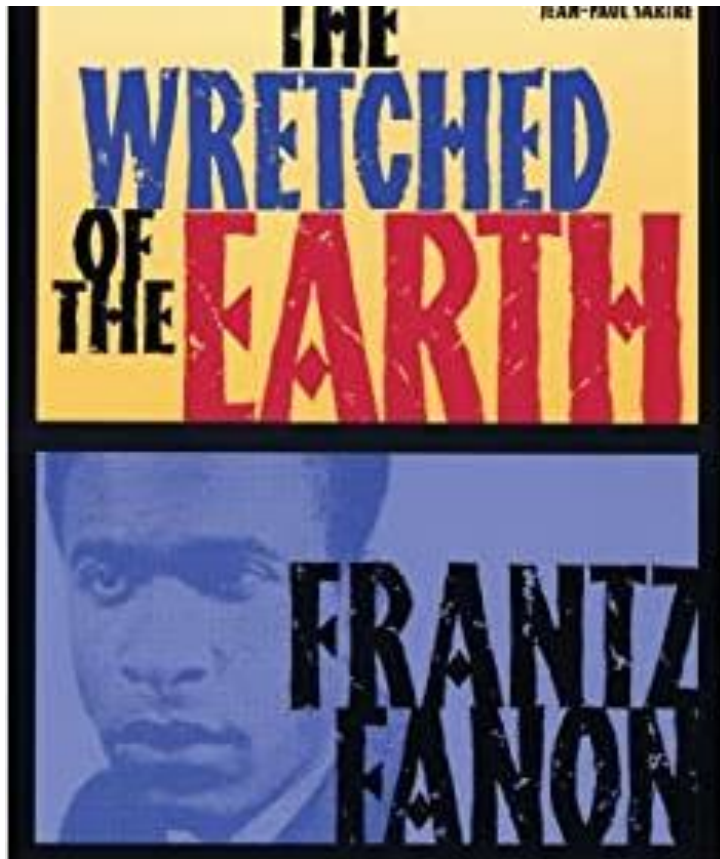
The Question of Colonialism

Colonialism is a situation where an economically advantaged group of people, with military superiority, takes absolute control of the affairs of a less advantaged group.

“Ideological state apparatuses” (schools, religious institutions, cultural technologies, etc.) supposedly to develop the Other (Louis Althusser 75).


Chinua Achebe reminds us that white Europeans went to Africa with the primary intention of looting in order to enrich themselves (“The Education of a British-Protected Child”).

On Colonial Violence and Land theft



Bennoune writes about the “destruction” and occupation of Algeria by French imperial power, which started from 1830 and continued well into the 20th century.

Image from: google.com

A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide, consisting of a grid of blue dots and a solid blue horizontal bar at the bottom.

On Colonial Violence and Land theft

The mission to Aro was also a violent military raid, which not only undermined the feared Aro oracle and its priests but decimated the surrounding areas (A. E. Afigbo 4).

One missionary is recorded to have said: “I trust the Matabele Kingdom will be smashed up.... We must put down the Matabeles and then go on with our work as if nothing happened” (qtd. in Chengetai Zvobgo 7).

“Decolonizing”

“To undermine or diminish a country's colonial occupation of (territory)”

“To free (a country) from the rule or control of a colonial power, bringing about political or economic independence; (of a colonial power) to withdraw from (a colony)”

“To free (an institution, sphere of activity, etc.) from the cultural or social effects of colonization; to eliminate foreign or colonial influences”

The etymology of the word is from “colonization” or “to colonize.”

In one entry, the *OED* mentions that a 1961 legal document called “The Code of Criminal Procedure” was the first of its kind in “decolonized Africa.”

*Oxford English Dictionary
(OED)*

On Colonial Education

“Orientalist discourse” which depends on the “positional superiority” of the person who stands/sits in the position of the Western reader (Edward Said 6, 7).

“Negrophobia” made the Africans “attempt to tear out their souls which they have been taught is bad” (Albert Memmi 119).

Ngugi wa Thiong’o says that even the use of a hegemonic language allows the colonizer to maintain hold over our “mental universe[s]” (*Decolonizing the Mind* 16).

Decolonization in the face of Neocolonization and Selective Amnesia

Europe tells the “story” of colonialism in a way that “frees [them] of the responsibility of a significant and traceable connection to the African present and allows Europe [to] glow of charity”

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie The Humboldt Forum).

Conference
Title?

“Abeg, just give me
my moni.”

“Gimme back my land
O, I no want again.”

Ngugi and the question of “Decolonization”

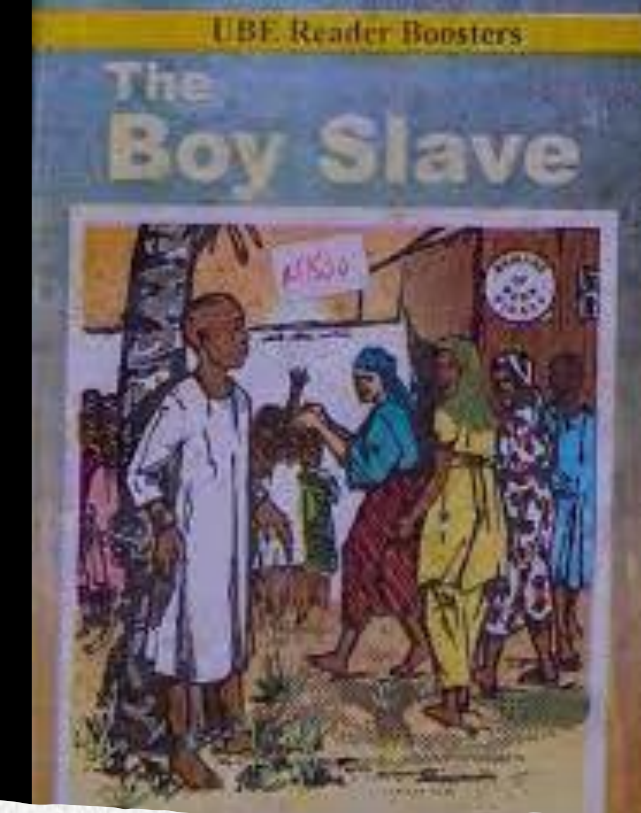
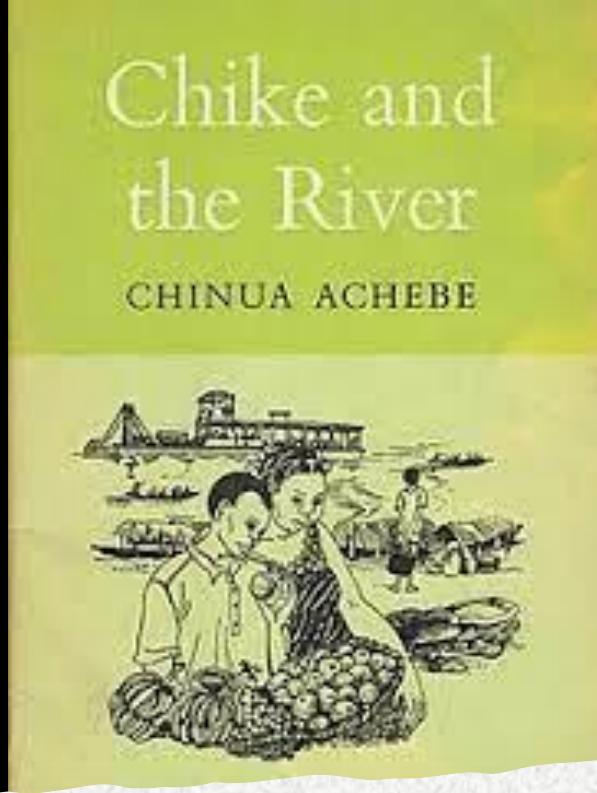
To decolonize, for Ngugi, means abandoning colonial languages, like English or French, as a means of official communication and the language of African literature.

Since language is more than a means of expression and also a “carrier of culture” (he says), it is “the most important vehicle to hold someone prisoner” (*Decolonizing the Mind* 13, 9).

Benefits of using African Languages:

- ❖ ensuring the survival of other African languages,
- ❖ promoting translation between different African languages,
- ❖ democratizing knowledge so that those in lesser positions of power (who cannot speak English) also participate as translators of knowledge (Paul Bandia, “Decolonizing Translation” 372-74).

Decolonization happens in this case as we shift the base from which we view the world, from its narrow European base, to a plurality and multiplicity of centres (Ngugi, “Moving the Centre” 202-05).



African Literature...

Achebe's *Chike and the River*, Ola Rotimi's *The God's are not to Blame*, Kola Onadipe's *The Boy Slave*, Eddieh Iroh's *Without a Silver Spoon*, Teresa Meniru's *Drums of Joy*, Cyprian Ekwensi's *An African Night's Entertainment*, Pita Nwana's *Omenuko, in Igbo and English*, Mazi Tony Ubesie's *Ukwa ruo oge ya : o daa*, or even Nathan Nkala's *Mezie the Ogbanje Boy*

What is African Literature? (*Ngugi, Decolonizing the Mind* 6-7).

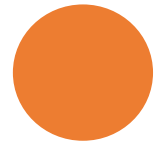
Conference Title: “A Conference of African Writers of **English Expression**,”

- “Was it literature about Africa or about the African (colonial) experience?”
- Was it literature written by Africans?

What about literature about Africa written by non-Africans?

Or were African languages the criteria?”

The organizers had effectively excluded African Writers of **Other Expressions** from this very important debate!



Literatures,
Curriculum,
Orthographies,
and an
Educational
System in the
Hegemonic
Language

Shakespeare surveys

Oscar Wilde, Jane Austen etc.

Beowulf

African Literature

Achebe and Decolonization

Achebe wrote in a unique style which allowed him “to use both language (and cultural) systems at once, thus doing away with colonial norms of expression and subverting the implied language hierarchies” (Bandia, *Translation as Reparation* 9).



From Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964)...

- As written in *Arrow of God*:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it, you will come back. But if there is something there, you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow. (Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language" 61)


- In "plain" English:

I am sending you as my representative among these people-just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight. (Achebe, "The African Writer" 62)



Chinua Ache in *The African Writer*


“I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (Achebe, “The African Writer” 65).





Things Fall Apart (1958)

Situated at the point of initial contact with British missionaries and colonial administrators, *Things Fall Apart* is a fictional re-telling of Igbo missionary and colonial history from Umuofia's perspective.



Things Fall Apart and Decolonization

Things Fall Apart invites me to look at the Igbo missionary colonial history from multiple perspectives, including insiders' perspectives.

Damian Opata offers a unique interpretation of this pivotal event and argues that rather than viewing the killing of Ikemefuna as a "murder," Okonkwo's act could be recognized as obedience to a sacred order (71-72).

Opata interprets Ikemefuna as the "sacrificial lamb" (71),

Can the missionaries condemn the people of Umuofia as barbaric given the fundamental similarity between their belief systems.

Or does one belief system trump the other; who decides?



*Things Fall
Apart: Other
figures of
(religious)
hegemony*

- ❖ Okonkwo
- ❖ Chielo
- ❖ Missionaries (and Colonials)



Figures of (religious) hegemony: Chielo

“Possessed by the spirit of her god [Agbala]” (70), [Chielo] forcefully enters Okonkwo’s home and demands to take his daughter, Ezinma, to Agbala:

[As this was at night,] Okonkwo pleaded with her [Chielo] to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep, But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter. Her voice was as clear as metal, and Okonkwo’s women and children heard from their huts all that she said. Okonkwo was still pleading that the girl had been ill of late and was asleep.... The priestess suddenly screamed. ‘Beware, Okonkwo!’ she warned. ‘Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!’ (Achebe, *Things*

Fall Apart 70-71)

Things Fall Apart argues that one cannot trust figures of hegemony (like Chielo, Okonkwo, the missionaries) as heroes, saviours, or moral witnesses. One cannot also entirely rely on missionary and colonial histories told from the hegemonic perspective.

“The Headstrong Historian” (Adichie)

a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*

Amongst other issues, “The Headstrong Historian” presents the continued negative legacies of colonization on Africans, as well as the mental colonization of the possessors of a perverse missionary and colonial education.



Image: newyorker.com

Afamefuna

“may my name not be lost.”

Illustration by Yvetta Fedorova

The “Hybrid,” “Nervous,” “Native”

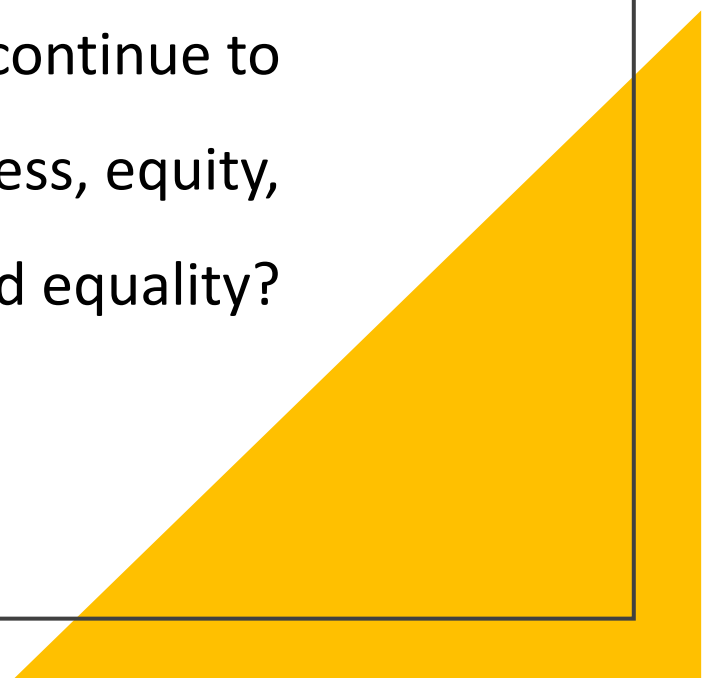
It is tempting to solely think about the “postcolonial” missionized Anikwenwa in Adichie’s story as “hybrid,” if one is examining the issue through the lens of Homi Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity,” the postcolonial in-between person (126).

Jean-Paul Sartre (in the preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*) writes that the colonizer attempted to “reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler’s treatment of them as beasts of burden” (15).

When one thinks about the colonial hybrid in Sartre’s and Fanon’s writing, the image that comes to mind is also the depredated condition of the “native.” It is safe to state that the ambivalence which Bhabha attributes to the “colonial presence” (150) is, in a more problematic way, equally an intrinsic part of the native presence.

why do
Africans
continue to
blame the
West for
their own
problems.

why do women, indigenous peoples,
displaced peoples, as well as other
politically, economically, and socially
marginalized groups continue to
protest about justice, fairness, equity,
and equality?

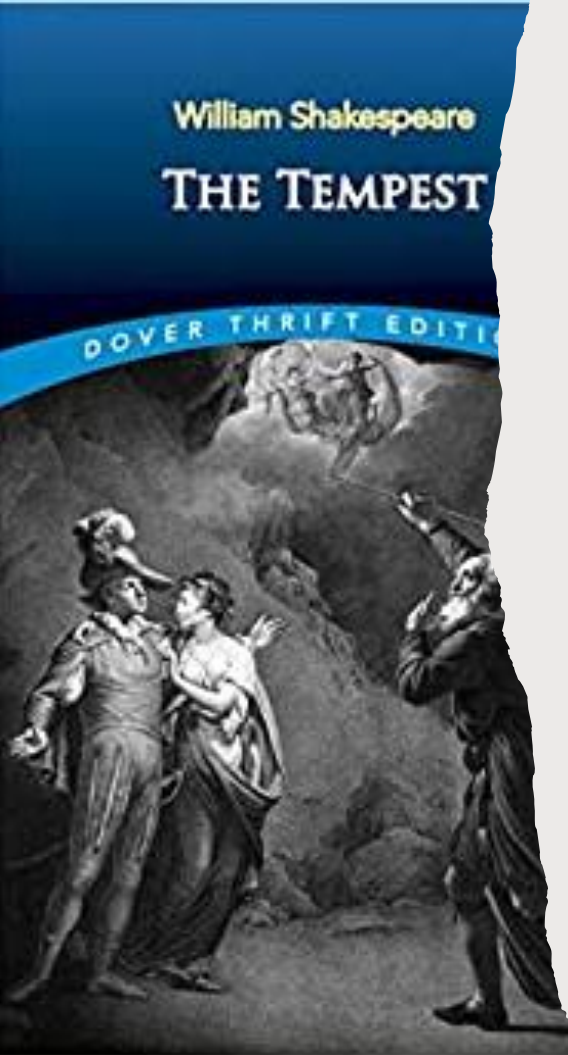


Literature, Teaching, and Decolonization

Create spaces where participants (insider and outsider) feel able to continue to ask questions about the place of (African) literature in decolonization.

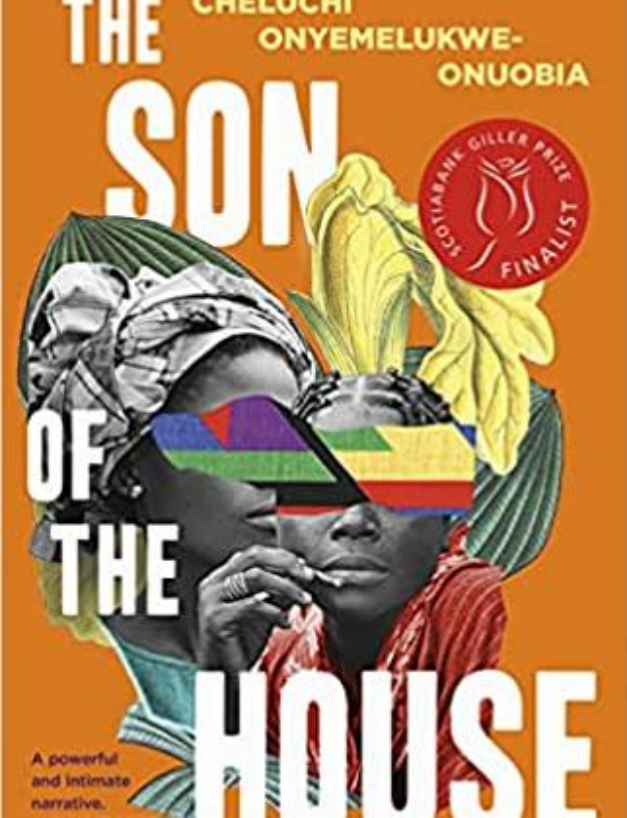
When reading *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, do we consider it important to read it alongside Ngugi's writings or Fanon or Aimé Césaire, who emphatically states that missionization is the twin of colonization (*Discourse on Colonialism*)?

Literature, Teaching, and Decolonization



“Zombification”: when postcolonial people are “robbed ... of their vitality and ...left [as] impotent” (Achille Mbembe 4).





“What has [African] Literature got to do with it?”

Literature is “a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life” (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediment* 170).

African Literature is a space to decenter colonial and neocolonial stories about the African continent

Decolonization can be found in the multiple stories told by Africans about themselves.

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