

The Trilogy of Chinua Achebe and 'Reterritorialization': An Intersectionality

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Abstract

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of reterritorialization in *A Thousand Plateaus* can be used to explain the processes of cultural formation in the post-colonial space. Chinua Achebe's Igbo trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* are replete with instances of reterritorialization within the Igbo community when it is faced with the phenomenon of colonialism. Okonkwo is the bathetic hero in the first trilogy, struggling to come to terms with the traditional rituals of his community and tries to reterritorialize it by collating his own images of culture in his community, thereby facing resistance from the traditionalists of his own community. Obi is the protagonist to the second volume and he also practices reterritorialization through his own resistance to the Igbo ritual of not marrying a woman with an 'osu' (ominous destiny) by instilling his own images of modernity. This paper proposes to broaden the scope of criticism related to the concept of reterritorialization of Deleuze and Guattari by looking at the process not just as an external phenomenon related to capitalist power but also as a process that interrogates and substitutes power representation of culture within the dynamics of a community.

Keywords: Capitalist knowledge production; Igbo; Nation; Race; Reterritorialization.

Chinua Achebe's body of works is narratives on how to negotiate history in terms of identity and collective narration of race. As a writer of post-colonial fiction, Achebe faces an intellectual's dilemma - how to negotiate history without becoming overtly nationalistic or too Eurocentric. Territory formation is one of the most contested theoretical questions in the postcolonial oeuvre of writings and hence his fiction faces the question of how to deal with territory formation in terms of identity construction. The trilogy of Achebe, that is, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960)

and *Arrow of God* (1964) is based on the themes of territorializing identity in a brutally fragile and shifting world that is finding it hard to locate tradition in modernity and modernity in tradition. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization is to be looked at over here in terms of locating the problematics of postcolonial identity when Achebe is looking at the colonial history of the Igbo territory as a part of his cultural and racial memory. Deleuze and Guattari note in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* that deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization in the sense that every cultural icon is appropriated and substituted/redefined to suit the politics of the coloniser. Deleuze and Guattari therefore make the point that every form of deterritorialization is effectively a means to construct a reterritorialization for the purposes of cultural capital to function from the citadels of power. In Achebe's fiction, the colonisers, that is, the British are not only the agents of reterritorialization, but the voices of modernity are too, though the whole practice of reterritorialization does not happen in a linear ideological movement. Achebe does not look at the colonial history as a monochrome of hyper-nationalist narrative, but he seeks to problematise the discourse in terms of location history as cross-currents of ideological and political struggles. Achebe notes:

Language is our tool, and language is the tool of the politicians. We are like two sides in a very hostile game. And I think that the attempt to deceive with words is countered by the efforts of the writer to go behind the words, to show the meaning. (Achebe, *Times*, 1)

The meaning that Achebe wants to arrive at is of a decentred nature where the anxiety is in locating the very essence of meaning itself in order to construct space for a narrative of identity formation.

The first novel that we need to look at is *Things Fall Apart*, which is Achebe's first attempt at understanding the fissures in Igbo community in terms of identity. Achebe's main narrative technique is centred on the use of myths and legends in order to create the anxiety between tradition and forces of modernity in Igbo community, with modernity being essentially defined through the lens of Eurocentric ideology. Deleuze and Guattari states:

Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity", that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual real-

ity, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomulti-plicities for what they are. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 8)

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is the central protagonist and he has to negotiate with tradition as a force of deterritorialization which strikes at the very narrative of using myths as cultural signifiers. The problem that Okonkwo faces is that he is caught between two spaces of cultural anxiety – one of conforming to Igbo norms in order to maintain his stance as the head of his tribe and the other of challenging those very norms in order to save his foster son Ikemefuna from getting sacrificed as a part of a cultural rite. Deleuze and Guattari dislocates history and culture from a space of fixed cultural signifier and brings up the concept of a rhizome, where “rhizome contains lines of segmentarity, according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 9). The cultural praxis of sacrifice can be located as a rhizome, which territorializes the Igbo cultural norm and then lines of deterritorialization are drawn in terms of Okonkwo’s anxiety to save Ikemefuna from the very cultural practices which have made him the tribal head. The narrator narrates in the novel that “He [Okonkwo] was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father, he could stand the look of blood” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 10), and at the same time “Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna” (Achebe, *Things*, 63). The overtly masculine construct of the Igbo culture forbids Okonkwo from having any identification with his father, who is seen as ‘feminine’ due to his love for flute, but at the same time Okonkwo is psychologically broken for not resisting enough to save Ikemefuna, as the act would have been construed as ‘feminine’. The anxiety of Okonkwo is between the strife of reterritorialization and deterritorialization, as myths and established cultural norms collide with his personal notions of human bond and legacy. The narrator says:

‘When did you become a shivering old woman’ Okonkwo asked himself... ‘How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number?’ (Achebe, *Things*, 65)

Okonkwo is perennially disturbed by the situation of him being identified with the ‘feminine’ constructs of Igbo patriarchy and he is anxious of not getting deterritorialized by the cultural signifiers of ‘femininity’.

One of the most significant aspects of the fiction of Chinua Achebe is to represent the Igbo cultural history in terms of the belief systems operating at the level of social energy in the form of rituals and various folk traditions. The rhizome structure used by Deleuze and Guattari to explain the idea of reterritorialization is further explored in their book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. In this book, Deleuze and Guattari goes to explore the nature of production in terms of wealth production in the form of culture and labour. They observe:

The earth is the primitive, savage unity of desire and production. For the earth is not merely the multiple and divided object of labor, it is also the unique, indivisible entity, the full body that falls back on the forces of production and appropriates them for its own as the natural or divine precondition. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 140)

The point that Deleuze and Guattari raises is on the issue of production of culture through narratives, geographical spaces and memory. According to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism appropriates memory and reproduction in order to control the forces of production and that constitutes the new base in the era of the New Left. Production of culture is a major political narrative in postcolonial fiction because culture in a postcolonial space has to negotiate with the colonial legacy of appropriating forces of production in terms of defining culture as a normative signifier, looked at from the perspective of the coloniser. Achebe's situation is made more problematic by his refusal to look at colonial history purely from a nationalistic perspective and hence when he produces culture through his fiction, he creates a space of fissure where memories of colonial narrative and Igbo narrative are simultaneously interrogated. In one of the moments of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma is carried away by the head priestess of the village called Cheilo for purposes of ritual cleansing. Achebe's narrative voice not only questions the purpose behind such rituals, he even provides for an alternate voice of protest in allowing Ekwefi, the mother of Ezinma, to follow Cheilo in the darkness before Ezinma's father Okonkwo. The narrator says:

What would she do when they got to the cave? She would not dare to enter. She would wait at the mouth, all alone in that fearful place. She thought of all the terrors of the night. She remembered that night, long ago, when she had seen *Ogbu-agali-odu*, one of those evil essences loosed upon the world by potent 'medicines' ... (Achebe, *Things*, 104)

This tells us that Achebe is not in allowance of nationalistic discourses to appropriate forces of production of culture, as much as he is critical of the colonial forces to impose their images of Africa on their native culture. He is critical of the British policy to appropriate native culture through innocuous means like setting up charitable schools, as is done in the novel by Mr. Brown. The boys in the area “worked on their farms in the morning and went to school in the afternoon” (*TFA*, 181). The colonial masters use Christian iconography to “reterritorialize” the Igbos in the faith of the colonisers, as Mr. Smith admonishes a woman for mutilating her dead child, who as declared to be an *ogbanje*, a deadly spirit who would return to plague the living four times. Mr. Smith calls such beliefs as heathen and dismisses such cultural signifiers as evil, thereby relocating the Igbos to the colonial space through Christian motives.

The second novel of the trilogy, *No Longer at Ease* further problematises the question of appropriation of cultural spaces in a given ambit of cultural production. One of the issues raised in the text is that of corruption in a postcolonial country. Obi, the protagonist of the novel has to face offers of bribery in the form of money and sexual favours after he returns from England after having studied there from the funding of Umuofia Progressive Union. Obi is the representation of the postcolonial youth who faces a decadent time in terms of corruption, nepotism and regressive tradition being made to confront individual freedom. Obi is the grandson of Okonkwo from the earlier novel in the trilogy and hence there is a shift from the codes of heroic idealism of Umuofian patriarchy to contemporary loss of heroic signifiers of culture. In discussing the codes of kinship in earlier societies, Deleuze and Guattari note:

Marxists are right to remind us that if kinship is dominant in primitive society, it is determined as dominant by economic and political factors. And if filiation expresses what is dominant while being itself determined, alliance expresses what is determinant, or rather the return of the determinant in the determinate system of dominance. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 147)

In Obi’s case, the determinant system is the code of honour which he is expected to respect as he is sent to England for higher studies from the funding of his native society. Kinship, as Deleuze and Guattari points out, is determined by economic and political forces. Obi’s test of filiation is based on his identity of being an Umuofian and he is expected to produce

his identity in terms of that pre-defined space. Achebe creates a world of myths and ritualistic codes in order to construct the territorial notion of existence. The conversations that Obi has with Okonkwo are the finest examples of this sort of displacement in the postcolonial consciousness through the cultural signifiers of myths and legends. When confronted with the Igbo notion of '*chi*', or personal destiny, Isaac Okonkwo has an argument with an old man regarding the nature of death during thunder. The old man says that it is the *chi* that decides who should die by what but Okonkwo points out that it is the Christian God who saves from such calamities. These little anecdotes point out the constant displacement going on in the Igbo community as they are put more and more under the influence of the 'new religion', Christianity so that Igbo icons are 'deterritorialized' so that the coloniser's voice can be imposed through his religious motifs.

There is a constant anxiety in Obi to be "reterritorialized" in terms of cultural displacement and alienation, as he is an English returned student who has to negotiate with his postcolonial anxiety of having appropriated a foreign tongue and yet having the desire to locate himself in the matrix of his native culture. The narrator notes:

Nothing gave him [Obi] greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. (Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, 40)

There is a very subtle issue of internal dynamics of identity and nationhood raised over here. Obi is from the Igbo speaking tribe of Nigeria in Nigeria there are several other tribes in Nigeria whose languages differ. To the coloniser, Nigeria is one stereotyped Black nation, coming from the margins but they cannot locate the differences within Nigeria's linguistic/tribal population, thereby reflecting the coloniser's lack in knowledge. Whereas, for Obi, his location of culture is problematic in London when he meets with a fellow Nigerian in London who is non-Igbo speaking as that would mean that their link language will have to be English, which would 'reterritorialize' them to the coloniser's cultural index. Foucault, while discussing the notion of discourse, says that "statement" or a cultural signifier is a "modality that allows it to be in relation with a domain of objects, to prescribe a definite position to any possible subject, to be situated among other verbal performances, and to be endowed with a repeatable materiality" (Foucault, *Archaeology*, 120). Obi's anxiety is located at the

repeated materiality of his language of dissent getting dislocated through his compulsion of studying abroad with the money of his on native people. Obi is faced with another crisis, which is surrounded by his relation with Clara. Clara is a woman from the same tribe to which Obi belongs but she is declared to be an 'osu'. An *osu* is supposedly a woman who is cursed and is not supposed to marry anyone as she is sure to bring ill luck to her husband. Obi is caught between his sense of modernity and scientific temperament and his allegiance to his native cultural mores which he is expected to follow as per the conventions of communal integrity. Obi makes Clara go through an abortion which she has to undergo reluctantly to avoid any social scandal. These events are commentaries on the way Achebe looks at modernity as a European construct, coming in direct confrontation with native cultural codes. Obi refuses to take bribes from his own community members to pass immigration of theirs to England but that pushes him further into financial turmoil as he has to repay the loan to UPU and also pay for his sibling's education. Obi cannot marry Clara, going against the wishes of his mother and hence he delves further into emotional loneliness, especially after the death of his mother.

Deleuze and Guattari note, "Racism never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness until those who resist identification have been wiped out. Its cruelty is equaled only by its incompetence and naivete" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 178). Obi's position in England is tacitly driven by racial narratives of divisiveness, which is not necessarily driven by his status of being the Other as the Black man but as a member of his own community who faces ostracisation on the issues related to beliefs and ritual driven codes of social behavior. Obi's anxiety comes across as a case of 'reterritorialization' since he is constantly appropriated by cultural codes of his homeland, when as a 'modern man', his ideology is to destabilise such codes. As Deleuze and Guattari notes that 'reterritorialization' comes through a control over the forces of production, Obi's reterritorialization is driven by the Umuofia Progressive Union's claim over him since they have funded Obi's education abroad. Obi's eventual arrest after he gives in to accepting bribe is a statement on how economic compulsions result in a colonised subject's appropriation into economic forces of production.

The question of cultural appropriation is a major issue in Achebe's third novel in the trilogy *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu is the head priest and the primary character who has to negotiate with the onslaught of the colonial forces, trying to take over every possible icons and symbols of culture from the Igbo community. The novel opens with the entire community waiting for

the sight of the new moon, especially the head priest himself:

The moon he saw that day as was as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by the cruel foster mother. He peered more closely to make sure he was not deceived by a feather of cloud. (Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 2)

Ezeulu's fear is borne out of certain cultural traditions embedded in the collective memory of the tribe. It is Achebe's politics to use myths as cultural signifiers to ascertain the socio-cultural identity of the Igbos. Ezeulu's fear of a delayed rise of the new moon has a more tangible psycho-pathological effect – the fear is about the arrival of the British and their total takeover of the Igbo land. The British advent of the Igbo land, as is the case with their imperial mission elsewhere as well, is essentially a Capitalist endeavour to appropriate the culture of the colonised through production of desire for the coloniser's culture. This tendency of reterritorialization of Deleuze and Guattari is reflected in the theory of Frantz Fanon:

He [the colonised subject] must seek his culture elsewhere, anywhere at all; and if he fails to find the substance of culture of the same grandeur and scope as displayed by the ruling power, the native intellectual will very often fall back upon emotional attitudes and will develop a psychology which is dominated by exceptional sensitivity and susceptibility. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 177)

Fanon, as a Marxist postcolonial thinker expostulates on the hypothesis that the colonised subject moves towards the colonial centre with the desire of appropriating the coloniser's self in order to move up the power structure. Deleuze and Guattari also harp on forces of production being the ruling ideological premise by which the coloniser appropriates the cultural denominators of the colonised. Deleuze and Guattari notes that the politics of representation is always a result of "social and psychic repression of desiring production" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 184), which implies that representation is based on certain tenets of desire that is created by the forces of production which in turn is controlled by the colonial narrative. Hence, Ezeulu's fear is that the Igbo rituals and the very way of life will be appropriated by the British as they control the production of culture, and as the head priest, he has to negotiate with the anxiety of losing the narrative over cultural norms and symbols.

Deleuze and Guattari's formulations of analyzing history as an overrun

of capitalism is of significance while looking at the postcolonial fiction of Achebe. They note that “primitive societies are not outside history”, implying that history is not marginal in constructing the social codes of these societies. By the phrase “primitive societies”, Deleuze and Guattari implies societies which existed before the advent of capitalism, and if these societies do not exist outside history, then “...it is capitalism which is at the end of history, it is capitalism that results from a long history of contingencies and accidents...” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 154). The question of history becomes very important in looking at the colonial and postcolonial paradigm because the advent of colonialism is indeed an advent of capitalism. The colonisers look to appropriate colonised history by taking on the economic and cultural forces of production, for which, the native culture faces obliteration and marginalization. Achebe’s narrative strategy transcends any linear analysis of history by pitting on the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary, as Ezeulu’s power politics goes beyond the simple act of trying to protect the “purity” of Igbo culture against the aggressive politics of the British, represented by Mr. Winterbottom. However, to start our argument, it must be stressed that colonialism is indeed a force of producing capital at the cost of controlling the forces of production of the colonised. In a simple, yet significant statement made by Terry Eagleton in ‘Why Marx as Right?’, he says that “the working class includes all those who are forced to sell their labour power to capital, who languish under its oppressive disciplines and who have little or no control over their conditions of labour” (Eagleton, *Why Marx*, 170).

It can be observed that Eagleton’s definition of the labour class can be used to tangentially refer to the colonised class who sell their labour to the capital force of the coloniser. Ezeulu is one such character, who has to accept the colonial narrative of power and takes on a mask of a priest who has control over the metaphysical forces, but he knows that the mask is a covering agent to conceal his actual loss of power in front of Winterbottom. Deleuze and Guattari’s reterritorialization becomes a problematic social force in the novel as there are some characters, especially those from the earlier generation, who vehemently wants to stay with their native identity by protecting their sacred ties with myths and rituals, but there are characters from the new generation like Obika who wants to challenge those sacred ties and move towards Christianity and hence to new cultural and religious codes, as in that they see the opportunity to gain access over colonial capital. In a village meeting, one of the men says, “Yes, we are talking about the white man’s road. But when the roof and the walls of a house fall in, the ceiling is not left standing. The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road – they are all part of the same thing”

(Achebe, *Arrow*, 85). This suggests that the common people of Umuofia are aware that the white man uses his colonial machinery to have absolute control over the forces of production of the colonised, and in that way, the entire narrative gets constructed in terms of the coloniser's discourse.

A very important part of Achebe's postcolonial discourse is to show how the colonised is desiring to move into the power centre in imitating the narrative of the coloniser. Deleuze and Guattari notes:

"It is Oedipus that depends on desiring production, either as a stimulus of one form or another, a simple inductor through which the oedipal organization of desiring-production is formed, beginning with early childhood, or as an effect of the psychic and social repression imposed on desiring-production by social reproduction by means of the family." (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 129)

The postcolonial discourse is a critique on the way colonial narrative feeds on the oedipal myth of constructing the colonised as the non-knowledgeable Other which fails to recognize itself in terms of self-identity and self-definition. The result of this is that the colonised subject feels the need to imitate the colonial narrative in order to gain that self-identity and sense of belonging in history. Frantz Fanon says that colonial politics "by a perverted logic" constructs the "past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon, *The Wretched*, 169) to devalue native history before the colonial era started. Achebe shows this politics of devaluing native culture and history through the British advent in Umuofia by using Christianity as a means to construct an alternate narrative of culture.

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