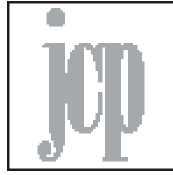

Humanism with a Difference: Universality and Cultural Difference in Postcolonial Theory

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ABSTRACT

One of the central claims made on behalf of postcolonial literature by critics and theorists of postcolonial literature is that this literature highlights the cultural identity of the different nations and communities it represents. In opposition to the idea of the universality of cultural values, which was long upheld in Western literary criticism, particularly in what is defined as liberal humanist criticism, postcolonial writers and critics emphasise the need to recognise and respect cultural differences among and between people. Imposing a single set of cultural norms upon all the people in the world, they argue, is unjust and unfair and leads to domination of the many by the few. From this perspective, all communities and nations have the right to live by their own cultural values and norms and no culture is superior to any other. This emphasis on cultural difference has given prominence to the idea of cultural relativism, which sees each culture as distinct and whole in itself and, therefore, not open to be judged and evaluated by the values and norms of another culture. Thus, in postcolonial literature, universalism is rejected in favour of cultural relativism. This paper discusses the possibility of reconciling universalism with cultural difference in postcolonial theory and literature and refers to the works of such pioneering critics of postcolonial literature as Franz Fanon and Edward Said to develop it. In light of the views of Fanon and Said, the paper offers a reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to highlight the interplay of cultural difference and universality in the novel. Fanon and Said were both very eloquent and committed critics of colonialism and the universalist ideology colonialism had espoused to undermine colonised cultures. However, both also remained committed to humanism and argued for redefining and reasserting humanism to counter colonialism. It is in their humanist thought that this paper aims to find the grounds for bringing together cultural difference and universalism in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, culture, humanism, postcolonial theory, universalism

In *Postcolonial Studies: Key Concepts*, the meaning of "Universalism/Universality" is given as:

> The assumption that there are irreducible features of human life and experience that exist beyond the constitutive effects of local cultural conditions. Universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity. For this reason, it is a crucial feature of imperial hegemony, because its assumption (or assertion) of a common humanity – its failure to acknowledge or value cultural difference – underlies the promulgation of imperial discourse for the 'advancement' or 'improvement' of the colonized, goals that thus mask the extensive and multifaceted exploitation of the colony. (216)

In this interpretation, universalism is defined as an ideology and one that European colonialism found convenient to espouse in its aim to subjugate people around the world. Universalism has therefore become synonymous with colonialist ideology and permanently discredited because of this association. And it is because of this that postcolonial theory has remained hostile to the concept of universalism. Moreover, with the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism in philosophy and critical theory, universalism has also lost its logical validity as its foundational principles have been challenged by these discourses. Thus, universalism as a philosophical concept and a framework in the analysis of literary works has been discarded by both philosophers and literary critics.

In place of universalism, philosophers and literary and cultural theorists have been developing the concept of cosmopolitanism in response to the growing need to promote peace and harmony among different nations and communities in the world. It has been acknowledged that, since the world has become increasingly interconnected due to globalisation, decisions taken in one part of the world have an impact on the whole world, and not just on the state or region where they are taken. Moreover, as Edward Said has pointed out, aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism have caused extremely violent conflicts in the world and an excessive emphasis on identity and difference has led to the present volatile situation in it. "In our wish to make ourselves heard", writes Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, "we tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess… " (xxi). In this context, therefore, it is as important to stress the commonalities of human experience as it is to identify and respect differences.

Cosmopolitanism is supposed to address this need to highlight the commonalities of human experience in a more acceptable and effective way than universalism.

The difference between universalism and cosmopolitanism is that the former is highly prescriptive and restrictive while the latter is supposed to be open and accommodating. From a universalist perspective, a narrow set of ethical and behavioural norms is taken as a model to which everyone in the world has to conform in order to be recognised as properly human. Since every nation or community believes its own culture to be superior to or at least equal to the cultures of others, universalism opens up a conflict about which culture is the best and must be adopted by everyone. As world history and particularly the history of European colonialism shows, these conflicts are resolved not upon the basis of debate and discussion but war and destruction. The powerful nations impose their culture upon subjugated nations, which then have to conform to the cultural norms of the dominant nation.

Cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, does not seek to impose a single ideal culture or model of human behaviour upon everyone. It is considered rather a framework for recognising and accepting cultural difference, one which allows interaction among people from different cultures on the basis of equality and justice. Robert Spencer has very effectively discussed the importance and relevance of cosmopolitanism for postcolonial criticism in his essay "Cosmopolitan Criticism". First, Spencer declares "the gradual elaboration of cosmopolitan perspectives and solidarities" as the "*raison d'être* of postcolonial literary criticism" (36; italics in original). Spencer then offers answers to four essential questions about cosmopolitanism: What is it? Why is it needed? What does it look like? And how is it achieved? For the present paper, Spencer's answers to the first and fourth questions are particularly relevant. For Spencer,

> cosmopolitanism is both a disposition–one characterized by self-awareness, by a penetrating sensitivity to the world beyond one's immediate milieu, and by an enlarged sense of moral and political responsibility – *and*, it is very important to add, a set of economic structures and political institutions that correspond to this. (36)

It is in the cultivation of a cosmopolitan disposition that postcolonial literature can play its part, in Spencer's view. Spencer believes that it is possible and important to demonstrate how "reading postcolonial literature can engender the critical consciousness and the global solidarities that are required to imagine, inaugurate and sustain cosmopolitan political arrangements" (37).

Referring to the acknowledged polyphonic and polysemic nature of literary works, Spencer highlights the qualities of postcolonial literature that, in his view, can lead to the development of a cosmopolitan sentiment in the reader. "Through encounters with different and unfamiliar perspectives",

claims Spencer, "readers of postcolonial literature can acquire the kind of self-reflexiveness required to relativise and to evaluate their own sometimes partial or even parochial outlook" (42). Due to the multiplicity of locations from which they originate and which they represent, postcolonial literary works "provide a fascinating deviation from orthodox ways of understanding and representing the postcolonial world" (42). However, it is not only because their critique of imperialism that postcolonial literary works are so valuable, but also because they offer ways of thinking beyond imperialism, often through what Spencer defines as utopian thinking, with reference to the work of Frederic Jameson (42). Thus, Spencer stresses the need for literary criticism that "combines an emphasis on their critical dimension (that is, on their capacity to dramatise and incite opposition to imperial practices) with an emphasis too on their frequently neglected normative aspect, by which I mean their equally crucial ability to outline – or at least to implore, contemplate or, however obliquely, foretell – alternatives to imperial rule" (42-43). For Spencer, then, the specific appeal and value of postcolonial literature lies in its ability to make the reader conscious of the injustices and inequalities that exist in the world and in its capacity to offer alternatives to such political and economic conditions. These effects are achieved through the ironic and contested perspectives offered in postcolonial literature, which show that the world is rich and diverse and there is no single perspective that conveys the essential truth about the world, only multiple perspectives each offering its own true account. Thus, cosmopolitanism is not just different form of universalism, it is rather opposed to it as it relies on recognition of the validity of a multiplicity of perspectives. Postcolonial literature, in this view, is valuable for cosmopolitanism because it is opposed to universalism.

In this paper, I will argue that without retaining universalism in some form, the cultivation of cosmopolitanism is not possible and that postcolonial literary works provide a ground for developing a redefined understanding of universality. This universality, I further argue, is best approached through the humanist perspective offered by Frantz Fanon and Edward Said in their various critical works. To establish these claims, I will first discuss the relation between universalism and cosmopolitanism, and then discuss the redefinition of humanism/universalism found in Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, and then move on to discuss the interplay of cultural relativism and universality in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. In discussing Fanon and Said's postcolonial humanism, I will also address the association of postcolonial theory with the anti-humanist position of poststructuralism. Through this discussion, I aim to show

that postcolonial literature not only highlights cultural differences but attempts to accommodate those differences within a redefined understanding of human nature and experience.

In "Cosmopolitanism and the Question of Universalism", Daniel Chernilo acknowledges that the problem of universalism is the "most vexing problem" for the theory of cosmopolitanism (47). Chernilo believes that the question of (and questioning of) universalism cannot be ignored in the development of cosmopolitan theory and that a re-engagement with this concept is necessary. It is because, in his view, "*thinking in cosmopolitan terms compels us to favour a universalistic orientation*" (47; italics in original). This does not mean that universalism in its traditional form needs to be reaffirmed. Rather, for Chernilo, "the core of cosmopolitanism as an intellectual project lies in the redefinition and refinement … of its universalistic orientation" (47). To engage with the issue of universalism in cosmopolitan theory, it is best to regard it as a "*key analytic presupposition*" of cosmopolitan theory, instead of taking it as something imposed from the outside (Chernilo 47; italics in original). In Chernilo's view, the cosmopolitan project may be best served by those "who are actually committed to a universalistic conception of humanity" (48). This "universalistic conception of humanity" which Chernilo considers essential for cosmopolitan theory relates universalism to humanism, concepts which "seem almost indistinguishable" from each other (Robbins 559). Thus, univeralism, humanism and cosmopolitanism are interconnected concepts and the theory of cosmopolitanism requires a universalistic perspective which, in Chernilo's view, has to be achieved through a humanist outlook.

It is because of the interconnectedness of universalism, humanism and cosmopolitanism that, with the cosmopolitan turn in postcolonial theory, a reengagement with universalism and humanism has also become necessary. And critics who favour a cosmopolitan outlook in postcolonial theory do not have to look far to find a universalist/humanist outlook acceptable to postcolonial theory. Two of the founding fathers of postcolonial theory were always committed to humanism – albeit revised and redefined from a postcolonial perspective. For anyone familiar with Fanon's and Said's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist writing, it comes as a surprise to find that both these founding fathers of postcolonial criticism adhered to some form of humanism in their works. It is generally understood, and to a large extent correctly so, that humanism as a philosophy and a critical framework has a very strong Eurocentric bias. For postcolonial critics, humanism and Eurocentrism are names of the same ideology, one which puts Europe at the centre of human civilisation and treats European culture as the

model for all the civilisations of the world. In other words, humanism imposes a single culture upon the whole world and negates the possibility of cultural difference. For humanism, cultural difference is cultural deviance, which needs to be corrected, by force if necessary. In this context, challenging colonialism, based on Eurocentric humanism, means to assert cultural difference. This becomes the foundation upon which anticolonial struggles can be staged. Thus, one of the central concerns in postcolonial literature has been the representation of culture in an unbiased manner. However, both Fanon and Said are sceptical of making cultural difference and its assertion as the foundation and goal of anticolonial struggle. Instead, both acknowledge the need to rise above cultural differences and emphasise the common humanity of all people, white as well as black or brown. Fanon, in his allegiance to the Algerian freedom struggle against France, and Said, in his allegiance to the Palestinian struggle for freedom, both affirm the political rights of specific nations, yet they do so in general universalist and humanist terms, in a distinct manner, instead of using the discourse of cultural difference.

In "On National Culture", Fanon critiques the nativism and cultural essentialism espoused by members of the negritude movement in Africa. For Fanon, African intellectuals' celebration of African culture is fundamentally flawed because it is based on a racial and essentialist conceptualisation of culture. It is based on a binary opposition between European and African cultures. According to Fanon, "the poets of Negro-ism oppose the idea of an old Europe to a young Africa, tiresome reasoning to lyricism, oppressive logic to high-stepping nature, and on one side stiffness, ceremony, etiquette and scepticism, while on the other frankness, liveliness, liberty and – why not? – luxuriance: but also irresponsibility" (171). This way of representing culture assumes that culture is something that is static, fixed and racially inherited. However, for Fanon, culture is something that changes and evolves, and its outward manifestations at any given time are "in fact only the inert, already forsaken result of frequent, and not always very coherent adaptations of a much more fundamental substance which itself is continually being renewed" (180). Thus, Fanon insists on adopting a historicist and existentialist concept of culture instead of the racial and essentialist conception adopted by African intellectuals. In a colonised world battling for freedom, the struggle for independence is a force that shapes culture, and not the other way round. "A national culture", writes Fanon, "is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.

A national culture in under-developed countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on" (188). Thus, for Fanon, cultural identity is not the source and foundation of the struggle for independence; rather the struggle for independence is the source and foundation of cultural identity.

Edward Said, too, has criticised the essentialisation of culture, and also its aestheticisation. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said describes two ways – aesthetic and political – in which culture is usually defined. From an aesthetic perspective, culture is understood as comprising "the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure" (xii). From a political perspective, culture is interpreted as a collection of the highest ethical, moral and behavioural codes that exist in a society, "a reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" as Said describes it with reference to Matthew Arnold. These norms are also supposed to be reflected in the canonical literature of a particular society. In this way, culture comes to be regarded as a manifestation of the spirit or character of a particular nation. This turns culture into a hegemonic ideology which shapes the people's self-perception as well as their perception of those they regard as 'aliens' or outsiders. For Said, both aesthetic and political approaches to culture are flawed because they ignore the historical context within which they are constructed. As Said states, "the trouble with this idea of culture is that it entails not only venerating one's own culture but also thinking of it as somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world" (xiii). Thus, like Fanon, Said also insists on historicising culture and understanding it as deeply affected by political ideologies and events.

Instead of relying upon cultural difference, Fanon and Said evoke what Anthony Alessandrini has described as "emergent humanism". Acknowledging the apparent self-contradictory nature of Fanon's ideas in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Alessandrini argues that the "splits and discontinuities" in Fanon's work are signs of his struggle to imagine "an emergent humanism which can be separated from this false [Eurocentric] model" (434). With reference to the chapter "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Alessandrini states that Fanon appears to reaffirm "the very 'neo-liberal universalism', expressed in a recognisably humanist vocabulary", which he attempts to refute in this chapter and the rest of the book (438). However, in Alessandrini's view, the chapter demonstrates Fanon's "struggle to theorise a new, non-Eurocentric form of hu-

manism" and not a return to classical Eurocentric humanism (438). According to Alessandrini, "The humanism which emerges at the end of the chapter … goes beyond the demands of rights discourse, beyond nationalism, and even beyond a united Africa, as a way of empowering 'all underdeveloped people' – indeed, as a way of achieving a 'human prospect' for all the 'wretched of the earth'" (438). For Alessandrini, Fanon moves from "a national to a transnational consciousness, and towards what might be called an emergent, transnational humanism" (438). Alessandrini also describes Fanon's articulation of humanist principles as a "strategic humanism", as Fanon's engagement with humanism remains historically contingent.

For Alessandrini, Edward Said goes even further than Fanon in reaffirming humanism as the best approach to counter colonial and imperialist ideologies. According to Alessandrini, more in his political than theoretical works, Said makes the attempt "to abide by universalist principles and yet be concrete and critical at the same time" (qtd. in Alessandrini 443). However, Said's relation to humanism, particularly in the context of his engagement with the work of Michel Foucault, a theorist recognised for his anti-humanist approach, remains a topic of debate among critics, as acknowledged by both Alessandrini and R. Radhakrishnan. In Radhakrishnan's view, Said's use of the term secular humanism was quite personal and even idiosyncratic and it is "precisely by inflecting received terms in a certain pragmatic way, [that he] was able to re-create them as essential tools in the service of worldliness" (432). According to Radhakrishnan:

> The moving aspect of [Said's] invocation of humanism is that it is in the context of contemporary human tragedy, suffering, injustice, and peril. He posits humanism as an omnihistorical state of being human that responds to worldly situations in the name of freedom and justice. Knowing that the term humanism and its indeterminacy have been appropriated in several mutually exclusive ways, he is keen on recuperating it in the name of a multilateral and secular humanity that is unfortunately structured in dominance. (435)

While Radhakrishnan goes on to discuss and critique Said's "return" to humanism in the rest of the essay, the important point made by him in the above passage is that Said's humanism is historical and worldly in nature. It is different from "liberal" humanism which, in the theorisation of critics like Arnold and Leavis, tended to be restricted to aesthetic and "spiritual" matters and not directly concerned with political questions.

Thus, as is evident from the above discussion of the humanist approach of Fanon and Said, postcolonial literature and theory do not reject humanism and universalism but seek to redefine it from a postcolonial perspective. However, before a redefined and reconceived humanism can become incorporated into

postcolonial theory, the affiliation of postcolonial theory with poststructuralism also needs to be reconsidered. Poststructuralism is generally defined as 'anti-humanist' in orientation and its critique of humanism has proved highly useful for theorists of postcolonialism seeking to develop their own critiques of colonialism and Eurocentrism. Yet, as Bruce Robbins argues, the anti-humanism of poststructuralism does not reject humanism entirely but redefines it through the categories of race, class and sexual identities. What poststructuralism critiques is the concept of a transcendental 'human' nature, which it seeks not only to historicise but also to differentiate along the lines of racial, class and sexual identities. Behind these distinct and particular identities, in Robbins' view, stands a more general 'human' identity, not named as such by the critics yet noticeable in the way these identities are acknowledged as particular aspects of a larger human identity. What the poststructuralist emphasis on local and particular identities shows is an "anti-universalist return of the universal" (561) – an acknowledgement that what constitutes a human identity is precisely this sense of difference and particularity, this sense of locatedness and historicity. If this seems paradoxical, it is only a reflection of a paradox which was already a part of the traditional humanist approach, as admitted by Robert Young: "For humanism itself is already anti-humanist. That is the problem" (qtd. in Robbins 561). For Robbins, this emphasis on local and particular identities within cultural theory in general and postcolonial theory in particular shows "a universalistic and humanistic impulse" which has gradually emerged within these discourses. This is not, however a return of traditional humanism and universalism. According to Robbins: "If the word 'universal' applies, it applies not as an already-existing foundation that all reasonable men and women must naturally agree on, but as a risky, uncertain balancing of the different values, vocabularies, and priorities that reasonably emerge from different circumstances" (567).

It is this anti-humanist humanism and anti-universalist universalism that are represented in postcolonial literature. Cultural relativism, which is supposed to be the central element of postcolonial literature and criticism, is only an initial step towards a redefined and reconceived humanism and universalism. An analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates this idea effectively. *Things Fall Apart* is generally regarded as an ethnographic novel, one that depicts the cultural life of African people with clarity and accuracy. The novel is rich in cultural and anthropological content. Detailed descriptions of African cultural life are given, particularly in the first and longest of the three parts of the novel. These descriptions show a culturally rich social life, with its rituals and festivals, and a

very elaborate set of religious, political and economic principles and practices. It shows a culture that is at peace with itself, a people living contentedly by their own values and norms, before this peace and contentment is shattered by the encounter with European culture and religion. This encounter, as depicted in the novel, brings out the theme of cultural relativism and, at several moments in the novel, cultural relativism is articulated by African characters. Even before Europeans make their appearance in the novel, cultural relativism is expressed by the elder brother of Obierika, a close friend of the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo. They are discussing different practices among African tribes regarding marriage arrangements when Obierika's brother says: "But what is good in one place is bad in another place" (Achebe 53). However, the strongest example of the articulation of cultural relativism comes in a scene in which African tribal leaders are about to launch an attack on the church built by Christian missionaries and converts. To avert this attack Mr Smith's interpreter asks the tribal leaders to let Mr Smith handle the matter and respond to their grievances. But the leader of the African party says to Mr James Smith, the chief missionary: "We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his" (Achebe 139).

The detailed cultural descriptions as well as these explicit statements establish the theme of cultural relativism in the novel. Cultural difference, when represented through a framework of cultural relativism, is seen as the difference between two separate and distinct cultures, complete within themselves. Since all cultures are different, the values and norms of one culture cannot be applied to any other. Every culture has to be evaluated according to its own norms and values. Seen from this perspective, African culture is distinct and different from European culture and cannot be judged on the basis of European cultural norms. Moreover, this relativistic understanding of culture also produces a determination among people to resist any critique of their culture from the outside and to justify their culture on the basis of its own distinct nature. Since there are no universal norms and standards, each culture defines its own criteria for self-evaluation. In extreme cases, no critique is acceptable because to critique is to question the norms of one's own culture and thus to become an outsider or even a traitor. As Said states in *Culture and Imperialism*, "In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'returns' to

culture and tradition" (xiii). Thus cultural relativism does not necessarily lead to peaceful coexistence between people belonging to different cultures but rather to cultural extremism, which can give rise to new conflicts and aggravate existing ones. Every individual who claims to belong to a specific cultural group feels under some obligation to defend his or her culture. In particular, literary writers are seen as defenders of culture and its custodians. In a postcolonial nation, writers themselves consider it their duty to defend their culture. As Fanon states, "the native [intellectual] … accepts everything, decides to take all for granted and confirms everything even though he may lose body and soul. The native finds that he is expected to answer for everything, and to all comers. He not only turns himself into the defender of his people's past; he is willing to be counted as one of them" (175).

Certain statements of Achebe give the impression that he also felt that African writers are under an obligation to defend African culture against European critique. Most relevant here is his essay "The Novelist as Teacher", in which he defines the role of a postcolonial novelist as an educator of his nation. While a European writer may regard himself as a rebel against society and consider it his duty to criticise the society, an African writer has to recognise what is needed from and expected of him in his own national context (27). The highest obligation Achebe sees for himself and other African writers is to help African people overcome the feeling of racial inferiority which has been imposed upon them by the experience of colonialism. "Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (30). In contrast to Fanon, he defends African writers' attempts to construct a distinct African identity in their works, defining such attempts as "props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again" (30). However, in agreement with Fanon, he sees these attempts only as initial steps towards a full recovery and freedom, to be discarded when these aims are achieved. Until that time, though, he encourages African writers to adopt an "anti-racist racism", a term coined by Jean-Paul Sartre (30). It is this obligation that Achebe claims to have taken up with satisfaction in his novels: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I 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" (30).

From this discussion it seems that Achebe is advocating the espousal of cultural relativism, if only temporarily, until African people regain confidence

in their own culture. As noted above, *Things Fall Apart* does seem to emphasise cultural difference from a relativistic perspective. However, far from justifying and upholding everything that happens in the name of culture, Achebe shows highly questionable practices prevalent in pre-colonial African culture, including domestic violence and the apparently needless killing of Ikemefuna, a hapless boy who is given over by the village of Mbaino to Umuofia in compensation for the murder of a Umuofian woman by an Mbaino man. The most repellent and shocking practice, however, is the murder of infant twins who are regarded as a curse for the family into which they are born. The twins are taken from the mother and thrown into the Evil Forest, a place supposedly inhabited by evil spirits, to die. Since these are cultural practices related to beliefs of the people, they are carried out quietly by them. There are some checks and balances, though, and penalties are imposed upon people who violate the laws of the tribe. While domestic violence seems to be a normal practice among people, those who cross a certain line are punished by the law. Okonkwo once beats his wife during the Week of Peace and is penalised accordingly (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 23), while Ozuwulu is told to beg his wife, who has been taken away by her brothers after she has been brutally beaten by her husband, to return to him (68). Even in the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is advised not to participate because the boy had begun to call him 'father' (41).

However, these acts of justice and sympathy pale before the heinous acts of infanticide committed by the people upon their own children, as required by their religion and culture. It seems that culture dominates the consciousness of African people so much that they have no purely human impulse left to shake their conscience. But this is only a very superficial reading of the novel. Beneath the thick layer of culture which provides the basic structure of the conscious life of Africans, there lies a deeper foundation of human nature which finds expression at certain moments in the novel. Yet, because there is no alternative cultural discourse available to the people, the voice of this human conscience remains unexplained and unanswered. This human conscience is seen most strongly in the character of Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son. It is also seen in the character of Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, and in Okonkwo himself at certain moments. Nwoye, who, because of his mild temperament, proves himself to be a disappointment to his father, shows a revulsion towards the masculine code of conduct generally prevalent in the society and exemplified by his father. Time and again his distaste is described for the violent behaviour his father recommends and seeks to instil in his children. Two moments, though, shake his human conscience

powerfully and finally lead him to leave his faith and convert to Christianity. The first moment is him accidental hearing the cries of infants thrown alive into the Evil Forest to die. The second moment is his realisation of the murder of Ikemefuna and recognition of the involvement of his own father in this gruesome act. Both of these experiences have the same kind of effect on him: "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 44).

Nwoye thus develops a deep emotional revulsion towards African culture but these feelings do not find an outlet until he comes across some Christian missionaries. He is one of the throng of people who come out to see these missionaries led by a white man. The missionaries preach Christianity to the onlookers and try to convince them to convert. While most people are simply amused by the speeches of the missionaries, Nwoye is inspired by this new religion. However, he is not inspired by the message of Christianity, which he does not understand, but by the poetry of the hymn sung by them at the conclusion of their interaction: "It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow" (108). It is significant to note how this moment of inspiration is described by Achebe. The hymn comes as a response to the "persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed" (108). These practices and acts are part of the culture Nwoye is being raised in, but there is something in his nature that cannot accept these customs. Nwoye is too young to respond to these questions in any critical way, but even if he were older, he would not have found any satisfying answer from within his own culture.

Thus, this 'snapping' of something inside is inexplicable in cultural terms to Nwoye. It is a coming to consciousness of something innate, something natural, which, in the given cultural framework, does not find any outlet. So severely is the code of masculinity imposed in the culture described in the novel, and so aggressively it is imposed by Okonkwo on his children, that this feeling of sympathy can only be interpreted as a kind of weakness. Yet this unnamed feeling is part of Nwoye's very being, his nature. It is here that the novel seems to be marking a difference between nature and culture. Culture, as a framework for interpreting nature, for organizing social life, is never a perfect interpretation of nature. Cultural norms and cultural life are conditioned by a number of factors, including the material conditions prevailing at a given time. It is in this light that Abiola Irele suggests that strict observance of the code of masculinity must be seen in

relation to the harsh conditions of existence and sustenance prevailing at the time of the novel's historical setting (Irele 8). It is these rough conditions of existence that shape the character of the people described in the novel and also their values. Manliness is not just a virtue among them, it is a necessity. The result of the over-emphasis on manliness, though, is that it leaves no space for pity, kindness and love, which are also part of human nature, as shown by the character of Nwoye.

It is in these moments that Achebe gives the reader a glimpse of something deeper that lies beneath the consciousness shaped by culture. These moments show the insufficiency of culture, its partiality and narrowness, against a larger and a more basic level of human experience – "something felt in the marrow". Nwoye is not alone in experiencing these moments of questioning and doubt. Okonkwo's close friend Obierika is also forced to ask these questions regarding African culture. Obierika is described as a "man who thought about things" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 91). He participates in the cultural practices of his tribe and abides by its customs and traditions, yet he is disturbed by the things that he experiences and observes. At one particular moment he is deeply shaken and forced to ponder over the events he has seen and participated in. This happens when he reflects on the communal act of "cleansing the land" (91) – destroying Okonkwo's property after he had committed the sin of accidentally killing a clansman. Obierika takes part in performing this cleansing act and with his own hand destroys the property of his closest friend. None of the people who take part in the act bear any animosity towards Okonkwo. They do it because it is dictated by the law of the tribe. Yet, after it is performed, Obierika is forced to question the justness and fairness of this law. But, like Nwoye, he does not find any answer. Instead, he is led into greater complexities as he remembers his own twin children whom he threw away into the Evil Forest with his own hands. He asks: "What crime had they committed?" and realises that his culture provides no satisfying answer to such a question (91).

But where do these questions come from? What makes Nwoye and Obierika ask these questions? While the conscious lives of these characters are shaped by the prevailing culture, their emotional responses disclose the presence of a deeper layer of existence. Since these emotional responses are shown in characters as diverse as Nwoye and Obierika, they may be taken as arising from a general or even universal human nature. Even Okonkwo at times feels the presence of this deeper element, the throbbing and prodding of which he seeks to aggressively and very often violently suppress in the name of manliness and cultural tradition. The way he is described early in the novel presents a very typi-

cal picture of the "African man" – "He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look" (3). Aggression and violence are described as his 'natural' traits. Yet, it is soon disclosed that all this show of aggression and display of manliness is only to hide a deep and profound fear – the fear of failure, failure personified in the figure of his father, Unoka: "Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (10). This fear is described as stronger than the fear of evil spirits and as lying deep within his heart. Okonkwo is extremely careful about showing any signs of weakness in his character, to the extent that he does not even express feelings of pleasure and appreciation, which he often feels for his family, to anyone, including his own children. It is this desire to prove his manliness on all occasions that compels him to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna against the advice of his friends and village elders.

Okonkwo's conscious effort, therefore, is to suppress the 'human' impulses that continue to arise from deep within himself. It is these reverberations of something elemental and natural, inexplicable and unanswerable for Nwoye and Obierika, and threatening for Okonkwo, as they might be interpreted as weakness, that the novel hints at, acknowledges and represents beneath the details of cultural life as signs of something universal – "felt in the marrow". The idea that emerges from these hints and glimpses of 'human nature' in the novel is not that cultural differences are ideological and, essentially, all human beings are alike, but that cultural differences are real and it is only through the recognition of difference that a sense of commonality can be developed. Cultural differences are accentuated and made visible in cross-cultural contact and these differences do not necessarily lead to hostility and war. In *Things Fall Apart*, the way the Christian missionaries under Mr Brown's leadership are received by the African tribes, initially with hostility but later on with respect and friendliness, shows that cultural differences are not always articulated with violence. But when they are, the first casualty is 'human nature' itself, as the opposing sides are led to assert the superiority of their culture. It is for this reason that Fanon is so intensely critical of colonialism and racism and calls it "an insult that the white man flung at humanity", and why he sees cultural movements like negritude as "an emotional if not logical" response to that insult (Fanon 171). Fanon, therefore, considers colonialism not just as violence against African culture but also against 'humanity'. Anti-colonial resistance leading to national independence is, for Fanon, only a step in the direction of universal liberation and humanism (for an extensive discussion of this point, see Nayar, "Frantz Fanon: Towards a Postcolonial Human-

ism").

As already discussed above, the kind of humanism Fanon and Said advocate is grounded in historical and political realities and does not posit a transcendental human nature and essence. This humanism is perfectly aligned with the anti-essentialist position of poststructuralist theory on culture and identity. Viewed from this position, 'human nature' is an empty concept, an ideological construct. Different historical and political conditions construct different versions of human nature and there is no essential human nature as such. In other words, there is no access to a purely 'human' dimension of experience outside the cultural framework prevalent at a given time. Yet, as Robbins has discussed, poststructuralism leads to a redefinition of human nature and not a rejection of it. What is rejected is an essentialist and transcendental conception in favour of a concept of human nature differentiated along the lines of culture, race, sex and class. However, behind these differentiations, there is always a constant engagement with the 'human', though theorists are reluctant to use that term. According to Robbins, poststructuralist and postcolonial critics' preference for specific identities randomly and varyingly listed as including race, class and sex:

> Suggests that it is not these precise items that are being referred to, but something bigger than they are, yet also not quite nameable: a whole larger than the sum of its seemingly infinite parts, and somewhat independent of those parts. It also suggests that differences and conflicts among these terms are being suppressed in the interest of sustaining that greater, nebulous whole". (561)

For Robbins, this larger and general concept or identity of which race, class and gender are specific manifestations is the concept of universal human nature.

Marjorie Garber in "Who Owns 'Human Nature'" has emphasised the need to reengage with the concept of human nature for disciplines belonging to the humanities. In her view, the humanities have actually never given up on the discussion and conceptualisation of human nature, but because "somewhere along the way, the concept of human nature became both stale and saccharine", scholars in the humanities feel embarrassed at using the term (439). According to Garber, "today's humanists are asking 'human nature' questions all the time, when they talk about psychic violence, or material culture, or epistemic breaks, or the history of the book, or the counter intuitive" (439). In Garber's view, it is not difficult to demonstrate that "fields like cultural anthropology, structural linguistics, women's studies, cyber theory, and posthumanism are indeed addressing the Big Questions … questions that all attach themselves to the heritage of 'human nature'" (440). Postcolonial literature and theory, in this sense, are also dealing with

questions of human nature and experience, and not just emphasising absolute and insurmountable cultural differences.

To conclude, the cosmopolitan turn in postcolonial theory has brought to light the need to reengage with humanism and universalism in postcolonial theory. These interrelated concepts and approaches, because of their perceived association with colonialism, have mostly been debated and critiqued in post-colonial theory from a poststructuralist position. However, this critique has led to a redefinition of the concepts of universality and human nature rather than a complete rejection of them. Human nature is now perceived through cultural, racial, class and sexual differences, instead of being perceived as above and against them. Postcolonial literature, as the example of *Things Fall Apart* shows, provides a vision of such a conception of human nature. It is through detailed descriptions of African culture, its close observation, that the humanity of African people is established. The culture represented in the novel is not a pure and essential African culture but a culture developed at a specific historical moment. The values and norms of this culture are shaped by the lived experiences of African people and, in the case of Okonkwo, the error of considering these values and norms as perfect and unchangeable is exposed. What seems questionable to Nwoye and Obierika is unquestionable for Okonkwo, and it is through the diversity of these experiences of and attitudes towards culture that a glimpse of the underlying 'human' dimension of the narrative is revealed. Postcolonial literature, therefore, does not promote cultural relativism on the basis of cultural essentialism but rather on the basis of a historicist concept of culture. While this historicism contextualises and relativises all cultures, it also brings out a vision of a human nature constructed not by essential characteristics but by an intersection of a variety of forces and contexts. It is in this sense that postcolonial literature and theory reflect an anti-universal return of the universal.

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