Chapter I: Introduction
Introduction

This study is about two African authors, John Maxwell Coetzee from South Africa and Chinua Achebe from Nigeria. They both are some of the most representative of African authors today. While Coetzee is white South African, writing on the problems of race, colonialism and gender issues, Chinua Achebe is the black Nigerian author who has written about Nigerian history and culture in his literary works.

J. M. Coetzee is the South-African novelist, critic, and translator, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. The violent history and politics of his native country, especially apartheid, has provided Coetzee much raw material for his work, but none of his books have been censored by the authorities. Often he has examined the effects of oppression within frameworks derived from postmodernist thought. Coetzee's reflective, unaffected and precise style cannot be characterized as experimental, but in his novels he has methodically broken the conventions of narration. “He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn, learn nothing.”

Coetzee, a descendant from 17th-century Dutch settlers, was born in Cape Town. His father was a lawyer and his mother a schoolteacher. At home Coetzee spoke English and with other relatives Afrikaans – his parents wanted to be English. Coetzee studied both mathematics and literature at the University of Cape Town. After graduating, he moved to England, where he worked as an applications
programmer (1962-63) in London. Coetzee spent his evenings in the British Museum, reading Ford Madox Ford, and the rest of the time tramping the cold streets of London seeking the meaning of life, as he later said. From London he moved to Bracknell, Berkshire, where he worked as a systems programmer for a computer company.

In 1969 Coetzee received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas with a dissertation on Beckett. From 1968 to 1971 he taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo. While in Buffalo, Coetzee started to write his first book, *Dusklands* (1974), which consists of two closely related novels, one about America and Vietnam, the other, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', set in the 1760s. In 1972 he became a Lecturer at the University of Cape Town, at that time an institution for Whites, and was later appointed Professor of Literature. From 2002 Coetzee has lived in Australia with his partner, Professor Dorothy Driver.

Coetzee's works cannot be classified as belonging to any specific postmodernist intellectual current. His essays reveal interest in linguistics, generative grammar, stylistics, structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction. The dilemmas of his novels are based on South African reality, but often presented in a timeless, metafictional form and carrying a plurality of meanings. *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), in which the central character is a rebellious, sexually deprived daughter of a sheepfarmer, Coetzee examined the conventions of the South African plaasroman, or farm novel. The calmly written torture scenes of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) questioned the voyeuristic nature of fiction. The title of the novel referred to a poem by Constantin Cavafy.
"Life and Times of Michael K" (1983) won the Booker Prize, but Coetzee did not attend the ceremonies. (In some sources, Coetzee's second name is Michael, or Marie.) The protagonist of the story, set in a future Cape Town and Karoo, is a descendant of Franz Kafka's characters, who never find out the meaning of their suffering, like the victim of the execution machine in the short story 'In der Strafkolonie' (1919).

Michael K eventually ends up in a concentration camp. Cynthia Ozick wrote of the book: “Mr. Coetzee's subdued yet urgent lament is for the sadness of South Africa that has made dependents and parasites and prisoners of its own children, black and white.”

Foe (1986) played with Defoe's classic novel Robinson Crusoe. In the story a woman, Susan Barton, shares the island with Robinson Cruso and Friday. “I am cast away. I am all alone, she says without getting any sympathy from Cruso, the cruel tyrant of his small empire.”

After they are rescued, Susan meets Daniel Foe and becomes his muse, whom he forgets. Friday remains mute, his tongue is cut, and he is never allowed to tell his own tale. In The Master of Petersburg (1994) the protagonist is the famous Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who tries to understand the death of his stepson, Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev. In his sorrow he takes the role of Orpheus:

“He thinks of Orpheus walking backwards step by step, whispering the dead woman's name, coaxing her out of the entrails of hell; of the wife in grave clothes with he blind, dead eyes following him, holding out limp hands before her like a sleepwalker. No flute, no lyre, just the word, the one word, over and over.”

Both works are written in the third person. *Boyhood* and *Youth*, after all, aren't an objective record of Coetzee's young life. William Deresiewicz wrote in The New York Times (July 7, 2002), they are the 50-something Coetzee's reconstruction, seven or eight novels later, of that life. The third volume of the autobiography, *Summertime* (2009), introduces a fictional character, Vincent, who serves as a biographer of the author – already dead. In *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) Coetzee invented his female alter ego, a famous writer, who travels all over the world and gives speeches and academic lectures. In the United States she discusses and analyzes Kafka's monkey story *A Report to the Academy*, in England at the fictional Appleton College she drew a parallel between gas chambers and the breeding of animals for slaughter, and in Amsterdam her subject is the problem of evil.

As a material Coetzee used his own academic lectures, but at the same time he strips bare Costello's intellectual lifestyle – although her arguments are always fresh and seductive, the result of all her theorizing is that she starts resemble more and more the copy of Kafka's primate, whose basic predicletions and moral ideas are contrary to the real world.

Costello resurfaced in *Slow Man* (2005), about a misanthropic photographer, who has lost his leg in an accident and who falls in love with a married Croat woman. In this story the protagonist is perhaps a figure imagined by Costello.
His postcolonial orientation draws upon myth and allegory as freely as it does realism. Coetzee is further distinguished by his acute awareness of marginalization, his affinity for rural settings, and his unique take on ethno-linguistic identity. The installment of the Nationalist Party in 1948 brought grave consequences for the Coetzee family. Because of his opposition to the legalization of apartheid, Zacharias was dismissed as a government lawyer.

At this time, John Maxwell was eight and the family moved back to the Coetzee family farm in Worchester. There, Zacharias farmed sheep and kept books for the local fruit-canning factory. Although the young boy developed a fond affinity for the farm, it was during his time in Worchester John Michael came to understand what it was like to be marginalized. At this time, John Maxwell was eight and the family moved back to the Coetzee family farm in Worchester. There, Zacharias farmed sheep and kept books for the local fruit-canning factory. Although the young boy developed a fond affinity for the farm, it was during his time in Worchester John Michael came to understand what it was like to be marginalized.

Zacharias' family were Afrikaners, people of Dutch South African descent. For the most part, Afrikaners were Protestants belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church and spoke Afrikaans, a Dutch South African dialect. Because of the political dissent between the English and the Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, the school systems for whites were segregated along linguistic lines. John Michael however did not fit neatly into Afrikaans culture. He attended English-medium classes and claimed to be Catholic. He loved reading English literature and never fully identified with rural Afrikaans children, who he found to be rough, coarse, and
poor. Although Afrikaans nationalism was at its height, the people were in the midst of an agricultural depression.

The family moved back to Cape Town in 1951 where Zacharias opened up a law firm, which failed because of Zacharias' inability to manage money. The family became more and more dependent on Vera's humble earnings as a teacher. As a young child, John Maxwell was very close to his mother but had trouble understanding the nuanced racism of South Africa. Coetzee says in his autobiography Boyhood, which is written in third person, John Michael is always trying to make sense of his mother. Jews are exploiters, she says yet she prefers Jewish doctors because they know what they are doing. Colored people are the salt of the earth, she says, yet she and her sisters are always gossiping about pretend-whites with secret Colored backgrounds. He cannot understand how she can hold so many contradictory beliefs at the same time.

Young Coetzee struggled to make sense of his world. On the farm, Coetzee had been told that the Colored laborers belonged on the land their ancestors had inhabited, yet he did not understand their unchanging subservient position. In Cape Town, Coetzee observed how the laws increasingly restricted these people to these low-paying jobs.

For high school, Coetzee attended St. Joseph's and continued to the University of Cape Town, where he received a B.A. in English in 1960 and a B.A. in mathematics in 1961. He worked as a computer programmer in England from 1962 to 1965. While in England, Coetzee completed a thesis on the novelist Ford Maddox Ford and earned his masters from the University of Cape Town. Coetzee moved to
America in pursuit of a Ph.D. He enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin where he completed a doctoral thesis on Samuel Beckett's English fiction. During his studies, Coetzee came across a 1760 account of explorations into South Africa written by one of his remote ancestors, Jacobus Coetzee. The account latter became a seed for his first published work of fiction. In 1968, Coetzee moved to the State University in New York at Buffalo to pursue a job in academia; the campus, meanwhile, was consumed by the Vietnam anti-war movement. Coetzee returned to the University of Cape Town as a professor of literature in 1972 after being refused permanent residence in the United States.

J.M. Coetzee then embarked on a rich literary career. Drawing both from the combination of his experience living in America during Vietnam and from his ancestor's exploration accounts, Coetzee wrote his first novel, *Dusklands* (1974). He followed this with *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), in which Coetzee explored the themes of colonialism. In 1983, Coetzee won his first Booker Prize for *Life and Times of Michael K*, a tale of a simple gardener who is made prisoner in a civil war from which he seeks liberation. The work also received the C.N.A. Literary Award and the Prix Etranger Literary Award. In *Foe* (1986), Coetzee turned to Robinson Crusoe for inspiration, writing the narrative from the perspective of mute Friday, Crusoe's slave whose tongue has been cut out. In 1990, he wrote *Age of Iron*, the story of an old South African woman dying of cancer, and in 1994, *Master of Petersburg*, and a fictionalized account of the Russian author Dostoevsky. Coetzee became the first author to receive the esteemed Booker Prize twice with *Disgrace* in 1999. His latest novel is *Slow Man* (2005). Coetzee has

Coetzee met and married his wife, Philippa Jubber, in 1963. While in America, they had son in 1966 and a daughter in 1968. He and his wife divorced in 1980, and they later lost their son in a car accident. Coetzee held several positions at the University of Cape Town from 1972 to 2000 and has been a visiting professor at several prominent universities such as Harvard, John Hopkins, Stanford and the University of Chicago. In 2002, Coetzee emigrated to Australia, where he lives today.

Chinua Achebe, the other writer under consideration of this study, was a prominent Igbo (Ibo) writer, famous for his novels describing the effects of Western customs and values on traditional African society. Achebe's satire and his keen ear for spoken language have made him one of the most highly esteemed African writers in English. In 1990 Achebe was paralyzed from the waist down in a serious car accident.

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.\(^5\)

Chinua Achebe was born at Ogidi, in 1930 in Nigeria, a son of a teacher in a missionary school. His parents, though they installed in him many of the values of their traditional Igbo culture, were devout evangelical Protestants and christened him Albert after Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. In 1944 Achebe attended
Government College in Umuahia. Like other major Nigerian writers including Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, John Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, and Cole Omotso, he was also educated at the University College of Ibadan, where he studied English, history and theology.

At the university Achebe rejected his British name and took his indigenous name Chinua. In 1953 he graduated with a BA. Before joining the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos in 1954 he travelled in Africa and America, and worked for a short time as a teacher. In the 1960s he was the director of External Services in charge of the Voice of Nigeria.

During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) Achebe was in the Biafran government service, and then taught at US and Nigerian universities. Achebe's writings from this period reflect his deep personal disappointment with what Nigeria became since independence.

In 1967 Achebe cofounded a publishing company at Enugu with his friend, the poet Christopher Okigbo, who was killed during the Nigerian Civil War. Achebe was appointed research fellow at the University of Nigeria, and after serving as professor of English, he retired in 1981. Since 1985, Achebe was a professor emeritus. From 1971 he edited Okike, the leading journal of Nigerian new writing. He also held the post of Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

There he met James Baldwin, also a faculty member, who was Professor of African studies at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of the Council at Anambra State University of Technology, Enugu. In
the1990s Achebe was a faculty member at Bard College, a liberal arts school, where he taught literature to undergraduates. An automobile accident on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway in 1990 left Achebe confined to a wheelchair permanently.

Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, appeared in 1958. The story of a traditional village big man Okonkwo, and his downfall has been translated into some 50 languages. It was followed two years later by *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* (1964), which concerned traditional Igbo life as it clashed with colonial powers in the form of missionaries and colonial government.

Among Achebe's later works is *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), a polyvocal story with multiple narrators. Set in an imaginary West African state, its central character is Sam, a Sandhurst-trained military officer, who has become President. Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi, his friends, die when resisting brutal abuse of power. A military coup eliminates Sam. Beatrice Okah - Chris's London-educated girl friend - is entrusted with her community of women to return the political sanity.

*Things Fall Apart* (1958), an unsentimental novel, depicts the life of Okonkwo, ambitious and powerful leader of an Igbo community, who counts on physical strength and courage. Okonkwo's life is good: his compound is large, he has no troubles with his wives, his garden grows yams, and he is respected by his fellow villagers. When Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman, he is banished from the village for seven years. But the vehicle for his downfall is his blindness to circumstances and the missionary church, which brings with it the new authority of the British District Commissioner.
The story is set in the 1890s, when missionaries and colonial government made its intrusion into Igbo society. In this process Okonkwo is destroyed, because his unwillingness to change set him apart from the community and he is fighting alone against colonialism. Achebe took the title of the book from William Butler Yates's *The Second Coming* – “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.

*A Man of the People* (1966) is a satire of corruption, and power struggles in an African state in the 1960s. The central characters are the Minister of Culture, Nanga, the man of the people, and teacher Odili, an African Lucky Jim, who tells the story. Odili stands against the government, but not because of ideological reasons. He has personal interests. Nanga has seduced his girl friend. Their political confrontation becomes violent, Nanga's thugs inflict havoc and chaos, and the army responds by staging a coup.

Achebe has also written collections of short stories, poetry, and several books for juvenile readers. His essays include *Beware, Soul Brother* (1971), about his experiences during the Civil War. He has received a Margaret Wrong Prize, the New Statesman Jock Campbell Prize, the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and the 2007 Man Booker International award.

In 1983, upon the death of Mallan Aminu Kano, Achebe was elected deputy national president of the People's Redemption Party. As the director of Heineman Educational Books in Nigeria, he has encouraged and published the work of dozens of African writers. He founded in 1984 the bilingual magazine *Uwa ndi Igbo*, a valuable source for Igbo studies.
Achebe's own literary language is Standard English blended with pidgin, Igbo vocabulary, proverbs, images and speech patterns. Achebe shows his skills as a storyteller in *The Madman* in which the social customs of the Ibo-speaking people are strongly present. In the richly layered narrative a nameless madman gets his revenge. Nwibe, an honored member of a distant town Ogbu, plans to go to the market. There in the market he had once chased a madman out of his hut and sent his children to throw stones at him. As he washes by the river, the madman takes his cloth. Nwibe runs naked after him, shouting 'Stop the madman.' The thief with the cloth disappears in the crowd, and Nwibe is taken to a medicine-man, but he has lost his social position. For how could a man be the same again of whom witnesses from all the lands of Olu and Igbo have once reported that they saw today a fine, hefty man in his prime, stark naked, tearing through the crowds to answer the call of the market-place. Such a man is marked forever.

As an essayist Achebe has gained fame with his collections *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1988) and his long essay *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). In *An Image of Africa* (1975) Achebe criticizes Conrad's racism in *Heart of Darkness*. He has defended the use of the English language in the production of African fiction, insisting that the African novelist has an obligation to educate, and has attacked European critics who have failed to understand African literature on its own terms.

Achebe has defined himself as a cultural nationalist with a revolutionary mission to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. But Achebe has not stopped criticizing
postcolonial African leaders who have pillaged economies. During the military dictatorship of Gen. Sani Abacha he left Nigeria several times.

*Arrow of God* (1994) is set in the 1920s. The central character is Ezeulu, priest, who sends one of his sons to missionary school and gains in some respect the approval of the English district superintendent. However, Ezeulu is doomed, because when defending the traditions of his people he is unyielding, unable to reach a compromise, and afraid of losing his authority.

Chinua Achebe, poet and novelist, is one of the most important living African writers. He is also considered one of the most original literary artists currently writing in English.

Achebe was born with the name of Albert Chinualumogo Achebe. He was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria. He received early education in English, but grew up surrounded by the complex fusion of Igbo traditions and the colonial legacy. He studied literature and medicine at the University of Ibadan; after graduating, he went to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was his first novel. It has been translated into at least forty-five languages, and has sold eight million copies worldwide.

From the 1950s, Achebe was central to a new Nigerian literary movement that drew on the oral traditions of Nigeria's indigenous tribes. Although Achebe writes in English, he attempts to incorporate Igbo vocabulary and narratives. Other novels include: *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966).
Achebe left his career in radio in 1966, during the national unrest and violence that led to the Biafran War. He narrowly escaped harm at the hands of soldiers who believed that his novel, *A Man of the People*, implicated him in the country's first military coup. He began an academic career the next year, taking a position as Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nigeria. That same year, he co-founded a publishing company with Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. In 1971, he became an editor for Okike, a prestigious Nigerian literary magazine. He founded Iwa ndi Ibo in 1984; this bilingual publication was dedicated to Igbo cultural life.

He was made Emeritus Professor at the University of Nigeria in 1985. He has taught at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut, and he has received over twenty honorary doctorates from universities around the world. He received Nigeria's highest honor for intellectual achievement, the Nigerian National Merit Award, in 1987. His novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was shortlisted for the Booker McConnell Prize that same year.

Achebe has been active in Nigerian politics since the 1960s. Many of his novels deal with the social and political problems facing his country, including the difficulty of the post-colonial legacy.
References


