

Chinua Achebe's Ethnographic Response to Imperial Romance

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'Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak' (Achebe 63).

Literary critics have long interpreted Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a conscious retelling of African society. However, this essay will explore the text as a response to John Buchan's *Prester John* and its genre of imperial romance. Contextualizing *Prester John* within its historical moment allows for an anthropological exploration of imperial romance. In turn, Achebe's novel counters Buchan's treatment of setting, particularly land and the ownership of land, through its adherence to a genre of ethnographic fiction, problematizing the imperial adventurer's claim to space, community, and ownership.

Prester John combines the form of the imperialist novel with a 'spatially and temporally ambiguous' setting of romance. By virtue of its Scottish authorship, *Prester John* is by definition an imperialist novel (Smith 17-18). However, the historical moment in which it operates, while congruent with actual developments during the Boer Wars, is not cartographically placeable in history. Instead, it operates in a 'representational space' that overlaps with its actual physical setting (Davies 5). Nonetheless, it remains in harmony with the broader literary consciousness of the British Empire and its colonies during the 20th century, and in doing so, follows an important trajectory in the burden of the colonial emigrant: making empire attractive. Graham Law elicits such a romantic reading from *Prester John*, affirming the 'almost desperate' intentions of the text in bringing mystery and spirituality back to a 'decadent metropolitan society' witnessing the first signs of modernist decay (10). It is useful to read this in Buchan's own words:

The emigrant has romance in his life, for he knows there is the chance of the unforeseen, and this chance puts enterprise and ambition into men [...] It is as the residuary remedy for social disorders that we must advocate it (Buchan 127-128).

At the heart of such an endeavor is the export of overseas adventure back home, 'like some raw material, to be processed and consumed in the metropole' (Smith 2). Central to this

is Buchan's rendition of an alluring figure of frontier mythology, Prester John, whose abundance of followers and treasures is all the more appealing to the Western traveler due to the ambiguity of their origins. Prester John was sought as a 'trickster-magician', operating as king in a remote colonial paradigm, not limited by the continental and social boundaries that existed beyond the world of the adventure novel. Laputa is the novel's embodiment of Prester John, and an ideal adventure villain for a boys' story. It is no surprise then that the novel, published first as a story called *The Black General* in a boys' journal called *The Captain*, was received as a handbook for the aspiring colonial in Britain, a memoir of sensational colonial maturity. Buchan's imperial protagonist Davie travels to South Africa to contest the Prester and outlines this in no indirect words: '[I]t was an experience for which I shall ever be grateful, for it turned me from a rash boy into a serious man. I knew then the meaning of the white man's duty'.

It is, however, worth noting that although the prospective colonial is warned that he must expect no reward except the 'fulfillment of his task', the hero returns home with bags full of jewels as the action comes to an end in the penultimate chapter titled "A Great Peril and a Great Salvation". This makes for a typical feature of adventure fiction in the late 1800s, what Craig Smith calls a 'mixture of paranoia, political sang-froid, and clammy religiosity' to appeal to the domestic subject (16). There is, therefore, an adherence to popular features of the imperial adventure novel: a heroic protagonist, a quest, remote locations with images of nature, action, and ultimate reward.

To set the scene for such adventure, Buchan employs common colonial tropes of 'textually emptying territories and creating virgin lands waiting for European penetration' to allude to exotic settings as realms of discovery, turning the colonized landscape into an idealized version of their homelands, to be populated by the imperial hero (Garuba 93). Accordingly, the South African landscape in *Prester John* is a close reflection of the Scottish highlands, invoking the charm of its rich past (Dean 71). It was imperative, however, that the

landscape be populated by the colonial race for it to gain poetical transcendence. Davie is therefore often in close sight of, but never truly within, native society: 'I would suddenly be conscious, as I walked on the road, that I was being watched. [...] [I] must get off the road'. The reader is only alerted to the presence of an Other who eludes sight and hearing, but never brought face-to-face. Thus, Buchan gradually creates the sense of an empty land, where the soldiers of the empire reside alone, and there is no native presence except that of the enemy.

Gradually, then, the African inhabitant is further anthropologically removed through a meticulous process of unraveling lines on the map, so the terrain is left wholly untenanted. The Othering of setting through 'demarcation of boundaries' was pursued to astonishing lengths by the empire, to stop the instabilities of land ownership and borders from translating into textual discourse (Garuba 96). Mary Hamer explains: 'An abstracted and standardised representation of terrain challenges direct local experience and removes, as it were, the terrain from the cognitive ownership of those who inhabit it' (184). So even before the true action starts, a physical and discursive ownership is established over African land, whereby local experience is trifling, even inconsequential, to the plot. Only the experiences of the colonial traveler require documentation. He wrestles in between a desire to exit the landscape and a simultaneous 'ever-present need to return, or look back, to that which is expanded beyond' (Davies 5). Davie executes this role faithfully, frequently voicing this dilemma of spatial dichotomy, wanting to move away from Laputa, 'the man of the hills', but also falling prey to his romantic image of the 'noble savage'.

In this context, it becomes important to analyze the presentation of Laputa's character in the novel, as he is the primary, and practically only, non-European whom the plot acknowledges. As the ultimate African leader, Laputa's existence is presented only as physical and sexual, when really it is also political. Laputa exists as the binary Other to Davie, our imperial crusader, with whom he is engaged in a battle of nationalisms. Davie is struck by his Machiavellian gallantry, but even more by his homoerotic masculinity:

the face stamped itself indelibly upon my mind. It was black, black as ebony, but it was different from the ordinary Negro. There were no thick lips and flat nostrils; rather, if I could trust my eyes, the nose was high-bridged, and the lines of the mouth sharp and firm. But it was distorted into an expression of such terror and devilish fury and amazement that my heart became like water. (8)

The pendulum of the text sways violently between denouncing Laputa as a ‘devilish’ African savage and accepting him as a progeny of the success of Britain’s civilizing mission, but never quite touches either end of the colonial spectrum. In the end, the text makes clear from Laputa’s ‘irredeemable Africanism’ that Davie’s physical resistance against him is merely that: physical (Smith 11). Laputa remains limited by his race, and by the homosocial bond he shares with Davie, so that even in all its homoerotic mania, the text can never take seriously his idea of African independence: the ‘sheer physical menace’ is there, but outside its contribution to the adventure genre, it must be inconceivable: ‘a pleasurable, necessary nightmare, but never a reality’ (Smith 14). Contained within Davie’s erotic desire, Laputa’s only choice to reclaim his body is to sever its link to life: he throws himself into an underground river chasm, effectively losing to his opponent in what the modern reader sees as an allegory to South Africa’s genocidal apartheid. Such a magical story of the creed of empire creates the need for a response from the margins, an attempt to bring forward its bruised narratives, exemplified by Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

The existence of the imperial romance genre makes *Things Fall Apart*, by nature, relational. It demands readership in the metropolises in order to educate the world outside Africa of the various historical milieus in colonial history that receive sparse or fabricated mention in adventure fiction. Akingbe sees *Things Fall Apart* as a two-fold reaction: against the infantilization of the African native in imperial romance, and the violation of boundaries

in African land (81).

Things Fall Apart's centrality to colonial discourse is not limited to the novel; it also further informs several anthropological disciplines in presenting the African as a self-subsistent being, and not the remote subject of the European man. Achebe becomes not just a recorder but also a commentator on Igbo life by virtue of his strategy of ethnographic distance. Like standard ethnographic fiction, *Things Fall Apart* consciously fulfills the integral function of accurately describing 'another way of life' (Langness et. al., 18). It communicates to the reader a cultural reality in which imperial romances are set, but without the imperial injustice of fabrication. Gilbert Ryle characterizes such ethnography as 'thick description', an account of life from within a society that understands what the events described mean to the participants themselves (Langnes, et. al. 18).

Things Fall Apart does this not in hypotheticals, but through realistic reports that truly reflect the constrictions of circumstances on its characters through their narrative voice. There are many instances in the novel that reflect this ethnographic distance, one being Okonkwo's murder of his adopted son, Ikemefuna. Achebe tells the reader: 'Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak' (63). Such an anticlimactic end to an otherwise suspense-ridden chapter creates a tone of novelistic realism and cultural authenticity. Okonkwo prioritizes his clan over his emotions, and the readers are allowed to participate in his action and locate themselves in his space. In doing this, Achebe's achievement is two-fold: first, the African man is reintroduced into his landscape without the need for him to lay his claim as the imperial romance had suggested—as Larson asserts, the description of setting, in this case the forest, is given just to let the reader know where he is; land, in the first half of the novel is merely a premise of the plot (30). Second, Achebe successfully relieves himself from criticism of ethnographic fiction for its attempts to 'compensate for an audience which [...] does not share the culture being depicted' (Beauvoir 123-221). *Things Fall Apart* makes no such effort.

The second half of the novel addresses imperial desecration of space and maps more directly. When European missionaries arrive in Umuofia, they take shelter in an ‘evil forest’, the place of ‘potent fetish and unwanted evil’. However, when the missionaries emerge unscathed after a week, African villagers are shocked: ‘And then it came to be known that the white man’s fetish had unbelievable power’. The subtle irony in the narration of this incident indicates the subversion of the material and cultural geography of the African space by the colonial intruder. The metaphysical boundary between good and evil spaces breaks down from the intrusion, and Achebe shows the reader this process of cartographic unraveling that had to exist for *Prester John’s* Davie to conduct his adventures. Parallel to this is the unjustified replacement of the dynamic orality of the concepts of land and ownership in Igbo culture by the status of the written document (Garuba 98). Umuofia’s verbal court of land disputes, administered by the *egwugwu*, is brought down to make way for the colonial court. Native reaction to this cartographic diversion subtly finds voice in the covetous backlash from Okonkwo.

In this manner, Okonkwo’s character creates a forceful resistance to the reductive fictionalization of Laputa in Buchan’s imperial adventure. He is in many ways the lone warrior holding together his history against colonial offense. The African man in Okonkwo is a fierce affirmation of the political legitimacy that is denied to Laputa by Buchan’s hero. Okonkwo is revered in Umuofia as a hardworking, prosperous man who ‘rarely felt fatigue’; not only does this serve to subvert *Prester John’s* treatment of native society as invisible, it also allows the African man to reclaim his masculinity from Buchan’s hero. What saves Okonkwo’s character from becoming a homoerotic caricature is the ‘implied temporal distance’ between him and the narrator (Corley 204). Corley sees Okonkwo’s voice as distinct, almost divergent, from the narrator’s implied values. ‘We are more than once alerted’, he claims, ‘to the fact that Okonkwo’s adoption of the manly ideal is excessive and even wrongheaded, as when Obierika emphatically expresses to Okonkwo himself his lack of

enthusiasm for the prowess in wrestling demonstrated by his own son' (Corley 130). Consequently, Achebe establishes an apparent moral difference from Okonkwo, shattering the imperial image of a racial model with homogenized patterns of social behavior.

Okonkwo thus challenges the binarism of imperial literature, but to read him merely as the representative reflection of a conjunctural society would be to ascribe too great a responsibility upon him. Quayson maintains: 'if patriarchal hegemony is privileged by both the ethno-text and the narrative itself, then this same patriarchy is alternatively shown as sitting uneasily within the general discourse of symbolization that the text constructs' (Quayson 11). Okonkwo's own son, Nwoye, rejects him, foreshadowing the larger expulsion of his family from their own home, to his maternal village of Mbanta. Other characters, such as Okonkwo's daughter Enzinma, operate outside not only Okonkwo's prescriptions of gender role-sharing but also colonial binaries of intrinsic gender identity. Thus, by creating an indigenous description of Umuofia's political and cultural struggle, Achebe creates a literary response to Prester John's imperial fiction, offering Austenite criticism of Igbo society while dismantling the stereotypes of colonial adventure.

What is important, then, in the reading of these novels, is to recognize how land demarcations serve the respective literary genre. In locating characters and conflicts, the reader must cognize the histories and presets of their physical setting as well as the appropriation, or lack thereof, of its physical inhabitants for the texts' readership. Both Buchan and Achebe do much more than merely naming a reality; they seek to fix certain concepts, creating opposing outcomes. In Buchan's case, this is a binary simplicity, which Achebe seeks to correct through his own narrative. As such, a relational reading of the imperial romance and the African novel offers more nuanced interpretations.

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