Chapter III: Racial Conflicts and Colonial Themes
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Inter-Relationships of the Colonizers and the Natives

The theme which instantly comes out of the reading of the works of Chinua Achebe and J. M. Coetzee is the inter-relationships of the colonizers and the natives. This is inevitable for any writer who wants to truly write about the historical perspectives of his country. Coetzee and Achebe are not alone in this. A plethora of writers before them have shown these conflicts on racial themes, a result of the colonial history of these countries.

A century of European (British and French mainly, but also Portuguese, German, Italian and Spanish) colonization left behind an African continent dazed, bewildered and confused. This is why modern African writers see the need for and admit a commitment to the restoration of African values. In fact, the Western world equates knowledge, modernity, modernization, civilization, progress and development to itself, while it views the Third-World from the perspective of the antithesis of the positive qualities ascribed to itself. Such negative stereotypes are perpetrated by a system of education, which encourages all the errors and falsehoods about Africa/Africans. Writing on the jaundiced portrayal of Africa/Africans in Western canonical works, Edward Wilmot Blyden asserted over a hundred years ago that: “All our traditions and experiences are connected with a foreign race—we have no poetry but that of our taskmasters. The songs which live in our ears and are often on our lips are the songs we heard sung by those who shouted while we groaned and lamented. They sang of their history, which was the history of our degradation. They recited their triumphs, which contained the records of our
humiliation. To our great misfortune, we learned their prejudices and their passions, and thought we had their aspirations and their power.”

Africa and Africans are given negative images in Western books of geography, travels, novels, history and in Hollywood films about the continent. Chinua Achebe has labelled it racism and has expressed it in very explicit words in his *In An Image of Africa* and *Hopes and Impediments*, two collections of essays on Africa and its fate. Achebe claims that in various western works, by western and non-African writers, Africans are misrepresented. They are portrayed as caricatures. This is what Achebe stresses in his works.

Unfortunately, Africans themselves are obliged to study such pernicious teachings. Reacting to this mistake, Chinua Achebe declares that if he were God, he would regard as the very worst our acceptance, for whatever reason, of racial inferiority. He further comments that his role as a writer is that of an educator who seeks to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of vilification and self-denigration.

The Western-associated canons of texts are dotted with a whole complex of conservative, authoritarian attitudes, which supposedly buttress the liberal-democratic (bourgeois) states of Europe and North Africa. Although Achebe stresses on the ethnic conflicts of his country of many tribes, Coetzee mainly focuses on the white-black relations, which often boils down to white versus non-white people and their racial conflicts.

Actually, the colonization of Africa is explicit in the physical domination and control of its vast geographical territory by the colonial world and
its cronies. However, this physical presence, domination and control of Africa by the colonizer is sustained by a series or range of concepts implicitly constructed in the minds of the colonized. Therefore, more than the power of the cannon, it is canonical knowledge that establishes the power of the colonizer I over the colonized Other. It should also be stressed that the available records of Africa's history handed down by the Europeans, far from being a disinterested account of Africa, are interested constructs of European representational narratives. This view is supported by Ania Looomba: the vast new world (Africa inclusive) encountered by European travelers were interpreted by them through ideological filters, or ways of seeing, provided by their own culture.

“Yesterday, at the end of this alley, I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside, a man I recognized from the streets: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs, wearing a baggy grey suit and a hat with a sagging brim. He had the hat on now, sleeping with the brim folded under his ear. A derelict, one of the derelicts who hang around the parking lots on Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the flyover(overpass), eating out of refuse cans. One of the homeless for whom August, month of rains, is the worst month. Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. An unsavory smell about him--urine, sweet wine, mouldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean.”

By distorting the history and culture of Africa, the colonizer has created a new set of values for the African. Consequently, just the subject fashioned by Orientalism, the African has equally become a creation by the West. J. M. Coetzee
fights with this kind of colonial thinking in his works as portrayed in the *Life and Times of Michael K*.

A very interesting part of the analysis of the work of J. M. Coetzee is the comparison of the original work of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe and the tragi-parody *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee, a work which reinterprets the original work by de-colonizing the racial narratives. He does it in an ironic way by highlighting the racist undertones of the *Robinson Crusoe* of Defoe.

The character, Robinson Crusoe of Daniel Defoe is the true symbol of the British conquest, who cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knife grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella maker and a clergyman. He is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday (the trusty savage who arrives on an unlucky day) is the symbol of the subject races.

Throughout *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist embodies Western mercantile capitalism, grounded in a colonial economy, through his money-making schemes (engaging in the slave trade, investing profits, hoarding gold on the island) and his moral lapses (most notably, selling the Moorish boy with whom he escaped from the Turkish pirates for sixty pieces of silver). On the other hand, the natives, represented by Friday, are depicted as careless self-indulgent individuals who lack forethought or reflections. This is why the white man who has a life of reason, introspection and faith, intervenes, like the Almighty God, to civilize the savage Other.
Although Friday is described specifically as not black, and as possessing non-Negroid features, he represents the Black Africans in *Robinson Crusoe* even more than he represents Amerindians (which he presumably is). The novel is set on a New World island; British colonialism at that time was centered in the Caribbean and its slave-based plantation economy. As most native Caribs, Arawaks and Tainos had been annihilated through war and disease, slaves were supplied from Africa. The triangular trade itself blurred spatial boundaries and, by importing a new 'native Other' to replace the old 'native Other,' blurred ethnic distinctions as well. Every one who is not white becomes 'black.' It is precisely this developing Manichean dichotomy, a direct consequence of the myth of civilization based on repression, that Robinson Crusoe records.

In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe the Western European self is equated with futurity, vision, civilization, rationality, language and light. Conversely, the depiction of the non-European (the Amerindians, the African) in the text is an absolute negation of the Other. The black is associated with pre-history, savagery, cannibalism, unconsciousness, silence and darkness.

Crusoe, the archetypal Western man, assumes the posture of a king, a prince, a governor, a general, and a field marshal. He is worried by the sense of his self-assumed greatness. He suffers the pang of delusions of grandeur, seeing himself as some kind of God. This temper is reflected in his unconscious (his dreams) most especially, in which he rescues a savage from his enemies. The so-called savage kneels down to Crusoe as a sign of reverence, praying him for assistance.
To a great extent, Crusoe has the passion of racial consciousness, an emblem of the relationship between the colonizer and the native. In fact, he is an unlikable man for a hero, an egoist who has little interest in anyone but himself. In his portrayal of Africa/Africans/Amerindians, Defoe was expressing an opinion common to his contemporaries. Robinson Crusoe articulates the European attitude about the peoples of Africa and America that structured an expanding imperialist venture. Once considered a model for alternative Rousseauean concepts of education and growing up, the 'Robinsonade' and its protagonist have had to face harsh criticism. In fact, Crusoe, his kith and kin, and Defoe, the author, are guilty of ethnocentrism, logocentrism, proto-imperialism, and even megalomania. Crusoe is not a role model in this multicultural, pluralistic world of ours. Instead, he plays a role that begs to be rewritten – thus the existence of alternative versions of the Robinson myth in post-colonial fiction, including Coetzee's *Foe*.

J. M. Coetzee expresses his opinions by making a parody of *Robinson Crusoe* in his groundbreaking work, *Foe*. In the original work of *Robinson Crusoe*, on his 'island', Crusoe attempts to subjugate all of nature, including Friday, his manservant. The founding principle of subjugation is force, as he uses his gun to save Friday from his captors (and to silently threaten Friday into obedience). He then begins a programme of imposing cultural imperialism. The first method in this programme is a linguistic one. Crusoe gives Friday his new name without bothering to enquire about his real name. He instructs Friday to call him Master. He thus initiates Friday into the rites of English with a view to making him just an incipient bilingual subject. He teaches him just the aspects of the English language
needed for the master-servant relationship – to make Friday useful, handy and dependent. The master-servant orders suggest how Africans and other 'natives' have been tabulated and classified by the West throughout colonial (and neocolonial) history.

Attempting to demythologize a dominant knowledge about empire, *Foe* is imbued with a 'fresh' paradigm; its textual universe is tailored towards not only revisiting but also retracting the long line of epistemic violence foisted on the psyche and intellect of the Other. The text seeks to uncover the silence and oppression at the heart of Defoe's classic novel to suggest the power of anti-colonial as well as colonial discourse.

Coetzee slips through the operations of various critical unfoldings of the Defoe's canonical text and sets up another text as a relatively autonomous but more often that not a very very supplementary interlocutor, which seems to add to and substitute the original at the same time. His novels are nourished by their relationship with canonical Western literature, but also through his complicated postcoloniality he brings that situation to light and finds fictional forms wherein it can be objectified, named and questioned. His works engage with a vast literary heritage and question the authority invested in precursor discourse, as well as investigate power dynamics, political oppression and ethical responsibility.

Coetzee does this by recasting both Defoe and his protagonist as minor characters within a woman-centred narrative, thereby distorting and twisting the 'truths' that the reader assumes from Defoe's original. A character omitted from and silenced by Defoe's account is foregrounded in Coetzee's version through the
narrator Susan, an English woman marooned for a year on the island with Cruso and Friday. The optimistic Robinson Crusoe, in *Foe*, becomes Cruso, a weak-minded mountain of insecurity who, unlike the original protagonist, lives sullenly on a desolate island with only a few tools, no gun, no Bible, no writing utensils, and no records.

He labors every day to construct gigantic terraces, walled by stone, which stand empty and barren, for he has nothing to plant. In Cruso's island (as opposed to Crusoe's island), there are no providential seeds, spiritual or and natural. Such meaningless construction also symbolizes the hollowness at the core of Empire-building. Cruso as colonist manqué is not only impotent but also ludicrous.

Perhaps most significantly, Friday becomes an eccentric mute with whom the real secrets of the story exist. Further, Coetzee demystifies the racial slippage surrounding Friday. Coetzee has stated that in *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday is a handsome Carib youth with near European features. In *Foe*, he is an African. By transforming the light-skinned, delicately-featured Amerindian into a wooly-haired, thick-lipped, dark complexioned Negro, Coetzee makes visible the racist subtext that drives Defoe's novel, colonialism in the Caribbean, and imperialism in Africa. Reading *Foe* allegorically, then, suggests a reaction against imperialism and white supremacy. As Derek Attridge maintains: “*Foe* represents a mode of fiction that explores the ideological basis of canonization, that draws attention to the existing canon, that thematizes the role of race, class, and gender in the process of cultural acceptance and exclusion, and that, while speaking from a marginal location, addresses the question of marginality such a mode of fiction would have to be seen
as engaged in an attempt to break the silence in which so many are caught, even if it does so by literary means that have traditionally been celebrated as characterizing canonic art.”

While *Foe* re-writes a canonical text from marginal perspectives, it still demonstrates the power of the original to command the desire for imitation; it also exposes the silences and contradictions of the precursor text. *Foe* privileges the intersection or partial overlap between the postmodern and the postcolonial in contemporary cultures, with reference to its resistance to the monologic metanarratives of modernism and realism (in arts), to Orientalism (in cultural anthropology), to colonialism and racism (in geopolitical history, fundamentalism and nativism) and to patriarchy (in gender relations).

The novel’s stylistic and ideological strategies challenge established ways of writing about race. For instance, the resolution of the plot action is an ideologically sensitive site for this challenge. It contradicts the typical ending of the colonial texts, which asserts that choice is over and that the growth of character or the capacity for defining action has ceased.

The fact that a significant portion of contemporary African literature is preoccupied with reworking Western canonical works is a logical and natural – rather than a misplaced and belated – response. This is because Africa’s contact with Europe has impacted greatly on its socio-cultural, political, economic and psychological well-being. The dislocation, psychic and physical debilitation that this contact has created, is so enormous that it rarely escapes the critical attention of African writers, and more recently, of the post-colonial discourse.
analyst. As Ime Ikiddeh claims in his Foreword to Ngugi's *Homecoming*: “There can be no end to the discussion of African encounter with Europe because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again with more subtle, more lethal weapon.”

African literature's fundamental engagement is with the colonial presence in Africa, dismantling its dehumanizing assumptions and resisting its pernicious consequences.

The African novel, in particular, reflects an evolving consciousness at once historical, cultural, and political. It strives to counter the negative picture of Africa and Africans promulgated by some European writers, including Joyce Cary, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Ryder Haggard, Daniel Defoe, William Shakespeare and the like. Even as African novelists seek to interrogate and modify European racism and exploitation in literature as well as in practice, they use their writings to ‘bridge’ the cultural gap between Blacks and Whites. Their reactions to precursor colonial canonical works emphasize their own difference and unique qualities. They claim their own culture, aesthetics, history and essence. This nationalist temper is also reflected in many movements (like Pan Africanism, the Black Renaissance, Negritude, Black Consciousness) that search for African roots and black traditions. In Schipper’s words: “The medium of the novel proved very suitable to the needs of African writers who wanted to address colonial reality as they have experienced it. In their work, the novelists uprooted the myth that riches and power make the white man superior.”
African writers see the need to tell their people’s and continent’s stories themselves. The two perspectives which emerge out of their narration are those of barbarity and civilization. According to Ernest Emenyonu, any attempt to relinquish this God-given right would allow foolish foresters stray in and mistake the middle of a mighty African baobab for an African tree trunk. The idea that only one group of privileged people (in this case, Europeans) is qualified to interpret the world should be interrogated.

For instance, Chinua Achebe, in Things Fall Apart (1958) and his other polemical writings, claims that the missionaries and explorers have lied about Africa. He argues that the depictions of the human and political landscapes of Africa enshrined in Western canonical works are biased and ignorant. Achebe thereby assumes the task of retelling the African stories and asserting the primacy of African culture. To Achebe, the ultimate service of African writers to their people is to make African society regain belief in itself and put away the complexities of years of denigration and self-abasement.

Inheriting Achebe’s legacy, contemporary African critics and writers are required to act with integrity and dedication. This is because the colonial discourses about Africa/Africans need to be subjected to further reworking with a view to correcting erroneous notions about Africa and her peoples. In the words of Walder, these works require a new sense of their place in the changing world of today, if they are to retain their freshness and relevance. Whether these reworkings take the form of national allegories, as Fredric Jameson suggests, or appear an inversion of black/white or center/periphery binaries or question binary structures of thought
themselves they must keep responding not only to the burdens of the past but also to the exigencies of the present and the challenges of the future.

Thus, the colonial discourse needs new liberating narratives to free the colonized from this disabling position. Therefore, the central 'postcolonialist' argument is that postcolonial culture has entailed a revolt of the margin against the metropolis, the periphery against the centre, in which experience has become uncentred, pluralistic and nefarious.

No place is created for the subaltern to speak, as colonialism's narrativization of African culture effaces all traces of black's voice. She believes that postcolonial critics should concentrate on articulating the margins and gaining control of the way in which the marginalized are represented; the postcolonial intellectual should also break with the paradigms of representation that promote antagonism between the First and Third Worlds.

Chinua Achebe along with other writers like Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Patrick White, Margaret Atwood, Jean Rhys and other postcolonial writers have rewritten particular works from the English canon with a view to restructuring European 'realities' in postcolonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based.

The African story continues to be told by postcolonial writers. When Coetzee's *Foe* was published in 1986, it added to the growing corpus of counter-discursive writings in postcolonial literature. Although Coetzee is among the most critically revered of world writers, he is also one of the most misunderstood and
misrepresented African writers. At least, this is the opinion of critics like Kwaku Korang and Andre Viola, who observe that a problem in Coetzee's fiction is the difficulty of reconciling a liberal humanist approach with the reality of the oppressive power hegemonies in South Africa, which negate such a vision. However, a careful consideration of the various systems of oppression with which Coetzee's novels contend provides a powerful antidote to viewing him as an apolitical relativist. Same is more explicitly true about Chinua Achebe. Both portray a world in which the relationship between the colonizer and the native is still brutal.

**A View of Black Consciousness in Coetzee’s South Africa**

The core of Coetzee's *Foe* lies in the deconstruction of established literary styles and conventional roles assigned to blacks and women—beginning, as Silvia Nagy-Zekmi has explained in reference to feminist and postcolonial theory, by simply subverting images of existing hierarchies (gender/class/culture/race) in a patriarchal or on the contrary a colonial setting.

*Foe* reworks Robinson Crusoe's representation of black identity in general and female identity in particular, of the values of the colonizer and those of the colonized, and of the forces of patriarchy against those who try to free themselves from it. Friday (the archetypal black man, the oppressed race) and Susan (the womenfolk) in *Foe* transgress social and prominent taboos, as the withered and sentimental portion of the feminine semiotics which therein imparts a half-crazed masculinity to the part of Coetzee's depiction of the very important second of the first half obligingly frustrated Venus part of the colonized/female resistance to colonial/patriarchal power.
Although Friday seems to be an object of colonial knowledge due to his tonguelessness, he—like the black world—has his own story to tell, even if a monocultural, metropolitan discourse cannot hear it. He may seem to be an embodiment of the world of self-absorption, without self-consciousness, without the Cartesian split of self and other, without a desire; yet his silence is not an ontological state but a social condition imposed upon him by those in power. He therefore represents all human beings who have been silenced because of their race, gender and class.

The apparent inaccessibility of his world to the Europeans in the story is an artist's devastating judgement of the crippling anti-humanist consequences of colonialism and racism on the self-confident white world. To Dick Penner, Friday's muteness can be read as a symbol of the inexpressible psychic damage absorbed by blacks under racist conditions.⁶

Yet his speechlessness, through negative inversion, becomes a symbol of a pre-capitalist Africa where history was transmitted and lived with full articulation, authenticity, and authority.

Friday's muteness marks Coetzee's rejection of the canon, that is, its limited authority; this rejection takes partial shape in formal innovations and subversions of generic expectations. Throughout the novel, Friday's silence and enigmatic presence gain in power until they overwhelm the narrator at the end. Friday's detachment causes the hole in Susan's narrative, and this is the primary cause of Susan's uncertain narrative voice.
In the third and final sections of the novel, Friday/the black world gains in stature as the site of a shimmering, indeterminate potency that has the power to engulf and cancel Susan's narrative and, ultimately, Coetzee's novel itself. This is an instance of the problem of closure. Friday, the radical black man, possesses the key to the ideological sensitive site of the narrative. He cannot give voice to this key, and no external discourse could adequately represent his knowledge. Coetzee does not allow Susan to assume the authority to construct the racial difference. Therefore, Susan's discourse as well as the novel's discourse, cannot appropriate the image of Africa/Africans. In frustration, Susan comments, I do not know how these matters can be written of in a book. Precisely, in relationship to lack of speech (Friday) and collapses of narrative voice (Susan), it is writing specifically, writing books that challenge the literary canon that is at stake in Foe.

Friday's own writing, that is, his marks on the slate, shows him to be the wholly Other (Spivak, Theory in the Margin 20); his trademark is the foot (the re-contextualized foot from Robinson Crusoe and every Robinsonade). Writing is a means for him to prove that he is a human being and not an ordinary thing. For instance, Friday once installs himself at Foe's desk, assuming the position of authorship with a quill pen in hand. The embarrassed Susan intervenes and tells Foe, he will foul your papers, but Foe replies, my papers are fouled enough, he can make them no worse. This interchange upsets expectations of mastery (the white man, the white literary canon), and it has been precipitated by Friday's silent, subversive assumption of 'Western' prerogatives.
Such subversive assumptions become points of 'education' for Susan, who now believes that all races are equal: We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world. Thus, *Foe* like much post-colonial literature rests upon one ethico-discursive principle—the right of formerly un-or misrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them, usurping their signifying and representing functions, and over-riding their historical reality.

The mystery surrounding Friday's silence as well as the silence surrounding Friday must be unravelled in order to allow Susan to see into the 'eyes' of the island. Friday has the ability to override both Susan's desire for authorization and Foe's ability to grant it. Friday possesses the history that Susan is unable to tell, and it will not be heard until there is a means of giving voice to Friday. This is to suggest that the world's harmony and true 'progress' will improve if there is mutual respect and cross-fertilization of ideas. Friday's voice, to wit, the black world's voice, will liberate not only himself/itself but also Susan (and, we assume, Foe the archetypal European, in other words the European world), for her story is dependent upon Friday's and the black world's meaning.

Therefore, in *Foe*, the reader witnesses a gradual development towards and a concern for giving voice to the Other so long silenced in literary history. Consequently, the subaltern has spoken, and his readings of the colonial text recover a native voice. In *Foe*, Coetzee uses a strategy of reading/writing that will speak to, as distinct from speaking
for the historically subaltern woman. Although this involves an act of the imagination, it is a profoundly viable vision.\footnote{7}

Coetzee has shifted the emphasis from the ostensibly unmediated narrative of Robinson Crusoe to the informing intelligence of multiple points of view. Foe wants to control the story of Susan and Friday; he is more interested in what will sell than the truth of the story. He finds the story lacking in exotic circumstances – for instance, a threat of cannibals landing on the island, as found in the original text. Susan, in her feminist temper, retorts: What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind.

Foe, the fictional meta-author, would have preferred a replication of the story as it occurs in Defoe's text. In addition, as a racist and a misogynist, Foe wants to write the significance and meaning of Friday's (black world's) life and determine Susan's story. This is to suggest that authorship and authority are equivalent. Throughout much of the novel, however, Susan resists Foe's authority and insists on telling her own story. If stories give people their identities, and people are written by others, Susan wonders, do people really exist for themselves?

The concluding image of the novel envisions a future when people exist as full individuals and when an equal exchange will be possible among races. Susan lies face-to-face with Friday underwater, and feels a slow stream, without breath, without interruption coming from inside him and beating against her eyelids, against the skin of her face. This is Coetzee's articulation of a strong desire for reciprocal speech from the victims of colonization, a cross-cultural dialogue.
This image positively reinforces the ironic thesis developed throughout *Foe*, that African history did not begin with the continent's contact and subsequent destruction by the European colonialists. Rather than being the beginning of African history, the colonial period signals the end of the beauty, communality and reciprocity characteristic of African culture. In the post-colonial era, it is the task of African literature to reclaim that which has been misappropriated and to reconstruct that which was been damaged, even destroyed. In fact, the tone and the narrative voice of the novel invest it with the authority to function as a counter-discourse.

*Coetzee's* *Foe* serves as a counter-text to the dominant discourse of representation in general, and to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in particular. Such counter-discourse is quite justifiable because knowledge about the Other, whether seen as Oriental, as African, as Caribbean, or aboriginal, is neatly packaged and disseminated through the medium of Western literature and travelogue. Consequently, one strong reason for the emergence of postcolonial theory has been to re-think the European representations of non-Europeans and their cultures.

To this end, what Coetzee—like other postcolonial African writers—has done in *Foe* is to undermine dominant notions of history by contradicting, challenging, or disrupting the prevailing discourse.

Yet beyond the foisted haze, the Africa that Coetzee depicts in the novel is whole, a community at peace with itself and whose pristine values are crystallized in the beauty of relationship, community and, above all, reciprocity.

Textuality should cease to be a 'battle ground' for orchestrating and illuminating the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. Rather,
canonical and non-canonical texts should be a means of promoting racial harmony, equality, and concord. This is in alliance with Bhabha's opinion that textuality should have more to offer in the way of hope for the oppressed. In his words:

Must we always polarize in order to polemicise? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and social contradictions can take no other form than a binary of theory versus politics? Can the aim of freedom or knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, margin and periphery, negative image and positive image?

What is needed in this millennium is the ability of disparate races and ethnic groups to come together to confront the challenges posed by globalization. Contemporary writers, scholars and critics need to articulate alternatives based on inclusivity and the full diversity of experiences. People of all ages, backgrounds and races would have a space to exercise their creativity, leadership acumen and imagination if there is an enduring racial harmony. In this way, we would be able to work collaboratively and strategically to create a world where many visions can coexist.

The Expression of Igbo Cultural Identity in Achebe’s Nigeria

One of the most important identities that Achebe’s characters display is their ethnic identity of Igbo. Igbo is the largest ethnic group in Nigeria and is the subject of a major civil war. Chinua Achebe, through his characters, displays the expression of
Igbo cultural identity very well, most prominently in his most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart.*

Achebe chose lines from a poem by William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming,* to introduce his novel and to give it its title. On the one hand, we see the protagonist, Okonkwo, as a great man of Umuofia, who succumbs to tragedy due to his own flaws. On the other hand, we see the disintegration of the complex Igbo society under the intrusion of European government, religion, and technology.

Besides being a classic example of a tragedy, *Things Fall Apart* also has a social purpose. Achebe has argued that European novels have treated Africa as a dark, savage continent, and little else. Africans are reduced to primitive, mysterious creatures, which in Achebe's opinion is racist stereotyping. Even ‘good’ African characters are flat and non-developed and are often portrayed as ‘noble savages,’ which is no better than any other stereotype. According to Achebe, colonialism, the forceful impression of one culture's beliefs onto another culture, leads to this kind of thinking. Europeans portray Africa as having experienced one long night of savagery, from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them. Achebe is extremely opposed to this vision, which he says is enforced by such novels as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* and he has said that his role as an author is, in part, to teach fellow Africans and others that this ‘one long night of savagery’ is an inaccurate depiction of a tribal past that denigrates the rich and sophisticated cultural traditions and values of the Igbo people, among others.

Achebe has written his works in English rather than in Igbo for several reasons. One is practical: there are far more readers of English than there are readers
of Igbo. Another is that English enables Achebe to reach a world community with his messages. A third is that, by using English, Achebe uses the very language that others have employed to portray Africa in racist terms, resulting in a sort of poetic justice. However, Achebe is strongly committed to portraying Igbo culture accurately and powerfully, so he uses several Igbo words and phrases within *Things Fall Apart*, until those words and phrases no longer need to be defined. After reading the novel, for instance, a reader is much more familiar with terms and concepts like chi, egwugwu, and ogbanje than before reading the novel. Also, the novel preserves several Igbo tales and proverbs throughout, such as the tale of the tortoise in chapter eleven. All of this helps to bridge the cultural divide between the Igbo and Western readers, revealing an African culture to readers who in all likelihood know little, if anything, about African tribes, apart from stereotypes in movies, print, and television.

Okonkwo serves as an excellent example of a tragic hero. A tragic hero is a character who is superior to those around him and is seen as an icon of his society, yet he possesses a fatal flaw that ultimately leads to his own demise. Okonkwo is a hard worker almost from birth, struggling against the memory of his own lazy father, Unoku. He is a champion wrestler of Umuofia, and indeed is legendary for his wrestling abilities. He has killed five men in tribal wars, and he has created a great farm and great wealth for himself and his family. Above all, he is an egwugwu, a masquerader of one of the ancestral spirits of his people, and he owns two tribal titles at a young age. From the very beginning, the omniscient narrator of the novel tells us that Okonkwo is one of the most important men of his village, and indeed of his tribe.
At the same time, we see Okonkwo's personal flaw appear in chapter two: his fear of weakness. His father Unoku was a musician who hated war and disliked work, and Okonkwo seems to excel at these things in part to spite the memory of his father. But this fear goes beyond an aversion to laziness. Okonkwo also hates gentleness, which he sees as womanly and weak. He beats his son Nwoye when the young boy cannot work as hard as Okonkwo can. He also nags his wives, who do not dare to rebel against him for fear of punishment.

Okonkwo's inability to show gentle emotion is hard put to the test by Ikemefuna, the young boy whom Umuofia takes ‘hostage’ as part of an agreement not to go to war with another neighboring tribe. This young boy pleases his foster father through his hard work and is even allowed to carry Okonkwo's stool and bag, a sign of respect from the forbidding Okonkwo. By chapter seven, we see how close Ikemefuna and Nwoye have become, and even how Okonkwo is beginning to relent in his harsh attitude toward the two boys. However, the Oracle's news that Ikemefuna must be killed weighs heavily on Okonkwo, and his participation in Ikemefuna's death is one of the more harrowing episodes in the novel.

By ignoring Ogbuefi Ezeudu's advice, Okonkwo initiates a pattern of bad judgment and worse luck that will follow him throughout the rest of the novel. Obierika, Okonkwo's close friend, does not approve of his participation in Ikemefuna's death and warns that the Earth goddess will not be pleased. Soon afterward, Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma, who is the only woman toward whom he shows kindness and affection, grows deathly ill and is later taken away by the priestess Chielo, despite Okonkwo's attempts to keep her at his home. In chapter
thirteen, at the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, Okonkwo's old rifle accidentally explodes, killing Ezeudu's son. Such an accidental death is ruled as a female or inadvertent crime, and so Okonkwo is exiled for seven years rather than killed. Such a punishment is almost worse than death for Okonkwo because of the association with a female crime and the loss of years in which he could have built up titles and remained a powerful leader for his village. He ignores his uncle Uchendu's advice to be thankful that he is not dead and still possesses wealth and a large family. He even loses his son Nwoye to the Christian missionaries, who in Okonkwo's mind are weak fools. In the end, his rage finds a focus: he slays a court messenger after the British administration punishes him and other men for destroying the church in his village. Eventually, he turns his anger and violence on himself, hanging himself in an act of ultimate humiliation.

For most Western readers, the Igbo people may at first seem barbaric or uncivilized. They are quite superstitious from a Western perspective, believing in such supernatural creatures as ogbanje, for example. Some of their social practices seem extraordinarily cruel as well, particularly the abandonment of twins at birth and the mutilation of infant corpses thought to be ogbanje. However, behind such practices lies a society which, while quite different from European cultures, is nevertheless sophisticated and complex.

Any reader of Things Fall Apart is struck by the complexity of rituals in Igbo society. Consider the wedding ceremonies, for example, or the trials at which the egwugwu preside over legal disputes. The preparation of food is also quite important, and specific foods have specific values. Yams are the most difficult crop to harvest
and therefore are considered manly (the king crop), while cassava and beans are easier to harvest and thus less worthy than yams. Yams are the centerpiece of important feasts, furthering their cultural significance. Greetings between hosts and visitors center around the breaking of a kola nut, revealing the hospitality of the Igbo.

The religion of the Igbo, while considered heathenish by such characters as the inflexible missionary Mr. Smith, is also extraordinary for its complexity. Consider the conversation in chapter twenty-one between Mr. Brown, the first Christian missionary, and one of Umuofia's leaders, Akunna. Akunna claims that the Igbo do believe in one all-mighty God, and have given Him the name Chukwu. Mr. Brown objects, however, to the Igbo practice of polytheism (the belief in more than one deity) and points to an idol carved of wood hanging from Akunna's rafter. But Akunna explains patiently that the Igbo do not wish to disturb Chukwu out of respect for His power and greatness, so they approach Him through subordinate gods, as a man would approach a powerful landlord through his servants. Such a religious concept could not come from ignorant, barbaric people.

What is perhaps most noteworthy is the idea that every man in Igbo society has an equal chance to rise within that society and gain success through his own efforts. While Okonkwo's father Unoka was widely regarded as lazy and weak, the people of Umuofia do not regard Okonkwo in the same fashion. In Igbo society, worth is based on individual accomplishment and hard work, not on class systems or connections with powerful figures. Okonkwo achieved his powerful status in Umuofia because of his relentless work on his farm.
The European characters in this work, such as Mr. Smith and the District Commissioner, ignore much of the complexity and richness of Igbo society. Although Mr. Brown respects the Igbo ways and merely preaches his faith, while derailing attempts to confront Igbo ways directly, Mr. Smith believes that such an attitude is weak and damaging to the Christian church. The District Commissioner is even harsher in his attitudes toward the Igbo, whom he sees as primitive and uncivilized, and he is somewhat amused at Okonkwo's death and at the reactions of Obierika and the other people of Umuofia who cannot, according to tribal custom, take down Okonkwo's body from the tree and bury it. The novel ends with the title of the District Commissioner's forthcoming book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, a title that sums up the basic attitudes of Europeans in Africa: native Africans are primitives who must be pacified and colonized, brought into civilization, and saved from what Achebe described as ‘one long night of savagery.’

This is what is expressed in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. The eclipse of the Igbo culture and the intermingling and the transplantation of the western cultures brought by the colonial empires are mirrored in these two early texts.
References


4 Ibid. p. 86.


7 Ibid. p. 97.