

Kunapipi

Volume 12 | Issue 2

Article 7

1990

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Recommended Citation

Niven, Alastair, Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy, *Kunapipi*, 12(2), 1990.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/7>

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Abstract

It is often said that the conditions for the creation of tragedy in art do not exist in the twentieth century. Modern man has lost a universal acquiescence in the existence of God. We all aspire to be materially prosperous members of a small nuclear family, neglecting or even unaware of our extended family. Modern government and taxation encourages self-interest rather than a sense of community. The lines which Calphurnia, Caesar's wife, speaks on the morning of the fatal Ides of March - 'When beggars die there are no comets seen;/ The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes' - reverberate less persuasively in an era of republicanism. It was not the heavens which blazed forth the death of President Kennedy or the fall of Nikolai Ceauscescu but the television cameras and the newspapers. Can tragedy possibly exist in a world where the innermost sexual secrets of our leaders are frequently made public knowledge or where atomic devastation and environmental pollution threaten the annihilation of our species?

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I believe that modern tragedies are possible and that the writings of Chinua Achebe conform broadly to their traditional demands, whilst at the same time they help us to re-define for the modern world what we mean by the term 'tragedy'. Although I shall argue my case from a reading of Achebe's works themselves, I start by rejecting many of the assumptions I summarised in my opening remarks. I do this almost instinctively. A few months ago, for example, I sat in a crowded studio theatre in London watching a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company of *Titus Andronicus*. Over four hours in length it was among the most harrowing expositions of suffering and grief I have ever witnessed. The audience communally explored the darkest shores of their humanity. It was the sense of shared experience which made it so anguishing an occasion. In an age when so many of us cocoon ourselves in a private relationship with the television or video screen it is salutary to be reminded that great theatrical tragedies demand an interflow of feeling between members of an audience as well as between the audience and the cast of actors. I have long hoped that Achebe would turn his hand to drama since the moral view I shall ascribe to him in this talk, as well as his experience in creating lively dialogue, seem to equip

him for the tragic stage. I was encouraged two years ago when I interviewed him for *South* magazine that he expressed interest in the possibility.

The simplified view of the late twentieth century, which states that tragedy is no longer imaginable, points to the essentially domesticated and at times even suburbanised worlds of its main practitioners. Are not Ibsen, Hardy and James a hundred years ago, Arthur Miller, Graham Greene and Athol Fugard today, examples of writers who take potentially tragic themes and transmute them into works about problems and issues? More immediately, the argument goes, have not Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass and Carlos Fuentes taken the grandest themes and trivialised them with fantastification? I am not going to engage now with these examples but merely use them as reminders that they are often cited in order to demonstrate the unsustainability of the tragic form in twentieth-century literature. As Rushdie's personal predicament today more clearly illustrates than any example I could take from a book, such a view is highly questionable. Ibsen, Hardy, James, Miller, Green, Rushdie, Márquez and Fuentes may individually have no worshipping concept of the divine – or, at best, as with Greene, a tormented and tentative one – but they all write about communities which struggle for it. Tragedy is about the struggle for knowledge and enlightenment, and I would argue that evidence of this struggle is present in a great deal of modern literature. As we enter the 1990s, perhaps the greatest clash of ideologies for more than a century lies just ahead of us, that between liberalism and materialism on the one hand and religion and doctrine on the other. It is hard to say that the conditions for tragedy are extinct when one reflects on the gulf which currently exists between these two world views.

Nor is it necessarily true to say that concern for self and an abnegation of interest in community values has become a fact of life. As a generalisation it was never globally true. No African, for example, needs to be told that his family relationships extend much wider than such relationships tend to do in Northern Europe or the United States. Community schemes are not devalued or even ridiculed by African governments, as sometimes they are in the world of Margaret Thatcher or George Bush. Mankind's inter-dependence is demonstrable still in many parts of the world. Even in the most materially advanced nations we are recognising that for decades we have been sowing the seeds of environmental destruction. In the last year or two politicians and writers have met on common ground in recognising that a tragedy to eclipse all tragedies could be born out of our blinkered self-regard if we do not take steps to prevent it by urgently protecting our surroundings.

My preamble, therefore, attempts to define the context for considering Achebe's work. Is modern tragedy possible? My sense is that it is possible, and that Chinua Achebe is as good an example of how it can be fashioned as we can find in the English-speaking world. But, just as African literature has been a factor in forcing Eurocentric literary critics to cease assuming that there are universal aesthetic criteria applicable to all cultures, so does it require someone like Achebe to extend the Aristotelian concept of tragedy with which I was educated. Ibsen may fall short of true tragic stature because he cannot wholly relate his domestic world to the larger issues of society – he tells us what is wrong in society but not always what it ought to believe in – but Achebe articulates not only the destructive forces in the social systems he describes but also the positive values against which they can be measured.

The word 'tragedy' is much abused in modern parlance. We use it of an air crash, or of the death of a friend, or sometimes even of a missed train or a minor disappointment. 'It was tragic. The bank had just closed when we got there.' In its proper sense tragedy must entail the threefold inter-relationship of man, society and God. Whatever our personal understanding of these terms there can be few people who do not recognise that each individual has to accommodate himself or herself to a broader social context, and that underpinning that social system is a moral order which defers either to a specific deity or to an agreed set of guiding assumptions about right and wrong. In western tragedy the compass needle darts between the three aspects of the inter-relationship I describe, the individual, his society, and the gods, but eventually it usually settles on the individual. In Greek tragedy this was not so (Sophocles' *Oedipus* for example) but we remember Shakespeare's Hamlet or Hardy's Mayor of Casterbridge first and foremost as individuals who try to determine their own destinies and who end up crushed by fate and presaging a changed social order. In African tragedy the focus is more evenly distributed. Indeed, some would say that the dominating factor in the relationship of man, society and God is the middle one of the three. I used to share this view and glibly say of African writing as a whole that it places much more emphasis on community values than it does on the individual, but a re-reading of Achebe's books tells me that this is not so. Ezeulu, Okonkwo, Obi and Chris Oriko are fully conceived characters. But nevertheless the community has an equal status with the individual protagonists. The moral authority of the gods, meanwhile, weighs even-handedly upon both the people and their heroes. What I am proposing is that in Achebe's work we find a balance of interests better sustained than in most European tragedy, from the Renaissance onwards. It would require a longer

exegesis than this to prove it, but I want to assert now that Achebe's writing finds a way of re-balancing the tripartite partnership of individual, society and the divine which European obsession with the primacy of self has tilted too much in one direction.

Just over twenty years ago Achebe, like all Nigerian writers, was embroiled in the Civil War. In a paper he gave at Makerere University, Uganda, in August 1968 he spoke of the war as though it were a mirror of the larger issues with which the whole African continent was engaged.

The fact of war [he wrote] merely puts the matter in sharper focus. It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.¹

It is a measure of the gulf which has grown up between the literatures of Africa and Europe that it is now only too easy to substitute the word 'European' or certainly the word 'British' for the word 'African' in this sentence and by mildly adjusting the syntax end up with an unfortunate home truth. The European writer today, especially the novelist, only rarely engages with the big social and political issues of the contemporary world and thus frequently seems marginalised and 'irrelevant'. Achebe has preached throughout his whole career the message of inter-action between the writer and his times but the Biafran war was a human tragedy on so large a scale that it made his statements at the time reverberate with more than academic or pedagogical force. The writer became the conscience of humanity, as Solzhenitsyn was simultaneously becoming in the Soviet Union.

In the poems which he wrote at the time of the Civil War, Achebe expressed the swift impersonality of war

It comes so quickly
The bird of death
from evil forests of Soviet technology

A man crossing the road
to greet a friend
is much too slow.
His friend cut in halves
has other worries now
than a friendly handshake
at noon.²

Any concept of tragedy of which I am aware entails the arbitrariness of fate. Oedipus meeting his father on the road to Thebes or Macbeth

the witches on the heath begin a road to destruction and self-knowledge which seems casual at the start but which can only be perceived as fatally intended when the consequent chain of events has been unravelled. The inter-connections of chance and fate are the stuff of tragedy. They run through Achebe's work. Okonkwo's gun explodes, kills Ezeulu's son, and so precipitates Okonkwo's banishment. In *Arrow of God* Captain Winterbottom's sudden illness enhances Ezeulu's reputation for magical propensities at exactly the moment when his authority is being questioned. The arbitrariness of dreams play their part in Achebe's world. One recalls Obi Okonkwo's mother:

I dreamt a bad dream, a very bad dream one night. I was lying on a bed spread with white cloth and I felt something creepy against my skin. I looked down on the bed and found that a swarm of white termites had eaten it up, and the mat and the white cloth ... I did not tell anybody about that dream in the morning. I carried it in my heart wondering what it was. I took down my bible and read the portion for the day. It gave me some strength, but my heart was still not at rest. In the afternoon your father came in with a letter from Joseph to tell us that you were going to marry an *osu*. I saw the meaning of my death in that dream.³

The list of chance interventions goes on. In *A Man of the People*, for example, the narrator Odili writes, 'I don't know what put it into my head to go to Chief Nanga's inaugural campaign meeting.' It is on that occasion that Odili is recognised in the crowd and provoked into publicly condemning the corrupt politician, the prelude to his own personal nemesis. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, which has the most sophisticated narrative structure of any of Achebe's novels, we perceive the same events through two or three different pairs of eyes. An event which seems sudden and inexplicable to one narrator is explained by another. The novel demonstrates, however, the impossibility of any individual having an omniscient overview of human behaviour. Everything may in time have to be accounted for rationally, but it does not seem like that as our lives unfold.

It is for this reason that I have called this paper 'Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy'. Achebe demonstrates an essentially tragic view of human action whereby we cannot easily determine our own destiny or even understand the pattern of it, much as we may plan to do so. Like Oedipus, in either the Sophocles' version or in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, we can try to forestall our fate beyond our individual sphere of influence and knowledge but other agencies, human and divine, have other intentions for us, the purposes and outcome of which we shall probably never know. Beatrice Okoh, Achebe's most developed female character, a woman whose illuminating

self-knowledge suggests hope for humanity even in the most corrupt surroundings, has a glimpse of what I am trying to express when at the start of Chapter 7 of *Anthills of the Savannah* she describes her sense of how we can only see fragments of the history we are living.

For weeks and months [she writes] after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin. Anything I tried to put down sounded wrong – either too abrupt, too indelicate or too obvious – to my middle ear. So I kept circling round and round.⁴

Achebe is surely here describing his own experience of writing tragedy, as well as his understanding of how the partial view of destiny we all possess – what the Bible means when it speaks of looking through a glass darkly – is itself part of the tragic process which humanity is doomed to experience.

If it is a part of any definition of tragedy that fate should impose arbitrarily upon human action it is also clear in Achebe's view that tragedy is about ignorance and about failures in self-knowledge. Hence his insistence, in essay after essay, that we must strive to know as much as possible about our circumstances, imperfect though that knowledge will always be. I see his famous remark in 'The Novelist as Teacher' – that 'I would be quite satisfied if my novels ... did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them' – as more than a clarion call to his African readers to remember their heritage but as an even larger statement about the perpetual urgency for human beings to attain maximum knowledge in their search for a way out of their tragic spiral.

Is such an exit to be found? This brings me to a further condition of tragedy, that we should feel the world is shifted by the process of the action and that some redemptive power for good has been revealed even if it does not triumph. I would argue that both conditions are met in Achebe's work, but in the most qualified and humanist of ways. As Okonkwo swings from his tree, as Ezeulu retreats into madness, as Obi gets sucked into corruption and imprisonment, as the people fail to remove their corrupt leaders in *A Man of the People* and as Chris Oriko falls victim to a rapacious police sergeant, we may feel that there is not much prospect of a better future. I do not wish to sentimentalise Achebe's bleak view of African political development by suggesting that he sees much prospect of a better society about to dawn at the close of his novels. On the contrary, the seeds of corrupt disintegration seem to be bearing fruit in all too fertile a way. The novels end not just with personal disaster for the protagonists – only Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills*

of the Savannah is an exception – but with the passing of bribes, the hardening of colonial authority, or the imposition of military rule. There is no Fortinbras or Malcolm to start a cleansed social order, as there is at the end of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Yet Fortinbras has shot his way into Elsinore and Malcolm only succeeded to the throne with the help of the traditional enemy to Scotland, the King of England. In no tragedy that I can think of is the new order unpolluted. What we do find in the greatest tragedies, in Achebe's work among them, is evidence that human goodness, whilst it can be corrupted and brutalised, cannot be eradicated. No one could read one of Achebe's major works without perceiving that there is a moral sense inherent in humanity, however obscured we allow it to become. The pragmatic fact is that we destroy it through avarice and political misgovernment. The more longterm and genuinely fatalistic hope is that eventually it must triumph.

For six years I was Director of the Africa Centre in London. Almost every day in my time there we presented writers, journalists, art historians and educationalists in a programme of commentary upon contemporary Africa. There were moments when a casual dropper-in would have had his worst prejudices about Africa confirmed. I recall the supporters of President Obote and ex-President Lule of Uganda nearly tearing the meeting hall apart as they presented their opposite views about their country. I recall Chinua Achebe himself, stoical and dignified as ever, being rounded upon by a young radical with the words 'You have betrayed the revolution', because he declined to give a neat socialist panacea for the problems of Africa. But overarching these particular memories of dissent and negativism, I recall the perpetual evidence of a continent in progress. We regularly complained at the Africa Centre that the world's press neglected the achievements of African people, concentrating only on their wars, struggles and poverty – as though these in themselves did not have an heroic dimension. The successes of independence, often brought about despite the undermining economic pressures of the very nations who were most prone to criticise, were little noted in the western press but they were the stuff of our programme at the Centre. Time after time I found myself saying to people who were sceptical about our contention that there was another side to the Africa they read about in their newspapers or saw on their televisions, 'Read Achebe.' I did so with the utmost confidence that in his work they would find evidence of that other Africa we knew existed. This was an Africa politically tragic in much of its destiny to date, but culturally and humanly so rich that the underside of tragedy, which is self-knowledge and an eventual accession to a better future, was inevitable. 'Read Achebe' became my defence and my justification for everything we sought to say about Africa, for he was clear-eyed, realistic,

practical, fatalistic, and supremely confident in the eventual worth of humanity.

I have tried so far to describe Achebe's gifts as a tragedian by focusing on his depiction of human character, since he peoples his novels with so many rounded and interacting individuals. In ancient tragedy – whether it be Greek, Sanskrit or in the praises of Sundiata and Shaka – all human drama is enveloped in a cloak of impersonality. Men are the playthings of the gods, doomed to a cyclical re-enactment of folly and insignificance in the wake of divine justice and supremacy. Although I am from a modestly Christian family and would describe myself as a churchgoer, I was educated, like the majority of my generation in Britain and the United States, to believe that faith was slightly embarrassing, best left dormant and unexpressed. Everyone seemed to know that religious conviction was slowly dying and that the future lay with science and rationalism. It has come as a shock to western liberals to realise recently that this comfortable agnostic tenet was not universally shared. The Salman Rushdie case has dramatised the issue explosively and in terms specific to literature. Faith is on the march in all the great religions of the world – not just in Islam, but in Christianity, Hinduism, Shintoism and Judaism. I can not easily think of a recent western writer who has recognised this, though Rushdie might claim to do so. Achebe, like Elechi Amadi, in this respect no less relevant an example, has had no difficulty in encompassing the fluctuating relationships of men and gods. Some might assert that Achebe concerns himself with the divine only in those novels set comparatively far back in time, in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, in both of which the place of priests, rituals and retribution is explicit. But it is there too in a work as contemporary as *Anthills of the Savannah*. Here is Ikem Osodi composing his Hymn to the Sun:

'Undying Eye of God! You will not relent, we know it, from compassion for us. Relent then for your own sake; for that bulging eye of madness that may be blinded by soaring notes of an incinerated world. Single Eye of God, will you put yourself out merely that men may stumble in your darkness. Remember: Single Eye, one-wall-neighbour-to-Blindness, remember!

What has man become to you, Eye of God, that you should hurt yourself on his account? Has he grown to such god-like stature in your sight? Homeward-bound from your great hunt, the carcass of an elephant on your great head, do you now dally on the way to pick up a grasshopper between your toes?

Great Messenger of the Creator! Take care that the ashes of the world rising daily from this pyre may not prove enough when they descend again to silt up the canals of birth in the season of renewal.¹⁵

There are few modern novelists who would attempt this great prayer. It is only possible for Achebe to do so because he writes within a tradi-

tion of story-telling in which orality and text seem at times almost interfused. I have a theory, too tentative to be explored now, that tragedy can only really be created at times when the written word is still dependent on a central living oral tradition. Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles; the authors of *The Mahabharata*; Shakespeare and Racine; Dostoevsky and conceivably Ibsen lived at such moments. Arthur Miller today does not live at the meeting place of oral and written cultures and so, in my view, does not produce true tragedy. Achebe does. And evidence for this exists in all his major works. Furthermore, it is a condition of true tragedy that ultimately the divine forces should act in their own and not entirely in mankind's interests. 'You will not relent, we know, from compassion for us,' Ikem writes in the passage just quoted. 'Relent then for your own sake.' Hence the unpredictability and apparent arbitrariness of the gods in all great tragedies. As Euripides expresses it,

Gods manifest themselves in many forms,
Bring many matters to surprising ends;
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
Things unexpected God makes possible.⁶

I have always advised people to read Achebe's principal work in the chronological order of the history they relate from 1890 to the present day. *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, 'Girls at War', the war poems, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, chronicle different phases in the development of modern Africa. Each work is wholly different in character from the others but together they legitimately can be seen as aspects of one gathering sequence of human imperfection. At the end of *The Trouble with Nigeria* Achebe writes a sentence that, with the substitution of one hundred years for twenty-five, could speak for the whole century he has covered in his fiction. 'I can see no rational answer to the chaotic jumble of tragic and tragicomical problems we have unleashed on ourselves in the past twenty-five years' (*The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 62). There may be no rational answer and hence no single pragmatism which will solve either the national crisis of Nigeria or the follies of the twentieth century, but there may be a fatalistic optimism possible if we can bring ourselves to recognise the power of human goodness. The thesis of *The Trouble with Nigeria* is, after all, that the example of great men like Gandhi may point a way to redemption. Local heroes such as Murtala Muhammed and Aminu Kano are on the same path. There is a way out of our tragic vortex but we need moral resolution to follow it. Great tragedies are about the subjugation of self-interest. The protagonist usually fails to show that ability and so falls, his power removed and his cause a mess.

I am conscious that my view of Achebe's work here has been a sombre one. I am of course aware of his humour and ebullience in much of what he writes. I have just quoted his sentence in *The Trouble with Nigeria* about 'the chaotic jumble of tragic and *tragi-comical* problems'. Comedy is not always the antithesis of tragedy, however. No tragedy is more ironic than *Oedipus the King*, no tragic hero wittier than Hamlet. Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* can be considered one of the great comic creations of nineteenth-century fiction, though he is indubitably tragic.

My contention, however, is that Achebe, this reasonable, compassionate and humane writer, has a fatalistic view of African history and of human behaviour which may even override his commonsense instinct for pragmatic courses of action. He does not believe that we can laugh our way out of misery. He does infer, however, that a renewal of moral integrity will help us on the way. The rest is in the lap of the gods.

NOTES

1. 'The African Writer and the Biafran Cause', *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 78.
2. 'Air Raid', from *Beware, Soul Brother*.
3. *No Longer at Ease*, p. 135.
4. *Anthills of the Savannah*, p. 82.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
6. *Alcestis*, closing lines, translated by Philip Vellacott.

Editions of Chinua Achebe's books to which page references refer:

Anthills of the Savannah (London: Heinemann, 1987).

Beware, Soul Brother (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972).

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No Longer at Ease (London: Heinemann, 1960).

The Trouble with Nigeria (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1983).