



Home and Exile

Chinua Achebe

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Chinua Achebe is Africa's most prominent writer. His fiction and poetry burn with a passionate commitment to political justice, bringing to life not only Africa's troubled encounters with Europe but also the dark side of contemporary African political life. Now, in *Home and Exile*, Achebe reveals the man behind his powerful work.

Home and Exile Details

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From Reader Review Home and Exile for online ebook

Elly says

When I first started this book I surprisingly liked it. It is far from the normal book I read, but I was surprised how easy it was to follow and enjoy. However, about half way through I lost momentum and started questioning what I was reading. To keep it short, I have different opinions on what we discussed and I started to feel like the book was contradicting itself quite a bit. But nonetheless, it's core message isn't the worst thing in the world.

Arthur Cravan says

On the back of the book, Home and Exile is described as "his first fully autobiographical work... Achebe recalls his childhood and early adulthood and reveals the man behind the writing." I don't know about you, but that got me thinkin' it was ol' Achebe spilling his story... it is not. There's a cringeworthy quote on the back by some tool named Richard Flanagan, who deems it necessary to say "Home and Exile shines through the cold cant of our winter of new empires, doing for stories what spring does for apricot trees." That, unfortunately, set a much truer tone for this small examination of the literature of the dispossessed & their imperial bff's.

I picked this book up as a bit of an apology. I read Things Fall Apart in college & haven't read any of his works since. That's because I couldn't stand Things Fall Apart, though I've always remembered Okonkwo & the overall vibe of the work. Getting a bit older, I realized I was really probably rather biased against the work due to the class itself, & meant to read it again to confirm whether or not the book's for me. Instead, I saw this in the library & thought that maybe some insight into the man behind the book would do me good. Na-uh.

First of all, I don't really like Achebe's tone. I really don't. I find it absolutely appalling what some of the English authors got away with saying in the excerpts he gives in the book, & some of his recollections of life back in his home town were rather charming, & he gets in some nice proverbs/metaphorical tales... but overall, I can imagine this book being a very dry lecture with the old man himself up on stage with one of his little hats on, giving joking smiles while my mind wanders.

I don't know. I currently don't have much reason to be interested in the stuff this book talks about, so it limits my possible enjoyment. I will still re-read Things Fall Apart, & then whether or not I like it, I will read its sequel. After that, I can consider myself as having given him a fair shot - here's to hoping the fiction finds a warmer place in my heart than Home and Exile!

Samir Rawas Sarayji says

Review has been moved to Samir's Critical Corner [here](#).

Lynecia says

Review to come!

Samadrita says

'The Empire Writes Back' would have been a fitting alternative title for this essay collection. (Achebe doesn't fail to pay a tribute to Salman Rushdie's essay of the same name published in 1982). Because that is what the running theme here is - a reclamation of a land and a culture that was wrested away with brutal force and made a part of an 'Empire' which still insists on viewing that period as one of glory and not characterized by the worst kind of human rights violation ever. And a heralding of the arrival of the African voice in the world literary scene.

Achebe is slowly turning into my personal literary hero. His wry humor, elegant prose, mildly sardonic tone and passion for social justice exude a righteousness that's hard not to defer to. His writings continue to make me question certain pet notions and ideas that are so deeply ingrained in each one of us that they seem like indisputable facts and consequently evade further introspection. My penchant for unconsciously comparing Latin American, South East Asian and African writing to the style, technique and language of the Americans and Europeans I admire and immediately pronouncing judgement on them on the basis of said parameters has to go away now, I realize.

It doesn't matter if African, Asian and other writers of the Commonwealth (Dear god, why do we have that ridiculous redundant grouping still? is it not there for the sole purpose of reminding us that we were once colonies?) have the same degree of grammatical precision and structural integrity to their English prose as their European and American counterparts. It matters that their voices be heard and universally acknowledged and the overlooked truths, their narratives highlight, be analyzed without bias.

Although this collection consists of 3 essays titled *'My Home Under Imperial Fire'*, *'The Empire Fights Back'* and *'Today, the Balance of Stories'* it should be considered a single body of work or discourse intended to dispel certain flawed notions about African people who are often derogatorily referred to as *'tribes'* and automatically consigned to a lesser category of humanity.

Achebe begins with his reminiscences on his early years as a young university student in Nigeria, reading literature based on Africa authored mostly by British and European scholars who, of course, liberally manufactured painfully offensive 'facts' regarding the intellectual and anatomical inferiority of his fellow brethren and propagated the theory that European acquisition of their land and sphere of existence was for the sake of their own personal benefit.

This is what Achebe says about the interlinked nature of inherently racist literature of the time (he is sophisticated enough not to use the word 'racist' even once though) and the Atlantic slave trade:-

"I will merely say that a tradition does not begin and thrive, as the tradition of British writing about Africa did, unless it serves a certain need. From the moment in the 1560s when the English captain John Hawkins sailed to West Africa and 'got into his possession, partly by the sword and partly by other means, to the number of three hundred Negroes,' the European trade in slaves was destined by its very profitability to displace trade in commodities with West Africa."

Achebe directs his suppressed ire at Anglo-Irishman Joyce Cary who was regarded as one of the finest novelists of his time and his creation *'Mister Johnson'* which Achebe systematically breaks down and interprets as a text strewn with viciously hateful commentary on Africans. Another renowned novelist and polymath who had considerable first hand experience of Africa, Elspeth Huxley, isn't spared either as her criticism of Amos Tutuola's *'The Palm-Wine Drinkard'* as a *'folk tale full of queer, distorted poetry, the deep*

and dreadful fears, the cruelty, the obsession with death and spirits, the macabre humour, the grotesque imagery of the African mind' comes off as an insidious denunciation of all African literature in general. Joseph Conrad, predictably, is his next victim. (Criticism of 'Heart of Darkness' seems like a recurrent theme in Achebe's essays)

Quote from 'Heart of Darkness' -

"Well, you know, that was the worst of it-this suspicion of their not being inhuman."

Achebe's deconstruction-

"A more deadly deployment of a mere sixteen words it would be hard to imagine. I think it merits close reading. Note first the narrator's suspicion; just suspicion, nothing more. And note also that even the faint glimmer of apparent charitableness around this speculation is not, as you might have thought, a good thing, but actually the worst of it! And note finally, the coup de grace of double negation, like a pair of prison guards, restraining that problematic being on each side."

Next in Achebe's line of fire is the ever controversial V.S. Naipaul and his lecture titled '*Our Universal Civilization*' delivered at the Manhattan Institute and his caustic and downright obnoxious comments on Asian and African readership and cultures. Achebe brings into focus the difference in attitudes between the Indian-origin Naipaul and the famed Indian writer R.K. Narayan by stating how Narayan saw 'a million stories' every time he looked out of his window and not a 'million mutinies' like Naipaul did.

He ends by hailing story-tellers of repute like Nadine Gordimer (for her literary activism in the backdrop of the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa), Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola and names like Nigerian Cyprian Ekwensi (People of the City), Guinea's Camara Laye (L'Enfant Noir), Cameroon's Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono (Houseboy), Cheikh Hamidou (Ambiguous Adventure) who have lent enormous credibility to the African literary landscape and have led readers all over the world, to take into account the complementary points of view of the people who had been, so far, deprived of a voice.

"Despite the significant changes that have taken place in the last four or five decades, the wound of the centuries is still a long way from healing. And I believe the curative power of stories can move the process forward."

P.S.-My rating may be upgraded (or downgraded) in the future based on what I glean from a reading of *A Bend in the River*, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and a re-reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

Stephen says

This short book is based on a series of lectures given at an American University after the author had moved to this country. It's a primer for anyone, like me, woefully unfamiliar with fiction written in Africa by Africans about Africans in Africa.

It examines how colonialism first suppressed, then condescended to, novels and stories from or about Africa unless they were written by whites. Good education was available to at least a few in a [then] colony like

Nigeria, but it was all based on English literature, as if London were more important to a young African than his own home. Heart of Darkness was about all there was until the publication of Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson in the early 1950s. Achebe is critical of both books, more so of Mister Johnson, as he is of the writings of V.S. Naipaul, whom he sees as contemptuous of Black Africa even in writings not (as is A Bend in the River) set there. He finds an ally in Salman Rushdie in the struggle for novelists to break out of the colonial oppression of local culture and sensibility.

Mr Achebe reviews briefly the emergence of black African fiction writers starting in the 1950s, making clear that one huge hindrance (among others) was the necessity (if one wanted to get published) to write what would sell in England and, later, in North America.

These lectures were meant to be eye-openers to Americans. This book motivates additions to my shelves that are long long overdue. There is a poignant personal message in our copy: it is inscribed by the author to "Elizabeth and Stephen." The Achebes were friends of my parents during Chinua Achebe's time of teaching at Bard College.

Athul Domichen says

Interesting and enlightening essays on the challenges and prejudices faced by African literature, evolving during and after the colonial era; the journey from stories that were about them through alien eyes who looked down upon them and refused to comprehend the varied cultures, to their own strong, true narratives and writers.

Liz says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Chinua Achebe presents the case of why the African voice is needed to tell the African story. He does this effectively through inviting the reader to explore the times where the African voice was largely absent in literature which told the story of the African continent. He largely criticises writers such as Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary and Elspeth Huxley's demeaning portrayal of Africa. However, in 'The Empire fights back', Achebe praises and encourages the emergence of African writers to the literary scene, this he feels provides a balance of stories. It presents the story of a people, from the people themselves.

I believe the perfect summary for this book lies in this statement: 'Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will only glorify the hunter'.

To conclude, Home and Exile clearly explains why Achebe is one of the greatest literary voices to emerge from Africa - and, I dare say, one of the best voices in literature the one has ever seen! It is very encouraging to see other African writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche carrying the torch of African literature lit in the 1950s by Achebe and his contemporaries to our generation today. I will definitely be reading more African literature.

Andrea says

I think Achebe is a great novelist, and I expected to learn a lot from reading this selection of lectures. But I was disappointed. First, Achebe goes over well-worn and familiar ground; most of what he discusses was cutting edge in the sixties and seventies, not the nineties, when this book was published. Second, he chooses two writers for specific ridicule, Elspeth Huxley and Buchi Emecheta. Call me a conspiracy theorist or whatever, but I wonder why both of his poster children for imperialism and African self-hatred respectively are women? Specific examples are okay, but he could have spread the blame around a bit. Achebe is an elderly man, and the thinking in this book illustrates that, sadly enough.

Sophia says

This is a very short book which contains several essays Achebe delivered as public lectures late on in his life at Harvard. As an introduction to Achebe's life and career I think they would work very well. I was especially interested in how he delineated the growth of African literature and the way in which it was received in the west. Also fascinating/sobering is his account of British imperial rule of Nigeria and the colonial education he received. This includes interesting observations about power and control which I think are widely applicable. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in African literature, the history of imperialism and the way in which power corrupts and extends its influence.

Moira McPartlin says

This is the second time of reading. Three fantastic essay on the development of African writing from the arrogant colonial writing of white Europeans to the reclamation of the African story by the great African writers we know today.

Chido says

This 'review' is more of a statement on personal experiences than a proper review but is still relevant to the book, I promise ^_^

Although I am glad to report that the dismissal of black African and/or Asian writers writing about their experiences of their homelands in favour of white European or American writers is not as commonplace as it was in Achebe's day, I love this small collection of essays & I love Chinua Achebe for highlighting (and therefore validating) the frustration I have often felt throughout my years of schooling in a Britain that prides itself on being multicultural and yet offers it's multiethnic students a very Eurocentric curriculum with few exceptions...

For example, in my first year of sixth form, along with Shakespeare's 'Othello' and Tennessee William's 'A Streetcar Named Desire', my English Lang&Lit class also read 'Purple Hibiscus' by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (and I'd just like to take this moment to mention how thankful I am to my teachers for choosing this particular syllabus and introducing me to the work of this amazing woman :-)). I was very excited about this but it seems my excitement was only shared by my English teacher as the rest of the class skimmed through the novel and exclaimed their exasperation at having to learn "African"...

So despite being the only one in the class that enjoyed the book and constantly having to defend Adichie's use of Igbo words and phrases.

But anyway, about the book: Achebe is insightful, witty and above all educational, although I guess the length of these essays prevent him from being more thorough with his observations - which I would have enjoyed.

I leave you with this quote; "Despite the significant changes that have taken place in the last four or five decades, the wound of the centuries is still a long way from healing. And I believe that the curative power of stories can move the process forward."

Eric 'siggy' says

I must say, the man is absolutely amazing and brilliant. The book, which is beautifully written, short, and easy to follow (I mean, it's Achebe, what else would you expect?), discusses the history of literature about Africa -- the British literature before and during the colonial period, and the African literature emerging in the 50's and 60's. It is a polemic not only against shallow treatments of African culture in the literature, but in favor of African yuppies holding true to their roots and developing an identity for the African academic beyond assimilation into Western culture.

I found the book valuable mostly as a telling of the story of the encounter with the Other. "Until the lions produce their own historians, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter," Achebe quotes the proverb of unknown origin on p. 73. In my opinion, well-written and story-filled discussions of this matter like Achebe's are an order of magnitude more valuable (and probably more true) than the abstract, unstructured drivel of the postmodern philosophers.

See my full reaction [here](#).

Stewart says

In 1958 Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*, the novel that helped usher in a new wave of African literature. Until that point literature concerning African had been written by European colonials, and was rife with derogatory depictions of African people and their varied cultures. With the contributions of Camara Laye, Amos Tutuola, and Chinua Achebe, amongst others, there came a rebellion of sorts - the African novel, going against "an age-old practice: the colonization of one people's story by another."

Read my full review [here](#).

Ashish says

A book written by an African of his own Africa and of his own natives. The first lecture was moving with which I was able to smell the fragrance of African soil, culture & innocence of people, which was indicated by terms like Ezebuilo which means a King is an Enemy, an intense feeling of not wanting a king or leader which was very different than the west like Germany & the east like in India, where people always looked for a Hero or a Savior. Achebe not only tells about his Africa but tells about how through literature people

has surpassed poisonous thoughts from one generation to another in the west about Africans as naked, beast and mean people, just for the sake of their economical capital and for their higher dominance over other race people. The most important thing which Achebe talks about is, how to be a good reader & writer and at various point of time is guidelines to his reader of reading the text again & again with awareness & carefully.
