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How successful is Chinua Achebe in representing an image of Africa that "writes back" to the European coloniser? Chinua Achebe was one of Africa's most influential and widely published writers. He was "Born on the 16th of November 1930 in Ogidi, an Igbo village a few miles from the Niger River in what was then the British-ruled colony of Nigeria". Achebe was a prominent Igbo writer, infamous for his novels depicting the effects of Western customs and beliefs on a traditional African society. A much praised African classic "a great book, that bespeaks a great, brave, kind human spirit," first published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* is an early narrative about the European colonization of Africa told from the point of view of the colonized people. Published on the eve of Nigerian independence in 1960 when Achebe was twenty eight *Things fall apart* helped reshape literature in the English-speaking world and with selling over 10 million copies in 45 languages, it poignantly evoked the early experience of colonialism by a tribal leader in Nigeria. The novel is told "from the inside" and relates to the destructive impact of European Christianity on pre-colonial Igbo culture amid the scramble for Africa in the 1890s. For Soyinka, *Things Fall Apart* was "the first novel in English which spoke from the interior of an African character, rather than portraying the African as exotic, as the white man would see him". The novel represents almost a personification of the African people, it gives them a means of writing back by having an expression and an inner self that is portrayed the same way as an expression or an emotion from any "white man". The barbaric perception of the African People is abolished and they are therefore given an equal opportunity of expression. Achebe juxtaposes between classic traditionalism and the "winds of change" in this

bluntly ironic novel. " The wind of change is blowing through this continent and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it". Achebe wishes to express his cultural identity in order to write back to the European colonizer in *Things Fall Apart*. He does however take into account the " winds of change" in the sense that he clearly does not object to the discovery of and learning about new religions and cultures. He presents a strong argument in favour of discussion as a path towards understanding. An example of this mutual understanding is expressed in conversation between the missionary Mr Brown and Akunna, one of the tribal elders. They often spend long hours in discussion, and although "Neither of them succeeded in converting the other ... they learnt more about their different beliefs" (147) This demonstrates a mutual relationship, in which both parties are equally eager to learn when approached on equal terms. Achebe does not wish to predominately scrutinize the Western traditions that are being imposed upon his society, however wants to write back to the European colonizer with respect to the Ibo way of thinking. He includes stories from Igbo culture and tradition with the use of parables and proverbs. Almost immediately in chapter 1 Okeye expresses that " he who brings kola brings life". This term is unfamiliar to a western reader however expresses an important ritual of the African culture with reference to hospitality. It allows readers all over the world to familiarize themselves with this culture. Achebe does not want to see the erasing of a pre colonial Africa and this is expressed throughout the novel not just with the Ibo way of thinking but also with reference to Ibo systems of customs, traditions and religions . All too

many Africans in his time were ready to accept the European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering; therefore the colonized seemed condemned to lose its memory. Although Achebe himself was a Christian, Okwonko the central character was a firm follower of the Igbo traditions. When looking at the actions of the Africans throughout the novel the church first attracts those who are *efulefu*, "worthless men" without titles, not the core of Umuofia society. And Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, joins the Christian faith. The reasons why Africans were ready to accept this judgment was due to the white missionaries influence and manipulation. The clash between mission Christianity and indigenous culture is a recurring theme in postcolonial African fiction. Missionaries were dominant in pre colonial Nigeria and early colonial Nigeria. Their aim was for changing the African culture to make the people favor Christianity and Western beliefs. Due to high cultural and tribal diversity of Nigeria, the missionaries could never quite be sure what to expect in different regions, or what sort of welcome they would receive. In many areas, their task must have seemed formidable. They specifically came to Africa to completely change the lives of the natives. This, they argued, was the whole point of conversion, everything had to change. From a Post colonialist viewpoint and indeed Achebe's this has often resulted in them being fiercely attacked for seeking to completely erase the pre-colonial Africa and start afresh. Achebe writes back to this point by expressing the attributes of the religious ideals of the Igbo culture throughout *Things Fall Apart*. The conversation between Mr. Brown, a Christian missionary in the village of Umuofia, and Akunna, a member of Umuofia, explains the Ibo religion very well. Akunna says that the Ibo believe

in one supreme God also, but they call him Chukwu because " he made all the world and the other gods ." Mr. Brown makes the comment that the Ibo worship carved wood and Akunna replies by saying, " The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all the minor gods were." Akunna also says that the Ibo " make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to they go to Chukwu .". Therefore, Achebe writes back successfully with his expression of the Ibo religion, however the missionaries begin their religious assault by openly denouncing the many gods worshipped by the Ibo in order to convert natives to the new faith. After accomplishing this, the white men set out to prove that the Christian religion is superior to all others by defying the powers of the Ibo gods when they built their church upon the cursed ground of the Evil Forest. With the Ibo religion being proved powerless, the converts begin challenging their former religion by killing the sacred python, revered by the natives of Umuofia. By attacking the fundamental teachings of the natives' religion, the Christians are able to effectively conquer the Ibo people. Okonkwo returns after just seven years of exile to find his village almost unrecognisable. Similarly, his fellow clan members seem unwilling to recognize him. Instead, "the new religion and government and trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds ... they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return" (149). It appears to Okwonkwo that after seven years the pre-colonial Nigeria has been lost. This presents a clear picture of the sheer rapidity of the colonial project. It seems inevitable that much indigenous tradition and heritage will be swept away, resulting in feelings of profound cultural dislocation, and loss of identity. Achebe strives in order to keep this

cultural identity in fear that in the future even his own people will educate from the view of the colonizer. George Lammings, *In the Castle of My Skin* is a good example of educating from the view of the colonizer as a teacher from Barbados tries to educate a young boy with the purpose of wiping away any historical memory the boy could or would have had. "No one there was a slave, the teacher said" The teacher wishes to excise any cultural knowledge or historical memory from the boy and this relates to "Things Fall Apart" as being the complete opposite of what Achebe hopes will come of native cultures. Although Achebe thrives for telling the European reader of traditional Nigeria he uses *Things fall apart* not only to write back by expressing his culture but also to accept the change of a colonial society. Nwoye, Okwonko's son is an example of this acceptance when he feels something stirring in him when learning of Christianity. In the poetry of the new religion, Nwoye finds an answer that is of some kind of comfort to soothe away the scars of Ikemefuna's death and the sound of twin children in the forest. Achebe does not try to force Nigerian culture upon a European audience however. This is exactly what he objects to in the colonial project - the forcing of European culture on an unwilling Nigerian clan. The missionaries simply walk into the midst of the tribe with their interpreters, and "told them that they worship false gods, gods of wood and stone" (*Things Fall Apart*, 120). After thousands of years of worshipping unchanged deities, the white man virtually commands them to "leave your wicked ways and false gods" (120). This is not to say that the missionaries were not dedicated to what they felt was their duty in Nigeria, and Africa as a whole. Many made sincere efforts, often putting their lives in danger to accomplish

their goals. In Chapter 15 of *Things Fall Apart*, the reader is informed of the first white man to be seen on his "iron horse", who was eventually killed by the natives after they consulted their oracle. Yet, the underlying forces at work behind the missions, as well as their inextricable links with commercial activities should never be overlooked. So overall although It is not Achebe's intention to demonstrate any superiority an idealistic pre-colonial Nigerian existence might hold over life in Europe. What he seeks to achieve is an "illumination of the complicated truth of African existence (and) a concrete insight into the reality of their existence"(Conch 6. 1-2, 1974, p. 19). As clearly demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*, he is making neither excuses nor apologies for African existence. By Africans meeting the colonial demands the culture of everything African was to be abolished and the native ideals ignored. With such a prominent colonial culture emerging this meant that for the the last hundred years and arguably longer, literature has taken stabs at Africa. Misrepresentations, omissions and eclipses bled from the pages of colonialist writers like those of Kipling's " White Man's Burden" and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe is writing back to the European colonizer and correcting such omissions from the works of Conrad and Kipling. Joyce Carey's *Mister Johnson* portrays a comic African who slavishly adores his white colonist boss, to the point of gladly being shot to death by him. He is despised by his boss as a member of an inferior race. This relates to the missionaries as they were absolutely convinced of the superiority of Europeans as an undeniable fact against the assumed inferiority of the natives. Achebe had become disturbed by the works of European writers which portrayed Africans as noble savages. " These European writers

believed that colonialism was an agent of enlightenment to primitive peoples without a valid value system or civilization of their own" (Taylor 28) . Overall Achebe writes back to these writers by removing the inferior perception of black natives and also excising the master slave relationship that Africans have been subjected to. Another way Achebe writes back is when he talks about the Igbo tribe and expresses their close bonds of clan kinship, unified allegiance to their gods, and their democratic society. These were the very things that the English set out to attack, to ' put a knife on'. Once they began this process, Igbo society was never to be the same again. " He has put a knife on all the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Things Fall Apart, 145) This attitude towards Europeans makes us ask the question as to why Achebe chooses to write his novel in English. There is a telling exchange between Obierika and Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart: " Does the white man understand our customs about land?" " How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" (145) He uses European form to write as he wants to achieve a national literature in order to write about his own people. Writing back to the Europeans by inscribing his culture in English presents an image of post colonial Africa to a nation of readers. Achebe's successors such as Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo prove that Achebe made a breakthrough in writing back to the colonizer and was an inspiration for many. Achebe also stresses up the African culture by building up the text with reference to Igbo ways of thinking and the speech that the natives use. Words such as " egwugwu" " inyanga" and " kotma" to name but a few, are used to express cultural viewpoints to a European audience. Although Achebe uses many of these terms which are not familiar to western cultures

he does it to make the story seem more real. He brings authenticity to the culture and an understanding of African terms to the colonizer. Also by opening up a scope of wider reading for European audiences it is educational and makes readers involvement in the text more dominant. The commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* sees the use of these words as most infuriating with their love of superfluous words Achebe also expresses the Africans as people who have a working system of peace and order. This is demonstrated during the week of peace. " Okonkwo broke the peace and was punished, as was the custom, by Ezeani, the priest. During the Week of Peace you are to live in complete peace no matter what the circumstances, " the evil he did could ruin the whole clan." Achebe also writes back by showing us the traditions of Igbo people with refernce to Obierka's daughter's wedding. Also Myths and legends had a two-fold purpose to provide and explain history and beliefs of the Ibo people, while at the same time to show the rise and fall of Okonkwo and his culture. This is done through stories such as *The Birds and the Tortoise*. After Okonkwo's suicide, the tribe, though broken, are held together. The Tortoise survives, a patchwork of himself, just as Ibo clanship survives. The morals of the Ibo people are catagorised in simple terms making it have the potential to be universal, with such simplistic method of story telling. The Igbo art of storytelling became central to the tale, since " proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". Although the text is predominately standard English Achebe's use of non-colonial language is used as a means to enrich our understanding of postcolonial issues He also writes back with his use of Folk tales such as *the Mosquito and the ear* " And at last the locusts did descend.

They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground" In allegorical terms Achebe is presenting the arrival of the colonizers. The locusts have been coming for years, but their symbolic significance in this passage lies in the inevitable arrival of the colonizers, which will alter the landscape and psychology of the Igbo people irreparably. The development of independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages. Such an appropriation is clearly the most significant feature in the emergence of modern post-colonial literatures

In conclusion Achebe writes back with great success to the European colonizer because he realizes that " the future of African writing does not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral traditions " By expressing his culture to the Europeans the novel became very successful was seen as a foundation text for African writings. It should be noted that the novel derives its title from a line from William Butler Yeats' poem " The Second Coming" which foretells the end of the world. Achebe's novel indeed foreshadows the end of a world with the incursion of the white man into the society of the African Ibo, and the subsequent dissolution of the indigenous culture. The image of Things falling apart is an extremely apt one, for we learn that from the author's point of view, Ibo culture is held together by one thing, its own traditions. Achebe writes back by expressing these traditions and uses oral story telling, religion, culture and all aspects of African Ibo to " bring Africa to the world " whilst still remaining as an African. His argument against colonizing Africa is a fair one however not totally biased in the sense that he is open to the experience to new religions

however sees the force at which the Europeans go about changing Ibo traditions unfair. Achebe builds up the text with Ibo ways of thinking and speech and allows a European audience the chance to experience Ibo culture. Although Achebe accepts that the colonization of Africa will happen he successfully writes back in his expression to the European colonizer by showing that without keeping the traditions and the true spirit of Africa alive then things will quite literally fall apart.