

**A New Perspective of Time in the African Novels**  
(with Special Reference to Achebe, Ngugi, La Guma and Thiong'o )

By

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There has always been a divergence of opinion about methods of measuring or reckoning the passage of time. However, philosophers have concluded that time takes two main, almost certainly conflicting, shapes: 'cyclic' and 'linear.' But what are the reasons for these conflicting views? Social, religious, cultural and political factors inevitably play a part. Literature, as a product of cultural history, has never been far from the issue.

Modern Western writers evince, in all their multifarious writings, a strong proclivity toward the linear concept. The staunch belief in the progression of things, accelerated by the advent of technology, plays a significant role in such a trend. But the recently propagated ideology of change or progress is by no means a modern invention, but rather harks back to ancient times. It was the eminent Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras, (later emulated by a long line of scholars such as Bacon, Descartes and Hegel) who first prophesied the evolution of human history out of the cyclicity or recurrence of definite humanistic or cultural aspects. Though they express this in different ways, these scholars avow that change is unavoidable, along with the safeguarding of the cosmogony of things in nature. Pythagoras states: "Nothing is constant in the whole world. Everything is in a state of flux, comes into being as a transient appearance"(James A. Snead 1984: 65).<sup>1</sup> Change, Pythagoras maintains, touches the biological structure of man: "in the same way our own bodies are always ceaselessly changing" in the constant flux of time (p. 65). Time forces change and evanescence upon things, and it

never changes or ceases; Pythagoras adds: "time, the devourer, and all the jealous years that pass, destroy all things, and, nibbling them away, consume them gradually" (p. 65). Inasmuch as things in nature are created and recreated, through the constant process of life and death, existence thus seems to take a discernible cyclical shape. However, Pythagoras and his advocates believe that things, including culture, evolve even if they are anchored via repetition to their archetypal roots.

Nonetheless, this concept of repetition and progression has no place in the old world of Africa. African peoples seem to view the world differently from Europeans. Like Occidental cultures, African and Oriental cultures pass through cyclical repetitions, yet with no radical change or development. Their particular ceremonies are performed at fixed intervals. The repetitive musical performances and round dances performed at the celebration of the seasonal rainfall, the only source of irrigation for major crops, and of occasional marriages or annual returns of sacred rituals, are just highlights of their observance of cultural repetition. This repetition has led many Western anthropological analysts to view African culture as inferior to their own, which they believed to be more viable. Apart from its bias, such a view may be based upon a misapprehension. Behind the repetition, the Africans seek to fulfil a twofold goal: to reenact the recurrence of "the roundings of natural time," and to preserve their national cultural traditions (p.65).<sup>2</sup> Thus this repetition aims to re-create particular social and religious beliefs through the ages. There seems to be a logic in all this:

if, for example, the human species is preserved through marriage, so is cultural identity through repetition. It is hardly surprising to find African writers, unlike Western ones, clinging to the cyclical representation of time in their modern narratives.

This paper examines the social, cultural, political and religious connections which make African novelists' perception of time differ from that of many Western and Oriental writers. Some African novelists regard time as circular, while others view it as formless. It is of paramount importance to examine the artistic devices these writers employ to create their own perceptions of time.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, most of which is set in pre-colonial conservative Nigeria, displays, more than any other African novel, a consciousness of the old deep-seated social traditions. The lives of people are shown to run in repetitive cyclic patterns. The environment in which they are raised exerts a shaping force upon their ways of living. In other words, their lives are a literal reproduction of the wave-like cycles of the surrounding nature. Their rhythmic flux of life is sometimes interrupted or broken, but this is due to external interference rather than to internal social factors. Colonization is the sole cause of the rupture. The novel opens with a celebratory gathering of all the villagers, from Umuofia to Mbaino. The wheel of time is turned back 'twenty years or more' to let us catch a glimpse of how people were accustomed to celebrating the harvest with wrestling rounds and general merriment. In wrestling matches, people come to the field where everyone, except

for the elders and grandees who sit on stools, stands "round in a huge circle leaving the center of the playground free [for the wrestlers]" (1958: 42). The drummers keep beating drums, in an unchanging repetitive rhythm, till the wrestlers get into the circle, and throughout the wrestling match. The match starts with the wrestlers' dancing and the crowd's roaring and clapping, and it ends with the victory of one or a team of wrestlers. Dancing and drums seem to be linked closely to everything in Umuofia; it is, as Achebe says, "like the pulsation of its heart" (p. 40). The sound of drums is always sensed to throb "in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees," making people enthusiastic (p. 40). Like Okoye, Unoka is a good musician whose mind is often busy with rehearsing the "intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and *ogene*," which he plays "with a colorful and plaintive tune" (p. 6). Most significant is the physical and spiritual communion between people and certain melodies. When Okonkwo hears the *ogene* one night played by the town-crier, he understands through the repetition of the tune: "Gome, gome, gome, gome," that it is a serious message for all the people of Umuofia "to gather at the marketplace tomorrow morning" (p. 9). And as the tune becomes overwhelmed by "a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier's voice," he takes it avowedly as something "amiss" (p.9).

The progression of seasons is given a special celebration. During "the two or three moons after the harvest," when the weather is always good, the village musicians bring "down their instruments, hung above the fireplace," to share in making merry everywhere (p.4).

People sing and dance in harmonious repetitive patterns. And when the harmattan blows severely, bringing dense clouds, "Old men and children ... sit round log fires, warming their bodies"(p.5). The dry season is, however, also met with rejoicing, as it is invariably accompanied by the return of migrating kites from their long journey about the world, which children welcome with enthusiastic songs.

Like these seasonal festal ceremonies, the religious rituals and taboos are accomplished in cyclic patterns. People occasionally offer sacrifices and prayers to their gods and ancestors, so as to ensure their share of blessings and glory, on one hand, and to show their true faithfulness to the ancestors, on the other. Okonkwo's father, Unoka, avows in front of Agbala, Oracle of the Hills and the Caves: "Every year.... before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams" (p. 16). Okonkwo believes in what his father does, yet he has his own god. Close to his hut he has built a shrine wherein he "kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children" (pp. 13-14). Many people pay frequent visits to the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves with the intention of finding answers to their problems, or in remorse for their wrongdoings: "The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors. They

came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers" (p. 15).

There are certain holy times in the year which are observed by all. It is a religious rite, preserved steadfastly over the years by their forefathers, that within a certain week in the year, called the Week of Peace, before any crop may be sown in the land, that no man may hurt or even "say a harsh word to his neighbor [no matter what his transgression]" (p. 28). When Okonkwo once comes to break peace in this week by beating one of his wives for neglecting a domestic task, he is reproached by Ezeani, priest of the goddess, and made to come to the shrine of Ani to offer a sacrifice of "one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries," in penitence (p. 28). He is also warned never to repeat such a sin, which angers the goddess and inflicts calamity on all the land, even if he sees his wife's "lover on top of her..." (p. 28). As he breaks the Week of Peace for the second time he is exiled from Umuofia for seven years. Even if someone dies during this week, he or she is not buried "but cast into the Evil Forest" (p. 29). This is due to a traditional belief that "it is an abomination for a man to die [then]" (p. 29).

Every year, before the yam harvest, the villagers celebrate 'The Feast of the New Yam.' It is "an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility" (p. 33). More than any other deity, Ani is always observed with awe and held in high regard, for "She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct ... and was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose

bodies had been committed to earth" (p. 33). Huge amounts of the new yam are cooked in this festival and served to huge crowds invited from all the surrounding villages.

"Rituals of eating and drinking as well as marriage are always practiced with the systems of agriculture and worship which almost invariably use circular or crescent shapes as symbols. In Obierika's wedding party, for instance, relatives and guests come carrying various gifts and sit in the outer compound with other men who are sitting "in a half-moon, thus completing a circle with their hosts. The pots of wine stood in their midst. Then the bride, her mother and half a dozen other women and girls emerged from the inner compound, and went around the circle shaking hands with all. The bride's mother led the way, followed by the bride and the other women" (p. 106). After eating the kola, all start to drink the palm-wine in small rings or circles: "Groups of four or five men sat round with a pot in their midst" (p. 107). In the evening all regale themselves at a huge banquet, and at night the party starts with lighting the torches, singing and dancing: "The elders sat in a big circle and the singers went round singing each man's praise as they came before him ... When they had gone round the circle they settled down in the center, and girls came from the inner compound to dance" (p. 107). In her turn, the bride came out with a rooster in her right hand, which she presented "to the musicians and began to dance" (p. 107). Repetitive tunes and songs are performed most of the night.

Despite the modernization forced by the colonists on people's inherited customs, the old ceremonial rites remain,



though they may change slightly. The wedding ceremony presented in Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird* is an example. Though the old musical instruments are developed, they are played in the same repetitive tunes. And even though people complain about the change in some habits, they still take part in honoring both the bride and groom in the same old style, by singing and dancing and shooting, till the couple leaves for their new home (1987: 67-70).

Even in funerals, Africans conform to specific ancestral ceremonies of burying and mourning the dead, which also seem to run in circular patterns. When someone dies, drums, as Achebe narrates, are beaten loudly and repeatedly for the purpose of informing people in all vicinities about the death so as to gather and share in the funeral and burial procession: "one of the things every man learned was the language of the hollowed out wooden instrument. Diim! Diim! Diim! boomed the cannon at intervals" (1958: 159). The women kept wailing, but, as their voices "would not be heard beyond the village, of the deceased, the "cannon," repeatedly boomed: "Di - go - go - di - di - go - go..." (p. 159). Every man who heard the booming hurried to the place of death and expressed his lamentation in the customary manner: "He raised his voice once or twice in manly sorrow and then sat down with the other men listening to the endless wailing of the women and the esoteric language of the ekwe" (p. 159). The wooden drums (ekwe) "were beaten over and over again till all people were gathered, finally, the [dead] man was named and people sighed..." (p. 110). And if the deceased was a

man of title, he would be given a special burial ceremony. In the funeral of, for example, Ezeudu, a man of three titles, all the clan of Umuofia gathered and "The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups" (p.110).

Finally, the circular pattern in Chinua Achebe's novel, which echoes human patterns of life, is also maintained in people's conscious use of ancestral proverbs in daily conversation. Everyone of these proverbs, basic to the African oral culture, when spoken by the characters, is introduced by one of these phrases: "as our father said" or "as our people say."

Not only social traditions, but also colonial systems, seem to have imposed a circular-shaping form upon the life of Africans. This is conspicuous in, for example, Thiong'o's novel *Matigari*. Viewed as a whole, the novel's structural technique reflects the real world, which the novelist seeks to portray. The action is modeled on a *démodé* fictional model of the journey theme, though it differs in that the temporal and spatial aspects of the journey are frequently vague.

The miraculous hero, Matigari, spends his life on a crusade of discovery. As an old patriot, he has been girding himself with a belt of arms in a constant state of preparation to fight the white settlers, who still own the country (South Africa) even after independence. One day he breaks into the house of Settler Williams and threatens, in front of his black

servant, John Boy, to kill him if he does not instantly pull out of the country. When Boy rushes to the phone to call the police, Matigari jumps out of the window of the armory room into the forest. He is chased by the man and his servant "across many hills and valleys, in the four corners of the globe" (1987: 3). This hunt, which goes on for many years, ends with Matigari killing Boy and his master. He digs around the stem of "a huge mugumo, a fig tree" and buries his arms, intending to gird himself with the belt of peace from now on (p.3).

Matigari sets out roaming in search of his comrades, who are scattered all over the world, in an attempt to bring them back home. But his arduous search is fruitless. Only a woman, Guthera, and a boy, Muriuki, accompany him. As they get closer to home, Matigari hurries to open the gate but his way is blocked by two men on horseback. One is settler Williams' son and the other is Boy's, and they tell Matigari that they now own the land. The dispute between them over who is the real owner of the land ends in Matigari being taken to gaol. The latter must not know of the social change that taken place in his country. The new government of South Africa has formed itself out of the sons of the dead settlers and their native allies and these now control both the economy and politics. The novel's first part ends with the mysterious shunting away of Matigari, along with all the other black prisoners, into a secure prison. Matigari is now regarded by all as a legend. Everyone wants to know who Matigari really is.

In the novel's second part, a rumor spreads throughout

the country "like wild fire over dry plains," that Matigari is Gabriel coming down from heaven, or Jesus Christ coming back (p.85). Though the reiteration of these rumors in the novel may seem repetitive and superfluous, it reflects the reality of people in Africa. It is their custom to busy themselves with gossip rather than action.

This pattern is disrupted by others. Matigari goes around the country in a quest for truth and justice. Whoever he meets in marketplaces, restaurants, kiosks, farms, wilderness, shops, Churches and law courts, he asks only one question: "Tell me, my people! Where in this country can one find truth and justice?" (p.82). Though he is informed by more than one person to "look for a needle dropped into the ocean," he never gets tired or frustrated, for he staunchly believes that: "A farmer does not stop planting seeds just because of the failure of one crop. Success is born of trying and trying again" (p. 84). He renews his search throughout the length and breadth of the country, "in the grass and in the bushes ... among the thorns, in the shrubs and the molehills and in birds' nests" (p.86). His quest, which very much resembles the search for the Holy Grail, ends with his arrest on the orders of the Minister of Truth and Justice and his subsequent imprisonment in a mental hospital on the false charge of insanity. Matigari's rare courage inspires his countrymen en masse; they sing his patriotic songs day and night.

The circular form of the action is also retained in the third last part of the novel. It seems to curl back, like surging waves, upon the novel's start. To the astonishment of both

the people and the government, Matigari is discovered to have imperceptibly slipped, despite the warders' close watch, out of the asylum. He intends to gird himself once again with the belt of arms, buried for so long under a tree, for he has now become convinced that: "Justice for the oppressed comes from a sharpened spear" (p. 131). With his companions Guthera and Muriuki, he is caught by the white police and their hunting dogs before he gets to the buried weapons. But Muriuki manages, with Matigari's directions, to get to the weapons. In an attempt to run away from the police, both Matigari and Guthera are showered with bullets from all directions. As Guthera is injured in her leg, Matigari picks her up and jumps into the river. The police are stunned at this man's magical powers, for they fail to find any trace of either his body or his companion's. On the other side of the river, the child Muriuki appears, wearing the cartridge belt and carrying the arms on his shoulder, while looking "across the river and beyond to the other valleys, other ridge and other mountains" (p.175). From a distance he seems to "hear the workers' voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students and other patriots of all the different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony: Victory shall be ours..." (p. 175). The novel thus ends with the same mystery that enshrouds the character of the hero from the start.

Behind the novel's action, we are implicitly referred to the disturbing realities of the colonial and post-colonial world of South Africa. The fiasco of the hero's reiterant attempts to reclaim his homeland from slavery and the

injustice of its laws, native or alien, signifies the impossibility of change within the existing dominant social, political and cultural systems. The end of the novel, most likely symbolic of the continuance of the Africans' struggle against colonial regimes, draws a closed circle, within which both the present repressive political regime and the repressed people chase each other in mysterious circles.

The mysterious world of the novel does not break with the normal unities of fiction. The metamorphosis of the central character, Matigari, through both time and space, depends upon, in the words of C. Kassem and M. Hashem, the explosion of "the far indivisible elements of fiction - namely character, time and space," for the purpose of "break[ing] away from the unities of narrow categorization and definition" (1985: 11). Matigari, as shown in the three parts of the novel, is modeled on such figures as the Archangel Gabriel, Jesus Christ, or the archetypal patriot. His voyages are never circumscribed by the boundaries of place or time: he wanders through several regions, and in all directions of the globe, for indefinite periods of time. He is to somewhere one moment, and the next he is somewhere else. In a dialogue with John Boy and Howard Williams over giving him the key to his house (symbolizing his homeland), Matigari says: "To let myself into the house, I have wandered for far too many years in far too many places over the earth" (p. 44). The chaos that reigned during the colonial and post-colonial periods makes people in South Africa, especially patriots, live with a sense of loss. The demarcating line between life and death, yesterday, today and tomorrow,

is inevitably blurred. Many characters are portrayed in the novel as losing their sense of life; in other words, of time. For example, a university student, who is arrested and tortured arbitrarily and brutally by the police for doing no wrong other than searching in communist books for the truth, goes to the extreme of feeling that all days are alike. In a conversation with Matigari, whom he befriends in prison, about the traumatic experience of all the university students, he wondered in a voice "full of tears of many years, when did we part? Was it only yesterday evening? Or was it the day before? Anyway, it doesn't matter. Yesterday, the day before, years ago, it has been the same story" (p. 90). A larger sector of people are also condemned to suffer far more traumatic influences of the dark time in the history of Africa. Matigari's patriot comrades are scattered in unknown locations and, as Matigari mentions, probably "do not know" who they are yet. Maybe they forgot who they really were" (p. 38). The laborers are compelled to spin, like cattle, the wheels of factories day and night in return for very little money, and ordered not to poke their noses into politics or hold strikes. Guthera, whose father, a Church elder, is executed on a trumped-up charge of keeping bullets in the Bible, and because she refuses to give herself to the police to spare his life, loses, inevitably, her purity and virginity to make money to feed her sisters and brothers. She feels that her life has lost all meaning.

On a much larger scale, all the demarcating lines between what is true and false, honest and bogus, disappear. The novel's world, in the eyes of its oppressed characters,

looks topsy-turvy. Matigari says it explicitly: "This world is upside down ... The robber calls the robbed robber. The murderer calls the murdered murderer, and the wicked calls the righteous evil. The one uprooting evil is accused of planting evil. The seeker of truth and justice ends up in prisons and detention camps..." (p. 150).

Timelessness as an inevitable consequence of oppressive social life is clear in other African novels set in the colonial period. In James Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*, the colonists' continuing oppression of the native Kenyans brings about an unequivocal state of loss. Ngotho's calamity makes him unconscious of the passage of time. Detained in a dark cell by the white police on the charge of killing Jacobo, a black agent of the colonial regime, he "could not tell day or night. For him, darkness and light were the same thing and time was a succession of nothingness" (1964: 133). If one is made to live as a slave, deprived of self-worth, ambition or even hope, as all are frustrated by cruel rulers, what difference does it make whether one lives or dies? If one's days, past and present as well as future, are the same - all dark - what benefit is there in keeping time? All the distinct threads of time thus seem to be interwoven in the complicated web of life in not only colonial Kenya, but indeed in the entire continent of Africa.

Once again, it is stressed that Ngotho, "Even before this calamity befell him," has lived an insignificant life, "divorced as he had been from what he valued" (p. 134). Since social upheavals seem to have neither end nor cure, Ngotho's young son, Njoroge, drifts into living most of the



time in a state of phantasmagoria, lost in a dream world, in sharp contrast to the real world surrounding him. But as the bloody clashes between his own countrymen and the colonial regime come to touch his family, he returns to the real, horrible world he has been attempting to escape from the beginning of the novel. The family's involvement in murdering Jacobo results in his being expelled from school and imprisoned. At the beginning, the event "had a numbing effect so that he did not seem to feel..." (p.135). The torture inflicted upon him in the police post, or "House of Pain" as so-called in the novel, makes him wish he were dead: "Perhaps death was not bad at all. It sent you into a big sleep from which you never awoke to the living fears, the dying hopes, the lost visions" (p. 132). Once again, the solid walls between death and life come down to emphasize the senselessness of life in the eyes of the oppressed and enslaved people.

The predicament of South Africans, as described in Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, is much more traumatic. The people's subjugation by a "pack of hyenas," the British colonists, reduces not only the life, but rather the identity, of the natives to nothing; they are treated like animals, unable to say anything about what goes on around them for fear of starving to death. If they break the laws that fetter them, as the activists do, they will "cease to exist" (1972: 82). No one will give them jobs or even recognize them "anywhere on the face of this earth," and they will have nothing to eat or drink, and "be as nothing, perhaps even less than nothing" (p. 82). Each tries in his own

way to escape the oppression of this bleak reality. To Tommy, for instance, "reality could be shut out by the blare of dance - bands and the voices of crooners" (p. 53). The activist minority are also deprived of sensing life, as they must always dig, like ants, holes in the ground to hide, far from the eyes of the police pursuing them day and night.

The lifelessness or alienation of the people is sometimes shown as part of the fluidity of both place and time: "On the morning of the big strike ... the light had taken a long time to come. It was as if time had become static and the earth lived through a night without change, the thin grayness towards the east remained inscrutable, chill and mocking and insipid as over-watered gruel" (p. 97). While passing by many black people's dwellings, the hero, Beukes, feels them to have no trace of life.

The structural pattern in *Weep Not, Child* and *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, as well as many other African novels, can thus be seen as circular. It is inseparable from, in fact produced by, the shared theme of all the novels. The traumatization of African peoples in all parts of the black continent, due to their nightmarish experiences with the white colonists, is the focal point of all the novels, and it also underlines the circular structure on the levels of narrative time and the depiction of character and place. The facts of daily life in Africa and the technical pattern of the novels are thus inseparable. Behind the individual structure of the novels, there seems to be a larger circle drawn about the social situation they depict. The end of any novel does not come up with solutions to the problem it raises from the

start, but rather implies its continuity again in a cyclical pattern. Both native Africans and alien colonists keep watching each other closely; when one side attacks and damages the other, the latter retaliates, even though unequally or less effectively. This way of living may result in the dominance of the aliens over the natives, yet the activists show unrelenting persistence both inside and outside Africa, in fighting back for independence. Each of the novels discussed above is sealed at the end with this optimistic vision.

Circular patterns of external reality are also produced in African novels through the use of other technical devices. All the main characters reflect a profound nostalgia for the past. The list of illustrative examples is too long to quote here, but to mention just one example, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, hangs himself in a tragic scene at the end of the novel, leaving us with the implications of his refusal to adapt to the acculturation the Christian missionaries are trying to impose on his people. In general, the fictional African characters have close ties to the mythical, even though simple and rural, pre-colonial world. Commenting on Wilson's black characters, Pereira accounts for these characters' attachment to their past by saying "it is only in their roots that they will discover true cultural or national identities" (1995: 5).

Nostalgia always tends to appear in those whose present life is characterized by social upheaval. It is normal in such a case to look upon the past as far better than the present. In the view of Chase, "the current preoccupation

with 'myth' is an attempt to bulwark our age's lack of religious faith with forms of belief no longer institutionalized" (see Daniel G. Hoffman 1961: 14). We are not far here from the many prominent writers of the twentieth century (W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate etc.) who integrate the legendary past of their own countries into their multifarious literary texts as a tacit rejection of the present, almost certainly seen as decadent. As man is severed by modern civilization from inherited ethics, he turns - according to many writers - to ancient myths through which he discovers his wholeness (see Cleanth Brooks 1995: 32-49). T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," for example, provides, through invoking "past cultures of the East and West from Dante and Shakespeare to the Upanishad," modern man with a shelter from "the ruin of the present" (see Martin Travers 1998: 137). Such trends in modern Western writing offer African writers a defense against the charge of backwardness due to their invocation of the African past. They have similar objectives behind the nostalgia in their novels, namely to give their own peoples a shelter from the modern cultural changes incurred by the European colonists.

It may thus be presumed that narrative time in African novels is inseparable from the social and political realities of Africans. It rather, to quote Colin Flack, "inscribes reality, and is a concentrated or intensified expression of life as it occurs at the distinctively human level" (1989: 123). As people's lives often move in circular patterns, no wonder then that narrative time is circular too. But this conclusion

may sound problematic in that it sharply contradicts the linear concept of time. According to many scholars, one's life is, regardless of any retrogressive social circumstances, predetermined to go on in a linear progression until it ends at a certain point; time does not stop or cease with the end of one's life. However, a deeper insight into life may find it circular. All living creatures undergo a continuous process of creation and recreation: our biological features are a recreation of our fathers' and great-grandfathers'. Even fashions in clothes return to echo the past. After all, the whole universe is designed in a circular order, if considered from a religious perspective: we are created to die, then be recreated in the hereafter.

The circular perspective is ancient, even though few people believe in it in our age, which staunchly believes in change and technological progression. The linear perspective, compared to the circular, is very recent. As Snead states, "Only with the coming of scientific progressivism (as predicted and formulated by Bacon in the *Advancement of Learning* in 1605) was the model able to attain pre-eminence, and then not for some 200 years" (1984: 65).<sup>3</sup>

It is hardly likely that African writers cling to the circular model out of backwardness or inability to change or progress; it is, rather, a mode of reaffirming their faith in their original national cultural stock. Even if the African peoples give way to modernization and development, as a result of their close contact with the West, they attempt to prevent new customs from deracinating their heritage. The

fictional characters thus are not so different from their real-life counterparts. It is in such representations of the national character that African writers' genuineness lies.

One final thing to mention here is that the African literary tradition may be presumed to discredit the critical theories of formalism and post-structuralism popular in the twentieth century. Contrary to the theory that "every type of formalism denies any connection between the world 'reality' and the literary text," permitted by "most varieties of post-structuralism," which insists that a text must be "necessarily fictional," African writers interweave the shape of their social realities with the form of their novels(see, e.g., William W. Demastes 1996: 1 and K. M. Newton 1988: 35-38).<sup>4</sup> With this deviation from the Western literary tradition, African writers may well have carved out a distinct niche for themselves in world literature.

## Notes

- 1- See also J.A. Philip, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism*, Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1966 P. 75; John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma, 'Bewildered Traveller,'* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, P.6, where a similar view of the idea of change is upheld.
- 2- The following books also discuss the idea of cultural repetition in Africa and other places: Robert F. Thompson "An Aesthetic of the Cool," in *African Forum*, 2: 2 (Fall 1966), P. 85; Eileen Southern (ed.), *Readings in Black American*, New York, Norton, 1971, PP. 41-7; Leonore Emery, *Black Dance in the United States, From 1619 to 1970*, Ph. D., Univ. of Southern California (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1971), the section: "Special Occasion Dances," PP. 50-102; John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, Chicago, Ill. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, PP. 43-67.
- 3- For further information about philosophical and scientific concepts of time, see Benjamin Farrington, *Francis Bacon: Philosopher of Industrial Science*, London, Macmillan, 1973; Sir Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, London, Hogarth Press, 1976; Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd rev. edn., Library of Liberal arts, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965; Scavan Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New

Haven, Conn., Yale Univ. Press, 1975; Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History*, Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1977.

- 4- These two writers, and several others, argue that the connection between a work of art and reality is most often indirect, or figurative.



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