

Burying the Dead: The Postcolonial Strategies of Achebe and Naipaul

Tahrir Khalil Hamdi
Arab Open University – Jordan

Abstract: *Mapping out a successful postcolonial strategy/response for the ‘native intellectual’ is a worthwhile endeavour in this global era, especially as the postcolonial subject is bombarded with countless Western-based theories that emphasize ‘fragmented’ or ‘floating’ identities, which occupy an ambiguous space. This paper will examine the strategies undertaken by two current postcolonial writers, V.S. Naipaul and Chinua Achebe, who have negotiated for themselves ideologically opposed strategies, which as I will argue, represent radically different psychological states of development on the part of the two writers as evidenced by their work. Frantz Fanon’s ideas on the development of the ‘native intellectual’ will be used to help bring the psyches of these two writers into sharper focus.*

‘We have a duty to the dead’. Sophocles, *Antigone*

The ‘postcolonial’ response/strategy of the postcolonial subject presents itself as one of the most pressing issues confronting the ‘native intellectual’ (Fanon 1967) in our global age, an age which has had the effect of creating ‘fragmented’ or ‘floating’ identities (occupying a precarious in-between or ambiguous space) that are supposedly more ‘fit’ for survival in this globalized postcolonial era. Postcolonial writers have assumed various strategies in order to cope with their postcolonial situations. Two opposed strategies are best represented by two current writers—V.S. Naipaul (a native of Trinidad, now residing in England) and Chinua Achebe (a native of Nigeria and currently living in his home country). The two writers come from lands (Trinidad and Nigeria), which have seen the birth of what is now the recognized field of postcolonial literature. The difference between these two writers is in the way they view their world and their place/role in it. But it is also more than that. There is an obvious ideological divide between these two postcolonial writers; however, in addition to their ideological differences, they also represent dramatically different psychological manifestations of the postcolonial subject trying to

negotiate survival tactics/strategies in a 'globalized' world; one, I would argue, is borne out of self-contempt and the other out of self understanding.

Self-contempt, as I believe, is embodied in the work of V.S. Naipaul whose 'native' characters are either stripped of any communal ties to their people or are seized by a groundless anger. The impotent anger of the narrator (a fellow Trinidadian) in Naipaul's 'Tell Me Who to Kill' (one of the stories in his 1971 novel *In a Free State*) is of an individual, who in fact, does not understand the causes of his anger, which is purely irrational and destructive. The source of the narrator's anger is taken out of its cultural and historical context. Naipaul's native characters are confused and their anger is at best ambiguous:

O God, show me the enemy. Once you find out who the enemy is, you can kill him. But these people here they confuse me. Who hurt me? Who spoil my life? Tell me who to beat back....Tell me who to kill. (1971:98)

The destructiveness of the narrator in 'Tell Me Who to Kill' is comparable to that of Naipaul, who upon arriving in England on a scholarship from Oxford University, 'tried to commit suicide' after a nervous breakdown. The young Naipaul wrote to his sister in 1949:

I never knew my face was fat. The picture said so. I looked at the Asiatic on the paper and thought that an Indian from India could look no more Indian than I did...I had hoped to send up a striking intellectual pose to the University people [at Oxford], but look what they have got. (Pegasos 2001)

Naipaul's literary career seems to display stunted growth or arrested development, an inability to go beyond Frantz Fanon's first phase of complete assimilation in which the native intellectual:

gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power...His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation' (Fanon 1967:178-179).

This is true of much of Naipaul's work. In fact, Naipaul's assimilation began in his native Trinidad as A. Sivanandan (1990:33) points out in his poignant article 'The enigma of the

colonized: reflections on Naipaul's arrival'. He writes, 'I am beginning to see that Naipaul was an Englishman from the beginning—not British, English—wholly, uniquely English'. This is the Naipaul who has totally absorbed the English language and imagination more astutely than the Englishman himself with his only problem being the stigma of his brown skin and his Indian face, giving proof of his racial ties to that dreaded 'area of darkness', the title of a novel by Naipaul which describes the absolute chaos of his ancestral home of India (c.f. Conrad's 1902 *Heart of Darkness*). In fact, one feels that Naipaul is imprisoned by his brown skin which seems to be an obstacle to his complete 'Anglicization' and perhaps the reason for this brown-skinned white man's attempted suicide upon his arrival in England to study at Oxford.

Even with the psychological disturbance of Naipaul's 'native' characters (i.e. the narrator in 'Tell Me Who to Kill'), one feels that Naipaul has not truly arrived at Fanon's second stage of the native intellectual's development, which Fanon describes as follows:

the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is....But since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only. (1967:179).

If I understand correctly Fanon's second stage of development, the native intellectual's recollection of native life is not necessarily focused on an ulterior motive. It seems to be an innocent recollection, albeit enveloped in a 'borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies' (ibid). More simply put, it seems to be the attitude of an outsider looking at the native plight from Western eyes and represents a *progressive* movement towards the third and final stage of the native intellectual's development: the 'fighting phase' or a stage of 'revolutionary literature', whereby the writer becomes 'an awakener of the people', and successfully produces a 'national literature' (ibid). I would argue here that Naipaul's arrested development has produced a literature of self-hate which in turn has transformed him into a 'double agent' of sorts, an individual who is enough of an 'insider' to be able to penetrate the world of the native and 'understand' him, not in sympathy, but in derision, in double agency, to deliver up the

native to his subjugators in mockery as Sivanandan (1990) so movingly describes:

I was just beginning to come out of the self-hate that colonialism had implanted in me when I first encountered Naipaul—a fellow colonial who knew my condition better than I did, described it with a fine and acute understanding, and then delivered me up to my subjugation in the pursuit of his own deliverance (33).

Naipaul's double agency is something that Edward Said recognizes in his description of Naipaul as a 'scavenger' who was 'sending back dispatches to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals, not of presumably unteachable colonials' (Said 2001:100). While Naipaul, in his role as the 'insider', seems to understand, he really does not. He only understands that the native is a primitive at heart: 'He mocks them, derides them, draws them, cruelly, honestly, from within—with the acuity and brazenness of an unregenerate double agent—but he does not understand them' (Sivanandan 1990:43). What Naipaul fails to understand (or perhaps does not want to understand) is the native's history and experience, the traumatic experience of racism, colonization and dispossession; he cannot even imaginatively become the native for his imagination is trapped in England, an imagination he developed in Trinidad reading his 'third-standard reader' as the narrator in his novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) says upon arriving in England from Trinidad (notice the striking resemblance between the two situations, Naipaul's own and that of the narrator in the novel):

It was Salisbury. It was almost the first English town I had got to know, the first I had been given some idea of, from the reproduction of the Constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in my third-standard reader. Far away in my tropical island, before I was ten. A four-colour reproduction which I had thought the most beautiful picture I had ever seen. (Naipaul 1987:5)

Perhaps the only warm experience Naipaul has of Trinidad is being introduced to a beautiful English world of Salisbury cathedrals and Wiltshire estates (Naipaul currently resides in Wiltshire).

Naipaul's English psyche is comparable to that of an adult man's psyche, which due to unhealthy psychological development, is trapped in or fixated at a certain stage in

childhood. If we turn to Freud and a psychological explanation without all the details and trimmings of his theory, we find that being unable to successfully overcome a certain stage of development (as I have shown above in my discussion of Fanon's necessary three stage development of the native intellectual psyche) can indeed lead to illness and a totally unhealthy development which, in Naipaul's case, has turned into self-hate, an irrational hate for the colonised's history, land and even physical characteristics. It is an illness which incapacitates the man and the writer. In Freudian theory, a man who does not successfully overcome the Oedipus complex is unable to have healthy adult relationships (Eagleton 1983:154); similarly, one can argue that the postcolonial subject, or to use Fanon's phrase, the 'native intellectual', who is unable to develop successfully through the phases outlined above cannot establish a healthy relationship with his past and present for he has not reached a level of maturity and humanity that would enable the man and the writer to achieve a 'symbiosis' (Sivanandan 1990:43), a symbiosis of past and present, which if unachieved, can only result in a destruction and erasure of native history.

Thus, in his assimilation, Naipaul can only malign Third World peoples for their backwardness and lack of civilization, and for their inability to understand or use the modern technology of Western civilization, which is beyond their mental and evolutionary development. His dislike or disgust for the Africans of *In a Free State* (1971), for example, is not only racist, but childish and primitive. Naipaul rambles on about the smell and stink of Africa and Africans. And the reader (who presumably does not know much about Africa and Africans) is reminded of the smelly Africans on every other page of the novel to the extent that it could be considered a motif or recurrent image:

The African opened the door himself. He filled the car with his smell (133).

"What a smell!" Linda said.... "Let's open this window. You can smell the filth they've been eating" (136).

"But I used to think I wasn't very sensitive, getting this smell of Africa that the Marshalls and everybody else said they so loved...It lasts about half an hour or so, no more. *It is a smell of rotting vegetation and Africans. One is very much like the other* (137). [my emphasis]

Lest the reader should forget, Naipaul's synaesthesiac symphony of African and smell continues:

The boy was big and he moved briskly, creating little turbulences of stink (174).

The Israelis talked softly. The tall boy came to clear away Bobby and Linda's plates and left a little of his stink behind (177).

His smell swirled about the room (186).

What exactly is behind this deprecation of Africa and Africans? Could it simply be the obsessive and ill psyche of a defeated and mentally enslaved 'native'?

It seems that Naipaul has turned his back on his own people and other 'wretched peoples of the earth' as his examination of his native Trinidad, India, Africa and the Islamic world reveals. His native characters' search for identity within the context of community has proved to be a futile attempt, as one of his characters in *In a Free State* (1971) learns. Santosh, the Indian peasant who was uprooted from India by his employer in 'One Out of Many', (a story in *In a Free State*), comes to the conclusion that his identity is to be understood individually and in isolation of any particular group. Therefore, Naipaul has negotiated for his characters (and for himself) a survival tactic that is individually based, a response that is, in fact, in line with much of the aesthetic and literary responses coming out of the West. Santosh declares at the end of 'One Out of Many':

Once, when there were rumours of new burnings, someone scrawled in white paint on the pavement outside my house: *Soul Brother*. I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or to whom? I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free. All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over.(Naipaul 1971:53)

For Naipaul, recognizing oneself as a 'presence' means disengaging from one's community and past. In order to be 'free', one should free himself/herself from the constraints of belonging to a group or history and should only worry about feeding and clothing one's body. The idea here is one of rootlessness, of an individual who is a free floating presence and 'soul brother' to no

one. One can only wonder, when it is all over after ‘a certain number of years’, who would bury this body that was brother to no one? This theme of rootlessness and restlessness is a typical twentieth century theme in Western literature, a thematic and aesthetic paradigm of thought that Naipaul has conveniently adopted for his fiction. This adoption, it seems, serves to ensure his easy acceptance in Western circles (he won the ‘Nobel Prize for Literature’ in 2001 and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990) and soothes the troubled psyche of the postcolonial, who due to arrested development, feels more at home with the tormentor and desperately wants to become him. To be free then is to be truncated, cut off, free floating in an ambiguous space or ‘a free state’, similar to the ‘random motion around the atomic nucleus of electrons...which are said to be “in a free state”’ (Wright 1998). This individually based survival tactic, which is basically of Western design and inspiration, cannot possibly constitute a successful postcolonial strategy. In fact, the main thrust of Naipaul’s work seems to be at proving the futility of communal action.

Every attempt at postcolonial independence is decisively struck down by showing that the postcolonial subject cannot rule himself. This is seen most evidently in *In a Free State* (1971) in which Naipaul draws up a hypothetical African state, both real and unreal as Derek Wright (1998) points out in his article ‘Autonomy and Autocracy in V.S. Naipaul’s *In a Free State*’: ‘The novelist’s conflation issue in what Landeg White has called “a free state sufficiently located in recent history to seem real, and sufficiently generalized to seem representative”’ (n.p.). Naipaul, Wright (1998) goes on to argue, is representative enough without being real, except here the important point is that Naipaul uses the imaginative (he has poetic or novelistic license) to wreak havoc on the real (after all, this is not history), thereby presenting readers with a misleading African history. Naipaul, in fact, intentionally conflates events taking place in Uganda in 1965 (tribal wars) with the Mau Mau struggle in Kenya in 1963 (War of Independence against the British) in order to show that post independence Africa in the imagined African state presented in the novella (or any other Third World country for that matter) will inevitably revert to its primitive tribal ways (ibid.). Naipaul’s ‘historical sleight-of-hand’, to use Wright’s term, has the effect of

destroying the colonised's history in a superbly colonialist manner.

Naipaul's inability to come to terms with his past in Trinidad and his ancestors' past in India does not allow him to become human enough to understand the pain of his ancestors. The problem is in Naipaul's refusal/inability to remember an embittered past. Homi Bhabha (1994:121) writes in his article 'Remembering Fanon: Self, psyche and the colonial condition':

Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

It is then this 're-membering' of a dismembered past that is never approached in Naipaul's fiction. It is only by 're-membering' that the postcolonial subject can begin putting things together, something altogether forbidden by Naipaul who very carefully and intentionally discredits all postcolonial attempts at self rule and postcolonial independence as Edward Said (2001:100) points out in 'Bitter Dispatches from the Third World' that 'he [Naipaul] exorcises all the 1960s devils—national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, Third Worldism—and shows them to be fraudulent'. Thus, it is in his rejection of communal/collective action, emphasis on Western-inspired philosophies of individual rootlessness (of not belonging) and burying an embittered past that Naipaul has denied his ancestors a proper and dignified burial.

I believe that the second stance as put forward by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe represents the postcolonial subject coming to terms with an 'embittered history'. Beatrice Okoh, one of Achebe's characters in his most recent novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), asks a very pertinent question: 'What must a people do to appease an embittered history?' (204) Achebe's literary journey, as I believe, represents a genuine effort at providing insights that could help in answering this question, thereby contributing towards a better understanding of the postcolonial situation. While Naipaul (1987:5) remembers and wallows in the 'fairy-tale feel of the snow and the rabbits' of England, Achebe (1995:192) remembers in his article 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England'; '[t]he folk-stories [his] mother and elder sister told [him which] had the immemorial quality of the

sky and the forests and the rivers' of Nigeria. It is easy to see without much analysis the difference between the two visions represented in the previous sentence; one is a distinctly European vision whereas the other is unabashedly African. The space that Achebe negotiates for himself is based on a thorough knowledge of the past and present. He understands that his own ancestors have fallen prey to identity erasure as a result of missionary efforts and English education during the colonization of Nigeria. In his almost tongue and cheek essay entitled, 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England', Achebe rejects a false identity forced upon him by the colonialism that made 'things fall apart' for his ancestors. Achebe (1995:192-193) writes:

I was baptized Albert Chinualumogu. I dropped the tribute to Victorian England when I went to the university....The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell. *Rule Britannia!* to which we had marched so unself-consciously on Empire Day now stuck in our throat.

The above quotation represents the healthy development of the postcolonial writer, successfully overcoming Fanon's first phase of complete assimilation, and humourously, as I might add; 'if someone asks you what Her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria had in common with Chinua Achebe, the answer is: they both lost their Albert!' (ibid.) In fact, the young Achebe was thoroughly enchanted by his ancestors' *African* past, perhaps, especially as his father was a 'Christian convert' and a 'catechist for the Church Missionary Society [CMS]' (Stratton 1994:27). This enchantment with his African past can, possibly, be viewed as the first signs of rebellion by the young Achebe who attended missionary church schools (ibid.).

Instead of turning his face away in shame, Achebe embraces his African traditions, not atavistically, but creatively, reproducing usable traditions from the past and dropping others that simply do not fit into the challenges of the present. One feels that even in his criticisms, Achebe exudes a love for his people, history and culture. His Africa is not the 'heart of darkness' or 'an area of darkness', but a rich community-based *living* culture, with both its strengths and weaknesses. Achebe's emphasis on community enables him to set an agenda that includes men and

women, young and old, an African culture tempered by the past, but living in the present.

Achebe's literary development, in fact, represents an attempt by the writer to address the postcolonial needs of his people and society. *Things Fall Apart*, an early novel by Achebe published in 1958, inhabits a different space than does his most recent novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). The gaps in *Things Fall Apart* are filled in in the later novel, especially in terms of the role of women in society. There is a genuine attempt on the part of Achebe to address the problems inherent in his earlier novel with regard to women, which means that Achebe is indeed in a constant state of development, reacting and responding positively to criticisms by various sectors of his society and is engaged in a healthy dialogue with those who have been and still are subjected to a double marginalization: the women of the wretched of the earth. His relationship with his society is a living and dynamic one. The complaints by African women with reference to the largely missing role of women in *Things Fall Apart* are dealt with proactively in *Anthills of the Savannah*. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Achebe identifies Idemili as the 'god of water'; this is later corrected to the 'goddess of water' in *Anthills of the Savannah* (Stratton 1994:26-27). This is a form of self education and a recognition of the greater role women played in traditional African society, something perhaps Achebe had not realized when he first wrote *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe implicitly blames his Western education for his ignorance of African heritage as Florence Stratton (1994:27) points out in her book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*.

One of the most important and creative characters in *Anthills* is a woman, Beatrice Okoh, who presumably represents all postcolonial people who were inculcated in the cultures of others, but who have been able to come to a realization of the dangers involved in not knowing one's past:

Beatrice...did not know [the] traditions and legends of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing. She was born...into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved (Achebe 1987:96).

Not only is Achebe capable of self correction, but also of *self criticism*, a sort of interrogation of the self, a going back not only to the past of his culture, but also to his own *literary* past. In *Things Fall Apart*, women represented society's last resort. When Oknokwo's world fell apart, he journeyed to his motherland for moral, financial and communal support. The 'Mother is Supreme' (Achebe 1958:96) theme in *Things Fall Apart* is really a double-edged sword because while it does recognize the role of women as essential for survival, it does so at the expense of leaving women as the final option or last resort in society. This would necessarily mean that women are excluded from everyday life and business when other options are present. This philosophy is clearly criticized in *Anthills* in a self-correcting gesture: 'It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!' (Achebe 1987:84) This, as I believe, shows that Achebe really is in constant dialogue with his society and tries to address their needs, a sign of a writer who shows healthy development and growth, especially as it involves self-correction and constructive self criticism. Achebe's native is a *changing* native, one who adapts to change and negotiates a survival tactic that entails a thorough understanding of the past, but is also firmly implanted in the present.

While African feminists still make relevant and significant points with reference to Achebe's inability to comment extensively on the role of women in society, he nonetheless is responding proactively to the needs of his society, keeping in dialogue with the past and present, in terms of history, culture and literature. Achebe does not propose to know the exact role of women in society and asks for the active participation of dynamic African women such as the heroine of the novel, Beatrice in *Anthills*, whose presence commands our attention and respect. In other words, Achebe is saying if herstory is to be told and roles assigned, that responsibility falls upon Beatrice, and therefore this platform cannot be designed by Achebe who can only tell and understand one side of the story. As can be inferred from *Anthills*, Achebe believes that the anger of the doubly marginalized is necessary in bringing about a transformation in the postcolonial situation:

It is now up to you women to tell us what has to be done. And Agatha is surely one of you. And do you know what? Perhaps it

might even be said that by being so clearly, so unpleasantly, so pig-headedly unhappy in her lot Agatha by her adamant refusal to be placated may be rendering a service to the cause more valuable than Elewa's acceptance; *valuable for keeping the memory of oppression intact, constantly burnished and ready* (Achebe 1987:169). [emphasis mine]

In fact, 'keeping the memory of oppression intact' is a recurrent theme in Achebe's fiction; he is in the words of Bhabha 're-membering' a 'dismembered past'. Achebe's literary career is an act of 're-membering', with his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, being in the words of Achebe himself 'an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son' as he states in his article 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1995:193). The title of his most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, is an allegory of 're-membering', which is, in fact, one of the underlying themes of the whole novel, and if I may be so bold to say, of his whole literary career.

It has indeed been argued by some critics that Achebe's 'reconstruction of the past—[and] establishment of "history as the hero of the African novel"' (Lewis Nkosi qtd. in Stratton 1994:22) has set the grounds for the postcolonial novel. Achebe's 'awakener of the people' in *Anthills* (to use Fanon's phrase in his description of the final stage of the development of the native intellectual) plays the role of the anthills 'surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires' (1987:28). In other words, the act of 're-membering' is not *only* an act of atonement with the past, it is also a *survival* tactic at its core, except unlike Naipaul's selfish gesture of feeding and clothing his body, Achebe's response is *communal*. The 'new grass of the savannah' or the youth of a nation must know and learn from the experience of their forebears; this is a thorough knowledge, a communal knowledge that would help ensure the survival of a race, nation and heritage.

Part of Achebe's communal response is embodied in his character Ikem Osodi in *Anthills* whose writings are for the community:

But leave this young man [Ikem] alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole of Kangan; the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighbourhood. (Achebe 1987:112)

One's attention is drawn here to the importance of writing for one's community; the writer's voice belongs to it, and it is the community which can lay claim to one's production. Intellectuals (Ikem, Beatrice and Chris in *Anthills*) can only exist within the scope of a community to which they belong and dedicate themselves, thereby creating a symbiosis between the intellectual and his/her community. It is only through this symbiosis that the native intellectual can have a healthy existence. A healthy psyche would enable the 'man [and woman] [to] quar[r] the world to become more human' (Sivanandan 1990:43). It is also interesting how Achebe weaves these ideas in accents steeped in African tradition and proverb; tradition and proverb are the material and aesthetic production of a community. Here, both the message (the importance of serving one's community) and the language used to express it (interwoven in traditional images) rely upon the unity of content and form, a coming together in more ways than one.

The communal aspect of Achebe's postcolonial intellectual is detailed in his 1973 lecture entitled 'The Writer and his Community' in which he addresses the 'symbiotic relationship between the artist, his art and his community' (Erritouni 2006:64). It is Achebe's firm belief that the writer must use his storytelling abilities in the service of his people. Ali Erritouni (2006:61) comments on this aspect of Achebe's work in his essay 'Contradictions and Alternatives in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*': 'He [Achebe] conceives their [intellectuals'] role as marshaling the subversive power of "storytelling" and serving, and if necessary dying, for the wretched of the earth'.

This firmly places Achebe in Fanon's third phase of the development of the native intellectual, that of the 'awakener of the people' who is in constant dialogue with his people as Achebe's character Ikem tells an audience of university students who have come to listen to his lecture:

Now I want to hear from you. Dialogues are infinitely more interesting than monologues. So fire your questions and comments and let's exchange a few blows. (1987:142)

Dialogues are, in fact, the cornerstone of Achebe's literary career. They make healthy, positive change possible. The change around which Achebe's novels revolve comes as a result of Achebe being *in dialogue* with the past and present, society, women and his own

literature, which tackles precolonial Africa and the ‘postcolonial’ modern state and the role of the native intellectual in it. Achebe’s native intellectual will provoke thought and ask penetrating questions rather than give answers as Ikem tells the crowd at the University of Bassa:

No I cannot give you the answer you are clamouring for. Go home and think! I cannot decree your pet, text-book revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living...As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination. (Achebe 1987:145-146)

Achebe’s self-examination traverses the historical, cultural and literary past. It is a self-examination of the writer and his community and their personal and public histories. While Naipaul is concerned about humouring Western academia and ‘liberal culture’ whose ‘darling’ (Said 2001:116) he has become, Achebe (2005:298) is genuinely concerned about answering up to his own:

There are clear signs that critics and readers from those areas of the world where continuing incidents and recent memories of racism, colonialism and other forms of victimization exist will more and more demand to know from their writers just on whose ideological side they are playing.

Achebe’s ideological stance stems from a healthy psychological disposition concerning his culture, history, traditions and identity. Achebe’s criticisms of precolonial and postcolonial Africa are done, one feels, with a view to improving the situation and to gaining a genuine understanding of the suffering of his people and culture. His efforts are basically directed towards appeasing an ‘embittered history’, a kind of making amends with the past. This act of atonement would allow the writer to deal effectively with the not so ideal present of his postcolonial world. This is done through a psychological and literary rite of passage from a precolonial phase, which would remind the people of a dignified, albeit a less than ideal past, and a postcolonial present in which the writer critically considers what is wrong, ‘where the rain began to beat’ his people and how they can ‘dry’ their ‘bod[ies]’ (Achebe qtd. in Killam 1969:8).

A healthy postcolonial response involves an interrogation of the past, which means a thorough understanding of what happened and why it happened. An escape into alienation, Western-style individualism and a self-perpetrated confusion would not provide an adequate response to the cultural, political and literary predicament of the 'postcolonial' world. An effective postcolonial strategy, as I believe, resides in "collective action," involving 'a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations' (Erritouni 2006:70), not by parroting Western paradigms of thought. Solutions to the problems of the postcolonial subject do not lie in what I would call, strategies of mimicry or cutting edge Western theory (i.e. the Western-designed queer theory) that do not address the cultural, historical and ideological makings of the postcolonial individual, whether male or female. The postcolonial subject needs to structure his/her own narratives which would take into account the dynamics of the postcolonial situation. Part of this response involves providing a proper metaphorical and spiritual burial for all the victims of colonialism, racism and dispossession, a burial that would secure for them the deserved rest and protection from the ravages of time and oppression, which can have the effect of misrepresenting and erasing their histories. These histories need to be preserved through the telling of story upon story, a story-telling festival across cultures and time. Postcolonial writers who take upon themselves this task are creatively contributing towards appeasing an 'embittered history' and securing a justified and dignified burial for their dead.

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