

A decolonial “African mode of self-writing”: The case of Chinua Achebe in *Things fall apart*

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The missionary who left the comforts of Europe to wander through my primeval forest was extremely earnest. He had to be; he came to change my world. The builders of empire who turned me into “a British protected person” knew the importance of being earnest; they had that quality of mind which imperial Rome before them understood so well: gravitas. Now, it seems to me pretty obvious that if I desire to change the role and identity fashioned for me by those earnest agents of colonialism I will need to borrow some of their resolve. Certainly, I could not hope to do it through self-indulgent levity.¹

Quite simply it is the desire – one might indeed say the need- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil of Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest... the image of Africa as the other world, the anti-thesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.²

Abstract

Against a background of arguments that Africa does not possess powerful modes of self-expression, the present paper explores Chinua Achebe’s Afrocentric literary vision that became his crowning reaction to colonialist imagination of Africa as an ahistorical and dark space that is bereft of humanity. Reactions to colonialist description of Africa have ranged, in the African academy, from the search for the origins of the name Africa to a critique of “the invention of Africa” after the colonial imaginary. Monumental research and writing has also been done on how in the transatlantic slavery of Africans and pursuant colonial settlement, Europe developed itself at the expense of Africa. Chinua Achebe has erected his work on a stubborn concern with the “image of Africa” as represented by colonialist and racist writers. This paper fleshes out Decolonial Critical Theory as its tool of reading and making sense of Chinua Achebe’s own decoloniality in defending Africa as a continent that has a wealth of history and humanity. The ability of Chinua Achebe to creatively appropriate the colonial English language and use it as a tool to rebuke Eurocentric imperialism and sensibility is understood as projecting a rebellious decoloniality and Afrocentricism that installs Achebe

1 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays* (London, Doubleday Books, 1989), p. 84.

2 C Achebe, *An image of Africa and the trouble with Nigeria* (Johannesburg, Penguin Books, 1977), p. 11.

as one of Africa's "whistle blowers against ideologies of Otherness." It is a crowning argument of this paper that Achebe envisions, in terms of power and knowledge, a "world where other worlds are possible", in so far as he gestures towards a conversation rather than a clash of civilisations in the globe.

Keywords: Coloniality; Decoloniality; Afrocentricism; Epistemic disobedience; Border thinking; Pluriversality.

Introduction

A provocative argument has been advanced to the effect that, "African modes of self-writing" and expression can be observed to be "very few" that are outstanding in richness and creativity. Achille Mbembe insists that "fewer still" of the African means of seeing and expressing the world "are of exceptional power" in comparison to "German philosophy" and "Jewish Messianism".³ This paper projects an argument that Chinua Achebe among other African thinkers presents not only a beautiful but also a powerful mode of African expression. The aim of the paper is to argue that Chinua Achebe in his essays, lectures and fiction provides a robust decolonial mode of African expression that so ably defends the humanity of Africans and the historicity of Africa against strong currents of racist and what Edward Said has called "orientalist" descriptions of the Other by European colonialist writers.⁴ Valentine Mudimbe has called this Eurocentric naming of Africa as the inferior Other, the "invention of Africa"⁵ after the colonial imaginary. Writing in the 1950s when the idea of decolonisation in Africa held such a strong current, Chinua Achebe installed himself among other writers as a vivid voice for African liberation and pride.

Kenyan political scientist, Ali Mazrui has done monumental research work tracing the origins of the name Africa, and how Africa's "triple heritage" from its own history, its contacts with Arabic cultures, and European civilisations has produced and conditioned Africa as we currently experience it.⁶ On the other hand, from a political and economic perspective, Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney advanced a compelling argument on "how" in concrete

3 A Mbembe, "African modes of self-writing", *Identity, Culture and Politics*, 2, January 2001, pp. 1-39.

4 EW Said, *Orientalism* (London, Penguin, 1978), p. 13.

5 VY Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 16.

6 A Mazrui, "The re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, VY Mudimbe, and beyond", *Thinking Africa*, 36, Autumn 2005, pp. 45-55.

terms "Europe" through the enslavement of Africans and colonisation "underdeveloped Africa."⁷ Among these many emphatic arguments and concerns with the condition of Africa in the world, Chinua Achebe has erected an enduring concern with how the "image of Africa" and that of Africans, as members of the human family, has been represented by colonialist thinkers and writers, and in a meaningful way, how Africans themselves have conspired with Coloniality in undermining the "image of Africa" in a world that is dominated by racist and orientalist prejudice.⁸

A principal observation of the present paper is that Achebe practices what Argentinean Semiotician; Walter Mignolo has called "epistemic disobedience",⁹ a rebellious attitude to knowledge that gestures to a "pluriversal world". Achebe, by refusing in his imagination and expression that Europe can have a monopoly of knowledge on Africa as a "heart of darkness" participates in the pursuit of a "pluriversal world" that is a shelter to knowledges not just one imperial and hegemonic knowledge. To such African writers as Mudimbe, as it is to Achebe, Europe cannot present an "invented" and fabricated "image of Africa" and not get an emphatic response. In presenting an Africa that has its humanity that includes certain gifts and some foibles, Achebe proposes a conversation of civilisations and a dialogue of worlds where Africa is another of the worlds and not some vacant space that invites colonial invasion, or lately; humanitarian intervention.

In spite of his colonial education, which he describes as the education of "a British protected child"¹⁰ in rural Nigeria of the 1940s, Achebe goes beyond the limiting parameters of European epistemology to draw poetry and philosophy from the oral Igbo archive which he deploys in challenging racist myths of Africa as having had a history comparable to "one long night of savagery".¹¹ Epitomising the later African freedom fighters that resorted to armed struggle, Achebe's creature, Okonkwo, in *Things fall apart*, published in 1958, projects decolonial practices, represents a rebellion to invading Eurocentric fundamentalism while defending the African Igbo cosmology to the point of committing suicide instead of surrendering to colonial authorities.

7 W Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania Publishing House, 1973), p. 16.

8 C Achebe, *An image of Africa...*, p. 6.

9 WD Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: (De)Coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience", *Transversal*, 9, August 2011, pp. 7-16.

10 C Achebe, *The education of a British protected child* (London, Penguin Books, 2009), p. 11.

11 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments...*, p. 45.

An apparent refutation of what Achille Mbembe calls “Afro-radicalism”¹² and which Puerto Rican sociologist, Ramon Grosfoguel describes as “third world fundamentalism”¹³ is represented in Achebe’s ability to expose some of the gory attributes of African tribal life such as the ritual murder of Ikemefuna in *Things fall apart*. Afro-radicalists and third world fundamentalist, in their extremism, would only blame colonialism for the ills of their societies and forget to critique internal societal fragilities. In *Things fall apart*, Ikemefuna had become a part of Okonkwo’s family after he was seized from another village as compensation for a crime of murder. The decision by the elders of the clan to have him killed has left some readers of *Things fall apart* with the thinking that at a certain level, the colonial Christian mission with its promises of grace, peace and love was a necessity in the village of Umuofia.¹⁴ The resolve to critique Africa from within, denouncing corruption, violence and tin-pot dictatorship in Nigeria became, for Chinua Achebe, a vocation that accompanied his now celebrated dedication to confronting Eurocentricism and its description of Africa.

Achebe elects an Afrocentric locus of enunciation which does not abstain from using the wealth of the English colonial language, domesticating it as a tool of expression and resistance against English cultural imperialism. As opposed to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o who sees the English language as imprisoning to African expression and sensibility,¹⁵ Achebe finds the language a usable weapon to deploy not only in speaking truth to empire but finding a unifying grammar among Africa’s different language speakers and writers who can now denounce the violence of imperialism in one voice, in the English language. The appropriation of the English language for use as part of the cultural equipment to rebuke imperialism on its own presses home a stubborn statement on the futility of imperialism as its tools of domination become seeds of its defeat. From here the present paper proceeds to explore Chinua Achebe’s Afrocentric literary vision, followed by an explication of Decolonial Critical Theory as the theoretical and conceptual tool of analysis that the paper has preferred in examining Achebe’s work. After that, the decolonial politics of Chinua Achebe that is projected in his classic novel *Things fall apart* is explored. Finally, the paper concludes by advancing the argument that Chinua Achebe’s literary work represents a decolonial vision of a “world

12 A Mbembe, “On the power of the false”, *Public Culture*, 14, June 2002, pp. 629-641.

13 R Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality...” (Available at: www.eurozone.org, accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

14 C Achebe, *Things fall apart...*, p. 77.

15 N WaThiong’o, *Remembering Africa* (Dar-es Salam: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), p. 23.

where other worlds are possible", in summary, a "pluriversal world".

Chinua Achebe's Afrocentric locus of enunciation

"The pleasure and art of story-telling" is in Achebe's own words a gift that was passed on to him by his elder sister.¹⁶ For the pain and the sorrow that pressed out of him the anger to write back to empire, Achebe relied on provocation by colonialist writers and critics who sought to present Africa as a space and a sign of deficiencies and inadequacies. In the essay that has become emblematic of his decolonial thought, *An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's heart of darkness*,¹⁷ Achebe confronts Joseph Conrad's racist depiction of Africa as the "heart of darkness" and his colonist description of Africans as people who were "not human" and were given to "savage" ways of life. Outside the pages of colonist writing such as that of Conrad, Chinua Achebe encountered racist and Eurocentric prejudice represented in the mockery of a fellow lecturer at the University of Massachusetts in 1974 who in a conversation emphatically asked:¹⁸

If I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African Literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African History, in a certain community college not far from here. It always surprised him; he went on to say, because he never thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know.

In such encounters as this, besides being mistaken for a student, one who must be taught by those who know better, Achebe came face to face with the doubt and scepticism of the humanity and history of Africa that Eurocentric thinkers held. While this might on the outside seem to be an isolated if unfortunate encounter of Achebe with racist Eurocentricism in a European university, in reality it is an enduring tendency in racist and colonial thinking to doubt the humanity of Africans and question the historicity of Africa. Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres has so ably described this tendency as "Manichean misanthropic scepticism"¹⁹ which borders on racist attempts to erase the humanity of the other in an attempt to atone for the guilt of their exclusion and oppression. In the case of Africans their

16 C Achebe, *Things fall apart...*, p. 3.

17 C Achebe, "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's heart of darkness", *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 20.

18 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments...*, pp. 1-2.

19 N Torres-Maldonado, "On the coloniality of being", *Cultural Studies*, 21, May 2007, pp. 240-270.

enslavement and later colonisation was defended on the grounds that they lacked humanity, and that slavery and colonialism brought to the African one of the greatest gifts to the living, God and Christianity.²⁰ The vocation of such writers as Achebe becomes an emphatic resistance to the erasure of African history, the denial of the humanity of Africans, and this is done through such a bold announcement of Africa as a human and historic space among other spaces under the sun.

Ali Mazrui has provided a compelling explanation of Africa's condition in the world as a condition of a "triple heritage" defined by Africa being a contested product of its own history of mixed forms "of violent contact with Arabic and Western cultures and religions. In this triple heritage" Africa becomes "central" in global contestations between Islam and Christianity, Westernising and Arabising missions and their imperial clashes in Africa, making the continent a volatile site of ideological and cultural battles.²¹ In this process of Westernising and Arabising missions on the continent, in the argument of Valentine Mudimbe, what has happened is "the invention of Africa" after the imagination of those who seek to dominate it, and who tend to judge it down as the inferior Other and its people as lacking in basic humanity.²² Edward Said described this Eurocentric and Western attitude towards non-Europeans as "orientalism" that is defined by hatred and racist prejudice.²³ From a historical and a political economy vantage point, Walter Rodney goes beyond describing the "invention of Africa" that Mudimbe provides, and the Arabisation and Westernisation of Africa that Mazrui enunciates. Rodney charges Europe with the underdevelopment of Africa through slavery and colonisation that siphoned labour from Africa and extracted, at no cost, human and natural resources.²⁴

The regard by Eurocentric and colonist thinkers of the colonised as lesser beings does not get exhausted in personally embarrassing the colonised and demeaning him as it did Achebe at a European university campus. It proceeds as Frantz Fanon argues "by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it."²⁵ Peruvian Sociologist, Anibal Quijano compares this Eurocentric mindset and way of

20 E Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1964), p. 112.

21 A Mazrui, "The re-invention of Africa...", *Thinking Africa*, 36, Autumn 2005, p 45-55.

22 VY Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 33.

23 EW Said, *Orientalism* (London, Penguin, 1978), pp. 44-45.

24 W Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Dar-Es- Salaam, Tanzania Publishing House, 1973), p. 36.

25 F Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press. 1963), p. 87.

thinking to a deliberately fraudulent mirror that "distorts what it reflects" presenting to the colonised a "necessarily partial and distorted" image of themselves which as Quijano continues, prevents the colonised and the despised from achieving the ability to "identify" their "true problems, much less solve them" as they "continue being what" they "are not" but what the coloniser has imagined and invented them to be.²⁶

From the observation of Frantz Fanon and that of Quijano, the imagination of the African by the colonist is not content with judging down the African as a bestial being and portraying Africa as an ahistorical space but it seeks to inject in the African a view of himself and herself as an object that is marked by inadequacy and inferiority. It is for that reason that Achebe is disgusted by missionary Albert Schweitzer's bigotry in exclaiming that "the African is indeed my brother but my junior brother".²⁷

In his canonical essay, *Impediments to Dialogue between North and South*, Achebe is even more infuriated by "a British governor of Rhodesia in the 1950s" who had the temerity to define "the partnership between black and white in his territory" of the British colony "apparently without intending any sarcasm, as the partnership between horse and its rider".²⁸ The figure of a black horse together with the image of a white rider to the horse compresses together the entire experience of Africans of the burden of slavery and colonialism.

The asymmetrical world, historically, economically and politically, that has installed Europe as the centre of the world and Europeans as the model of humanity seems to have at worst provoked and at best frightened Achebe into the kind of thinking and writing that marks *Things fall apart* and his other novels and short stories. As much as the traumatic experience of slavery imprinted its violence in the melancholic songs of the slave in the narrative of Frederick Douglass,²⁹ the agony of colonialism and its technologies of dehumanisation inevitably stamped their signature on Achebe's decolonial expression of the condition of the colonised in Africa.

The individual pain that Achebe felt upon encountering the violence of colonial dehumanisation of the colonised, and the violence that colonial

26 A Quijano, "Coloniality of power, Eurocentricism and Latin America, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1, August 2000, p. 533.

27 C Achebe, *An image of Africa and the trouble with Nigeria...*, p. 11.

28 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments...*, p. 46.

29 F Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (New York, Penguin Books, 1983), p. 88.

thinkers mounted by erecting fictions of the African as a “horse” of burden seem to have defined anew the relationship between Achebe and his community. He was not going to be a peripheral commentator or a detached observer but an interested insider who wrote from among the oppressed and their locus of enunciation. Unlike the European writer who sees himself and is seen by society as a strange outsider, Achebe, in his combative essay, *The novelist as a teacher* sees himself as a societal insider whose vocation is to awaken society to such injustices as colonial racism.³⁰

Because of our largely European education our writers may be pardoned if they begin by thinking that the relationship between European writers and their audience will automatically reproduce itself in Africa. We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society – wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility.

To the society that produced him, that experienced colonialism before and together with him, and that consumes his work, Achebe is a guide as much as he is a student. He projects himself as a polite follower and sometimes a questioner of the society’s central values as *Things fall apart* demonstrates. Achebe sees it as his role “to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration” because, he says “no African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul”³¹ that colonialism and slavery inflicted. In the observation of Grosfoguel such thinkers who do as Achebe does in this case, who are enmeshed in the experience of their communities and who “walk with” their people while “asking questions” and “listening” to them instead of “walking while preaching” to the people their own personal inventions constitute a decolonial “rear guard” that is different from the colonial “vanguard”.³² Such writers as Achebe models himself are writers that Ngugi wa Thiongo has called ‘writers in politics’ who position themselves on “the side of the people” and see the people not only as objects of their writing but powerful and knowing subjects.³³

30 C Achebe, “The novelist as a teacher”, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 40.

31 C Achebe, “The novelist as a teacher...”, p. 44.

32 R Grosfoguel, “Decolonising Western universalism: Decolonial pluriversalism from Aimé Cesaire to the Zapatistas”, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, Spring 2012, pp. 1-17.

33 N wa Thiongo, *Writers in politics: A re-engagement with issues of literature and society* (Nairobi, Heinemann, 1997), p. 33.

In one of the epigraphs that introduce the present paper, Achebe (1989:84) emphatically proclaims the importance of him being “earnest” about his project of erecting robust counterfictions to Eurocentric racist and colonial imaginations of Africa. If he is to succeed, he argues, in “the desire to change the role and identity fashioned” for him, “by the earnest agents of colonialism”, he will need “to borrow some of their resolve” and determination to change the world. This fiery and militant resolve by Achebe to confront racist Eurocentric fundamentalism is nowhere expressed in such terse and vehement terms as in his essay, *The Novelist as Teacher*, in which he clearly spells out his role and vocation as an African writer:³⁴

Needless to say, we do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name. If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance – for whatever reason – of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about or blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find where we went wrong, where the rain began to bit us.

In his own eyes, Achebe sees himself as a “teacher” whose primary role is to fight African acceptance of racial inferiority which he regards as the “first” sin. He proposes a return to where Africans began to lose their honour and pride, and accepted inferiorisation by Europe. Once again Achebe refuses to neglect the recognition that Africans as victims of slavery, colonialism and the violence that is suffered by excluded peoples have their own “sins” to account for. The task ahead, he argues, is to look back and see where Africa lost its way to become so peripherised and her people inferiorised. The taxing agony that Achebe endures at observing the inferiorisation of Africans becomes more palpable in light of the vivid claims that Mazrui makes to the effect that in the past Africa was a world leader not only in “God, gold and cultural glory” but in knowledge and scholarly “erudition” in the arts and the sciences.³⁵

In writing such novels as *Things fall apart* that go back into the history of colonial encounters of the 18th century and the conquest of Africa, Achebe assumes the mantle of an activist historian who burns with a desire to inject pride in Africans about their past. In the same line with Ali Mazrui and Valentine Mudimbe among many other African writers, Achebe goes into the past to reclaim Africa’s glory:³⁶

34 C Achebe, “The novelist as a teacher”, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 43.

35 A Mazrui, “The re-invention of Africa...”, *Thinking Africa*, 36, Autumn 2005, pp. 45-55.

36 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments...*, p. 45.

I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels, especially the ones set in the past did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.

Thus Achebe’s urge is to correct Eurocentric myths of Africa as a “heart of darkness” and some kind of devil’s headquarters where only the Europeans as God’s chosen and sent can rescue the African from savagery and the consequences of damnation. In the past of Africa lies, in Achebe’s view, the lessons that can assist the present Africans to recover themselves from the condition of exteriority and inferiority that they find themselves in. In this argument Achebe is in concert with such African historians as Bethwell Ogot who has argued that to gain their confidence as a people, Africans need to “give credit to their past” and take a positive look at their history as not having been a nightmare from which colonists rescued them.³⁷

The wealth of Achebe’s thought as an African thinker, which is largely overshadowed by his dazzling fictional work is briefly profiled in this section whose argument is that Achebe claims his space among others as an Afrocentric and decolonial philosopher. The argument that African literature is a form of African political philosophy is eruditely defended by MSC Okolo who insists that African imaginative writers and philosophers are “intimately connected” in that they construct “a comprehensive world view” and both have “people and their world as the object of consideration”.³⁸

Maulana Karenga defines Afrocentricism as “a quality of thought that is rooted in the cultural image and human interest of African people”³⁹ and Achebe’s writing as announced by himself and demonstrated in his *Things fall apart* and other works of history and fiction seem to fit this definition. From here this paper progresses to discuss the Decolonial Critical Theory as the elected lenses of reading Chinua Achebe and understanding Achebe’s project as a writer, philosopher and Afrocentric activist.

On Decolonial Critical Theory

Anibal Quijano is credited with coining the term and crafting the concept

37 B Ogot, *Building on the indigenous: Selected essays* (Nairobi, Regal Press, 1999), p. 73.

38 MSC Okolo, *African literature as political philosophy* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2007), p. 124.

39 M Karenga, *Black studies in the 21st century* (available at: <http://www.wolrdagesarchives.com>, as accessed on 13 August 2013).

of “coloniality”.⁴⁰ Alongside such decolonial thinkers as Ramon Grosfoguel, Walter D. Mignolo has also contributed meaningfully to the understanding of the conceptual corpus of Decolonial Thought when he argued that there is, in the world system “rhetoric” that parades western particularism as universal and seeks to erect the Euro-American Empire as a standard of power and knowledge in the globe. This “rhetoric” has as its “under” and “darker side”, which is the “logic of coloniality” as a global power structure that visits racism, inferiorisation, siphoning of resources and “dispensability of lives” in the global South.⁴¹ As a response to the “rhetoric of modernity” and its constitutive “logic of coloniality” decolonial thinkers and philosophers have discharged what Mignolo has termed the “grammar of decoloniality” that participates in unmasking coloniality and installing such decolonial projects as “epistemic disobedience” that will be discussed in the study of *Things fall apart* below.

In enunciating the “rhetoric of modernity”, Mignolo argues that it is the principal “myth of modernity” that has since the colonisation of America in 1492 sought to parade fictions of Europe as the “centre” of the world and the rest of the globe as an inferior “periphery”. For Mignolo, the “myth of modernity” has become such an emphatic fallacy working through Eurocentric knowledge and perpetuating the falsehood that European provincialism is global universalism.⁴²

As Mignolo says, “modernity, in other words, is not the natural unfolding of world history, but the regional narrative of the Eurocentric worldview”.⁴³ It is this Eurocentric “myth of modernity” that rationalises “emancipation” instead of “liberation” and imposes European power, knowledge and culture upon the world and often times by use of force. In arguing for “decolonising western universalism” Grosfoguel observes that throughout history, the global South has had to endure violent impositions from the North, including the

40 A Quijano, “Coloniality of power, Eurocentricism and Latin America”, *Nepatl: Views from South*, 1, August 2000, p. 533.

41 WD Mignolo, *Preamble: The historical foundation of modernity/coloniality and the emergence of decolonial thinking* (New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 11.

42 WD Mignolo, *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options* (New York, Duke University Press, 2011), p. 117.

43 WD Mignolo, *Preamble: The historical foundation of modernity/coloniality and the emergence of decolonial thinking...*, p. 13.

imposition of western democracy as a model of democracy for the whole world.⁴⁴

The physical and cultural violence of a modernity that seeks to install itself as a global standard constitutes what Mignolo calls the “darker side of western modernity”.⁴⁵ While in the West this modernity is credited with producing such achievements as the “renaissance” and “enlightenment” together with the storied “industrialisation”, in the global South it has visited slavery, colonialism and coloniality as its “darker” projects. The arrival of the white man in the village of Umuofia in *Things fall apart* constitutes the disruption and violation that occurs when one civilisation imposes itself upon another.

Discussing the symbiotic relationship between modernity and coloniality, Maldonado-Torres says that modernity, usually considered to being a product of the European Renaissance or the European Enlightenment, has a “darker side, which is constitutive of it”. That “darker side” he argues, is occasioned by the fact that “Modernity as a discourse and as a practice would not be possible without coloniality, and coloniality continues to be an inevitable outcome of modern discourses”.⁴⁶ Maldonado-Torres’ argument which suggests that coloniality is inevitably incarnated in “modern discourses” is important for the present paper that seeks to observe, among other things, Achebe’s fictive response to the crashing arrival of the colonial empire in Umuofia, a village in pre-colonial Igboland in Nigeria.

After elaborating on modernity which is constituted with coloniality, it will profit this paper to understand what fundamentally coloniality is and how it applies itself or manifests itself as a power structure. Anibal Quijano argues that coloniality “began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet”.⁴⁷ Quijano goes on to argue that “coloniality of power is based upon racial social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power” creating a “Eurocentered capitalist colonial/modern world power”. In a vivid and persuasive definition of coloniality as a global power structure, Maldonado-Torres argues that “Coloniality is different from colonialism” in that “coloniality survives colonialism”, which refers to how colonial power

44 R Grosfoguel, “Decolonising Western universalism: Decolonial pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas”, *Transmodernity, Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, Spring 2012, pp. 1-17.

45 WD Mignolo, *The darker side of Western modernity...*, p. 13.

46 N Torres-Maldonado, “On the coloniality of being”, *Cultural Studies*, 21, May 2007, pp. 240-270.

47 A Quijano, “Coloniality and modernity/rationality”, *Cultural Studies*, 21, April 2007, pp. 168-178.

relations and racial inequalities remain after administrative colonialism has been dethroned.⁴⁸

A discussion of modernity and its underside of coloniality inevitably leads to questions about decoloniality which is erected by decolonial thinkers and theorists as a response if not a reaction to the rhetoric and logic of coloniality. Noteworthy is that decoloniality emphatically seeks a departure from "capitalism" and "communism" as political and economic systems.⁴⁹ There is a keen intention to imagine futures that are not engulfed by the tyranny of both western and eastern knowledges that have been installed as universal wisdom when in actuality they are provincial narratives. Also noteworthy in Mignolo's emphasis in describing decoloniality is the word "delinking" which emphatically signifies decoloniality as a radical movement away from the enticements and pretences of the Eurocentric universal abstract.⁵⁰ The emphatic "Western macro-narratives" face abandonment in decoloniality that seeks to invent new paths of seeing and understanding the world and how it works.

A question might be asked if in "delinking" and seeking to manufacture an alternative imagination of politics and the future, decoloniality is not erecting itself using its own fictions as the new universal abstract that contests the Western, or else an alternative fundamentalism that projects its own tyrannies and dominations. In answer to this possible question, Mignolo presents decoloniality not as another messianic mission but a liberating "option" that proposes new conversations in the "dialogue between North and South" a theme that has occupied Chinua Achebe in a significant way, especially in his enriching essay, *Hopes and Impediments in the Dialogue between North and South*.⁵¹ Other decolonial thinkers such as Grosfoguel, however, insist that decoloniality, in light of the grave violence of coloniality "cannot be an option", but it is "a necessity".⁵²

Decoloniality projects itself as not another absolute but as Mignolo says, a "grammar" that simply refuses to echo and repeat the absolutism of Eurocentric fundamentalisms that have imposed rigid monologues and

48 N Torres-Maldonado, "On the coloniality of being", *Cultural Studies*, 21, May 2007, pp. 240-270.

49 WD Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing...", *Transversal*, 9, August 2011, p. 104.

50 WD Mignolo, *The darker side of Western modernity...*, p. 107.

51 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments in the dialogue between North and South hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, pp. 21-29.

52 R Grosfoguel, Unpublished lecture, "Decolonial summer school on: Power, knowledge and being", *University of South Africa*, January 2014, p. 9.

strait-jacket templates on how the world should work, defined by capitalist or communist aspirations. Grosfoguel adds that decoloniality departs from both “Eurocentric fundamentalism” and “Third World fundamentalism”,⁵³ an attribute that Achebe has sustained in his writing in so far as he takes care to recognise even the weaknesses of African pre-colonial and post-independence societies as he debunks Eurocentricism.

Within the wide expanse of the conceptual corpus of decoloniality are two conceptual attitudes of Decolonial Thought that inform decolonial practices in the global South: Epistemic disobedience and delinking. Mignolo observes that “epistemic disobedience” is part of a search in the global South for “independent thought and decolonial freedom”.⁵⁴ It is an epistemic project that confronts the “epistemic privilege of the first world” that marks the classification of knowledges in the globe. Concerning African knowledges and their peripherisation, Kwesi Wiredu, says that in light of the global privileging of Eurocentric knowledges in the world, in Africa “conceptually speaking then, the maxim of the moment should be: African know thy self”.⁵⁵ Wiredu’s is a gesture towards epistemic disobedience that prefers a radical refusal of seeing and knowing Africa in terms of Eurocentric lenses. The motion of African self-knowledge that Wiredu gestures to is central to Achebe’s work in so far as he projects to counter Eurocentric fictions of Africa’s “savagery” and “darkness”.

Closely related to the decolonial conceptual tools of epistemic disobedience and delinking is the concept of border thinking that is once again traceable to the vast decolonial archive of Walter Mignolo. Pursuantly described by Ramon Grosfoguel, “border thinking” is nothing but “one of the epistemic perspectives” among many which is “precisely a critical response to both hegemonic and marginal fundamentalisms”.⁵⁶ It is Grosfoguel’s view that “what all fundamentalisms share (including the Eurocentric one) is the premise that there is one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve truth and universality?” In refusal to that limited and limiting fundamentalism,

53 R Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality... (available at: www.eurozone, as accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

54 WD Mignolo, “Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26 June 2009, pp 1-23.

55 K Wiredu, “Formulating modern thoughts in African languages some theoretical considerations”, VY Mudimbe (ed.), *The surreptitious speech: Presence Africaine and the politics of otherness, 1947-1948* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 301-332.

56 R Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality... (available at: www.eurozone, as accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

Colombian anthropologist, Arturo Escobar argues that border thinking prefers to understand the world from beyond the parameters of colonial thinking and practice. Border thinking locates its efforts not inside but at the fences and parameters of hegemonic knowledges and subaltern knowledges, and therefore escapes the fundamentalisms and excesses of both extremes.⁵⁷ Achebe thinks and writes from the border of knowledges when he uses his colonial education and his deeply African cultural positionality to rebuke Eurocentricism and to propose a world that can provide shelter for all provinces of life and thought under the sun.

Thus, while agreeing to a dialogue of knowledges and a conversation of thoughts, border thinking prefers to dwell at the limits to avoid appropriation into, and infections by hegemonic and fundamentalist stand points. In remaining at the borders of hegemonic thoughts, the border thinking stand point has the privilege to be strengthened by the strengths of other stand points at the same time benefiting from the advantageous "analytical distance" of being not at the centre, enmeshed and entangled, but at the border, analysing and judging power.⁵⁸

In Mignolo's view border thinking is a motion towards genuine universality that is alive to multiplicity of voices and standpoints. By espousing "multiplicity" border thinking participates in contributing to inclusive universality. "Remaking and readapting Western global designs", points border thinking to attempts at conversations between and amongst local and global standpoints. In so doing the "totality" of imperial knowledges is being challenged to "networks" of knowledges that may produce a non-imperial universality. It is the imagination of border thinking that by its efforts, a convivial family of knowledges in the world may be achieved.⁵⁹ In *Things fall apart*, as this paper will argue, Achebe presses home an emphatic argument for pluriversality where there is no God but gods and where there is no knowledge but knowledges.

Also of import in the understanding of the conceptual equipments of Decolonial Critical Theory and its projects are "transmodernity" and "pluriversality". The concept of transmodernity as a decolonial plank of analysis is, according to Argentinean philosopher, Enrique Dussel founded

57 A Escobar, "Worlds and knowledges otherwise", *Cultural Studies*, 21, June 2009, pp. 129-210.

58 WD Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: (De)Coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience, *Transversal*, 9 August 2011, pp. 7-16.

59 WD Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing...", *Transversal*, 9 August 2011, pp. 7-16.

on a critique of the insufficiency of postmodernism which “critiques the universalist and foundationalist pretensions of modern reason, but it critiques it as modern and not as European”.⁶⁰ In essence, Dussel gestures that postmodern contestations of modernity are ill-equipped to disrupt the coloniality of modernity because of their own roots and investments in modernity.

Decolonial critical thinking thus finds post-modern critique to be an insufficient master’s tool whose potency in demolishing the colonial master’s dwelling is in doubt. For that reason, Dussel dismisses “postmodernity” as “profoundly Eurocentric” and gestures for a need for a “transmodernity” that will transcend the limits of Eurocentric modernity. Grosfoguel describes transmodernity as “critical cosmopolitanism” whose utopian project is “to transcend the Eurocentric version of modernity as opposed to Habermas’ project whose gesture is that “what needs to be done is to fulfil the incomplete and unfinished project of modernity”.⁶¹ In the decolonial thinking of Grosfoguel and such thinkers as Achebe, philosophers and other imaginists of a better world, should not carry the cross of just complementing the present modernity but should challenge it to decoloniality and de-imperialisation.

Portuguese lawyer and sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that what must be imagined is “ecology of knowledges, post-abysal thinking premised upon the idea of the epistemological diversity of the world”.⁶² The “ecology of knowledges” that Santos imagines entails “pluriversality” which aspires in Dussel’s words for “a multiplicity of decolonial critical responses to Eurocentred modernity”. It is a concept that Arturo Escobar imagines as the possibility of “worlds and knowledges otherwise”, a “world where other worlds”⁶³ and their knowledges can all exist, and where civilisations can have a dialogue and knowledges can participate in conversations. As it will be seen, in *Things fall apart*, the villagers of Umuofia represent their own world of knowledge and ecology of thought that colonialism violently disrupts.

Of the wealth of concepts through which decoloniality pursues its critical project, the concept of a “locus of enunciation” tends to take a prominent position. It is a concept that is founded on the thinking that in a “pluriversal

60 E Dussel, “World-system trans-modernity”, *Nepatla: Views from South*, 3, April 2002, p. 221-242.

61 R Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality...” (available at: www.eurozone.org, accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

62 BDS Santos, “Beyond Abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges”, *Review*, 1, October 2007, pp. 1-66.

63 A Escobar, “Worlds and knowledges otherwise”, *Cultural Studies*, 21, June 2009, pp. 129-210.

world", and a world that espouses not just one imperial knowledge, but "ecologies of knowledge" all knowledges are situated and located. In arguing for "shifting the geography of reason in the age of disciplinary decadence", Afro-American philosopher of humanity, Lewis R Gordon depicts the geopolitics of knowledge, where knowing and thinking are grounded.⁶⁴ In the same way, when Paula ML Moya insists on the importance of being "who we are, from where we speak" she argues for a geo-politics and a body-politics of thinking and knowing from an announced locale.⁶⁵ Walter Dignolo collapses the geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge together when he argues that "I am where I think",⁶⁶ which is an insistence that knowledge is produced by bodies that are located and situated in history, on the land, in time and on some experiences that inevitably condition the knowledge that is produced. The body becomes a site of experiencing, knowing and expressing the world and life. In that prayer, "o my body, make me always a man who questions".⁶⁷ Frantz Fanon was emphasising the body and not the mind as a site of production of knowledge. Decolonial thinkers and philosophers, in opposition to the ego-politics of knowledge of "I think therefore I am"⁶⁸ as propounded by Rene' Descartes insist that human subjects all speak from bodies and geographies, and that there is no one universal ego-politics of knowledge that offers universal truths about the world. Walter Dignolo argues that it cannot be ignored "who and when, why and where" knowledge is produced. For that reason "rather than assuming that thinking comes before being", decolonial thinkers must "assume instead that it is a racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space that feels the urge or gets the call to speak".⁶⁹ There is no one neutral, universal and all truthful site of knowledge production.

Grosfoguel advances the thinking that as thinking and speaking subjects, we always think and speak from our location in terms of time and space, and the "ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic" and other markers of our identity that colour the thoughts and the knowledge that we produce. It is the rhetoric of

64 LR Gordon, "Shifting the geography of reason in an age of disciplinary decadence," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, Fall 2011, pp. 94-103.

65 PL Moya, "Who we are, and from where we speak", *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, Fall 2012, pp. 79-94.

66 WD Dignolo, "I am where I think: Epistemology and the colonial difference", *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 8, February 1999, pp. 235-245.

67 F Fanon, *Black skins, white masks* (London, Pluto Press, 1986), p. 222.

68 R Descartes, *Discourse on method: Of rightly conducting the reason and seeking truth in the sciences* (New York, Collier and Son Company, 1972), pp. 17-18.

69 WD Dignolo, "Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26, June 2009, pp. 1-23.

“western philosophy” that it is neutral, universal and objective, however, the logic that is concealed behind the rhetoric is that it is situated philosophy that has an “underside” of coloniality and deploys throughout the globe imperial and colonial designs.⁷⁰ It is these designs that seek to install Euro-America as the standard in the world that have seen decolonial African writers like Chinua Achebe and others producing literatures that defend Africanity while contesting colonial myths of Africa as a space of darkness.

Ali Mazrui argues that Africa’s condition in the world becomes even more complex considering that “it is the great ironies of modern African history that it took European colonialism to inform Africans that they were Africans”.⁷¹ Mazrui argues thus in reference to the colonial origins of the name Africa, and the historical fact that colonialism and its racism awakened Africans such as Chinua Achebe to the reality of their blackness and Otherness in the world. Added to that definition of Africa by European colonialism, Mazrui argues, is that defining event where European cartographers mapped African and named many of its countries. The task that Achebe and other decolonial African writers assume is to disentangle Africa from its entanglement in European imperialism and Coloniality.

The decolonial politics of Chinua Achebe in *Things fall apart*

What has eluded even some of the most careful readers of Achebe is how his arresting fiction has tended to steal much attention from the philosophical work of Achebe as an African thinker that is represented in his archive of essays and lectures. To restore some of the stolen attention to the legacy of Achebe as an African philosopher, more than just a novelist, and to allow Achebe’s own views on literature to guide our interpretation of his work in *Things fall apart*, this paper will in this section pay attention to his self-proclaimed literary vision and political vocation in “earnest”. MSC Okolo has done much work in pressing home the argument that such writers as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo, in their ability to describe the African experience and human condition, and to shape worldviews, are philosophers, not just creative imaginists.⁷² The consignment of literature to the provinces

70 R Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality...” (available at: www.eurozone.net, accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

71 A Mazrui, “The re-invention of Africa...”, *Africa*, 36, Autumn 2005, p 45-55.

72 MSC Okolo, *African literature as political philosophy* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2007), p. 11.

of leisure and entertainment is apparently a luxury that those who project to fight coloniality can scarcely afford. Literature becomes part of the decolonial struggle for a "pluriversal" world.

Things fall apart, set during the time of colonial invasions in Africa, in the 18th century specifically, begins with an arresting description of the self-building of Okonkwo who became "well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (p. 1) for his wrestling prowess, courage in war and industry as a farmer. Out of the ashes of the poverty and cowardice of his father Unoka, a lazy and heavily indebted village musician, Okonkwo's "fame had grown like a bush fire in the harmattan" (p. 4).⁷³ True to the fashion of successful titled men of the village, and having been admitted to the league of the "egwugwu" spirit mediums of the village, Okonkwo became "impatient with less successful men". Frequently he got into trouble with village laws as he bit his wife during the "week of peace" and accidentally kills another person earning himself seven years of exile to his mother's homeland as punishment. Chief among the many misfortunes that befall Okonkwo is the speedy conversion of his first born son Nwoye into the new religion, Christianity, of the invading white settlers who admit him into their school and name him Isaac after the biblical son of Abraham. As if success paves the road that leads Okonkwo back to the lowly destiny of his father, after killing a colonial messenger and committing suicide, Okonkwo will have his remains abandoned in the "evil forest" like the body of his father who died of an abominable disease of which the village gave no other form of burial besides to abandon the corpse in the "evil forest".

Kenyan literary critic, Simon Gikandi makes a rather intriguing claim that "Chinua Achebe is the man who invented African literature". It is my take that while Gikandi will need a lot of argument to defend this rather large scale claim, he is not entirely wrong in that Chinua Achebe "was able to show, in the structure and language of his novel that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation" and plagiarism of "European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral African "traditions".⁷⁴ In *Things fall apart* Achebe excels in domesticating the English language and commanding it to vividly express what Abiola Irele calls "the African experience"⁷⁵ of colonialism and Otherness. Chinua Achebe's domesticated English language

73 C Achebe, *Things fall apart* (Oxford, Heinemann Publishers, 1958), p. 1.

74 S Gikandi, *Reading the African Novel* (London, James Currey, 1987), p. 88.

75 A Irele, *The African experience in literature and ideology* (Bloomington, Indiana Press, 1981), p. 96.

that is loaded with picturesque African proverbs and idioms is not a product of an imaginative chance or is it a form of writing that by literary coincidence he has stumbled upon; it is a deliberate and rebellious design. In *The writer and his Community*, Achebe challenges “simplistic” critics who argue for the abolition of the English language in African literature:⁷⁶

On language we are given equally simplistic prescriptions. Abolish the use of English! But after its abolition we remain seriously divided on what to put in its place. One proffered solution gives up Nigeria with its 200-odd languages as a bad case and travels all the way to East Africa to borrow Swahili; just as in the past a kingdom caught in a succession bind sometimes solved its problem by going to another kingdom to hire an underemployed prince.

This rather emphatic assertion, which Achebe insisted on in the heady days of the language debate in African literature in the 1970s, is in response to equally strong currents of argument from writers and critics fronted by Ngugi wa Thiongo⁷⁷ who have emphatically argued for the peripherisation of the English language in the description and expression of the “African experience”. Achebe’s view is that the English language is an inevitable master’s tool that can creatively be domesticated, re-invented, disciplined and be diverted to fight back to empire by expressing the historicity of Africa and humanity of Africans under the sun.

While English is indeed a colonial language, and one that carries the worldview and sensibility of the colonist, for Achebe it still remains a ready weapon that can be appropriated for use in the struggle against coloniality. More still, the English language delivers the unintended benefit of helping Africans of different languages to understand each other in cultural pan-African conviviality.

There is a political risk to loading the English language with African proverbs, idioms and even refreshing it with poetic African indigenous syntax; it is creativity that might render the English language richer at the expense of the African linguistic archive. However, Achebe’s project seems to justify the risk, or else the risk is diminished to minimality when an account of the political and cultural benefits is made. In the essay *Colonialist criticism*, Achebe warns the critics who mock the “futility” of expressing the “African experience” using colonial languages such as English. “And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English” because “we intend to do unheard of things”

76 C Achebe, “The writer and his community”, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 60.

77 N WaThiongo, *Remembering Africa* (Dar-es Salam, Basic Civitas Books, 2009), p. 66.

with the language.⁷⁸ It is the "unheard of things" that announce Achebe's combative design to deploy a captured and domesticated English language to confront the imperialism of English culture and sensibility. In defense of this decolonial design Achebe reflects on the question that "is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's?" as "it looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling". The resolution that Achebe makes however, is that "for me there is no other choice. I have been given a language and I intend to use it' because.... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English"⁷⁹ that will adequately express the African colonial experience and condemn English imperialism.

Instead of wallowing in desperation and mourning the imposition of the colonial language and the culture that it carries, Achebe stubbornly intends to "use" the language in his decolonial project of dethroning English sensibility. For that reason Gikandi's claim of Achebe's invention of African literature gains monumentality in that it can arguably be said that Achebe invented a "mode of African self- writing" that took advantage of a colonial language to carry out the "unheard of" decolonial project of using the master's tool to demolish his cultural domain. The ability of Achebe as a missionary educated person, and therefore some kind of an insider into the English world view, a "colonial subject", to turn around and use the English language against its own origins constitutes decolonial "border thinking" of an insider who is an outsider and whose thinking dwells in the fences of the periphery from which he unmasks the projects of coloniality in the colonial modern world.

In *Things fall apart*, Achebe represents the colonial clash of civilisations that Aimé Césaire has so ably described as an all-enveloping experience that constituted physical and cultural violence. Nothing of the life of the colonised was spared the vandalism of the colonial experience that true to the title of the novel divided and scattered the lives of the "natives" all over the place.⁸⁰ The falling "apart" of "things" constitutes total disintegration of the religious, political, social and even physical fabrics that hold a society together. The people that were the rejects of society become the first converts of the invading colonial world; they become the important men and women of the new religion and school of the white man. Titled men and elders of the clan such

78 C Achebe, *Colonialist criticism, Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 74.

79 C Achebe, *Colonialist criticism, Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 75.

80 A Césaire, *The liberating power of words*, T Melsan, interview (UNESCO Courier, 16 January, 1997). pp. 6-7.

as Okonkwo are criminalised, and imprisoned by the new establishment that has turned tables and made nothing of the things society previously valued.

In demonstrating how settlers and natives were mutually ignorant of each other's cultures, and how there was lack of knowledge of each other's worlds between the coloniser and the colonised, Achebe is arguing for a decolonial "ecology of knowledges" that Escobar says is "knowledges and worlds otherwise" where all different "knowledges" can co-exist without violence to each other.⁸¹ Achebe holds it firmly that "every literature must seek the things that belong unto its peace" that is it must "speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current" and most importantly capture the "aspirations and destiny of its people".⁸² *Things fall apart* upholds this situatedness of literature by erecting its projects in a specific community of "nine villages" whose experience of colonial invasion is dramatised in the story. The geography of land from "Umuofia to Mbaino" becomes at once the geography of the meaning of the story that from its "locus of enunciation" becomes the story of how the whole of Africa experienced the "colonial encounters".

While *Things fall apart* does not claim to speak for Africa, but for "nine villages" in the Igboland part of pre-colonial Nigeria, the meaning of the story rhymes with the experiences of colonial encounters of all African villages. In the typical and combative tone of Achebe, he announces that:⁸³

I should like to see the word 'universal' banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world.

Thus, in *Things fall apart* Achebe contributes to what Grosfoguel⁸⁴ advocates for, the decolonial refusal to accept Eurocentric particularism as global universalism. Achebe defends what Dussel refers to as "transmodernity"⁸⁵ and what Walter Mignolo calls "pluriversality",⁸⁶ In transmodernity decolonialists participate in transcending western modernity by insisting on modernities,

81 A Escobar, "Worlds and knowledges otherwise", *Cultural Studies*, 21, June 2009, p. 129-210.

82 C Achebe, *Hopes and impediments...*, p. 74.

83 C Achebe, "Colonialist criticism", *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 76.

84 R Grosfoguel, "Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality..." (available at: www.eurozone.net, accessed on 15 May 2012), pp. 28-37.

85 E Dussel, "World-system trans-modernity", *Nepatla: Views from South*, 3, June 2002, p. 221-242.

86 WD Mignolo, "Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26, June 2009, pp. 1-23.

while in pluriversality western universalism is transcended to erect the co-existence of universalities.

Things fall apart presents Umuofia as a complete world that does not need the endorsement of any other world to achieve fulfilment. The “nine villages” even have their own creation myth that is independent of the biblical and western story of creation. Abiola Irele notes that the story “provides us with a passing view of the tribe’s myth of origin”.⁸⁷ Gikandi describes it as a presentation of “the Igbo epistemology”.⁸⁸ From the beginning of the novel, we are told of the “fierce” wrestling match that pitted “a spirit of the wild” against the founder of the tribe. The Western and biblical story of creation that purveys the monotheism of one God is challenged by the “Igbo cosmology” that boasts of “gods” and where every man has his “chi” or personal god. Achebe defends this transmodernity and pluriversality of thought when he argues in *Colonialist criticism* that “Americans have their vision; we have ours” and he insists that “we do not claim that ours is superior, we only ask to keep it, for as our forefathers said” in their wisdom “the firewood which a people have is adequate for the kind of cooking they do”.⁸⁹ This stubborn decolonial rejection of western universalism and defense of Pluriversality constitutes “epistemic disobedience” and a gesture toward inclusive universality that is so ably articulated by Aimé Césaire who says:⁹⁰

Provincialism? Absolutely not. I’m not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But nor do I intend lose myself in a disembodied universalism. There are two ways to lose one: through walled-in segregation in the particular, or through dissolution into the “universal.” My idea of the universal is that of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all particulars, the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.

Things fall apart in many ways embodies and exudes this thinking of “a universal rich with all particulars” especially in it being a novel in English that in its form and content is against English imperialism and for African sensibility. Achebe is not gesturing towards some kind of third world fundamentalism, but is refusing the imperial and Eurocentric fundamentalism while proposing a conversation and a dialogue of civilisations towards a co-existence of ‘worlds’ and standpoints.

87 A Irele, “The crisis of memory in Chinua Achebe’s *Things fall apart*”, *African Studies Quarterly*, 4, May 2000, p. 40.

88 S Gikandi, *Reading the African novel* (London, James Currey, 1987), p. 66.

89 C Achebe, “Colonialist criticism”, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays ...*, p. 88.

90 A Césaire, *Discourse on colonialism* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 1-31.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Achebe insists on the argument for the co-existence of worlds minus imperial relations of domination:⁹¹

Wherever something stands something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. 'I am the truth, the way and the life' would be called blasphemous or simply absurd for is it not well known a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo.

In this case Achebe is not insisting on mere polytheism or the existence of many gods, but is arguing for the decolonial existence of many different loci of enunciation and worlds of life and belief. It is the pluriversality, and transmodernity that punctuated not only *Things fall apart*, but also the life of Achebe, who in an essay, *Travelling white*, narrates how he as a political activist resisted Rhodesian racism in 1960 by remaining put in a whites only bus.⁹² The bold and stubborn resistance to inferiorisation that Achebe displays here is no different from the unbending resolve of the fictional Okonkwo who refused to bow to the colonial order, and one resolve that led to his killing of a colonial messenger and his preference for death by a suicide than life in colonial bondage.

Even at that, as strongly as Achebe feels about the equal humanity of Africans and the historicity of Africa, he still critiques the controversies of African tribal life and culture by showing us the gruesome and sad killing of Ikemefuna, the abandoning in the forest of twin children together with the unnerving treatment of albinos. That Achebe is not issuing a quarrelsome monologue against Eurocentric fundamentalism, but is prepared for a conversation is demonstrated at the end of the story when the colonial District Commissioner promises to tell his own story titled: *The pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger*,⁹³ which in a way is the promise of a narrative that will most probably contest Achebe's account of colonial encounters in *Things fall apart*. The world that Achebe imagines has no one truth but many truths that must be allowed to share space in the globe. The promise of the colonial official to write his own version of the history of conquest in Nigeria represents Achebe's own preparedness to listen to what even the colonists have to say. Achebe's imagined world is that "pluriversal" globe where everyone has a say.

91 B Moyers, *Interview with Achebe, A world of ideas ...*, p. 76.

92 C Achebe, *The education of a British protected child* (London, Penguin Books, 2009), p. 88.

93 C Achebe, *Things fall apart* (Oxford, Heinemann Publishers, 1958), p. 224.

Conclusion

The present paper has observed that the literary vocation of Chinua Achebe presents a robust argument for a world that admits the reality of other worlds, and a world where there is no one monopolistic Eurocentric knowledge; but a multiplicity of knowledges under the sun. For that reason, Achebe presents a stubborn decolonial "mode of African self-writing" that challenges Mbembe's conclusion that, compared to "Germanic philosophy" and to "Jewish Messianism" Africa is bereft of a powerful quality of self-writing. Achebe's domestication of the colonial English language and loading it with African proverbs and idioms to express African sensibility bespeaks a vivid decolonial "border thinking" that privileges a moderation to Eurocentric and third world fundamentalisms and extremisms of thought. The epistemic disobedience constituted in Achebe's refusal of the western universal abstract and the insistence on "ecologies" of knowledge and an inclusive universality are an emphatic argument for a pluriversal universe that is minus the ego-politics of coloniality.

In refusing Eurocentricism the monopoly of agency to describe and define Africa, Achebe transcends the dominating and limiting parameters of colonial western modernity. Reading Achebe's bewitching classic *Things fall apart* alongside his essays where he announces his Afrocentric decolonial vocation as an organic intellectual, philosopher and teacher illuminates his decolonial projects that are summarised in the bold refusal that Africa was ever a "heart of darkness" or that the African past was ever "one long night of savagery". In his defense of the humanity of Africans and the historicity of Africa against the violence of coloniality and racism, Achebe in fiction and in history manifests the decolonial resolve typified by his main character, Okonkwo, who chooses death to a life of inferiority. Together with such African writers as Ali Mazrui, Valentine Mudimbe and Walter Rodney among many others, Chinua Achebe participates in the "re-invention of Africa" and achieves what Ali Mazrui has called "whistle-blowing against ideologies of Otherness".