CHALLENGING 'OTHERING' MECHANISMS. REPLACING AFRICAN DARKNESS AND ABSENCE WITH THE LIGHT OF PRESENCE AND CELEBRATION IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NO LONGER AT EASE AND THE EDUCATION OF A BRITISH-PROTECTED CHILD

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Abstract

The focal point of this paper is the exploration of Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's (1930–2013) literary criticism of 'othering' and the solutions and earnest appeals he launches for eradicating conceptions of difference resulting from colonial ideology. The investigation focuses on both fiction and non-fiction, with special focus on the novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960/2010) and the collection of autobiographical essays *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009/2011). The close reading of the two texts discloses Achebe's response to the prevalent themes of darkness and difference associated with the condition of Africans, a response which is redemptive, conciliatory and deeply humanistic. Colonial 'othering' was negatively constructed in terms of ethnicity and race and the writer posits at its core central themes like darkness, absence, and difference. Another common theme of the colonial discourse was its insistence on dehumanizing perceptions of Africans, and Achebe seeks precisely to reinstitute the humanity of his people. The analysis also explores celebration as a key-paradigm proposed by Achebe in order to repudiate the themes of darkness and absence. The denial of the African identity by the colonizer is another key-concern in Achebe's writings, so he also calls forth the recovery of the Africans' name, an act which coincides with the redemption of their abused identity. Finally, the paper focuses on Achebe's view of literature as a celebration of humanity in its diversity, which constitutes yet another type of response to the mentality which harmfully represented the Africans as 'others'.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, 'othering', darkness, absence, presence, celebration.

1. Introduction

The present study first seeks to explore some of the 'othering' practices performed by the West in its relation to the African continent, an ideological and discursive mechanism built on conceptions of darkness, difference, dehumanization, and absence. Secondly, it aims to disclose the way in which Chinua Achebe's literary response constitutes an appeal for the reinstitution of a basic human right, the right to an undamaged identity and the right to a free life.

After centuries of colonial oppression and "brigandage" (Achebe 2011: 61), we might expect that the common reactions of the Africans could be wrathful and resentful. However, though Achebe does denounce the crimes of colonial times, he does not look back in anger. On the contrary, he does not want to respond to the victimizer by using his own discursive or ideological tools. He understands that deliverance from the past and the shaping of a bright future for Nigeria depends on a totally different type of ideology, one which rests on the glorification of humanity in its diversity.

Hence, the rehabilitation of the African people's identity in the postcolonial environment represents a central concern for Achebe, who promotes the replacement of the colonial ideology built on conceptions of darkness, absence and denial of humanity with "celebration" (Achebe 2011: 107). This does not represent the happy rejoicing or

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solemn performance of a festivity or ceremony. Its basic principle lies in the simple recognition of the other's presence and existence as a human being in the world, an attitude which aims at transforming perceptions of the African from 'someone different' to 'one of us' in the contemporary globalized world. Achebe suggests that, among other things, reinstating the Africans' proper name, which reveals their real identity, and celebrating the other by means of art and literature could constitute viable proposals for annihilating reminiscences of imperial ideology and start shaping a brighter future.

The cultural practice of 'othering' which is specific to colonial ideology has persisted even in its aftermath. Both works reveal that 'othering' involved an invented perception of difference, the propagation of perceptions of darkness, a particular insistence on absence, the constant abuse of the name and identity of the African, robbery and invention. What this paper seeks to explore is Achebe's representation of 'othering' as a process primarily built on the obliteration of the African people's humanity and their very existence, while the redemption of their humanity can be achieved if they start asserting their name, presence and identity in the postcolonial world. Achebe was not seduced by Occidental ideology, nor did he want to supplant African values with Western values, as Njeng (2008) argues. On the contrary, his position is deeply rooted in the traditional ideology and life of the Igbo people, and he often refers to such principles or attitudes which find their viability even nowadays, and celebration, the central solution he launches, is deeply ingrained in his Igbo ancestry.

Thus, the exploration of Achebe's response to 'othering' undertaken in this paper seeks to offer new insights into his work and to show that the lesson taught by Achebe is ultimately a profoundly peaceful and human-centred one. The textual analysis intends to reveal that Achebe's most important literary contribution to the postcolonial redemption of his people does not primarily lie in the promotion of a conception which ruthlessly erases 'othering' as an ideology which maintains difference, discrimination or conflict. The point he makes is much simpler, yet more profound because it mirrors the most terrible atrocity of the imperial mentality. He signals that before talking about equality, tolerance, human adhesion and communion, we need to restore the identity of the African people by performing a simple act, that of acknowledging their very existence in the world. Of course, once this first step is taken, the repelling of 'othering' comes naturally.

In effect, Achebe provides an alternative view to the rather common attitude of striking back with vengeance, thus promoting an essentially humanistic approach marked by a keen interest in the welfare of people, their values and dignity, with respect not only to the Nigerian or African people but to people in general. Since colonization denied the fundamental humanity of the Africans, the restoration of their humanity seems to be an essential component of African identity in the contemporary world.

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2. The African as 'Other'

'Othering', 'otherness', alterity, marginalisation, stigma, discrimination and inequality represent inter-related concepts which have often constituted the focus of social and cultural research (Spivak 1985, JanMohamed 1985, Hall 1997, Hallam and Street 2000, Baumann and Gingrich 2006, Ashcroft et al. 2007). 'Othering' has also received special attention from medical research with a wide variety of valuable implications for human health issues (Johnson et al. 2004, Canales 2000).

'Otherness' defines the state of being different, whereas 'othering' can represent the action or attitude of perceiving or treating the other as different. Perceiving and understanding difference sometimes helps us find out more about ourselves, so G.W.F. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), identified the roots of 'othering' in our struggle for identity (MacQuarrie 2010: 360). Built on oppositional binaries, perceptions of difference reveal the gaps between white and black, primitive and civilized, educated and uneducated, good and bad, lazy and hardworking, even human and nonhuman, etc. The 'other' is thus one perceived as being different from the perspective of a dominant group that establishes the norm. Moreover, "such binaries of difference usually involve a relationship of power, of inclusion and exclusion, in that one of the pair is empowered with a positive identity and the other side of the equation becomes the subordinated Other" (Barker 2004: 139).

This is because the discourse and practices of a dominant group represent the factor of authority and establishes the centre, while everything that does not conform to this centre is 'fashioned' as 'other'. As the social, linguistic and psychological mechanism that distinguishes 'us' from 'them', the normal from the supposedly deviant (Johnson et al. 2004), 'othering' creates an exclusionary matrix. Consequently, it also breeds inequality and further produces tension, dissention, or even conflict between members of the two groups by treating the 'other' as inferior. It maintains a gap between the powerful, advantaged and the marginalized or disadvantaged ones (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

'Othering' is also connected to bias, stereotype and prejudice. Stereotypes represent beliefs about the characteristics of groups or individuals. In sociology, stereotypes are defined as simplified and standardized conceptions or images invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group (Ritzer and Ryan 2011). A fixed, commonly held notion or image of a person or group, a stereotype is based on an oversimplification of some observed or imagined trait of personality, behaviour or appearance. It often represents predetermined ideas held about others who are seen as different and, as a result, it can be used as an indication of superiority and dominance on the part of the one launching the stereotype.

As a means of categorizing people, similar to the original printing stamp used to make multiple copies from a single model or mould, stereotyping involves 'stamping' human beings with a set of characteristics (Lippmann 2009). Negative stereotyping is a form of 'othering' which fractures individuality and reduces human features to simplified representations. Furthermore, stereotypes are emotionally laden and hard to replace or

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obliterate. Stored as cognitive schemata, it reflects the dominant ideology within the social context and the 'otherness' that we attribute to certain groups in terms of difference (Batziou 2011: 23).

Stereotypes turn into prejudices when negative feelings or attitudes toward the members of a group are displayed (Stangor 2000: 1). The less we individuate people the more prone we are to categorize them and this affects social interaction. When a group considers that it possesses characteristics which make it better than the other group this means that a relation of the type in-group vs. out-group is established. Members of the in-group will not only see themselves as better but they will also favour their group and look down on the other group(s). This can lead to intergroup bias which, in turn, can cause discrimination. In effect, discrimination is a result of categorization and occurs when stereotypes or prejudice lead to negative behaviour toward the others, crime, hate, racism, sexism, anti-immigration bias or certain forms of oppression, domination, or subjugation. 'Othering' also contributes to marginalisation insofar as it generates social distance, exclusion or repudiation.

As a process, 'othering' is unavoidably linked with the colonial age and its postcolonial critique. Coined by Gayatri Spivak, it refers to the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others' (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 156). Since 'otherness' is usually connected to race, ethnicity or skin-colour, the colonial ideology insisted on perpetuating ideas of difference built on discriminatory perceptions regarding the Africans. In this case, too, 'otherness' operates at the level of the four interconnected dimensions identified by Hall (1997): linguistic, social, cultural, and psychic. As a result, the production of the colonized subject is often built on power relations where the position of the 'Other' represents the centre of authority, whereas the numerous 'others' contain the 'mastered' subjects (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 156).

In colonial times, the 'othering' of the African involved a complex mechanism of devaluation which rested on the joint application of all the concepts presented above because the dominant group of the colonizer asserted difference in a manner that negated the value of that difference. It involved bias, stereotype and prejudice and was also a question of social, economic, or political power. Moreover, the dominant group sought to impose its ideology and dominate the 'other' psychologically and culturally on the pretext of superior civilization, authority and command.

Thus, the many abuses of colonialism were rooted in the very perception of the African as 'other', a type of identification condemned by Achebe in his essay "Travelling White" (Achebe 2011: 47-53). Obviously, Achebe does not profess himself as a supporter of colonialism, but he openly states right from the beginning of *The Education of a British-Protected Child* that it is useless to start presenting "all over again the pros and cons of colonial rule" (Achebe 2011: 4). Instead, he purposefully takes a different stance from other contemporary critics. First of all, he admits that despite its many wrongs, colonialism must have done "something right" (Achebe 2011: 24). This was particularly

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the case of certain people who managed to reach across the brutal political and ideological separation constructed by colonialism.

Secondly, he aims to offer an outlook on events from "the *middle* ground" (Achebe 2011: 5; author's emphasis). This middle way was very much celebrated by his Igbo countrymen and promotes an equidistant and balanced view of facts. It rests on mindsets placed midway between extremes, on finding an intermediate position between opposites, and on annihilating centres and margins. Fostering cooperation and collaboration, it seeks to achieve blending, compromise or reconciliation and so, a state of harmony.

Thirdly, the author insists on the importance of shaping the present and the future for the Nigerian community rather than lingering in the past. Indeed, the colonial past damaged the African identity and stole its independence, but its tarnished name needs to be spelled out forcefully and thus pave the way to the proper restoration of its individuality in the world.

However, this does not mean that Achebe keeps away from denying the many abuses of colonialism. For example, the disturbing colonial attitude of "imposing oneself on another" (Achebe 2011: 7) utterly contradicts the Igbo mental attitude Achebe adheres to. Thus, colonialism disavowed "human worth and dignity" (Achebe 2011: 22) mainly because of economic and political motives. This is in fact Achebe's fundamental objection to colonial rule: "it is a gross crime for anyone to impose himself on another, to seize his land and his history (...)" (Achebe 2011: 7).

Colonial discourse was also founded on invention, intention and design (Achebe 2011: 60, 66, 78). It was a carefully planned strategy of repression on the pretext of racial difference, a story built on lie, prejudice and mischief, made up to deceit the blacks, to belittle them and their existence in the world, to bring chaos among them. This invention of difference anticipated two gigantic crimes in world history: the Transatlantic slave trade[2] and the colonization of Africa by Europe (Achebe 2011: 78). The process involved the falsification, denigration and repression of the black man so as "to serve political and economic ends" (Achebe 2011: 63).

Built on negation and repudiation of the other, the colonial discourse of 'othering' also went against the principles of the Igbo mentality which insisted on treating the one next to you as your brother. Even more, kinship was seen as almost sacred since "a man's in-law was his *chi*, his personal god" (Achebe 2011: 37). Brotherhood entails warmth, respect, admiration, thankful recognition, generosity, kindness and honest behaviour towards the others regardless of any type of difference. However, by means of its practices, colonialism turned people into enemies and encouraged domination and hatred.

It seems that Achebe retains a feeling of scepticism and counterbalances benefits (education, opening up to the world, language) and disadvantages of colonialism (promoting violence and difference, linguistic denigration, psychological abuse, ideological dominance and mistreatment, economic and political interests, the invalidation of

[2] The devastating effects of the Transatlantic slave on Africa's economic, social and political development are discussed minutely by M'baye (2006).

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humanity, the characteristics of Western culture as a "dictatorial, authoritative and invasive" one (Achebe 2011: 68)). Still, his bitterest tone echoes anguish against the greatest crime of colonialism, that of abusing and denigrating the human being under the disguise of religious discourse. The deceit shows that the present 'saviours' were, in fact, the very abusers of the past:

> "centuries before these European Christians sailed down to us in ships to deliver the Gospel and save us from darkness, their ancestors, also sailing in ships, had delivered our forefathers to the horrendous transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in our world?" (Achebe 2011: 38)

Achebe points out that the colonization of Africa was based on economic and political interests. However, it constituted an act of stealing (Achebe 2011: 61, 112, 118) which involved the dispossession of land, but also of language, traditions and history. All of this, of course, together with the questioning of the humanity of the people themselves (Achebe 2011: 112) translated into an act of annihilating humanity.[3]

As we have previously highlighted, the recognition and treatment of the other in negative terms has constantly permeated various discourses dealing with the African other. Achebe's solutions are undergirded by a series of concepts that have their roots in his traditional culture, namely the "*middle* ground" (Achebe 2011: 5) and "duality" (Achebe 2011: 6), both being assisted by the concept of "diversimiliarity" (Loden & Rosener 1991).[4] The next sections discuss the elements of the 'othering' mechanism in detail, as well as other solutions formulated by Achebe in order to fight this mechanism.

3. Darkness as 'Othering' vs. the Apparent 'Light' of (Post)colonialism

One of the recurrent themes in the colonial discourse is the African people's barbarism and uncivilized nature. This view often served political ends and led to the disempowerment of the colonized group if we consider that in "the history of western imperialism, such claims of moral victimhood have often served to justify the consolidation of imperial power" (Smith 2012: 3). This condition of inferiority assigned to the African fellow being is also related to the invention of difference which basically derives from a problem of perception – the perception of blackness, of a different complexion which has often been used as an explanation of difference. Thus, Achebe also tackles the problems of equality vs. 'otherness' and proximity vs. distance. In Europe's perception, despite its spatial proximity, Africa occupies "the farthest point of otherness" (Achebe 2011: 77). Historically and geographically, Africa and Europe share a number of similar aspects, but it is only latitude which is often used as an argument for difference,

[3] Less interested in the human being, it was the land that mattered, and the "The Scramble for Africa" (1884) allowed major European leaders to cut Africa into slices and share this great cake together, as Baloubi shows (1999: 611).

[4] For a detailed analysis of these solutions see Mihaela Culea, "Middle Ground", "Duality" and "Diversimilarity" as Responses to Postcolonial and Global Challenges in Chinua Achebe's *The Education of a British-protected Child* and *No Longer at Ease*", in *Respectus Philologicus*, no. 24(29)/2013, pp. 151-161.

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engendering the existence of different complexions (Achebe 2011: 8). This invented perception of difference made the Africans conform to a typology including "dark, ominous, different" (Achebe 2011: 88). Primitive, savage and brutish behaviour is also associated with the Africans who live in a place of "dark impulses and unspeakable appetites" (Achebe 2011: 115).

Darkness sends to blackness and its cultural implication has often fuelled the black stereotype associated with 'othering' practices. So, what does "light" stand for? First, it metaphorically indicates whiteness, the colonizer's world, or the Western world. It signifies the white supremacist position which cannot be contested. Second, from the colonizer's perspective, it meant bestowing onto the Africans everything they apparently did not possess. In other words, the gifts of civilization, according to the Western model: education, scientific advancement, religion, administrative and political structures, social structures and hierarchies, and even Western mindsets. The Western world shaped the centre while the African setting formed the periphery, which was expected to conform to the practices of the centre and thus preserve its position of marginality. In *No Longer at Ease*, Mr Green, the senior officer, is compared to Joseph Conrad's Kurtz from the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Mr Green takes his civilizing mission seriously, thus bringing light to the African people, so he identifies Africa with a state of subordination and inferiority in relation to the West. He believes only in "the Africa of Charles, the messenger, the Africa of his garden-boy and steward-boy" (Achebe 2010: 84). In his view, the British mission in the heart of darkness was still incomplete and he could not accept the emerging dawn of light. For those like him, the defining characteristics of the centre could not be contested, subverted or deconstructed.

Yet, Achebe indicates that the only valid interpretation of light refers to the recovery of Nigeria's condition of normality as a nation, thus paving the way for progress, an intention which has still been a utopian project in its post-independence years. Achebe admits that Nigeria, as anew nation, still has a long way to go and certainly needs time to grow from a wayward child to a fully responsible adult. But people like Mr Green denied Nigeria's chance to achieve independence, liberation and growth. Metaphorically speaking, colonialism itself turned into a state of darkness for the African people, while the emerging daylight of independence brought much brighter prospects. Henceforth, "Kurtz had succumbed to the darkness, Green to the incipient dawn" (Achebe 2010: 85).

One of the outcomes of this perception problem which insisted on difference and subordination was that the colonized individual was perceived as a "minor requiring protection" (Achebe 2010: 7). The official designation of an African individual in pre-independence years was that of a "British Protected Person", a tag which framed an "unexciting identity" for Achebe (Achebe 2010: 39) during his studies at the BBC Staff School in London. The turning of a "victim" into a "minor" (Achebe 2010: 7) emphasized once more the discourse of superiority and advantage professed by the colonizer who identified himself as a protector.

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Even later, in postcolonial times, abuse has still taken the form of practices such as 'othering', discrimination and racism. For instance, the African nationality was included in the category reading "Other" in immigration forms, the other boxes being for "European, Asiatic" and "Arab" nationalities (Achebe 2011: 48). Being prohibited accommodation or alcoholic drinks, or having to travel in separate partitions in the bus (as shown in the essay "Travelling White", Achebe 2011: 47-53) seems outrageous for Achebe as he travels to Southern Rhodesia. Nevertheless, Achebe dares to travel like the whites do, fighting the hostility of the white travellers and thus seeking to deconstruct a set of common 'othering' practices. Unfortunately, the promised implications of light in postcolonial times seem to lag or fail to reach full development mainly because of ideological reasons.

4. Replacing 'Othering' with Celebration

'Othering' set the scene for oppression and also upheld Western racism against the African fellow being. Achebe also shows that the colonial rhetoric of 'othering' was also constructed on animalization, a state of absence and the ultimate annihilation of humanity understood as the condition of being human. For example, one of the components of this discourse is the depiction of the African as a subhuman being, a primitive brute or creature. In line with Conrad's writings, a long literary and historical tradition of representing the African as an animal has existed through centuries. Africa has often been depicted as a zoo (Achebe 2011: 62), a derogatory and even dehumanizing representation perpetuated by many, be they writers or just ordinary people. We can even identify the emergence of the "colonial genre (...) beginning with Rudyard Kipling in the 1880s, proceeding through Joseph Conrad to its apogee in E.M. Forster and ending with Joyce Cary and Graham Greene" (Achebe 2011: 63). Their accounts substantiate this dehumanized perception of Africans, a view which underscores their apparently rudimentary nature, their lack of education, the existence of forms of worship (including the fact that they worship any European who comes along and even European objects) (Achebe 2011: 89), or their lack of social or political responsibility (Achebe 2011: 63).
Another aspect which weakens the humanity of the African people refers to the formulation of typologies about them which place them in classes defining "something dark and ominous and different" (Achebe 2011: 88). By means of typologizing, this type of representation reduces their personality and worth as individuals, thus including them in stock, fixed, standardized images or patterns. In response, Achebe reiterates the general message of his works, that of seeing and treating the Africans "for what they are: human beings" (Achebe 2011: 88).

Therefore, the colonial discourse and its underlying ideology concerning the Africans were constructed on negation, lack or absence. Achebe observes that there is a whole list of what the Africans were said "not to have or not to be" (Achebe 2011: 114): they did not have a soul, a history, reason or awareness of themselves, religion, culture, not even human speech, being merely capable of making sounds and babbling, no intelligence, and no accountability (Achebe 2011: 114). Colonial narratives about the

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Africans often excluded the African voice from their representations, and this type of discourse based on absence fuelled a negative image of the African in the cultural imagery of the West, depicting "the perfect canvas on which to project phobias or forbidden fantasies, a savage bereft of rationality and morality, fit only for subjection or charitable aid" (Ochiagha 2012: 99). This (mis)representation of African identity as lack or absence of value and worth corresponds to an important characteristic of the 'othering' process, which demonstrates that "defining the other is the project of colonizing praxis" (MacQuarrie 2010: 636).

As a result, the most important step in rehabilitating the position of the Africans in the world is their recognition as human beings, an attitude which is synthesized by the concept of celebration. This basic idea of admitting or acknowledging the existence of the African as a human fellow originates in the traditional mentality of the Igbo people. It is connected to the building of the *mbari* temple of art by the Igbo community, which represented "a celebration, through art, of the world and the life lived in it" (Achebe 2011: 108). The sculptures in the temple were representations of all the people and even objects the Igbo community came in contact with, no matter what their presence signified for them. This means that their entire experience, even the encounter with the colonizer and his presence, occupied a part in the temple. It was not a ritual of blind adoration or awkward manifestation of mysterious forces, but an artistic medium "to domesticate that which is wild" (Achebe 2011: 110), new or unknown, a way to become familiar with new experiences. It was a celebration, indeed, but one with special significance because "to them, celebration is the acknowledgement, not the welcoming, of a presence. It is the courtesy of giving to everybody his due" (Achebe 2011: 110-11), so it involved the fair treatment of everyone. For the Igbo people, art was a vehicle for celebrating reality based on the simple action of recognizing another human being's existence. The violation of this principle breaks the harmony and can only lead to some form of conflict, just as the colonial project showed. For them, "any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration, can become a focus for anxiety and disruption" (Achebe 2011: 110).

Achebe himself was influenced by two types of inheritance, his pre-colonial and colonial heritage. He does not show resentment; instead, he tries to understand the past and show appropriate recognition for everything that was a part of his experience in the world. It is as if the time line is divided into three sections, the colonial inheritance being his "Middle Passage" (Achebe 2011: 111) in life, between the pre-colonial Igbo ancestry and the postcolonial experience. Giving all these aspects their proper due is part of the philosophy emanated by the *mbari* celebration.

While the African recognized the presence of the colonizer and even offered him a place in the *mbari*, the colonizer performed a double type of mischief. First, the colonizer generated an existential crisis after denigrating the Africans' existence as humans by perceiving them as animals. Second, he denied the very presence of African people on their own land altogether. A strange, dark, elusive, weak creature, the presence of the

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African on his own land was hardly decipherable and could not change the colonizer's designs. In effect, Achebe signals the fundamental significance of "presence" for colonialism, which represented "the critical question, the crucial word" (Achebe 2011: 112). The repudiation of the African's presence was the "keynote of colonialist discourse" (Achebe 2011: 113) and concurred with the invalidation of the Africans' existence and the formation of a matrix of exclusion. The example given in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* illustrates the total obliteration of the African 'other':

> "*Question*: Were there people there? *Answer*: Well … not really, you know … people of sorts, perhaps, but not as you and I understand the word." (Achebe 2011: 113)

The celebration principle can also be associated with the necessity of adaptation related to human experience in the third section of the time line, namely in the postcolonial context. In *No Longer at Ease*, after the last link with the clan is broken, Obi recollects the gradual disempowerment of his Igbo clansmen by the white man's policies and feels at ease because he realizes that he must accept the changes in mentality initiated by the colonial rule, and that he must recognize rather than refute these transformations in the reality he experiences: "We all have to stand on the earth itself and go with her at her pace" (Achebe 2010: 133). Achebe suggests that even though the values or principles of the new Nigerian society are different, unstable, sometimes disruptive or harmful as compared to the traditional society, adaptation should come naturally to those who live in the new times because "greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune" (Achebe 2010: 43). And this is a consequence of understanding the importance of celebration, as well.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi finally understands that he must come to terms with the present reality and its change from the past. This coincides with the death of his old self which leaves room for the emergence of a new self, one which is more suited to the new order of things, "feeling like a brand-new snake just emerged from his slough" (Achebe 2010: 132) and which makes him a "cultural hybrid" (Gandhi 2012).[5] His name is suggestive of the restoration of harmony after starting to accept the new reality, his full name, Obiajulu, meaning that "the mind at last is at rest" (Achebe 2010: 5). The transition from uneasiness and disrootedness at the beginning of the novel to this state of easiness in the end is the result of a process in which alienation and displacement must give way to adaptation to the new social, cultural or political environment. This kind of liberation makes him adaptable to the transformed reality he is a part of, while a changed self takes shape:

[5] For the role of religion in the creation of this type of hybrid identity as well as for a discussion of the two-dimensional reality of identity – which contains aspects of the past but also involves a prospective dimension – see Lundby and Dayan (1999).

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> "He no longer felt guilt. He, too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality." (Achebe 2010: 133)

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the collapse of the Igbo community and its norms because of the colonial presence, but he also signals that coping with change is also crucial. As a result, in consonance with W.B. Yeats's view, Achebe illustrates that "no civilization can remain static or evolve forever towards a more inclusive perfection. It must both collapse from within and be overwhelmed from without, and what replaces it will appear most opposite to itself, being built from all that it overlooked or undervalued" (Stock 1970: 106).

5. The Recovery of the Africans' "Proper Name"[6]

The elimination of 'othering' practices must necessarily include the free and open assertion of one's identity, a fact which was utterly rebuffed by the colonial mission. An integral element of human identity (Morărașu 2007), naming, re-naming, mis-naming, forgetting one's name, losing one's name, falsifying or giving one's real name constitute important aspects for Achebe in his essay "Spelling Our Proper Name" (Achebe 2011: 54-67) written in 1988. First, naming is inextricably imbued with cultural features and values so it cannot be perceived outside the cultural background it speaks of. This is because "a name is a description with historical connotations, personal meanings, and cultural resonances drawn from our conscious environment but reflective of our subconscious selves" (George Melnyk, *Poetics of Naming*, 2003, *apud* Morărașu 2007: 77).

As a result, in *No Longer at Ease*, naming is associated with ethnic identity. The protagonist realizes that he had never known Nigeria fully or accurately until living abroad, for "it was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him" (Achebe 2010: 10). In England, his longing for his home country fuses with remembrances of his Igbo tradition. However, upon return, he faces the bitter gap between the idealized image he had formed about Lagos and the reality which exposes a shallow, flashy, crowded, dirty yet highly urbanized space. It is the novelty of this space that shocks him and this type of newness, which is the result of Nigeria's new political status, does not match his recollection of the ancestral social, cultural and political organization. Under the circumstances, Obi feels he must renegotiate his ethnic identity in the changing environment of his community.

Naming undeniably connects the recognition of another human being's presence with the acknowledgement of his identity. Hence, the loss of name leads to the fracturing of identities and the dehumanization of African-Americans in colonial discourse. A special intercontinental relation between Africans and Americans was born as a result of the slave trade. The physical rupture between home and diaspora, slavery and oppression led to forgetting "who they were, their proper name" (Achebe 2011: 56), so the integrity and truthfulness of their identity were damaged.

[6] Achebe 2011: 54.

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The colonizers also renamed their victims, replacing the Africans' and Americans' real names in conjunction with degrading and oppressing them. Oppression implied the undermining of individuality, of individual names as markers of individual identity, turning these names into "common signatures" (Achebe 2011: 56). More than that, the new name echoed ideas of domination, suppression and barbarity since "one side earned the name of slaves, and the other of savages" (Achebe 2011: 56). Depersonalization was further joined by objectification since the Africans were no longer seen as people, but as mere objects.

Given this background which has still lingered in collective memory, Achebe reinforces the necessity to "Spell Our Proper Name" (Achebe 2011: 53, 56-7), a fact which corresponds to restoring and upholding their identity and "waving it like a banner in the wind" (Achebe 2011: 67). This can only be realized by fighting off the stories invented about Africa and by revealing the truth about its people's identity. It entails the emergence of agency for the African subject in order to subvert the false ideas about his identity. It is thus necessary to switch the poles of representation so as "to hear Africa speak for itself after a lifetime of hearing Africa spoken about by others" (Achebe 2011: 53).

At the same time, the oppressor acted under disguise, concealing his "real name" and presenting himself to the victim with "an alias, a pseudonym, or a nom de plume" (Achebe 2011: 57). This type of attitude suggests that the colonizer did not openly assume responsibility for his actions, and so it was a sign of mischief and cowardice. Assuming a false name, "the trickster" (Achebe 2011: 58) set about acting fraudulently and dishonestly. However, in the African people's perception, the name of the colonizer echoed ideas of authority and power. For example, the colonizers were rarely seen, but their apparent absence did not reduce their authority (Achebe 2011: 16), so the impact they had on the native population resulted from all aspects related to their domination.

6. Literature as Celebration of Humanity

The assertion of African identity implies the act of daring to take appropriate action so as to make its presence felt and its voice heard. How can this be achieved? For example, by means of literature insofar as the contemporary African writers have the chance to facilitate the affirmation of African identity through their works and thus contribute to the erasure of old conceptions of difference, darkness and absence proliferated by the colonial literary genre.

First of all, Achebe goes back in time to trace the role of the colonial literary genre in transmitting images of 'otherness'. He shows that the slave trade was influenced by British writing practices. The changes in the content of British writing about Africa and the increase in intensity of the slave trade synchronized and reached a climax in the eighteenth century. Therefore, literature handed down pejorative stereotypes of Africa to other cultural media, such as the cinema, journalism, even anthropology, humanitarianism and missionary work (Achebe 2011: 79-80).

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Secondly, the writer refers to the postcolonial times so as to identify the current position of literature in the process of 'othering'. Colonial mentality was antagonistic to the theory of celebration exposed above. Unfortunately, this slave-trading colonial mentality breeds on a long tradition and still transmits disparaging images of Africa:

> "it was the same in the times of Joseph Conrad a century later, and it is the same today!" (Achebe 2011: 92)

In post-independence years, even children's stories were permeated with derogatory and offensive ideas about African people who, for instance, were seen as irrational enough to worship objects (Achebe 2011: 69-70). Consequently, the new generation of African writers must restore celebration with the meaning described above, as the proper acknowledgement of the other's presence, of reality's manifold nature and as the application of fair treatment. This is an invitation addressed both to other African writers and to the Western world in general, an entreaty for recognizing the presence of the African fellow being.

Achebe's appeal for artistic expression based on celebration counteracts the type of literary representation employed by the colonial genre which built its discourse on destruction, denigration, belittling and abuse. First of all, African writes must tell the real story of Africa's past and present and thus attempt to replace fake stories about them. Second, starting from the example offered by the Igbo temple of art, everyone must simply commence to recognize the presence of the African person in the world. Third, celebration by means of literature must go one step further and promote the idea that every human being should be treated with respect and courtesy.

The assertion of African identity corresponds to the reassertion of their inherent humanity. It means refusing to be denied existence, disallowing to be ignored, depreciated, disparaged and thrown not only to the margins of civilized society but also out of the limits of humankind. This act of refusal represents the firm affirmation of the state and quality of being human since "the great thing about being human is our ability to face adversity down by refusing to be defined by it, refusing to be no more than its agent or its victim" (Achebe 2011: 23). It involves the rejection of being assigned with a false identity and to be shaped by it. It also entails recuperating the dignity impaired by the colonizer's practices and stories.

As a form of artistic activity, except for its stylistic value, literature must also reflect themes of general interest, so its social dimension is significant. Besides emphasizing "the creative potential in all of us", it is the appropriate medium to "exercise this latent energy again and again in artistic expression and communal, cooperative enterprises" (Achebe 2011: 111). Literature should not become an instrument for doing harm, or for creating the setting for dissention and conflict based on the struggle for domination and control of the 'other'. In agreement with the African tradition's fondness for song, literature, as a form of art, provides the locus for the expression of the self,

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allowing the Africans to sing "the song of ourselves, in the loud, insistent world and song of others" (Achebe 2011: 112).

Literature in general is a site for "celebrating humanity" (Achebe 2011: 123) in the contemporary globalized environment, given that "our contemporary world interlocks more and more with the worlds of others" (Achebe 2011: 123). On that level, literature in general brings people together by depicting similar concerns of people in different corners of the world. A unifying factor, it entreats everyone "to identify, even deeply, with characters and situations in an African novel" (Achebe 2011: 127). Making reference to the world of his novels and outside them, Achebe's message takes account again of the theory which underlines the universal nature of the human spirit.

The bold attitude of the Africans to spell their proper name is also linked with the role of the writer as a promoter of freedom. Achebe advocates "the freedom of the artist" and that of "man in general", his "annoying voice" (Achebe 1981: 59) acting against political repression and defending citizens' rights. It is the writer's duty to fight political injustice and repression by not allowing to be silenced. Employing the previously analysed theme of counteracting darkness with light, he suggests that writers must actively endorse freedom, expose the truth about the reality they experience and endeavour to apprehend the reality as it is, for they "light one candle rather than curse the darkness" (Achebe 1981: 59). In another essay, Achebe underlines the necessity for writers to show preoccupation with the subject of human values (Achebe 1973).[7] As we have shown, the celebration theory also has its contribution to the upholding of human values.

Conclusions

Achebe's approach to the common themes of the colonial project is both original and topical. Achebe does not present a nostalgic view of the past, nor does he rebel with resentment against the past maltreatment of the African. Instead, he proves that the past and the present can interconnect peaceably if we carefully respect some basic principles in our relationships with the others. In the context of the present world of globalized identities, Achebe warns that harmony can only exist if we admit the presence of the other human fellow next to us and then productively engage in collaborative endeavours. He does not speak of equality, but somehow suggests that this ideal is still a long way off. This is why this process should first begin with the eradication of the much-ignored denial of human presence in Africa. Therefore, the seizure of identity was perhaps a much greater crime than the confiscation of land.

Achebe's work denounces the (post)colonial process of 'othering' constructed on various types of misrepresentation, mistreatment and oppression. However, he looks to the future with forgiving and condoning eyes, as if suggesting that instead of difference we should speak of diversity and try to find the means for conciliating human variety. The imperial discourse of difference which was constructed so strongly on patterns of control,

[7] Also see Ibironke's study for the writer's need to actively engage in "the championing of political struggle" (Ibironke 2001: 75) which is an imperative mission for Nigeria's political present and future.

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domination, subjugation and negation of human worth and dignity needs to be substituted with the recognition of humanity, respect and effective cooperation. He responds to abuse, subjugation and wrath with celebration, a conception of life which is liberatory, placatory, and purifying.

The present indicates that we must replace conceptions and attitudes of difference, superiority, supremacy and oneness (the existence of one truth, one race, one perspective) with middle ground options and attitudes, cooperation, tolerance, pluralism and multiculturalism. However, Achebe's proposals are not related solely to the invigoration and restoration of African identity in the contemporary world. They can prove their efficiency for dealing with ethnic conflict successfully, or for homogenizing culturally and geographically diverse identities. Ultimately, the proper application of these paradigms in practice could contribute to the removal of conceptions that make a difference between centre and periphery, dominators and dominated, black and white and their replacement with a model of a multicultural integrative society where 'othering' could no longer be a workable mechanism.

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