



## Deconstructing the Hegemony of History: A Study of Postcolonial Resistance in the Indian and African Perspective

### KEYWORDS

historiography, determinism, storytelling, hegemony.

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**ABSTRACT** *Rewriting history had been one of the crucial tools in the reconstruction of post-colonial nations. Hegelian historical principle was incorporated by colonial ideology in order to justify imperial civilizing missions throughout history. African and India post-colonial intellectuals always emphasized the role of the writer over the politician in reclaiming the nation. Gandhi in the Indian context, formulated an alternative model of historicizing, by deemphasizing the aggressive, imperialist spirit of history, thereby taking the battle to conquering of the minds. Gandhi privileged myths over history. In the African context, we find Achebe privileging storytelling as an alternative to history proper in *Anthills of Savannah*. Thus, nationalist excavations of myths, legends and stories emerged as postcolonial alternatives to Western hegemony of historical narratives.*

The necessity of rewriting history, of foisting the colonised self as the subject of that history, emerged as one of the pre-conditions of anti-colonial and post-colonial movements in the nineteenth century. The battle for Independence which broke forth in the fifties and sixties within the colonized countries was preceded by a process of 'historical excavations'. Amilcar Cabral calls the national liberation of a people the regaining of the historical personality of that people, and their return to history (Boehmer, 2005). Since colonialism was a denial of all cultures, history and value outside the coloniser's frame, 'a systematic negation of the other person', the historical retrieval meant a way of making reparation, a reclamation of oral memory, of presenting the African past as not blank but filled with significant human interactions- conflict, tragedy, friendship, ceremony.

In his early essays like 'The Role of Writer in a New Nation' (1964) and 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1965), Chinua Achebe points out the role of the writer as teacher, whose function should be imparting education, 'to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-debasement'. To tell the world that African society had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all dignity (Achebe, 1964). Achebe here envisages a writer to be a cultural nationalist engaged in the revival of the past because he believed like Aime Cesaire that short cut to the future is via the past. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* had been precisely written with this purpose. Though written much earlier than *Things Fall Apart*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, R.K.Narayan's *Swamy and his Friends* or *The Bachelor of Arts* served a similar purpose in case of India too. In the seventies, we see Achebe assigning a second duty to the writers, that of a social critic. The need for recreating a past is being surpassed by the more urgent need of dealing with the neo-colonial malaises afflicting the African societies. In the essay 'The Black Writer's Burden' (1964) written before *A Man of the People*, Achebe says that African writers should be free to criticise their societies, and should focus on the evils within African societies. And he feels the role of a writer should be that of a social transformer, one who is 'aware of the faintest measures of injustice in human relations'. The post-colonial experiences of African societies had forced Achebe to accord a proactive role in the society, not just criticising but re-historicizing it also.

In the Indian context, it was Mahatma Gandhi who countered the hegemony of Hegelian progressive determinism of European history by taking the battle to the realm of the minds. Gandhi not only aimed at liberation of Indians, but also the British from the history and psychology of British colonialism. His battle was a universal battle to rediscover the softer side of human nature, the so-called non-masculine self of man, relegated to the forgotten zones by the western enlightenment notion of historical progressivism. Gandhi rejected history and affirmed the primacy of myth over historical chronicles. By rejecting history, he rejected the unilateral doctrine of progress, from primitivism to modernity and from political immaturity to political adulthood. In Gandhi, the specific orientation to myth became a major general orientation to public consciousness. Public consciousness was seen not as a causal product of history but as related to history non-causally through memories and anti-memories. If for the West, the present was a special case of unfolding history, for Gandhi history was a special case of an all-embracing permanent present, waiting to be interpreted and reinterpreted. Indian society conceptualises the past as a possible means of reaffirming or altering the present. Here, the past is regarded as an authority, but the nature of the authority is seen as shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention. As Marcea Eliade puts it:

While a modern man, though regarding himself as the result of the course of universal history, does not feel obliged to know the whole of it, the man of the archaic societies is not only obliged to remember mythical history but also to re-enact a large part of it periodically. It is here that we find the greatest difference between the man of the archaic societies and modern man: the irreversibility of events, which is the characteristic trait of history for the latter, is not a fact to the former... (Nandy, 1983: 58)

For the Indian, there can be no real disjunction between the past and the present. To Gandhi myths are the essence of a culture, because they contain history, because they are contemporary, and unlike history amenable to intervention. History at best is superfluous and at worst misleading. History as one-way traffic is built up as independent variables which limit human options and pre-empt human futures. Myths on the other hand, allow one access to the processes, which constitute history at the level of the here-

and-the-now. As the core of culture myths widen instead of restricting human choices. They allow one to remember in an anticipatory fashion and to concentrate on undoing aspects of the present rather than avenging the past.

The Western social analysis had regarded history as the reality, while the myth a flawed, irrational fairy tale produced by 'unconscious' history, meant for savages and children. Thus, cultures living by myths are ahistorical and representatives of an earlier second-rate social consciousness. Historical societies are the true representatives of mature human self-consciousness and therefore, their constructions of the ahistorical societies are more valid scientifically than those of these societies themselves. The societies of the East must act out their ahistorical fates as understood by those who are historians of the world. Gandhi, coming in the early part of twentieth century, challenged the hegemony of history over myth, worked out in the paradigm of adult-child relationship by affirming the language of continuity and re-emphasizing the language of the self. The language of continuity undervalued the role of revolution, by negating the ideology of modernity, which seek to locate all the creativity, including creative social action, in clear-cut breaks with the past. It privileged reformism over revolution invoking the Indian worldview, which recognised that as the language of revolution hid within it the message of continuity, the language of continuity too had a latent message of disjunction. The language of the self held that greater self-realisation and self-control lead to greater understanding of the 'objective' material world, and hence a better scope of changing the world. Through these two languages, Gandhi broke out of the determinism of history, making the common man an agent of cultural change through a realisation of his self. He gave the societies the option of choosing their futures here and now, without heroes, without high drama and without a constant search for originality, discontinuous changes and final victories. The present is thus made the historical moment, the permanent yet shifting point of crisis and the time for choice. This was the concept of permanent revolution introduced by Gandhi to battle out the colonial consciousness.

African postcolonial critics have also argued that 'History' is a discourse through which the West has asserted its hegemony over the rest of the world. In the post-colonial world, history can be manipulated to sustain the material interests of the ruling class. If one looks carefully at the archives of history, one finds that it caters to the documentation of the dominant group only and the peasants; the working class and other marginalized groups are systematically kept outside the purview of historiography. This prompts Achebe to reject history proper as the narrative of the masses. He turns to the alternative method of historiography- the indigenous technique of storytelling. In his novel, *Anthills of Savannah*, Achebe privileges story as the more authentic and popular depository of knowledge. In the story there is an instance, where a group of elders assemble in front of the President's palace, to meet him to apprise about their opinion regarding the President-for-Life referendum.. One elder from the Abazon delegation elaborates the significance of story to the assembled crowd: "The sounding of the battle drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards-each is important in its own way.... But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story" (124). He says:

"The same reason I think that our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters - Recalling-Is-

Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours.... The story is everlasting.... Like fire, when it is not blazing it is smouldering under its own ashes or sleeping and resting inside its flint-house." (123-4)

History can be manipulated but not the storyteller, because Agwu, the god of healers,

...picks his disciple, rings his eye with white chalk and dips his tongue, willing or not, in the brew of prophecy; and right away the man will speak and put head and tail back to the severed trunk of our tale. This miracle-man will amaze us because he may be a fellow of little account, not the bold warrior we all expect nor even the war-drummer. But in his new-found utterance our struggle will stand incarnated before us. (125)

To understand the significance of story and its advantage over the European novel, one needs to look at Walter Benjamin's famous essay 'The Storyteller' as pointed out by David Carroll. According to him the story is without explanation or psychological analysis. That is why the reader is free to interpret the way he understands them. The story does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. And in the final paragraph of the essay he writes:

"Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel- not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life".

"The story continues in the shape of the myth, legend, parables incorporated in the form of a novel. It seeks to transform the random history of contemporary politics into a rite of passage to the future' (Carroll, 1990: 194).

The story itself is significant, but also significant is the listener's ability to adapt it to contemporary times. Achebe's mouthpiece in the novel, Ikem in a lecture to the students of the University of Bassa elaborates why 'the storytellers are a threat' (153). The authenticity of the people's story is a threat to the power structure that places itself outside of and above the people. The act of telling the story is a sign of resistance, a determined attempt to counter official myths of stability and justice. Thus, countering the hegemony of history has been a crucial tool in the armory of most of the post-colonial intellectuals and writers of the world.

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