CHALIMBANA UNIVERSITY

DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

LITERATURE

LIT 3200: AFRICAN PROSE FICTION: POSTCOLONIAL UP TO PRESENT

FIRST EDITION 2019

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SECONDARY DEGREE

LITERATURE

COURSE: LIT 3200

AFRICAN PROSE FICTION: POSTCOLONIAL UP TO PRESENT

FIRST EDITION 2019 **CHAU 2019**

Acknowledgements

The Directorate of Distance Education wishes to thank Kelly Malumani for the contribution to this course.

Introduction

Welcome to *African Prose Fiction: Postcolonial up to Present* course. The preliminary part of this course aims to equip you with the necessary skills required for writing standard academic essays, while the main part of the course will consolidate your skills of analysis and critical thinking.

Rationale

The selection in this course is not only an attempt to highlight the disillusionment that followed in the wake of most African emerging democracies since the 1960s, but also offers unique insight through deep analysis and commentary on the required texts in terms of form and technique, paying attention to characterisation, structure, tone, style and thematic exposition of contemporary African fiction as well as the role of the author. Placing the literary material of the course in the context of African society, it ultimately seeks to show how far literature has gone to educate the society in the hope of bringing about a paradigmatic political and cultural shift.

Assessment

Course Work: Assignments and Examinations

Assessment	**Comments**	**Percentage %**
Assignment 1	Written	20
Assignment 2	(seminar) Team work	10
Test	Individual	20
Final Exam	Individual	50
Total		**100**

Aim of the Course

The course aims to acquaint you with a variety of African fiction and impart a sense of cultural identity.With special emphasis on the role of the writer in presenting historicity, it introduces you to literary trends in African literature as well as varying techniques used by writers to convey their themes.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of this course, students are expected to:

1) **demonstrate** adequate knowledge of thematic exposition and style of contemporaryAfrican fiction
2) **show** that the contents and form of contemporary African fiction relates to society
3) **state** the specificity of a variety of contemporary African writers and their works

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Summary of Module

LIT 3200 is designed to make you knowledgeable on literary trends and thematic concerns of the selected novels in the course. Upon completion of the course, you will be well placed to appreciate some of the most essential issues for advanced scholars in the study of postcolonial literature. You should, for instance, be in a position to understand the nature of African prose fiction in terms of form and technique, paying attention to characterisation, structure, tone, style and thematic exposition of contemporary African novels.

General Remarks About Written Work In Literature

a) Procedure

When you are given an assignment topic:

1. Analyse the question carefully to ensure that you know what you are required to do in answering it. If the question is not clear you can consult your lecturer for clarification.
2. Think about the book in terms of the question. Consult any notes you have made while reading or listening to a lecture which might be related to the question.
3. Before you begin to write you should have a plan or outline to follow.
4. Be careful not to include any points not directly relevant to the question asked – answers should be brief and to the point since you only have a maximum of five pages in which to develop them.
5. Avoid points which are not supported by proof.
6. Never tell the story for its own sake.
7. Proofread your work before submitting it for marking.
8. Give specific examples from the texts to support any general statement you make.
9. Do not under any circumstances merely repeat what has been said or discussed about the book in lectures, tutorials or seminars – prove in your paper that you have considered the book independently. **Originality is of utmost importance**.
10. Do not plagiarize or submit work that is not yours by right. Do not be afraid of making mistakes for the sake of passing or making points. People learn from their mistakes.

b) Essay Writing

1. Preliminaries – we are aware that there are various valid styles of essay writing but we are providing a version which is fairly acceptable in the literature section. It is so unique it is not even valid for the department as a whole.

   Agreed, we are aware that many of you, being teachers of English and Literature, are already well established essay writers and teachers of essay writing skills, but we need to review what we know for the sake of uniformity in the course.
2. Before starting to write, have a clear vision of what you are going to do in the essay. Even in a question requiring you to discuss (i.e. to weigh various factors or points of view held on a subject), you have to make a clear stand. You will not get marks for sitting on the fence, for being non-committal. Neither will you get marks for presenting the views and making lightweight comments on each. As a scholar, **let your stand come out! Let your vision come out! Let your purpose come out!** If, for whatever reason you find yourself sitting on the fence, then you have not arrived at your vision yet. And if you lack the vision, go back to the question once again and reflect deeply on it before attempting to write.

   It's true that the purpose is to a large extent determined by instruction words in an essay, but you still need to reflect, to think in a deep and penetrating way, to let the ideas simmer in your head until you reach a moment where everything becomes clear when you reach it. You begin to see clearly when you reach the moment of realisation.

   Purpose is being stressed for mainly three reasons. It gives a clear direction of the paper. It determines the manner and style of the paper. These are all crucial elements in essay writing.

   Essays are basically of two types – the expository and the argumentative essay;

   The Expository Essay:

   (i) Definition – This is an essay whose main goal is to explain an idea, thing or phenomena.

   (ii) Assumptions underlying exposition:

(a) The ideas that expressed should not be controversial. They should be universally accepted by other people who are engaged in a similar activity. If some of these people do not agree then it is an argumentative essay. For instance, if readers are asked to comment on a character it is very likely that different opinions will be expressed by the readers. Such a question is therefore argumentative rather than expository.

(b) The need to know should be there in the target audience. The information should be new to the listeners or readers.

(c) The writer should know more about the subject than his/her audience

(iii) Ways of expositing:

There are many ways of expositing:

(a) Illustrating: where the writer explains an idea by the use of Examples that are understood by the audience.

(b) Definition: is where the writer explains an idea by defining it in the language that can be understood by the target audience.

Comparison is explaining an idea by comparing the new to what the audience knows, something that is similar to what they already know.

Analysis: explaining an idea by breaking up something into its constituent parts so as to make the whole clear.

Another way is explaining an idea by enumerating details of it in the hope that the audience will grasp the new. Also, you may exposit by taking a historical approach, by tracing the origins of something to make the audience understand in a better way what the new thing is.

Lastly, expositing may be achieved by the clever use of comparison and contrasts.

It must be admitted though that since expositing is a creative and dynamic process, various techniques will usually be used in a single work of exposition.

The Argumentative Essay:

This is an essay in which a writer seeks to defend a proposition which does not have the universal support of the audience.

In academic life it is the more common type. Since it is a must that every new student should contribute to new knowledge, this can only be done by not only presenting this new view point but also criticizing the current popular notions held on the subject, by arguing. In essence, the new viewpoints have to come out through arguments of an intellectual.

(1) **Suggested way of dealing with an argumentative essay:**

(a) Understanding the question: Find out what it requires you to do in a literal way. Do not read your assumptions about the lecturer into the question. Just have a literal interpretation.

(b) Thinking about the question to come up with two untenable positions or two hypotheses.

If you can immediately arrive at these positions from your initial readings of the book and notes, then go back to the book armed with the question.

Review your thoughts, readings if it is a question which does not require you to discuss. So come out with position A and position B.

Jot down points in support of A

Jot down points in support of B

The selected points should be the strong ones not lightweight.

Evaluate the two positions. The one with more points is the one to be selected. Write a short statement that summarises the position (i.e. your thesis statement).

The other position is not discarded. You are supposed to take the strongest argument of the side on the same subject. Think seriously about them and refute them as convincingly as possible so that position A still remains without any inconsistency. Don't merely parade the view of position B in the essay without pointing out the faults of this position. If you do that you will be guilty of contradicting yourself and it will cost you vital marks!

(2) **Plan.**

Paragraph 1 – Introduction

- Thesis –

- Definitional Matter
- Summary of the points to support the thesis
- Presenting and refuting the opposing views

Paragraph 2 – Develop and Organize Arguments

The reasons and examples that support your thesis will form the middle paragraphs of your essay.

There's no single method of argumentation that will work in every context. One essay prompt might ask you to compare and contrast two characters, while another asks you to trace an image through a given work of literature. These questions require different kinds of answers and therefore different kinds of arguments, but the format and type of plan that we require from you on essay questions for this course is the one presented here.

(c) Manner and Style

Your introduction sets up the entire essay. It's where you present your topic and articulate the particular issues and questions you'll be addressing. It's also where you, as the writer, introduce yourself to your readers. A persuasive literary essay immediately establishes its writer as a knowledgeable, authoritative figure.

An introduction can vary in length depending on the overall length of the essay, but in a traditional five-paragraph essay it should be no longer than one paragraph. However long it is, your introduction needs to:

- **Provide Any Necessary Context.** Your introduction should situate the reader and let him or her know what to expect. What book are you discussing? Which characters? What topic will you be addressing?

- **Answer The "So What?" Question.** Why is this topic important, and why is your particular position on the topic noteworthy? Ideally, your introduction should pique the reader's interest by suggesting how your argument is surprising or otherwise

counterintuitive. Literary essays make unexpected connections and reveal less-than-obvious truths.

- **Present Your Thesis.** This usually happens at or very near the end of your introduction.
- **Indicate The Shape Of The Essay To Come.** Your reader should finish reading your introduction with a good sense of the scope of your essay as well as the path you'll take toward proving your thesis. You don't need to spell out every step, but you do need to suggest the organizational pattern you'll be using.

Your introduction should not:

- **Be Vague.** Beware of the two killer words in literary analysis: interesting and important. Of course the work, question, or example is interesting and important—that's why you're writing about it!
- **Open With Any Grandiose Assertions.** Many student readers think that beginning their essays with a flamboyant statement such as, "Since the dawn of time, writers have been fascinated with the topic of free will," makes them sound important and commanding. You know what? It actually sounds pretty amateurish.
- **Wildly Praise The Work.** Another typical mistake student writers make is extolling the work or author. Your teacher doesn't need to be told that "Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest writer in the English language." You can mention a work's reputation in passing—by referring to *Things Fall Apart* as "Chinua Achebe's enduring classic," for example—but don't make a point of bringing it up unless that reputation is key to your argument.
- **Go Off-Topic.** Keep your introduction streamlined and to the point. Don't feel the need to throw in all kinds of bells and whistles in order to impress your reader—just get to the point as quickly as you can, without skimping on any of the required steps.

6. Write the Body Paragraphs

Once you've written your introduction, you'll take the arguments you developed in step 4 and turn them into your body paragraphs. The organization of this middle section of your essay will largely be determined by the argumentative strategy you use, but no matter how you arrange your thoughts, your body paragraphs need to do the following:

- **Begin With A Strong Topic Sentence.** Topic sentences are like signs on a highway: they tell the reader where they are and where they're going. A good topic sentence not only alerts readers to what issue will be discussed in the following paragraph but also gives them a sense of what argument will be made about that issue. "Jealousy and hate play an important role in *Quills of Desire*" isn't a strong topic sentence because it doesn't tell us very much. "The Headmaster's constant fault-finding creates an environment that allows false accusations to flourish" is a much stronger topic sentence— it not only tells us what the paragraph will discuss (gossip) but how the paragraph will discuss the topic (by showing how jealousy creates a set of conditions that leads to the novel's climactic action).
- **Fully And Completely Develop A Single Thought.** Don't skip around in your paragraph or try to stuff in too much material. Body paragraphs are like bricks: each individual one needs to be strong and sturdy or the entire structure will collapse. Make sure you have really proven your point before moving on to the next one.
- **Use Transitions Effectively.** Good literary essay writers know that each paragraph must be clearly and strongly linked to the material around it. Think of each paragraph as a response to the one that precedes it. Use transition words and phrases such as however, similarly, on the contrary, therefore, and furthermore to indicate what kind of response you're making.

7. Write the Conclusion

Just as you used the introduction to ground your readers in the topic before providing your thesis, you'll use the conclusion to quickly summarize the specifics learned thus far and then hint at the broader implications of your topic. A good conclusion will:

- **Do More Than Simply Restate The Thesis.** If your thesis argued that *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* can be read as an allegory, don't simply end your essay by saying, "And that is why *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* can be read as an allegory." If you've constructed your arguments well, this kind of statement will just be redundant.

- **Synthesize The Arguments, Not Summarize Them.** Similarly, don't repeat the details of your body paragraphs in your conclusion. The reader has already read your essay, and chances are it's not so long that they've forgotten all your points by now.
- **Revisit The "So What?" Question.** In your introduction, you made a case for why your topic and position are important. You should close your essay with the same sort of gesture. What do your readers know now that they didn't know before? How will that knowledge help them better appreciate or understand the work overall?
- **Move From The Specific To The General.** Your essay has most likely treated a very specific element of the work—a single character, a small set of images, or a particular passage. In your conclusion, try to show how this narrow discussion has wider implications for the work overall. If your essay on *Mission to Kala* focused on the character of Jean-Marie Medza, for example, you might want to include a bit in your conclusion about how he fits into the novel's larger message about childhood, innocence, or family life.
- **Stay Relevant.** Your conclusion should suggest new directions of thought, but it shouldn't be treated as an opportunity to pad your essay with all the extra, interesting ideas you came up with during your brainstorming sessions but couldn't fit into the essay proper. Don't attempt to stuff in unrelated queries or too many abstract thoughts.
- **Avoid Making Overblown Closing Statements.** A conclusion should open up your highly specific, focused discussion, but it should do so without drawing a sweeping lesson about life or human nature. Making such observations may be part of the point of reading, but it's almost always a mistake in essays, where these observations tend to sound overly dramatic or simply silly.

- **Be objective in your language use.** The expository and argumentative essays are both written in a formal manner and tone. A chatty, conversational style which I'm using in this module (for instance, use of phrases like "we shall", "I will show") must be avoided as this is not accepted in a formal essay. You have to be impersonal and almost unassuming (use phrases like "This essay will attempt to show…" or "It will be attempted in this essay to prove that…" etc.).

N.B. Do not cut words at the end of a line in a sentence, example (e.g. alarmingly!) That will cost you marks! Instead write the complete word in the next line if there is no space left. Also, a formal essay DEMANDS that words are ALWAYS written in full instead of clipping them (e.g. that can't happen… it shouldn't be done…). Instead, write the words in full, e.g. "that cannot happen…it should not be done…"

Lastly, avoid the tendency to reproduce lecturer's ideas and articles. Remember that we are not interested in essays in which students are merely spurting out what the lecturer has given whether during class or in the module. **Be independent-minded and creative!!!** Bring out your own personal appreciation of materials.

- **Quote in your essay**. Avoid making unsupported allegations in your essay. Provide evidence for statements that you are making. The authority of source is very important to show that you have researched the matter deeply. Also, avoid absolute statements since most of them are not correct. For instance, "All Lozi's are very good mathematicians." Clearly, this is not entirely true (as evidenced here)!

  For quotations in the body of the essay, any quotations that are **from one to four lines** can be written **in the body of the essay**. Such a quotation has to be within opening "…and closing" quotation marks. The selected quote must be the best one to illustrate or support what the writer is trying to put across. However, for quotes **that are longer than four lines, from five onwards,** these **must be indented! ALWAYS UNDERLINE THE TITLE OF A NOVEL!**

  For information on how to quote using either the APA or MLA formats, consult your lecturer for assistance on this depending on which style they prefer.

8. Format of your essay

The following is the accepted format for an academic essay:

- **Title page:** This must include the full title of the course; the topic or assignment question in full; the name of the lecturer / tutor; the due date. **It is not numbered**.
- **Body of the essay:** the numbering of the essay from **1 – 5,** the maximum number of pages in this case.

- **Bibliography:** List both the primary and secondary sources of information you used in the course of your research. This page is either included in the numbering from 1 – 5 or sometimes acts as just an appendage. But whichever way, **it must be numbered.**

9. Help Desk (contacts)

If you should need help or clarification on anything related to this course, you can contact me through email at**malumanik@yahoo.com**or **kellymalumani@gmail.com.**You may also see us physically at the Chalimbana University, Literature and Languages department.

10. PRESCRIBED TEXTS IN THE COURSE:

1. ***Things Fall Apart* –** Chinua Achebe
2. ***Mission to Kala*–** Mongo Beti
3. ***The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* –** Ayi Kwei Armah
4. ***No Longer at Ease* –** Chinua Achebe
5. ***Song of Lawino* –** Okot p'Bitek
6. ***Quills of Desire* –** Binwell Sinyangwe

11. RECOMMENDED READING IN THE COURSE:

1. ***Kongi's Harvest* –** Wole Soyinka
2. ***A Grain of Wheat* –** Ngugi wa Thiong'o
3. ***Harvest of Thorns* –** Shimmer Chinodya
4. ***The Grass is Singing* –** Doris Lessing
5. ***The Old Man and the Medal* –**Ferdinand Oyono
6. ***Kill Me Quick* –** Meja Mwangi

UNIT 1: GENERAL OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN PROSE FICTION: POST COLONIAL TO PRESENT

1.1.0 Introduction

Welcome to Unit One. This unit covers a general overview of African prose fiction from the post-colonial era up to the present period. Critical among the issues it will explore is the emergence of African literature vis-à-vis the role of the African author(s) in producing literature. It will attempt to answer the question on whether African literature should be on any subject or if it must have an African theme, or indeed whether African literature does embrace the continent as whole.

1.2.0 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you are expected to achieve the following:-

- Highlight the importance of African literature in shaping culture and identity
- Describe postcolonial literature and its tenets
- Identify the role of the African author(s) in producing Literature.
- Explain whether African literature should be in indigenous African languages or should it include other languages?
- Explain whether African literature could be on any subject or must it have an African theme?
- Identify whether African literature does embrace the continent.

1.3.0 African Literature: A Struggle for Control of Identity

The term 'African Literature' covers a huge range of languages, cultures, and colonial contexts. It reflects the cultural traditions, colonial history, and inner conflicts of African people.

The birth of the debate on African literature is historically associated with two related happenings: Western discourse on Africa, and the African response to it. This dialogue has taken many forms and has discussed a variety of topics and ideas depicting the author's role and impact in shaping and controlling one's cultural identity and destiny. At the centre of this debate is the concept of authenticity, a value which is believed to stand as the great divide between the colonized and uncolonized. The debate evolved as claims and counterclaims, justification and alienations, passed between various factions, leading to the birth of such groupings as the Negritude movement. To a large extent, the debate about African prose fiction can be summarized as a significant contribution to the discussion and definition of what African Literature is today.

1.3.1 The Birth of Negritude

Negritude, characterized by many scholars as a formative movement of African literature, is a significant ideological and literary development that originated during the 1930s. In essence, the movement aims to break down established boundaries and stereotypes of blacks that had been cultivated through several centuries of enslavement and of colonial rule. To writers in the Negritude movement, colonization had stripped their cultures of not only their uniqueness, but also of the means of expressing it. To them Negritude provided the best means of expressing the essence of black identity. This movement is important in the broader fight for African independence because it provided a great impetus to African literature in the 1930s and helped an entire generation of authors and intellectuals to develop an awareness and appreciation of their racial and cultural identities. In doing so, the movement also helped pave the way to national and political freedom for many African countries, and therefore it "should be placed within the context of an evolving African identity", according to Ibao (2018).

Negritude's decision to embrace African culture—however abstract and idealized—was a crucial step in developing a nationalist, anti-colonial consciousness. The rejection was reinforced by the general impression that Africa needed to evolve a literature that will not be an imitation of the literary norms of Europe. It is therefore not surprising that authors of protest literature advocated a literary endeavor, whose style, language, aesthetic standards and concerns were required to be different from those of the colonizing powers who were seen as having subjugated them and undervalued every aspect of their lives. The desire for originality was thus to become the prerequisite for authentic African literature, which would explore Africa's past, buttress its present, and advocate a hopeful future.

The focus on authenticity may not be obvious to many, particularly to students and those unacquainted with the historical upheavals of colonialism which swept the continent in the latter half of the nineteenth century and better half of the twentieth century. For this reason, I felt it would be helpful to map out the course of the debate so as to provide a historical background to many of the issues and problems discussed in African Literature today. The background should help, I believe, to illuminate the development of the discussion to its present complex state.

1.3.2 Postcolonial African Literature: Background and Historical Foundations

Justification:

"The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery. … This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story." (Chinua Achebe, "An African Voice", *The Atlantic*)

In a broad sense, postcolonial literature is "affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft et al, 1989: 2). The term 'postcolonial' designates independence and oppositional responses to colonialism more broadly than the hyphenated term 'post-colonial'. Thus the term postcolonial refers to the response to the colonial: racial difference, identity crisis, issues of cultural difference, cultural identity, legal inequality, subaltern theme and all of the submerged or suppressed contradictions within the colonial social order itself. It is a period that dates from the late 1950s well into the 1960s and 70s, when most African countries were agitating for independence and self-rule in many aspects.

Briefly, postcolonial literature hinges on addressing the following gargantuan concerns which have been identified as being cardinal to the reclamation of independence in its totality (Ashcroft et al, 1989: 2):

a) ***Reclaiming spaces and places***

Colonialism was, above all, a means of claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources, and people. Enslavement, indentured labor, and migration forced many indigenous populations to move from the places that they considered "home". Postcolonial literature attempts to counteract their resulting alienation from their surroundings by restoring a connection between indigenous people and places through description, narration, and dramatization.

b) ***Asserting cultural integrity***

During colonization, the indigenous cultures of those countries subjected to foreign rule were often sidelined, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favor of elevating the social and cultural preferences and conventions of the colonizers. In response, much postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism.

c) *Revising history*

Colonizers often depicted their colonial subjects as existing "outside of history" in unchanging, timeless societies, unable to progress or develop without their intervention and assistance. In this way, they justified their actions, including violence against those who resisted colonial rule. Revising history to tell things from the perspective of those colonized is thus a major preoccupation of postcolonial writing.

In this context, Postcolonial literature asserts the indigenous cultures to restore the cultural practices and traditions. The writers in the post-colonial period justified the location of the culture of their countries. The major preoccupation of the postcolonial writing is to revise the historical social norms in the perspectives to justify the actions of the society. The postcolonial writers mainly emphasized the indigenous people, places, and their practices to get rid of the stereotypes, inaccuracies and general influences in the spheres of education, social, legal and political settings. They articulated the modes of creative expressions through the folk-songs, tales, proverbs and pidgin structures; In short, a postcolonial study has the potential to assemble new communities, who are supposed to follow the consequences of domination and subordination during the colonial power.

Thus, in its totality, postcolonial literature can be summed up as follows:

> ***Postcolonial literature (or Post-colonial literature, sometimes called New English literature(s)), is a body of literary writings that reacts to the discourse of colonization. Post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. It is also a literary critique to texts that carry racist or colonial undertones. Postcolonial literature, finally in its most recent form, also attempts to critique the contemporary postcolonial discourse that has been shaped over recent times. It attempts to re-read this very emergence of postcolonialism and its literary expression itself.*** *(Online Encyclopedia)*

Reflection:

In order to justify the necessity of postcolonial African literature, ask yourself this question: "What did Africans lose during the centuries they were under the yoke of colonialism??? For answer, consider the concerns highlighted above, together with the justification given by Chinua Achebe in the preamble to this section.

As can be deduced from the above discussion, History itself has become a crucial issue in literature thanks to postcolonial literature, and we can see that through its definition. Cultural and ideological implications of a literary text also have become important since the emergence of postcolonial studies. The postcolonial text serves as a vehicle to transmit the identity and national interest of a society. Besides, postcolonial literature attempts to get rid of the fact that it has no history or literature, a quality which was attributed to it by many imperial texts. These facts make the themes in postcolonial literatures widely varying: place and displacement, language, hybridity, identity, colonialism, resistance … etc. (Cheriet Asma, 2015).

1.3.3 Origin of Anglophone Literature in West Africa

Having been provoked thus far by the above lucid statement from a man widely considered as the father of African Literature, Chinua Achebe, let us begin our discussion from the motivation to write from an African perspective. African Literature forms a pivotal segment of the 20th -century world literature. It represents the writings of African nationals living on or who have lived on African soil reflecting the African native issues related to culture and identity. The significance of African Literature lies in its Africanness (authenticity), which is retained in spite its cosmopolitan origin. This is a distinctive feature of African Literature when compared to the literature of the other parts of the world.

The African colonial experience has dominated the origin and nature of contemporary African protest literature and rendered it opposed to Western standards of aesthetics, according to Kwaku Asante-Darko (2000). Postcolonial novels in the continent have therefore become veritable weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as "Us" and "them"; "First–world" and "third–world"; "white" and "black", "colonizer" and "colonized" observes Kehinde (2000).

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) was the first ever published African novel. The novelist projects a hero in search of his dead palm-wine tapster, in the Dead's town. During this quest, he does one evil after another, till he reaches his goal through sheer perseverance. The novel is compared with John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. With the exception of Tutuoala, Okara and Ekwensi, quite a few Nigerian writers like J.P. Clark, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and T.M. Aluko were all trained in the universities. They may be termed as Africa's 'University Wits'. They did not succeed only in bringing self-knowledge but also provided the needed inspiration in hastening the process of Independence all over Africa. Ekwensi, Achebe and Aluko with their all the time best novels, Clark and Soyinka contributed plays with great satires. Okigbo and Okara wrote deep, powerful and sensual poetry. The contribution of these writers can be considered into two stages. First, African values and predicament are

expressed by Africans themselves, for the first time in a widely accessible medium. Secondly, African writing has the uncanny power of drawing certain patterns of their culture and heritage.

Pre-eminent among postcolonial African writers, however, is the author Chinua Achebe, in full Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, (born November 16, 1930, Ogidi, Nigeria—died March 21, 2013, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.), Nigerian novelist acclaimed for his unsentimental depictions of the social and psychological disorientation accompanying the imposition of Western customs and values upon traditional African society. His particular concern was with emergent Africa at its moments of crisis; his novels range in subject matter from the first contact of an African village with the white man (in *Things Fall Apart*) to the educated African's attempt to create a firm moral order out of the changing values in a large city (in *No Longer at Ease*).

Achebe felt that authors like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad, whose texts *Mr Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness* respectively served as a model of Africa for the Western audience, had created an Africa that is often appalling and beyond redemption and thus branded him as racist. "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality…Africans are misrepresented in *Heart of Darkness* as they make 'violent babble of uncouth sounds among themselves' (p.6) in place of speech. On the grounds of such partial African image, Conrad is a "thoroughgoing racist" Achebe contends (1988).

Thus, *Things Fall Apart*, first novel by Chinua Achebe, written in English and published in 1958, was written primarily to address the stereotypes, inaccuracies, and generalizations perpetuated in Western discourse by texts like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In this sense, *Things Fall Apart* helped create not only the Nigerian literary renaissance of the 1960s, but helped launch and develop postcolonial literature in Africa as a whole. However, unlike the extremes of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or the Negritude sense, Achebe did not shy from presenting the 'bad' in African tradition and customs as well as the good, nor did he fail to highlight the progressive in Western culture. Rather, his style struck a balance and presented historicity in all its glory as well as the gory!

Stop and think:
In what way(s) is Chinua Achebe's approach to the portrayal of Africa and writing from the African perspective different from that advocated for by the Negritude movement?

1.3.4 Origin of Anglophone Literature in East Africa (selected author and novel): Ngugi wa Thiong'o and *A Grain of Wheat*

In East Africa, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is the most prolific author from the postcolonial period onwards. Just as his contemporaries in other colonized countries, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o tends to utilize literature as a powerful tool for raising national awareness. The pre-independence period, in which Ngũgĩ's novels are set, is marked by a certain degree of romanticism and idealism, yet there is also an underlying sense of doom.

Ngũgĩ's early novels – *Weep not, child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – are all marked by his social campaigning and zealous activism as they portray the disruptive practices of European colonizers in local communities. The novels are set during different periods of Kenyan history, yet they all articulate heavy criticism of the British colonial system and its destructive impact by depicting communities on the verge of disintegration and collapse. In this sense, there is a strong echo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in all three texts since the need for a stable centre which holds the family unit together, and thus the community and the country respectively, is reiterated repeatedly. Ngũgĩ's texts can be characterized as politically committed literature which utilizes the form of the novel as a medium of anticolonial argument (Hevešiová, 2014).

A Grain of Wheat (1967), which is set in a small Kenyan village, is explicitly political since it traces a detailed account of the Kenyan journey to independence, drawing on historical facts and crucial events as well as introducing significant historical personalities. At first sight, Ngugi's novels are set in small rural communities, yet the seemingly small-scale incidents are reflective of larger events in the country and thus parallel the national struggle for identity. In fact, it is impossible not to read Ngũgĩ's texts against the backdrop of socio-political transformations in Kenya since they present vital parts of the narratives.

The affirmation of one's identity, individual, group or national expectedly includes an establishment of value for, recognition and acceptance of it. The average African novelist responds to the urgency and inevitability of this historic mission. What is primary on his mind and central to his work is the urge to put the record straight and illuminate the threshold between past and present, thought and action, self and other, and Africa and the world.

Food for thought!!!

On the basis of the foregoing background, what do you think is the role of the African author(s) in producing literature? Could African literature be on any subject or must it have an African theme?

1.3.5 Issues of Language and Culture in Postcolonial African Literature

The African novel occupies a central position in the criticism of colonial portrayal of the African continent and her people. It grew, in part, from a history of active resistance to the colonial encounter. It has been crossing boundaries and assaulting walls imposed by History upon the horizon of the continent whose aspirations it has been striving to articulate (Kehinde, 2000).

On the basis of the foregoing background, post-colonial African novelists use their novels to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and her people. One of those aspects which have attracted debate and counter-debates over the years has to do with the language of African Literature. In this context, the imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of metropolitan language as the norm and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities (Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen, Tiffin.1989:7). Frantz Fanon had already indicated that "The use of language as a tool of assimilation and subsequent rebellion against linguistic integration and alienation have become familiar aspects of colonial life" (qtd. in Gendzier 1973, 47). It was clear that some advocates of African authenticity have been swift to brand foreign languages as instruments of colonial domination whose public practices must be discontinued at least in post-colonial African literature. Before we continue, consider the following view from one of Africa's celebrated literary critics, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his thought-provoking work entitled *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

Reflection:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europe stole art treasures from Africa to decorate their houses and museums; in the twentieth century Europe is stealing the treasures of the mind to enrich their languages and cultures. Africa needs back its economy, its politics, its culture, its languages and all its patriotic writers (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986: xii).

Baptized as James Ngugi Thiong'o, Kenyan Marxist, playwright, essayist, short story writer, and critique of colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-) later gave up English as well as Christianity. In the book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Thiong'o protests against the usage of English to express African Literature. As he states in the preface to the same edition:

> *If in these essays I criticise the Afro-European (or Euroafrican) choice of our linguistic praxis, it is not to take away from the talent and the genius of those who have written in English, French or Portuguese. On the contrary I am lamenting a neo-colonial situation which has meant the European bourgeoisie once again stealing our talents and geniuses as they have stolen our economies* (Thiong'o, 1986: xii)

Basing his arguments on the debatable premise that the imitation or introduction of a foreign language presupposes the inferiority of the imitator, Ngugi, for instance, further argued that: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Ngugi 1972, 282) and "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngugi 1972, 290). This idea falls in with the disputable opinion according to which the possession of a particular language indicates that the possessor shares or even approves of the ideological and cultural world view of the society in which the language is born and practiced (Asante-Darko, 2000).

However, not all the eminent African novelists agree with Ngugi wa Thiong'o viewpoints on language in African literature. As one scholar, Agatucci (1998) notes, Achebe, like many other postcolonial writers from Africa, attempts to construct an image of Africa in a language that respects the national traditions of his native land while recognizing the demands of a cosmopolitan, international audience to whom *Things Fall Apart* is, in part, addressed. Achebe aims to reclaim his heritage and at the same time indicate directions for constructive change. He writes at a time when countries are adapting to a global economy and responding to pressures for reform and international cooperation, yet Achebe is keenly aware of the dangers of reactionary forms of nationalism and the desire for absolute power that, in Nigeria and elsewhere, have blocked reform and given dictators unrestrained rule.

Achebe believes that literature has social and political importance. It is much more than a creative ornament. It provides a necessary critical perspective on everyday experience, educates us on the meaning of our actions and offers us greater control over our social and personal lives. As Agatucci (1998: 2) aptly notes, Achebe represents a particular reality: a modern Africa whose rich variety of ethnic and cultural identities is complicated by the impact of European colonialism. Read by Western audiences, works like *Things Fall Apart* are intended to challenge stereotypes of Africans as primitive savages, and present the complexities of African societies, with their alternative sets of traditions, ideals, values, and behaviours. Achebe is even more dismayed, however, to see Africans themselves internalizing these stereotypes and turn away from their cultures to emulate supposedly superior white European civilizations. So Achebe describes a dual mission in his elucidating essay 'The Novelist as a Teacher', which is to educate both

African and European readers, to reinstate a sense of pride in African cultures and "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement."

Achebe's goals cannot be realized by a simple return to a pre-colonial African age. He believes African society has been irrevocably changed by the colonial era. Achebe chooses to write in English and use Western forms of literary expression, unlike other African writers who reject the colonizers' languages (e.g., English, French) and other vestiges of colonial influence. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya) chooses now to write and create only in his native Gikuyu language to build up an indigenous literature and "orature" (oral and performance arts). Achebe says he chooses to write in "African English" to express "a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language. So my answer to the question, Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? Is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. . . . The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (Agatucci, 1998: 2). For Achebe, the story is more important than the means of conveying it.

Reflection:

"…only the story...can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story...that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us." (Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

The story embodies a tradition that can adapt to the new; the problem Achebe confronts is that of preserving national and cultural identity in the face of the inevitable blending of different cultures, yet preserving that identity in a way that does not reject—and can benefit.

Stop and think:

Should African literature be in indigenous African languages or should it include other languages? Why do you think so or why not? Compare your answers with the views advanced above by both Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe.

1.3.6 Characteristics of African Novels in Postcolonial Period

Another aspect to consider when it comes to postcolonial African Literature is that of inclusivity and commonality in terms of theme(s). Africa has a unique cultural heritage with a distinct past. African Literature often makes assumptions about the existence of the unified 'African' culture, but closer inspection reveals a far more complex and a problematic picture. The term 'African Literature' covers a huge range of languages, cultures, and colonial contexts. In the context, what then qualifies to be called 'African Literature'?

The scholar Kanneh (1998) in his book *African Identities* makes an inquiry into interpretations of Africa as a cultural, racial and philosophical whole by reading how ethnographies have interacted with and developed from the colonial politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In tracing the how 'Africa' operates as a referent and as a politics in modern ideologies of race, culture and nation, Kanneh (1998) unpacks the implicit dialogue between dispersed times and places. Revealing the links between a range of disciplines that have constructed 'Africa' as a discursive object invested with meanings, he argues that an analysis of how African identities are made meaningful relies on attention to the construction of Africa *across* and *between* disciplines. Discourses of Africa are significant in relation to the politics of Black identities and cultures in the African Diaspora, and any theorisation of these constructions and subjectivities needs to recognise, not only the interrelatedness of disciplines in the present, but also the ways in which the present has been constructed by its historical traces, Kanneh (1998) contends.

To this effect, the geographical models which cross the boundaries of language, nationality, or race to generate the concept of a regional literature, such as African-American literature, West Indian or South Pacific literature have been created. On the other hand, "African literature got a powerful appeal to writers and critics in the various African countries, they produced several regional and national studies which reflect the widespread political, economic, and cultural differences between modern African Countries" (Ashcroft et al, 1989). Some regional groupings got acceptance in the regions themselves than are others, and derived from collective identity which is evident in other ways in the African Literature.

Identity is a key theme in African Literature. It is dynamic and a continuing changing process: it is not static and it continues to be modified and finally becomes generally accepted with the times. The issues of identity are related within the framework of culture. There are certain traditional African concepts of identity in the post-colonial African Literature, which are by no means simplistic in their explorations.

In addressing the colonial legacy, it is important to bear in mind that African literature emerged solely in the postcolonial period as a response to the tyranny of colonialism as we can say it is a kind of 'colonial encounter' with Europe. African culture and its

adaption of European parameters foster an idea of the identity issues during the post-colonial period. The invention of self is an important index in the formation of identity (Kanneh, 1998).

The political tone of the African novel is another characteristic of its postcolonial literature, and one that is related to the role of the authors. One of the often mentioned differences between African and European novels is the "insistence on the social role of the African artist and the denial of the European preoccupation with individual experience" (Ashcroft et al., 1989: 125). Many writers are openly concerned about their societies and take a social responsibility. By 1965, Achebe could point to a significant audience for his works in Nigeria and in other African societies. Achebe's belief that the modern Africa writer should teach, that he has a particular responsibility to shape the social moral values of the society, has been a persistent theme of his various public state affairs. Before the African writer could write about contemporary issues, Achebe maintained, he had first to resolve the question of his humanity: "[t]he writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones 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..." (Achebe qtd in Ashcroft et al., 1989: 125-126).

From the foregoing explanation, it can be safely concluded that African literature is that body of literature which provides an avenue for the Orient/Other to represent itself, instead of the hitherto practice whereby the West would represent the Other.

But the political nature of the African novel can also take a very different dimension. For instance, as Jameson mentions, authors such as Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Senegalese Ousmane Sembène [including Ayi Kwei Armah] writing after the independence of their countries "have a passion for change and social regeneration which has not yet found its agents" (Jameson, 1986: 81), which in his view is also an aesthetic dilemma. This problem arises when oppression comes from within society – previously the enemy, the colonizer, was easily represented for he spoke a different language, looked different and had a specific place in society. Also, since cultural imperialism is often seen as the "enemy", representing it requires other means than those familiar from realist novels. Thus, the African novel after independence also portrays a powerful sense of the disillusionment characteristic of most of the emerging democracies on the continent.

1.4.0 Conclusion

The post-colonial African literature novel reveals the friction within the individual and the friction between the individual and society, as well as the way both account for transformation that the culture undergoes. As war is said to be a bigger evil that wipes away all minor evils, so it is with the impact of the colonial encounter, which eradicated

the evils, rooted in the African culture. It is undeniable that the 'encounter' has been traumatic. It is therefore true to say that the primary concern of most postcolonial African novelists is to salvage the history of their people that colonialism has taken off or manipulated. The African novel, and by extension, the novelist, occupies a central position in the criticism of colonial portrayal of the African continent and her people.

1.5.0 Summary

This unit has looked at Postcolonial African Literature. It has sketched a historical background of African literature from its earliest beginnings to the present and established a foundation for the development of African prose fiction to the present. The unit has presented the challenges of identity brought about initially by the impact of colonialism and compacted by the multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. The unit has also identified the role of the African author in producing Literature, concluding that this task is their primary goal to set the record straight against the biases established by centuries of Western hegemony. Having given an overview of African Literature from its earliest beginnings, the next unit gives a historical overview of fictional publications in English by Africans from the 1960s to the present.

1.6.0 Reflection

From your analysis of the section above, could African literature be on any subject or must it have an African theme? Do you agree with the role of the African writer as prescribed above? Why or why not?

1.7.0 Activity

1. Discuss the tenets of Postcolonial Literature. Apply these to the African novel.
2. Does African Literature embrace the continent?
3. What is the role of the African author(s) in producing Literature?

UNIT 2: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FICTIONAL PUBLICATIONS IN ENGLISH BY AFRICANS FROM THE 1960s TO THE PRESENT

> *This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. [...] [W]hen we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise*. Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (2009)

2.1 Introduction

Welcome to Unit Two. This unit gives a historical overview of notable fictional publications in English by Africans from the 1960s to the present. It selects the novels based on among other parameters, the commonality of themes and characteristics peculiar to the African continent.

In Anglophone Africa from the 1960s, many authors writing during this time, and even during colonial times, saw themselves as both artists and political activists, and their works reflected their concerns regarding the political and social conditions of their countries. As nation after nation gained independence from their colonial rulers, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a sense of euphoria swept through Africa as each country celebrated its independence from years of political and cultural domination. Much of early postcolonial writing reflects this sense of freedom and hope. However, beginning in the late 1960s, the direction of African fiction began to change, with writers forging new forms of expression reflecting more clearly their own thoughts about culture and politics in their works. The writing of this period and later onwards moves away from the subject matter of postcolonial Africa, and moves into the realm of new and realistic texts that reflect the concerns of their respective nations.

2.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify notable African novels in English from the 1960s to the present
- Relate the characteristics of postcolonial African literature in Unit One to the themes and characteristics of the major African novels
- Trace the shift in focus from postcolonial Africa to a new kind of realism bordering on disillusionment

- Appreciate the variety and contributions of the selected authors to the body of African literature, and by extension, the world.

2.3 Origin of African Fictional Publications from 1960s

Postcolonialism in Africa refers in general to the era between 1960 and 1970, during which time many African nations gained political independence from their colonial rulers. With liberation and increased literacy since most African nations gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, African literature has since grown dramatically in quantity and in recognition (George, 1996). African writers in this period wrote both in Western languages (notably English, French, and Portuguese) and in traditional African languages such as Luo from Uganda as in the case of Okot p'Bitek *Song of Lawino* (1966).

The literary scholar Ali A. Mazrui (1993) and others identify seven conflicts as themes which were characteristic of the literature of the period. These include: the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modernity, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between Africanity and humanity.Other themes in this period include social problems such as corruption, the economic disparities in newly independent countries, and the rights and roles of women. Female writers are today far better represented in published African literature than they were prior to independence.

Though Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) has the distinction of being the first Anglophone novel to be published in Africa, it is primarily Chinua Achebe and his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* that has blazed the trail of African literature, creating a literary renaissance throughout the continent which was at its peak in the 1960s. In "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature" Simon Gikandi (1996) acclaims Chinua Achebe as the writer who "invented African literature" (p. ix), and rightly so. Achebe's novel '*Things Fall Apart'(1958)*, written primarily as a reaction against Joyce Cary (*Mr Johnson*) and Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) depiction of Africa, highlights the ambiguities produced by the colonial encounter and identityissues related to the invasion, pacification and disruption created by the colonies. The novel did much to not only dispel "the single story" complex of Africa that was depicted in Western literature by the works of Cary and Conrad, but also gave impetus to that literary movement which saw the African novelists use their novels to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and her people.

Consider this:

…literature works by "enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within our problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us." (Chinua Achebe, 1988)

It seems the above implication of literature was exactly what the Cameroonian literary great Mongo Beti had in mind when he published the timeless classic *Mission to Kala* in 1957. First published in French as *Mission Terminee* in 1957, the novel was translated into English in 1958 and was almost universally praised for its wit and application. *Mission to Kala*is a satire on the impact of colonial education on the African colonized mind and its thematic appeal firmly established Mongo Beti as one of the most important figures in modern African literature. Mongo Beti has been called "Francophone Africa's most effective gadfly in literature and social commentary" (Arnold, p. 1). Like almost all African writers of his generation, Beti has had to reconcile his inherited African culture and his European education, which left an indelible mark on his style of writing.

Mission to Kala is a comic novel that draws on several classic traditions: the coming-of-age story, the fish-out-of-water story, and the story of mistaken identities. Its hero, Jean Medza, is at the center of all these elements—at times, "victim" seems to be a better word than "center." Written in the first person, the novel creates a voice of subtle, slightly self-mocking irony for its protagonist. But underneath the humour and gentle satire, Beti shapes a compelling critique of the harm that Western education can do to an African mind, and the novel ends pessimistically, as Medza exiles himself from his family and the culture that is so attractive, yet so alien, to him (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 2019).

Mission to Kala can be placed alongside all the novels produced by Africans under colonization. These works, few and often rudimentary, nevertheless helped immensely in defining the African voice as it screamed for liberty. Beti was among the loudest Cameroonian voices for independence; in fact, after independence he fell silent as a novelist for a decade and a half. As a result of his early success and his later journalistic radicalism, Beti has remained a voice of liberty and an eminent Cameroon literary figure despite his long exile.

2.4 Major Contemporary African Fiction Writers from 1960s to Present

Things Fall Apart (1958) singularly established Chinua Achebe as the forerunner of the African literary renaissance which gained traction from the 1960s onwards. In the novel, Achebe depicts traditional Igbo life at the time of the advent of missionaries and colonial government in the late nineteenth century. The principal character in the text, however, cannot accept the new order, even though the old has already collapsed. In the sequel to this, *No Longer at Ease* published in 1960, Achebe then heralds the epoch of corruption and disillusionment reminiscent of most African post-independent countries as he portrayed a newly appointed civil servant, recently returned from university study in England, who is unable to sustain the moral values he believes to be correct in the face of the obligations and temptations of his new position.

Meanwhile, Mongo Beti had already established himself as a prolific novelist with his breakout classic *Mission to Kala* which was originally published in French 1957, then translated in English in 1958. A prominent Marxist, Beti has been as prolific in producing essays, criticism, and journalism as in writing novels. His career began in the early 1950s, when most of Cameroon was still under French rule, with a series of four satiric novels that questioned the right of Europeans to colonize Africa. Beti stopped writing novels in the 1960s and 70s, devoting his attention to criticism and theory. In the late 1970s he returned to fiction, producing a series of novels that address problems of neo-colonialism that Cameroon encountered after independence.

In East Africa, Okot p'Bitek quickly established himself as a literary genius through his epic poem *Song of Lawino*. First published in 1966 in Luo it was quickly translated into other languages, including English. *Song of Lawino* has become one of the most widely read literary works originating from Sub-Saharan Africa, and has also become a cultural icon in Africa itself, because of its scathing display of how African society was being destroyed by the colonization of Africa**.** The text addresses the issue of the conflict of cultures. It is the lament of a non-literate woman over the strange ways of her university-educated husband, whose new ways are incompatible with traditional African concepts of manhood.

But just as his contemporaries in Kenya and other colonized countries, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o tends to utilize literature as a powerful tool for raising national awareness. In *A Grain of Wheat* published in 1967, Thiong'o deals with sacrifice and betrayal as major themes in looking at the problems besetting post-independence Kenya. Ngugi's novels not only document the history of the country, they also provide the author with the space

to rewrite the history from the perspective of the formerly silent colonized subject that was believed to have been deprived of its voice: “Ngugi posits narrative here as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our notions of national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation in modern Kenya and Africa in general” (James, 1999, p. 2). His novels thus not only reconstruct the history of the country but also take the liberty to modify and mould the historical narrative in such a way that suits his artistic purposes.

Meanwhile, Ayi Kwei Armah in his 1968 novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* exposes the dirt, decay and disease in post-independent Ghana as metaphors for the corruption and failure to transform the oppressive social conditions inherited from the colonial era. The novel established him as a writer of world renown. The book, whose title has an intentional misspelling (Beautyful) taken from an inscription on a bus, portrays both the euphoria of independence and the disillusionment that followed thereafter in Ghana. It was a sobering period, in which the early promise of freedom gave way to economic malaise, political corruption, and continued financial dependence on Europe.

Binwell Sinyangwe, born in 1956, was a leading Zambian novelist credited with novels like *A Cowrie of Hope* which appeared in the African Writers Series (a brainchild of Chinua Achebe that was created to promote African literature) and *Quills of Desire*, which was published in 1993. In *Quills of Desire*, Sinyangwe paints the picture of a young, intelligent secondary school student named Wiza, whose ambitions and dreams is to use his education as a ticket out poverty and reach the higher echelons of both the academic and professional world. His family holds the dreams for him to succeed, hoping for him to follow in the footsteps of his elder brother (another gifted son named Kocha). However, Wiza’s temperament is his own worst enemy and inevitably leads to his disillusionment with life as well as his education. The novel paints a powerful picture of the expectations placed on a young student in a postcolonial setup, attracted by the lure of a life as a successful graduate, while trying to break free from the pull of tradition. Ultimately, this leads to an identity crisis and disillusionment.

Last in this list (but by no means the least—no pun intended) of selected African authors is the Zimbabwean author Shimmer Chinodya (born 1957), whose masterpiece is the historical fiction novel *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), which to this day remains his most well-known literary work. Critics have referred to *Harvest of Thorns* as a "coming-of-age" story; others emphasize its politics, reading it as a tale of Zimbabwe's fight for independence. Chinodya demonstrates that unless people die—as some do, here—they must come of age, inescapably. What that means will be determined by idiosyncratic politics, in conjunction with the oral communication and awareness of community that

alone can, in this novel, preserve humanity. Those communal values shape the novel's structure and content, imbuing it with a revolutionary vision belied by its straightforward and engaging style. Postmodern fireworks of language do not interrupt the story here; no narrator self-importantly trumpets about the difficulties of writing. Instead, we are caught up in the story of a young man—but one told in a way not imagined by the traditional bildungsroman (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 2001).

2.5 Conclusion

To conclude this section, it is important to note that Achebe's belief that the modern African writer should teach, that he has a particular responsibility to shape the social moral values of the society, acted as inspiration and launch pad for most emerging indigenous writers whose works were ultimately compiled and published in the African Writers Series for which Achebe was Editor-in-Chief. Thus, at a time when African interests were either not considered in the West or were grossly misrepresented, as in the case of Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe, like the iconic statue of liberty on the shores of the Atlantic, lit the beacon of hope for Africa as continent with his classic, *Things Fall Apart*, ultimately paving the way for a generation of indigenous writers to follow suit and unlock the hitherto unknown or misunderstood African mindset, firmly anchored on its myriad customs and traditional practices.

2.6 Summary

This unit has offered a selected brief historical overview of fictional publications in English by Africans from The 1960s to the present, which is by no means exhaustive as there are numerous other works of fiction by African writers not mentioned here but which are of similar importance. However, the prescriptive works highlighted herein expose what is essential to your understanding of this course. The unit ultimately offered an expose of the influential postcolonial African writers and their works, concluding with the important role that the author has in teaching society through his works. The next unit is an exploration of African trends and thematic concerns of selected novels.

2.7 Reflection

From the discussion above, is African literature that which is produced in Africa or that which is about Africa? Does African literature embrace the continent?

2.8 Activity

1. From the above selection of African novels, what common strand do you think unites these major works? How do they differ?
2. Think of other prominent African writers whose works can fit in this category.
3. What are your views regarding the role of the author in presenting historicity?

UNIT 3: EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN TRENDS AND THEMATIC CONCERNS OF SELECTED NOVELS

3.1 Introduction

Welcome to Unit 3. This unit explores the African trends symptomatic of postcolonial African literature as well as delves into the thematic concerns of the various selected novels. In essence, it aims to consolidate the knowledge you have acquired thus far from the preceding units, as well as give a fresh perspective on the insights to be gleaned from a closer reading of the selected novels.

3.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to

- Identify common literary trends and techniques used in the selected classic African novels
- Explore the relationships and make comparisons and evaluations of relevant material from the texts being studied with other literary works and life in general
- Exhibit competence in examining the thematic concerns portrayed in the selected classic African novels
- Appreciate and critically assess a variety of African literature

3.3.0 Cultural Nationalism in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Reflection:

"Culture, like life itself, is a dynamic or continuing process: and its quality often depends upon a people's responses to evolutionary pressures from within or to stresses generated from outside through friction with new sets of values and institutional structure" (Bhabha, 1994:135).

Set in the late nineteenth century, *Things Fall Apart* covers a tumultuous period in African history as the encroachment of British civilization into many parts of Nigeria in the form of missionaries, explorers, and eventually an administrative apparatus disrupted and ultimately destroyed the economic and social systems of traditional cultures such as the Igbo. This singular narrative is symptomatic of the colonial conquest of Africa and its indigenous traditions and customs by European hegemony.

Food for thought:

"As a young boy the 'African literature' he was taught consisted entirely of works by Europeans about Africa, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, which portrays a comic African who slavishly adores his white colonist boss, to the point of gladly being shot to death by him. Achebe has said that it was his indignation at this latter novel that inspired the writing of *Things Fall Apart*. Try to see in what ways his novel answers Cary's [and Conrad's]. He also wrote a famous attack ['**An Image of Africa**'] on the racism of *Heart of Darkness* which continues to be the subject of heated debate" Paul Brians on Achebe, qtd in 'Chinua Achebe In His Own Words' by Agatucci (1998: 1).

3.3.1 Structure of the Novel

Things Fall Apart is divided into three parts which follow each other progressively and chronologically towards the protagonist Okonkwo's shocking and premature death by suicide in the last part.

3.3.2 Part One

In the First Part, the reader is exposed to some of the nuances of traditional Igbo culture and its precepts as well as the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo. The longest of the three parts, it comprises Chapters 1-13. It is an evocation and depiction of African traditional life in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria, before the coming of the white man to Africa. Achebe creates life in the traditional village of Umuofia, still unperturbed by foreign influences, with its own political, social, economic, religious and other superstructures that made it self-sufficient.

This society owed its continued existence to each individual's strict and unquestionable adherence to tradition, custom and communal chores and observances. The individual's role was clearly defined, and the individual exercised his rights and obligations within the parameters set out by the community. If the individual fell foul of these parameters and exceeded or fell short of them, failing to operate within their limits, then society's heavy hand, which would act in accordance with the sanction of both the community and the gods, would descend on that individual with the weight that was commensurate with the crime committed.

Some of the traditions and cultural aspects of Igbo life introduced in this part are social rituals such as the treatment of a guest. A guest always visits a house with his goat skin, which he unrolls and sits on. A small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk is brought out, and the disc is passed to the guest. The

disc is then broken and some lines are drawn on the floor. After eating the kola nut, they have conversation on various subjects. A number of proverbs are used while speaking. These proverbs are wise sayings that reflect on the morals and customs of their society as well as provide a very particular meaning within Igbo society. They are "the palm oil with which words are eaten." As well as social rituals, marriage customs such as having more than one wife, honorific titles, economic indicators such as yams and cowries (shells) and legends are detailed to reveal the complex culture the Igbo have.

One of the main indicators of a person's wealth and success is the number of yams a man has grown and stored in his barns, as well as the number of titles he has taken. A title is taken when a man has reached a certain economic status and buys his recognition through initiation fees to others who share that title. There are four titles to be gained in Igbo society, each one more expensive than the other. With these titles comes power within the tribe. These economic indicators allow those who are not born into wealth such as Okonkwo to amass fortunes through hard work and gain a prestige that is not based on inheritance or nobility.

Okwonko is portrayed as a dynamic protagonist, who has immense belief in success and who resents failure. He is a self-made man who has risen above his father's disreputable life to achieve success and power in his village. "He had no patience with his father." In Part One, his father, Unoka is portrayed as a lazy man who enjoyed his life and was happiest when he played on his flute. Okwonko's fear of failure is deeply ingrained in him and throughout the novel, he fears his father's deeds coming back to him.

Using the familiar structure and traditions of Greek tragedy, Achebe developed his character Okonkwo as a tragic hero and *Things Fall Apart* can be interpreted within this form as a tragedy. Although Okonkwo is admirable and represents the best qualities including physical feats and economic success, he also has a tragic flaw or harmartia, his fear of failure and to be seen as weak. This fear becomes a motif and spurs Okonkwo to commit atrocious acts which impact negatively on his fortunes and life.

Towards the end of chapter one, mention is made of Ikemefuna, an ill-fated young man who will be part of Okonkwo's household, and who will have a significant impact on Okonkwo's personal tragedy.

Achebe continues to paint a pristine picture of cultural life in Part One as seen through the stratification of labour in the society, one of the most significant traditions of Igbo society. What are womanly and what are manly actions are denoted, and chores and responsibilities are seen to be strictly divided on this score. Men are respected and successful, which is often shown in the number of wives they have whereas, woman are restricted to household activities and childcare.

Okonkwo is seen here as a man fearful of being seen as womanly or agbala, a word that not only means woman but represents a lack of titles/economic success. The two are equated and therefore reveal the little power woman have in this society. So frightened is he of being seen as soft, Okonkwo exagerates his manly qualities, being severe and tyrannical and only expressing the emotion of anger.

Hint:
Compare the foregoing literary technique of Achebe to Conrad's portrayal of the native African in *Heart of Darkness*.

The concept of revenge and the justification for war is also shown in this section through the town meeting. If any woman of the village is defiled or murdered by a man from another village, revenge is taken in the form of a war or an offering. When the orator speaks about the murdered woman, the entire crowd is swept with anger. Any man or woman of the village is considered to be part of its family and therefore the villagers demand revenge. This scene is a typical example of a ceremonial town meeting where the speaker greets the crowd while turning in all four directions.
The division of the sexes is not just in social behavior but manifests itself physically as in the set-up of individual obis, or huts, with the man's obi being the central focus of his unit while the wives form a circle around his, even in the classification of crops into women's and men's. Also, the Igbo worship the gods with an offering of kola nut, food and palm wine. These gods may take the form of wooden objects representing not only personal gods but ancestral spirits as well.

Certain superstitions of Igbo culture are also portrayed in this section. It is said that in the night, dangerous animals become even more sinister, so a snake should never be called by its name since it can hear but should instead be called a string. The powerful aspects of language are shown here to have both good and bad qualities.

The custom of consulting the Oracle is also mentioned in this section of the novel as an integral part of this culture. The Oracle was Agbala and many people came to consult him even though the journey was very difficult and entailed entering a small hole, and crawling on one's belly until sighting the priestess. Nobody had ever seen Agbala as he spoke through a priestess, a woman in the village called Chielo. This is one of the few positions of power for women in this culture as she is a conduit to Agbala's wisdom and prophecy and therefore gains much respect.

Another custom described is that of leaving a sick man in the evil forest to die. The swelling in the stomach was a sickness considered an abomination to the earth, therefore the body could not be buried in the soil. Though, in these modern times, the custom may

seem inhuman, it was an accepted custom in Africa in those times and could have something to do with a disease that was considered infectious or easily contracted.

What is most intricate about Igbo culture is their use of proverbs that shape their beliefs as well as bring an elevated symbolic level to their discourse. In the scene between Okonkwo and Nwakibie and other men of the village, many proverbs are shared that comment on individual character or life in general. For instance, "the lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did" means that Okonkwo feels that since he has no one to speak for him, he has to speak for himself.

Hint:
Compare the above literary technique to Achebe's motivation in writing *Things Fall Apart* vis-à-vis Cary's and Conrad's novels on Africa.

Another proverb "Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching" means that Nwakibie has become wise to the ways of the world and he has learned to be stingy with his yams. The poetic nature of this language represents a sophisticated and sensitive ability to reflect on oneself and life without directly referring to the self. Indeed, Achebe proves that Africans had a sophisticated language structure as opposed to the inaudible "babble" of the natives in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Just as stories are told to all children in every household, stories are told in this village too, but the stories are gender divided much like the rest of this society. For instance, those stories Nwoye (Okonkwo's first born son) enjoys are the fables his mother told to him that usually had a moral or lesson embedded in them. The ones his father tells him are tales of bravado and conquest.

The eventual killing of Ikemefuna is a turning point in the novel and reveals how deep Okonkwo's obsession to not be perceived as weak is. Not only participating in his killing but actually striking him dead after Ikemefuna called out for his help shows how deep the fear of being seen weak had consumed Okonkwo. What makes this murder more poignant is the deepening friendship between Nwoye and Ikemefuna and their participation in manly activities as well as Ikemefuna's last thoughts on how much Okonkwo had become like a father to him. This distressing act changes Nwoye deeply and his conflicted feelings about the outdated methods of his culture and his inability to be appropriate (i.e. the proper behavior of a man), will lead him to reject the life that Okonkwo demands him to lead. Although the act of retribution is justified by the murder of the woman many years ago, it seems irrelevant after three years and unjust after Ikemefuna has become part of Okonkwo's clan.

Hint:

From the foregoing, Achebe's mastery of literature through the story is brought to the fore as his portrayal of African culture is not just a mechanical defense of everything African; rather it's an appraisal of that which was good in African customs and a continuous re-evaluation of the gory, as seen through the character of Nwoye and Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend and foil throughout the novel.

Another seemingly heartless behavior is the custom of disowning twin children and leaving them to die. Twins were seen as unnatural products of some crime or evil deed, and so had to be disposed of in order to ward off more evil coming to the family. Here religion and superstition are equated and seen as inflexible, inhumane, and irrational, a critique that will be further elaborated on with the encroachment of the British civilizing mission and the introduction of missionaries into the area.

Another aspect of culture which is depicted in the first section is that of the *egwugwu* and their system of justice, which is similar to Western society's notion of a fair public trial. The men who conduct the hearings are the senior members of the society, and have political as well as economic power, but they mask themselves to hide their identity, so that a fair judgement can be given. Here, each party is given a chance to state their case and then the *egwugwu* leave to debate a verdict as well as a punishment or remuneration.

Arbiters of justice have often been traditionally represented as fearful and all-powerful beings. The *egwugwu*, although fierce-looking and frightening, meted out justice fairly. This combination of drama and jurisprudence can be seen in Western courtrooms today, and Achebe contends through his novel that this system of dispensing justice was not unique to the Western world only.

The importance of oral tradition is also shown in this section of the novel with Ekwefi's tale of why the turtle has a broken shell (a myth). Ezinma herself is a budding storyteller although she is young. As Achebe intended to show, stories are told to reinforce cultural customs and traditions and to explain unknown phenomena.

Part One concludes with the climax of the novel when Okonkwo inadvertently kills a kinsman during a funeral, and this event signals a major downfall in Okonkwo's status and a blow to his ambitions. According to traditional dictum, Okonkwo has to bear the punishment of being ostracized from the village for a period of seven years. Though Okwonkwo was an important and respected figure in the village, and though his act was inadvertent, the law has to be abided. This shows the importance of law and legal actions in a tribal village in Africa, where one has to accept his punishment, no matter how eminent he is.

3.3.3 Part Two

Part Two, which comprises chapters 14-19, briefly changes the setting of the novel from Umuofia to Mbanta, Okonkwo's maternal homeland and also a traditional village with a closed integrated communal life like in Umuofia. This physical movement in the novel is soon complimented by movement in the narrative that sounds the alarm of the white man's advent into Eastern Nigeria.

This section reveals the importance that white people will play in the lives of the people of Africa. Until now, there have been several references to their coming in the text but nothing as tangible as the story of a village called Abame which has been wiped out by the white man. This singular action projects the conflict between the native peoples and the white men, an encounter which would lead to disastrous consequences on the part of the former. It is in this section that Achebe also candidly shows the disruption of the traditional customs and religious practices of the native Africans. For instance, the presence of the missionaries in Mbanta signals the widespread efforts of the "civilizing mission" deployed in Africa in the 19th century.

3.3.4 Part Three

Reflection:

"…the most striking feature [of *Things Fall Apart*] is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a traditional village culture in Africa. Achebe is trying not only to inform the outside world about Ibo cultural traditions, but to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it had contained much of value. All too many Africans in his time were ready to accept the European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering" Paul Brians on Achebe, qtd in 'Chinua Achebe In His Own Words' by Agatucci (1998: 1).

In Part Three, which comprises chapters 20-25, the setting moves back to Umuofia. Okonkwo's seven years of exile have passed slowly and he returns to a changed society in Umuofia. In fact, as the text indicates, too much has changed over the years to ever go back to the old ways. This is seen primarily through the fact that Okonkwo, who was considered one of the greatest men in the society before his exile, is hardly noticed upon his arrival back home.

The influence of the white man is seen twofold; firstly, through the activities of the missionaries and the growth of the Christian church. As the text ironically puts it, "The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it" (Achebe, 1958: 139). Secondly, through the formation of a colonial government; As the text again ironically put it: "But apart from

the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance" (Achebe, 1958: 139).

The disruption of the native's traditional life by the white man reaches a crescendo in Part Three when the two friends, Okonkwo and Obierika, are found discussing a case where one native was sentenced to death by hanging over a land dispute. This anecdote is found on page 141 of the text (Achebe, 1958) and indicates the significance of the overall theme as well as title of the text:

> *'Does the white man understand our customs about land?'*
>
> *'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who taken up his religion also say our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."*

In my opinion, this is the most iconic and influential passage in the entire text, as it at once sums up the gist of our deliberations in this module: Firstly, it subtly conveys a sense of the ignorance which largely permeated the Western discourse and psyche (largely due to Conrad's and Cary's contribution) as well as addressing the perception contrived about African customs, which is that they were overall bad; Secondly, it shows how this image was successfully transposed onto some native Africans, those who obstinately followed the white man and denigrated their own customs and way of life as a result (**Hint:** Compare with the character of Ocol in p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*); and thirdly, the consequence that followed from a combination of the above, which is African culture and tradition falling apart.

Part Three, and the novel, ends with Okonkwo's death by suicide, sounding conclusively the death knell of old era of authentic African culture and traditions, as well as heralding the coming of the new era of Western hegemony.

3.3.5 Conclusion

Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as the title suggests, exposes the anarchic tendencies in the Igbo society, which has the "great cultural past to boast of, like any other civilization of the world i.e. Chinese, Indian or Egyptian" (Rao,2003:10). If we take a closer look at the above mentioned culture, it is evident that at some point of time, after having touched the zenith, it was eclipsed by the inexorable forces of anarchy, at least for some time, which inevitably meant a change, a flux, a replacement of old values by a set of new norms and emergence of a new order.

3.3.6 Summary

The unit above has presented a comprehensive scope of Achebe's depiction of a particularized African community engaged in its own social processes, carried out entirely on its own terms, with all the internal tensions entailed, challenging the simplified representation that the West offered itself of Africa as a formless area of life, as "an area of darkness" devoid of human significance. Through its form and structure, *Things Fall Apart* testifies to an aesthetic project which consists in fashioning a new language appropriate to its setting, serving, therefore, to give life and substance to the narrative content and thus to enforce the novelist's initial gesture of cultural reclamation.

3.3.7 Reflection

From your reading and observations in the above section, why do you think Achebe is widely regarded as the “Father of African literature?” Does *Things Fall Apart* aptly sum up the singular action of colonial conquest in Africa as a continent?

3.3.8 Activity

1. Why do you think *Things Fall Apart* has remained relevant as a text in contemporary African fiction?
2. Discuss in groups the significance of the ending portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*.
3. Does *Things Fall Apart* effectively answer ‘the single story’ theory of Africa? Give reasons why or why not.

UNIT 4: DISILLUSIONMENT AND BREAKUP… THE COLONIAL WORLD

4.1 Introduction

This unit continues with the exploration of African trends and thematic concerns of selected novels. It will focus on the themes of disillusionment and breakup as portrayed in two selected texts, namely *Mission to Kala* by Mongo Beti and *The Beautyful OnesAre Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah. The unit further serves to consolidate the knowledge you have acquired thus far from the preceding units, as well as give a fresh perspective on the insights to be gleaned from a closer reading of the selected novels.

4.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to

- Identify common literary trends and techniques used in the selected classic African novels
- Explore the relationships and make comparisons and evaluations of relevant material from the texts being studied with other literary works and life in general
- Exhibit competence in examining the thematic concerns portrayed in the selected classic African novels
- Appreciate and critically assess a variety of African literature

4.3.0 The Impact of Western Education on the Colonized Mind in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*

Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* is a novel set in the Cameroon Republic in the late 1950s, before it gained independence; published in French (as *Mission terminée*) in 1957; in English in 1958.

Briefly, the plot of the novel is about a young student who is sent to a rural village (Kala) to persuade a wayward wife to return to her husband.

Written in the first person, the novel creates a voice of subtle, slightly self-mocking irony for its protagonist, Jean-Marie Medza. But underneath the humor and gentle satire, Beti shapes a compelling critique of the harm that Western education can do to an African mind, and the novel ends pessimistically, as Medza exiles himself from his family and the culture that is so attractive, but so alien, to him. Primarily, he draws from an arsenal of literary techniques; symbolism, irony, humor, allusion and at times very powerful metaphors to achieve his literary purposes. In effect, the overall theme of the novel, which is the impact of colonial education on the colonized mind, is revealed twofold; firstly through the main character, Jean-Marie Medza, who is depicted as a "victim" of

circumstances in a world fast-changing both physically and morally due to the impact of the colonial machine and its active agent—education. Secondly, the impact of colonialism is seen through the perception of the people around Medza, albeit in a very comical way, to indicate just how much the colonial hegemony had altered the psyche of Africans.

Reflection:

"Why do the events which form this story plague me so? The memory of them pours back into my mind again and again, like a sea tide. I may be depressed or cheerful: it makes no difference. The impulse absorbs every mood: romantic enthusiasm, nostalgia, indifference, the lot. Why?... But you my friend, may see more clearly. You have travelled the same road as I, and made an almost identical journey up a very similar river…" (Beti, 1958: v)

The foregoing reflection is appropriate, I daresay even prophetic. One element stands out as obsessive and that element will stubbornly steer the course of our deliberations: That of disillusionment!

The statement in the reflection aptly brings to the fore the desperation and anguish of Jean-Marie Medza, the novel's protagonist. But then again, it could very well be the plight of every African who has been affected by the tentacles of colonialism. By using the literary technique of the first-person narrative, Beti puts not only himself as the author at the centre and as a mouthpiece, but achieves the effect of showing how every African felt "helpless" in the face of the "sea tide" of colonialism. Thus, this literary technique by the author plumbs most deeply to grasp that which is mostly perceived only on the surface: the stream of consciousness of the native African.

At the core of this disillusionment is another element that is at once contradictory—education. Throughout the novel, the role of colonial education elicits ambivalence as seen through the actions of Medza and those surrounding him.

As the novel opens, Medza returns to his hometown. School has just finished for the year, and Medza has just failed the all-important baccalaureate examination. He is confused, uncertain about his future, and—perhaps most of all—terrified: he expects his demanding father to be furious. Through this motif, Beti shows the implication of colonial education on the African from two perspectives: firstly, the victim, Medza who admits to being "ploughed" by the exam, but whose overall attitude about failing is somewhat nonchalant. Consider the following incident on page 1 of the novel:

> *It was lucky that we had friends with us – such as that extraordinary chap Daniel – whose irrepressible wit and high spirits took me out of myself, and stopped me doing what the romantic poets would describe as 'meditating on my sad destiny'. Do you remember how Daniel always used to say that our ancestors weren't Gauls but Bantus, and had stayed Bantus ever since? And his prediction that that wherever there was a Negro, there would always be some European colonial to kick his backside?* (Beti, 1958)

Through the above quote, Beti shows his intelligence as a writer in that he subtly conveys the sense that colonial education was not really in tandem with the aspirations and immediate lifestyle of most Africans, but rather that it was 'forced' on them just like it was on Medza through his demanding father. By contending (albeit comically) that African ancestors weren't Gauls (Europeans) but rather Bantus (Africans), Beti shows a negritude sense that at once highlights a deep chasm in the relationship between colonial education and the African's immediate needs.

Secondly, the author shows the divide (break up) that colonial education had brought on the family, and by extension, the society. By failing the exam, Medza becomes further estranged from his demanding father whom he fears. This contrasts with the relationship that Medza's cousin, Zambo had with his own father, (uncle) Mama in the village of Kala. (**Hint:** Consider also the relationship between Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, and that of Wiza Chambuleni and his father in *Quills of Desire* in relation to education).

Beti develops this theme of the impact of colonial education on the African mind through another literary technique, that of symbolism. The bus, for instance, symbolises European education, the vehicle which not only in the novel, but also in the wider African context, promised a life of influence and affluence at the higher echelons of society. This is evident both from the expectations of Medza's demanding father, as well as those of his immediate extended family (Uncle Mama's rapacity) and the society at large. For instance, Uncle Mama takes advantage of Medza's presence in the village of Kala by amassing himself a fortune through exploiting his nephew's celebrity status as a result of his education. He practically emphasizes the importance of kinship ('*blood-relationship'*) to his unsuspecting nephew in a clever ruse to benefit from this colonial education.

However, as the author subtly implies, the 'vehicle' of education which the Europeans were offering to Africans was not only old in itself as seen through the old bus owned by Kritikos (A European from Greece), but was unsuited to the challenges that awaited the colonized Africans. Beti achieves this effect through a combination of sarcasm, irony, symbolism and even foreshadowing in the scene where Medza engages in a squabble with the bus driver over the poor roads on his way home from school. The theme of the journey (peregrination) comes to the fore as the old bus bogged down in the mud,

struggled to climb up a steep hill and nearly fell down a ravine due its exertions. The interpretation of this incident could be, as follows, I argue:

First, the colonial education being offered to Africans was old (like the bus itself) and therefore unsuited to equip the intended beneficiaries with the lifelong skills needed to adapt to the ever-changing world around them. These challenges are given a physical manifestation in the novel, (e.g. the mud in which the bus bogs itself, the steep hill it fails to climb, and finally the road block ahead when Medza and the rest of the passengers finally disembark and are forced to continue their journeys on foot), plus the disillusionment with what he was learning in terms of the curriculum as he struggles to explain to his 'simple' audience in Kala on one occasion when asked what it was that the whites were teaching them, and further, how relevant this education would be when he completed his studies.

Secondly, the challenges posed by colonial education took a mental (or spiritual) manifestation as seen in the fear that Medza has throughout of his impending encounter with his father, as well as his failure or inability to translate this education into practicality as noted by his continuous amazement at the simple, yet somewhat fulfilling lives of the natives of Kala.

Thirdly, his pursuit of colonial education only widens the gap between him and his traditional roots, as seen, for example, in the incident where one of his far-sighted uncles comes to his defence during the episode where Medza's cousin, Niam had called on him to undertake the mission of bringing back his decamped wife: "Use your common sense. He's away at school most of the time. He only comes home occasionally. The really surprising thing is that he's still familiar with our tribal wisdom and customs at all…" (Beti, 1958: 13).

In the end, it seems the only course left open to Medza is to rebel against his father (another clever technique by the author to foreshadow the inevitability of the conflict between the colonized African against his aggressor, the European). In the end, the break-up of the family bonds and community becomes a reality as ultimately his unwillingness to face his obligations to his father and his flight from home lead to his most treacherous move, his abandonment of Edima (a wife he involuntarily acquired in Kala, but nevertheless loved). As one critic notes, this abandonment is the most telling indication of the deficiencies in Medza's education. He has not been prepared, by centuries of tradition, to understand the obligations that marriage brings: "he has no conception of consequences, no long-term commitment to the group, no concern for the perpetuation of the tribe" (Mickelson, p. 76). Rejecting his father seems like an act of self-liberation; but the fact that it also forces him to abandon the wife he loves, and who depends on him, should hint to the reader that Medza's flight is not an unmixed triumph. It is disillusionment and break-up at best (or is it at worst—pun intended!). The melancholy

tone of the last two chapters provides more evidence. The pleasant humour of the chapters in Kala gives way to a flat reportage of a life spent roaming and unsatisfied. Medza's final comment sums up the plight of the "colonized African," who has been separated from the ancestral wisdom of his people but not given a new way of understanding life: "The tragedy which our nation is now suffering is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand" (Beti, 1958: 181).

Stop and think:

"The central task of education is to impart a will and a facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. The truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents and children are students together" Eric Hoffer qtd in Zais (1976: 33).

4.4.0 Disillusionment and break-up in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born takes place in 1965 and 1966, one of the darkest periods of Ghana's history. It opens in the final months of Kwame Nkrumah's regime and closes with the coup that ousted him on February 24, 1966. The early promise of independence had given way to profound disillusionment, as poverty ran rampant and the economy, overdependent on foreign goods and capital, stagnated. Nkrumah was perceived to have withdrawn from the people and his Convention People's Party, which during the 1950s was the voice of the masses, was now seen as serving only the interests of its own bureaucrats. Corruption and bribery were ubiquitous. As one historian writes, "It was with a shock that this country realized that a nation might dance its way to freedom, but might not dance its way through the thorny problems of self-government" (Hagan, p. 187).

In terms of our exploration of African trends and thematic concerns of selected novels, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) seems to pick up from where Mongo Beti left in *Mission to Kala* (1958) and in fact reads more like a sequel, as if they were conceived by the same author. At the centre of the story in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is the unnamed hero who has been thoroughly disillusioned by his country's decline. A high school-educated civil servant for the national railroad, he is torn between two contradictory desires. On the one hand, he wants to provide a comfortable life for his wife and children; on the other, he is repulsed by what is required to get rich in Ghana: participation in the bribery and corruption that accompany almost

every public transaction. He refuses to surrender to fraud and corruption, but because this decision hurts his family, he cannot even feel proud of his own honesty.

According to Gikandi (1996) Armah's major achievement in his classic novel is the establishment of a close, almost fatalistic relationship between his characters and their social and physical contexts. Characters and the landscape tend to exist in an antagonistic relationship, built up by symbols and images of rot and decrepitude, which functions as a commentary on contemporary Ghana. In the first few paragraphs of the novel the bus, itself a symbol of the country as a whole, is choked by rust and rattles along the road in a confused manner, as if it has lost its sense of direction; the driver's matches have been spent and he is resigned to his state; the passengers lower themselves from the bus almost unwillingly. This initial image of waste and decrepitude is sustained throughout the text (**Hint:** Compare and contrast with the image of the bus in Beti's *Mission to Kala*).

The central conflicts in the novel arise when the characters try to understand, or deal with a world which is beyond their powers. For instance, in the preliminary pages, the characters are defined by their impotence and vulnerability (closer to 'victim' as Medza's portrayal in *Mission to Kala*): they are described as 'still bodies walking in their sleep' or dwarfs walking in their sleep. This state of being is brought about to counter the harsh realities in the world surrounding them. Armah portrays the decaying urban landscape in pictorial detail: trash cans, outhouses, and crumbling buildings are lavishly described. Alongside such depictions runs a description of the interior life of the protagonist as he reflects on his predicament. He is torn between his desire to believe that life is beautiful and his fear that corruption and decay are inevitably a part of the human condition. In short, he represents the condition of Ghana in the mid-1960s—a country still young enough to remember the elation of independence but quickly succumbing to greed and self-interest.

Could this be the product of the colonial education which most of the young promising liberation fighters (like Kwame Nkrumah) had acquired? Had the people been short-changed by the promise of a better life after acquiring independence from their colonial masters? Consider the episode in the bus between the conductor and his passengers, in particular, when he short-changed the so-called 'big-man' who gave him a cedi. Who, in the context of the novel and the ultimate reality that depicts the power relations between the lower class and the political elite, short-changed the other? Your guess is as good as mine!!!

The Beautiful Ones Are Not YetBorn depicts the plight of most newly independent African states through a literary technique of the grotesque and the downright ugly. But why does Armah devote so much attention to filth? First, it physically represents the novel's themes of decay, corruption, and waste—Ghana, it seems, is a figurative cesspool. More importantly, it provides a literary register for the protagonist's disgust at

his surroundings. He finds using the bathroom a nauseating, but necessary, ordeal, as is negotiating the needs and expectations of his peers. (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 1999).

On his way home from work the protagonist encounters the central embodiment of official dishonesty: his classmate Koomson, who has risen through the CPP to a position of prominence. The protagonist sees Koomson in his luxury car, buying fruit and bread from a street vendor who gives him the honorific nickname of "white man." Koomson is the protagonist's foil; while the latter has been paralyzed by a desire to do right, the former has achieved great success by his willingness to do anything. Before they part ways, Koomson announces that he and his wife will have dinner with the protagonist next Sunday night.

At home, the protagonist must face his wife, Oyo. Although they love each other, their marriage is strained to the breaking point because Oyo wants security and comfort, and cannot understand her husband's desire for honesty. She interprets his integrity as cowardice or stupidity. In a brief conversation, they quarrel about Koomson, about participating in corruption, and about the timber contractor. Oyo wants a toilet and other conveniences for her home. At the most elemental level, she wants a clean life like Estella Koomson's; the protagonist counters by saying, "Some of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of the garbage dump" (*Beautyful Ones*, p. 44). But for Oyo this is just cowardice: she likens her husband to the proverbial chichidodo, a bird that eats only maggots but is too fastidious to dig through the excrement where maggots live. The lure of a 'European' type of life was powerful, indeed, and Armah makes no concessions with the reader in his portrayal of the realities that his characters faced in order to attain it. (**Hint:** Compare and contrast this theme with those in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*).

One of the most significant intellectual influences on Ayi Kwei Armah is the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who, though born in Martinique, allied himself with the Algerian independence movement in the 1950s. In his ***The Wretched of the Earth*** (also covered in *African Literature and Its Times*), Fanon expounds a psychologically based theory of colonialism, arguing that decades of dependence on European decision-makers impoverished native African culture because leaders of the newly independent countries were afraid to break free from foreign advice and foreign aid. Because they had been trained to see European culture as supreme and African culture as backward, success to them meant imitating European ways and acquiring European goods. In brief, they had an inferiority complex. According to Fanon, along with breaking free of economic and political impediments to real independence, Africans must learn once more to trust their own culture and history (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 1999). I propose, compare this phenomenon to the issues raised in Beti's *Mission to Kala*.

The applicability of this analysis to *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* cannot be denied. The government official Koomson, his wife, and even the protagonist's family are focused on what Armah calls "the gleam": beautiful, highly processed, and artificial foreign goods. Estella Koomson even complains that Ghanaian drinks don't "agree with her constitution," as if she were from somewhere else (*Beautyful Ones*, p. 131). Armah makes it clear that Koomson's dereliction of duty springs from an acquired dislike of the very people he is supposed to be serving. One might argue that Armah eventually saw, in his own following of European literary traditions, a subtler version of the same cultural inferiority complex.

4.5.0 Conclusion

Mongo Beti and Ayi Kwei Armah are two of the finest modern writers of the African contemporary situation depicting disillusionment and breakup. By using the first person narrative, the modern novelist sees himself as the medium through which the alienated individual expresses his sense of fragmentation. The main characters in both *Mission to Kala* and *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* exist in a world which always seems beyond their practical abilities, leaving them at once impotent and with no option but to recoil into their inner being.

4.6.0 Summary

The above unit has focused on the themes of disillusionment and breakup in two selected texts, *Mission to Kala* and *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Through detailed analysis, we have seen how the mystification of education and its discredited utopia, the problematic continuities of past and present, the perennial omnipresence of corruption and the hegemony of populist leaders are formidable obstacles in the path to forging a clear identity for the African colonized mind. The conclusion reached strikes a chord of melancholy as the characters in both texts are left powerless to effect any substantial change in their fortunes.

4.7.0 Reflection

Nelson Mandela once said that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." How ambiguous is this statement in relation to events in both *Mission to Kala* and *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*?

4.8.0 Activity

1. From your analysis of the two texts above, compare and contrast the literary styles and techniques of Mongo Beti in *Mission to Kala* and Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. How effective are they in conveying the broader themes of the texts to the reader?

2. In both texts, the protagonists are portrayed as 'victims' of their circumstances. Do you think this is reflective of the African situation in the face of colonialism and its offshoots i.e. education? Why or why not?

UNIT 5: ALIENATION AND FLIGHT IN…

5.1 Introduction

This unit covers thematic concerns in form of alienation and flight in two selected African texts i.e. Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. In essence, it aims to consolidate the knowledge you have acquired so far from the preceding units, as well as give a fresh perspective on the insights to be gleaned from a closer reading of the selected novels.

5.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you are expected to

- Identify common literary trends and techniques of the selected classic African novels
- Explore the relationships and make comparisons and evaluations of relevant material from the texts being studied with other literary works and life in general
- Exhibit competence in examining the thematic concerns portrayed in the selected classic African novels
- Appreciate and critically assess a variety of African literature

5.3 Alienation and flight in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

Reflection:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot: 'The Journey of the Magi'.

No Longer at Ease is a 1960 novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and a sequel to his 1958 classic *Things Fall Apart*. It is the story of an Igbo man, Obi Okonkwo (grandson of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*), who leaves his village on a scholarship for an education in Britain and then eventually lands a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service, but is soon conflicted between his African culture and Western lifestyle and ends up taking a bribe, which spells disastrous consequences for his career and life.

Before we delve into the main themes of the text, let us have a working definition of the overriding theme of alienation and flight. According to the online American dictionary, Merriam-Webster (2018), alienation is defined as "a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment: estrangement" and flight as "wish-fulfilment fantasy or wishful thinking". Both definitions echo a sense of melancholy and crisis.

Thus defined, the above themes are evident in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, seen through the experiences of the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo. The Umuofia Progressive Union (U.P.U) has given Obi a scholarship to study law in England, a scholarship that Obi has to pay back upon his return. And, thus, he leaves for England, stopping in Lagos on the way out. While in England, several things happen to him. First, he changes his course of study to English and abandons law. Secondly, he finds himself nostalgic for home, writing poems about Nigeria. Finally, he meets a girl named Clara at a dance in London but fails to make a good impression. However, the girl is Nigerian also, and on Obi's boat ride back home, after nearly four years in England, he meets Clara once again. This time, they begin a relationship.

In the context of the novel, the sense of crisis is signalled by its title and the epigraph from which it comes, a selection from the last stanza of T.S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', itself a poem of doubt about faith and identity. In the preface to the same edition, Simon Gikandi notes that the melancholic story of Obi Okonkwo, a young idealistic man who fails to live up to the expectations of his country and community, is mirrored by the Magi in Eliot's poem. Like Eliot's wise men, who suffer through the hazards of alien landscapes, renounce their pagan ways for the new Christian God, yet end up belonging to neither the old nor the new worlds, Obi is an outsider both to his Umuofian community and his European employers. He has powerful cultural connections to his Umuofian community through virtue of kinship and the qualifications to be admitted to a 'European post' and interact with the higher echelons in modern Nigerian society through his employment in the civil service. But, as the text shows, he is not at ease in the society which forms his immediate surroundings.

The first hint of Obi's alienation in the novel can be traced in a flashback through his physical movement from his traditional Umuofian community to study in England for four years on a scholarship from the Umuofia Progressive Union. This physical movement at once produces a mental flight in Obi—whilst in England, he longs to go back home and writes nostalgic sentimental poems about Nigeria. However, the picture of Nigeria which he depicted in his poems turns out to be anything but idyllic upon his return home after four years: he finds a totally different country in the grip of corruption and moral debauchery.

When Obi first arrives in Nigeria from England after a long time, he is given a warm reception by the Umuofian Progressive Union. He does not respond to the people in a good traditional way and he forgets how to act in his homeland: he wears a short sleeved shirt and sees nothing wrong with it. The narrative indicates;

> "*Everybody was properly dressed in Agbada or European suit who appeared in his shirt sleeves because of the heat. That was Obi's mistake number one…Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out" (NLAE: 28).*

Obi is quickly given a post on the Scholarship Board of the Civil Service and is also quickly introduced to the world of bribery, which is a world he wholeheartedly rejects with a strong idealism at first. This is indicated early on when a man offers Obi money in order for Obi to "pull strings" for his little sister's scholarship. Obi is appalled and rejects the offer, only later to be met at home by the little sister herself who offers Obi her body in return for the scholarship favor. Again, Obi rejects this offer.

Still idealistic, Obi refuses to take bribes and also finds it necessary for himself to be a "pioneer" in Nigeria, bringing down corruption in government and instigating change. It seems that corruption runs rampant and that everyone in Nigeria from the "white man" to the Umuofian Progressive Union participates in "seeing" people about what they need done. Men offer money, and women offer their bodies, in return for favors and services. Obi believes that by not taking bribes he can make a difference. He had written, while at the university in London, a paper in which he theorized on what would change the corruption of high positions in Nigeria. He believed that the "old Africans" at the top of civil service positions would have to be replaced by a younger generation of idealistic and educated university graduates, such as himself. But as Achebe shows in the text, what a flight of fancy Obi had—mere wishful thinking. (**Hint:** Compare this aspect with the unnamed protagonist's views in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*).

Soon, things take a turn for the worse in Obi's personal affairs as Clara tells him that she cannot marry him because she is an *osu,* an outcast (refer to *Things Fall Apart* for elaboration on this). Obi decides to ignore this and go against what most of his fellow countrymen believe to be a major transgression of custom, and he decides he will marry her anyway. This is the beginning of his estrangement from his traditional community and his family, as his mother, with whom he was very close, gives him an ultimatum: she tells him that if he insists on marrying Clara, he must wait until she is dead because if he marries Clara while she is alive, she will kill herself. Obi tries in vain to argue that this was a 'modern' society where such beliefs should be outdated, but from the reactions of both his family as well as those of the Umuofia Progressive Union, it is clear that the long shadow of tradition still holds sway over even the so-called modern society. Obi is

therefore left devastated and undergoes a crisis of identity as he weighs his options. No longer at ease indeed. (**Hint:** Compare and contrast this with Wiza Chambuleni in Binwell Sinyangwe's *Quills of Desire*)

In the end, although Obi begins his life in Nigeria in an honest way, events do not go as he has planned. His economic hardship worsens, given that he has to send money home and that he is in debt and has to pay back the scholarship he got from the Umuofia Progressive Union (U.P.U). Achebe takes us through the path of how someone like Obi can come to take bribes. It began with the death of his mother, who was the most important person in his life (next to Clara, of course). He does not go home for the funeral, and the U.P.U. discusses this failure on Obi's behalf as a sign of his not having cared about his mother's death. The truth, however, is that he was terribly saddened by her death, feels terrible remorse and guilt, and has entered into a state of mental unrest. However, Obi awakes from this unrest with a new sense of calm. He feels like a new man, and it is at this point that he takes his first bribe, not without a certain degree of guilt. Like his father, Isaac (Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*) before him, it was like something snapped in Obi at the death of his mother. Her death comes to symbolize the death of all that Obi had once held dear—all his idealism vanishes in an instant. His alienation becomes complete.

From then on, Obi allows this acceptance of bribes to become habitual. He continues to take bribes until the end of the novel, when he decides he cannot stand it anymore. He has paid off all of his debts and can no longer be a part of the corruption. It is at this moment, however, when he has taken his last bribe, that he gets caught. As the ending suggests, it is when we least expect it that tragedy usually strikes. Everyone is left perplexed as to how such a 'young man of great promise' could take a 'small' bribe and ruin his life and career.

Another important aspect to consider when reading *No Longer At Ease* is the role of education in hastening both the alienation and flight of Obi Okonkwo. Obi was educated in England. This small fact molds the way others treat him and shapes what others expect of him (**Hint:** consider the expectations of the Umuofia Progressive Union as well as those of his own family, and relate these to the events in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*). At the same time, just like with Medza in *Mission to Kala*, the education he holds dear is also one for which he has felt guilt and one which has often made him a stranger in his own Nigeria.

Upon his return from England, Obi is secured a position in the civil service, given a car, money, and respect. At the same time, however, he seems to be making constant mistakes because of what he has learned to be like, what he has come to understand, and what he has never learned. For instance, when Obi first arrives, he is given a reception by the Umuofian Progressive Union at which he makes several mistakes. He has forgotten how

to act in his home or simply does not agree with its ways: he wears a short-sleeved shirt and sees nothing wrong with it, for it is hot, and he speaks casually in English, instead of the kind of heavy English that the Umuofians admire in the president of the Union. His education has brought him status and has placed him in a position where others expect the most and best of him. No one can understand, in the end, how a man of "his education and promise" could take a bribe. Of course, Achebe, says this cheekily since many who have accused him and who also hold high positions are guilty of similar transgressions (like in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*). Ironically, the only thing his "education" did not teach him was how not to get caught.

No Longer at Ease (1960) thus reflects the personal dilemma that modern tribal societies face as a result of rapid Westernization and the central character epitomizes the death of native cultures. Obi naively tries to maintain the idea of his own integrity as a detribalized, rational, thoroughly modern man, but overall his reintegration into Nigeria is a failure because he is unable to assimilate successfully any of the competing cultures he passes through. He finds it impossible to mediate the conflicting duties that are thrust upon him, and his steady progress in the novel is inevitably toward despair and withdrawal.

5.4 Alienation and flight in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*

Song of Lawino has become one of the most widely read literary works originating from sub-Saharan Africa that addresses the issues facing a liberated Africa. The poem poses a question: what kind of liberation should Africa take on? Should it honor its traditions, or should it adapt the European values that were already set in place during colonialism? This question of course embraces the themes of alienation and flight we are just from analyzing in the section above.

Okot p'Bitek worked as anthropologist, poet, novelist and even footballer which led him to go and be educated in England on law and anthropology and later literature. He distinguished himself from other African writers who wrote in western styles and in western point of view. He has chosen an African tool to express himself, a tool associated with oral tradition of Africa. He called it 'song', and his depiction of the alienation and flight which still faces most Africans even to this day has ensured that his text *Song ofLawino* remains a classic!

In essence, the text is an African woman's lamentation over the cultural death of her western educated husband—Ocol. The story is told as a dialogue between Lawino and Ocol. The poem itself is separated in different sections or Chapters, each one detailing the social problems facing Lawino and Ocol in their marriage, their differences and value systems. The poem is an extended appeal from Lawino to Ocol to stay true to his own customs, and to abandon his desire to be white.

Bearing in mind the definition of alienation given already as our working definition (refer to the section above for emphasis), this immediately becomes evident in Chapter One of the text which is aptly entitled 'My Husband's Tongue is Bitter'. In this chapter, the author uses Lawino to complain against her husband's abusive tongue towards her, her family and clansmen at large: Ocol says Lawino's mother is a witch adding that her clansmen are fools because they eat rats. He says, "We are all Kaffirs. We do not know the ways of God. We sit in deep darkness and do not know the Gospel" (Bitek, 1966: 35). This blatant abuse is developed further in the chapter when Ocol says "Black people are primitive and their ways are utterly harmful. Their dances are mortal sins. They are ignorant, poor and diseased!" (Bitek, 1966: 36). This image is immediately contrasted with that of Ocol's, who says of himself that "…he is a modern man, a progressive and civilized man. He says he has read extensively and widely and he can no longer live with a thing like me…he says I am blocking his progress…" (Bitek, 1966: 36).

Through this ingenious literary technique of using the first-person narrative to present powerful images of the stream-of-consciousness, Bitek manages to successfully convey a sense of the loss of identity colonized Africans like Ocol underwent by attributing this to the role of colonial education on the colonized mind. Ocol rejects his wife on this score, for instance, by arguing that she 'does not know the letter A' because 'she has not been to school and has not been baptized', hence he does not want Lawino anymore! This is the mental form of alienation, or more precisely, the 'inferiority complex' affecting Africans like Ocol who begin to look down on their own traditional cultural customs in preference for western customs.

This alienation takes a physical form and gets even worse in Chapter Two when Lawino indicates that her husband is in love with another woman: "Ocol rejects the old type. He is in love with a modern woman, he is in love with a beautiful girl who speaks English. But only recently we would sit close together, touching each other!" (p. 36). This powerful contrast at once sums up the theme of alienation which has beset that breed of Africans like Ocol. In the context of things, it seems there is no worse situation than to find oneself in a position like that of Ocol who denigrates the first love of his life in preference for what he considers to be 'modern'. This is what the author seems to suggest as Lawino launches into a comic description of her rival, Clementine: "Brother, when you see Clementine! The beautiful one aspires to look like a white woman; Tina dusts powder on her face and it looks so pale; she resembles the wizard getting ready for the midnight dance' (p.37).

P'Bitek sustains this theme of alienation throughout the text using a variety of literary techniques, from symbolism, metaphors, similes, imagery and hyperbole, depicting Lawino as a fierce defender of her traditional Acoli customs, while showing Ocol as a quintessential caricature of the 'colonized' African, lost to himself and to the world.

All of the issues the poem address are ones that have concerned and divided African nations since liberation from colonialism. P'Bitek argues that Africa should reject European ways and re-embrace traditional African values. He does not dismiss European ways by having Lawino state that they are good but only good for Europeans. There is no room for cross-cultural re-inventions in p'Bitek's beliefs, as the motif 'Let no one uproot the pumpkin' implies. It is in essence a clarion call as well as a timely reminder to all the Ocols out there that no one can erase their past, and any attempts at doing so can only result in alienation and flight of fancy—mere wishful thinking!!!

5.5. Conclusion

Both *No Longer at Ease* and *Song of Lawino* deal with aspects of identity crisis caused primarily by the impact of colonial education, but more so by centuries of colonial hegemony. Indeed, both texts central concern is with the 'hybrid' society that followed in the wake of neocolonialism in African countries, producing characters who could neither locate their roots in tradition, nor project a clear definitive existence in the modern world. The attempt to reconstruct identity or to reinvent a new one is what is at the core of most postcolonial texts, which *No Longer at Ease* and *Song of Lawino* undoubtedly have proven to be.

5.6 Summary

This unit has looked at themes of identity crisis brought on by the machinations of colonialism, in particular the impact of education on the colonized African mind. It has established that as a consequence, a hybrid individual and society were created in most postcolonial African countries. The next unit looks to build up on a similar theme.

5.7 Reflection

Try to discuss the vast notion of identity and how it is shaped and constructed through the works of postcolonial writers highlighted in this course.

5.8 Activity

1. From your analysis of the two texts in the section above, are the themes highlighted in both still relevant today? Give reasons why or why not?
2. Compare and contrast Achebe's portrayal of alienation and flight in *No Longer At Ease* to that of Ayi Kwei Armah's in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. How do the titles of both texts project this overriding theme?
3. P'Bitek uses Lawino as his mouthpiece to project the impact of colonialism on Africa as a whole. How effective is Lawino as a medium of the author?
4. Compare and contrast the characters of Lawino and Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

UNIT 6: THE LOST GENERATION IN…

6.1 Introduction

In this unit, we shall be fixated with thematic concerns of lost purpose and identity in two selected texts, namely Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* (1958) and Binwell Sinyangwe's *Quills of Desire* (1996). From this close inspection of the two texts, it is desired that you shall be able to consolidate your knowledge of the common trends in African literature and be able to readily identify and apply these themes across a wider spectrum.

6.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to

- Identify common literary trends in the selected novels and techniques of the authors
- Explore the relationships and make comparisons and evaluations of relevant material from the texts being studied with other literary works and life in general
- Exhibit competence in examining the thematic concerns portrayed in the selected classic African novels
- Appreciate and critically assess a variety of African literature

6.3 The Lost Generation in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*

Reflection:

…the tragedy our nation is suffering from today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. It is the tragedy of man bereft of any intellectual compass, a man walking blindly through the dark in some hostile city like New York. Who will tell him that he can only cross Fifth Avenue by the pedestrian crossings, or teach him how to interpret the traffic signs? How will he solve the intricacies of a subway map, or know where to change trains?

Beti, 1958: 167

The words contained in exegesis from the novel *Mission to Kala* above are appropriate. Undeniably, the echoes of despair cannot fail to impress us. Beti depicts the plight of Africans such as Jean-Marie Medza who is a product of a deficient western colonial education, an education which has not fully prepared him to face the challenges of life ahead in an Africa that is still much largely wont to traditional dictums.

Largely, the success of Beti in painting such a poignant picture of the lost generation arises from the fact that *Mission to Kala* can be read as a comic novel that draws on several classic traditions: the coming-of-age story, the fish-out-of-water story, and the story of mistaken identities. Its hero, Jean Marie-Medza, is at the center of all these elements—at times, "victim" seems to be a better word than "center."

Written in the first person, Beti creates a compelling bildungsroman of Medza, a young student who is returning home just after failing his all-important baccalaureat exams. As the narrative progresses, we learn that this fact terrifies Medza because of his overbearing father, hence there is a sense of fear and foreboding throughout the novel before Medza meets with him. This motif of Medza's impending meeting with his father is developed throughout the text using stark contrasts as well as allusion, as evidenced, for instance, when Medza goes to Kala and is shocked to learn that his cousin, Zambo is living with his mistress under the same roof as his father (Uncle Mama).

The close bonds of father and son in the rural set-up of Kala is sharply contrasted to the demands of an urban life where Medza comes from, and is one of the first hints in the text about the negative impact of colonialism on Africans. The socio-economic relations between the town where Medza comes from (i.e. Vimili) is sharply contrasted with the rural scenes in Kala, albeit in a very comical manner. One example is depicted on page 15 of the text:

> *'Can any bus or any kind of car travel on this track?' Bikokolo asked, with the air of a man who knows in advance exactly what answer he will get.*
>
> *'Not a hope,' said some wag or other, 'not a hope of getting a car down this track.'*
>
> *'That's what I thought,' said the old man. 'If these up-country bushmen round Kala saw cars every day, I can't see any reason why they shouldn't be as smart as we are…'*

The foregoing anecdote tends, without exaggeration, to cast the African psyche in a shroud of ambivalence with regards to colonialism and its offshoots. Firstly, the element of self-praise cannot be mistaken here. The long arm of colonialism had indeed slowly but surely altered the landscape of the African continent, clearing vast areas of forests and bringing infrastructure like roads and railways, in essence transforming what were hitherto called villages into towns. This, in and of itself, was enough to alter the thinking of Africans (like Bikokolo above) who lived in such areas to now see themselves as better off than their counterparts in the rural set-ups like Kala. In fact, it was largely due to this phenomenon that certain classes of African bourgeoisie (**Hint:** consider Ocol in *Song ofLawino*) emerged in the aftermath of colonial hegemony and began to denigrate their so-called humble origins. These were the makings of the lost generation, I propose!

Secondly, native Cameroonians, like most Africans, quite rightly viewed a European-style education as the key to success in colonial society. This is actually what makes Medza a 'victim' in the first place, as his adventure to Kala is premised on the fact that he is educated. Medza is initially perplexed when his cousin, Niam, requests of him to go to Kala and bring back his decamped wife: Medza does not understand how he, a teenage boy, can succeed where others have failed. He debates this point with Niam and the other villagers. Finally, an elder named Bikokolo, considered the 'village Solomon', tells him the truth:

> *Shall I tell you what your special thunder is? Your certificates, your learning….Have you any idea what these upcountry bushmen will seriously believe about you? That you only have to write a letter in French, or speak French to the nearest District Officer, to have anyone you like imprisoned, or get any personal favour you like.*
>
> (*Mission to Kala*, p. 15)

The above quote, after the self-praise of earlier, denotes another unfortunate harbinger of the lost generation: subordination of the uneducated. This phenomenon, of course, played out twofold: firstly, Africans who acquired a colonial style education were seen to have better chances of acquiring a European type of employment, which portended power and success, whereas secondly, those who lacked this European type of education envied or admired their counterparts who had, as the case may be. (**Hint:** consider this trend in *Song of Lawino* and *No Longer At Ease*).

Thus, Medza is shocked to discover that despite being a failed student, his prestige is immense among his people, and even worse, among the inhabitants of Kala, who throw feasts in his honour. On the first of the many feasts held in his honor—feasts that invariably turn into interrogation sessions—Medza realizes how wide a gap separates him from his people's ways of living and thinking. As he struggles to find the words that will explain abstract, Western modes of knowledge such as geography and economics, he comes to question whether or not his education has prepared him for life any more appropriately than growing up in the old way would have (**Hint:** Refer to the quote in exegesis at the beginning to this section).

He watches the easy interaction of Zambo and his friends with appreciation, but also with something like envy. Although they incorporate him into their community with great ease, he always feels like an outsider. He is perhaps most envious of the absolute certainty with which the villagers of Kala assume that their own worldview is adequate. Toward the end, he comments on the placidity with which Zambo accepts the treachery of Niam's wife, a placidity that makes Zambo seem much older than his 20 years: "This unshakeable stoicism in the face of all life's accidents and vicissitudes is probably the

townsman's greatest loss, when he abandons village, tribes, and local culture. We who choose the city have lost this ancient wisdom: irritable, ambitious, hot-headed, fed on illusion, we have become the world's eternal dupes" (*Mission to Kala*, p. 145). Need I say more???

6.4 The Lost Generation in Binwell Sinyangwe's *Quills of Desire*

Reflection:

The id is the reservoir of libido which is the source of all psychic energy. Its function is to fulfil the pleasure principle. The id may be largely seen as a source of all our aggressions and desires. It is a lawless, asocial, amoral. Its function is to gratify our instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraint. Unchecked—it would lead us to any lengths of destruction and even self-destruction—to satisfy its impulses for pleasure.

Sigmund Freud, qtd in Guerin et al (2005)

The Freudian dimension echoed above commands our attention to the analysis of Binwell Sinyangwe's *Quills of Desire* (1993) text from a predominantly psychological perspective. Indeed, as I will argue, the title of the text itself connotes feelings, and impinges on our attitude towards the protagonist, Wiza Chambuleni. By the end of our deliberations, you will agree with me that indeed Wiza is a classic Freudian case of lost id[entity]! Let us see how this is so.

The text, *Quills of Desire* (1993) by Binwell Sinyangwe has 158 pages divided into three (3) parts and fifteen (15) chapters which follow each other progressively, chronicling the life of the text's protagonist, Wiza Chambuleni, from his early childhood years in primary school, to his struggles with secondary school life and adolescence, until finally his resignation with fate and premature death by suicide in the last part.

The text, modeled closely in terms of structure and thematic concerns to that of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, begins with part one which is entitled 'A Future and A Hope'. As a bildungsroman, the text details the early childhood and growth of the main character, Wiza Chambuleni, a brilliant but whimsical character with a penchant for rubbing people (especially those in authority) the wrong way.

The novel begins with Wiza and his father, Chambuleni sitting on the veranda before a fading fire in a brazier. The father gives his son some counsel about life: —"My son, life is like a queue. With patience, your turn always comes. When that time comes you are free to pick what pleases you. Then look after your neck; the beads you wear around it

are as easy to find as the droppings of a chicken" (p.1). These proverbs are not coincidental. We soon learn that it was the third time the father has spoken these words.

The proverbs are not only central to the plot of the text because all the events revolve around Wiza trying to operate within the confines of these words, but they are also central to our deliberations in trying to locate the theme of the lost generation in context. From the get-go, we discover that Mr Chambuleni (Wiza's father) is very anxious about his son, Wiza. The most talented of all his children, Wiza is also the most unpredictable in terms of his temperament. For instance, he would occasionally run away from home after a lesson in discipline (a good smacking with a whip, colonial style!) from his father. This forces Mr Chambuleni to revise his parenting methods, and so he resorts to trying to counsel his son instead. On this occasion when he used the above proverbs, we learn through a flashback that Wiza's temperament at school was threatening to undo his future and hope of a stable, secure life.

In fact, we soon learn about Wiza's ambition in life. As the text reveals, Wiza's dream was to have a good education. A first-class engineering degree reinforced by a colourful chain of post-graduate professional qualifications and followed by an illustrious industrial career. The dream was old, deep-rooted and ever-growing (**Hint:** Consider the Freudian and Jungian theory on the unconscious aspect of human psyche here). To emphasize this point, the text gives a flashback of Wiza's determination during his primary school life: he had appealed to the ancestral spirits to let him go to secondary school. Wiza had visited the home of Kuzuke (who existed in the form of a large python) the god of prosperity and the future, on the eve of final primary school-leaving examination, to whisper his ambitions.

From the foregoing, we can deduce the importance that Wiza attached to education, more especially the formal academic type. Not to suggest that he did not take his father's 'traditional type of education' and wisdom any less serious, but I'll argue that Wiza did not put these two on the same footing nonetheless. I say so for the following reasons:

Stop and think:
Wiza's perspective on education differs totally from that which was held by Medza in *Mission to Kala*. Explain how?

Firstly, Wiza becomes fixated on succeeding in life through getting good academic results at school and acquiring a first-class engineering degree afterwards. This becomes his lifelong goal and obsession, and for good reason: he has an elder brother, by the name of Kocha, as his role model. Kocha is studying overseas in England. This in itself is enough motivation for Wiza to try and emulate, if not better the achievements of his elder brother. Sinyangwe thus sets fertile grounds for the disillusionment that will beset the young protagonist when later on he is expelled from school for a misdemeanor he is not

entirely to blame for, in my opinion, but one he should have avoided nevertheless; true, Evi was a very attractive girl who turned every boy's head, but Wiza should have been more wary because of the perilous relationship he had with those in authority who considered him as their enemy i.e. Yona and the Head teacher, Mr Dasgupta.

Wiza's world is in turmoil after his expulsion from school for sleeping with Evi (I will come to Evi's role in Wiza's downfall later). In the context of things, Wiza's lifelong ambition of succeeding in life through education as a vehicle is temporarily thwarted, and his shame is complete when instead of going back home, he chooses to head for Lusaka in the hopes of seeking out the help of one of Kocha's friends, Martin Thole, who ironically, is Evi's elder brother. This physical movement in the text can be juxtaposed with that of Jean Marie-Medza in *Mission to Kala* when he also turned his back on his father, preferring to live a life on his own. However, Wiza, unlike Medza, was afraid of facing his father due to the utter shame of what he had done. He resolves to only go back home after completing his Form Five education. When his plan of getting Martin's help fails, he resloves to wait for his brother Kocha's return from England.

Right here, the seeds of disillusionment are sown as Wiza (and Medza) were not prepared for life on the streets, away from the comfort and hearth of the family. With a failure to complete his education in a society which was fast becoming modernized, Wiza becomes the epitome of the lost generation as he scrounges for a living in the streets of Lusaka, a wanton and restless vagabond. He becomes alienated in this sense!

Let me come to the second point which hastens Wiza's descent into the abyss of the lost generation: his failure to heed the traditional wisdom of his father. Despite the fact that his father had on several occasions counseled him on the need to be patient in life, what brings about Wiza's downfall is exactly his failure to adhere to these timely precepts. Agreed, he had shown a remarkable change in behavior as he grew up and especially when he was nearing completion of his Form Five, but nevertheless he still failed to meet the standard. His consummation of the relationship with Evi proves not only this, but also an alarming level of naivety which his father could have been forgiven for thinking that evil spirits were after his son's life.

Indeed, Mr Chambuleni makes this point when Wiza, after enduring a life roaming and wandering the streets of Lusaka, and an unsuccessful stint as a bus conductor, eventually decided to go back home and wait for his brother's return from there: 'A child is like an axe, it will drop from your shoulder and cut your flesh open but you still pick it up and hung it over your shoulder' (Pg. 119). Mr Chambuleni's parental role is admirable to say the least. But ironically, in the context of the novel, it is his attempts at intervening in his son's life that actually hastens its end. (**Hint**: Contrast with Medza's father in *Mission to Kala*).

Mr Chambuleni asks Wiza about his future plans in the presence of Milika, his wife and Wiza's mother. Wiza advances school but Chambuleni has long lost faith in that prospect and instead proposes him marrying and settling down. Gelina (a primary school drop-out) is advanced as his future bride. Chambuleni promises to take care of all the costs and needs. This revelation is like a slap a face of Wiza due to two things: firstly, he still held firm to the belief of completing his high school education, however faint the prospects (and indeed they were becoming fainter as his elder brother and last remaining hope, Kocha had remained in England to pursue a Master's program; initially he delayed due to health complications). Secondly, Wiza held firmly to the belief of marrying a beautiful, educated bride and becoming an example in the society of a sophisticated family. This dream had taken a physical shape in the form of Evi (Evirilda Thole), and Wiza still firmly believed they were destined to be together. What flight of fancy in the context of things—wishful thinking!!! Anyway, Wiza still held to these articles of faith, and as a result, that same night he flees. The mother weeps and his father remains moody for months.

Wiza's returns home for the second time after life as an unsuccessful fisherman in Mpulungu where he had run to sought refuge. Indeed, his return is precipitated by his receipt of a letter from his elder brother, Kocha,who has done so well in the degree that the university had offered him a scholarship for a Masters for two years. Thereafter, he would only come for a week or two and go back for his PhD for another three years. Wiza fails to write to Kocha as their father had advised all family members not to bother him and to let him focus on his school. Wiza sees his dream of completing his education vanishing quickly, and so overcome by emotions, he writes a letter to his father telling him that he would be returning home the next month; he tells the date of his return too.

Reflection:

A porcupine knows not only how to throw its quills but when and where to throw them; for its own quills may cause it harm. It is true. It is also true regarding the quills of desire in a man's chest. Marry, my son, and avoid calamity.

(Sinyangwe, 1993: 138)

Wiza returned home after a long self-imposed exile, his disillusionment with life becomes complete when after all these months, his father had not forgotten about the issue of marriage after all. In one of the most moving passages in the text, Mr Chambuleni entreats his son to not focus on school anymore, but rather to embrace a wholesome life as a married man if only to stave off evil. He also mentions that he had consulted the gods. He advises his son that he needed to marry and settle. 'Marry a woman like Gelina, rooted in tradition and not the jokes of marriages in town' (pg. 136).

As the father intoned, the marriage would bring him dignity. There was no excuse as he was not in school. He concludes his lengthy sermon on life by indicating the words contained in the exegesis to this section above, and from which the title of the text is derived. The traditional wisdom contained in the quote is the central key to Wiza's destiny, if only he had heeded. Let us break it down to its constituent parts:

Firstly: *A porcupine knows not only how to throw its quills but when and where to throw them;* Here, Sinyangwe creates a blend of traditional mythology and cultural wisdom, using a porcupine to symbolize both tact and patience. Mr Chambuleni is entreating his son to be both wily and patient in life. In essence, he wants to 'wean' his son from the fixation he has held since childhood that formal schooling was the only source of salvation and for him to consider other options. 'School is something, but it is not the only thing,' Chambuleni emphasizes to his son (p.136). However, Mr Chambuleni faces a leviathan task as Wiza had long held the belief that '—For genuine development to take place in any nation, the citizens of the nation must go to school first and rid themselves of illiteracy through formal education' (p.97).

The second part of the adage goes as follows: *for its own quills may cause it harm. It is true. It is also true regarding the* ***quills of desire*** *in a man's chest.* (p.138) There is no mistaking the timely counsel from a father to a son here. In the case of Africa our perception of the bad and the good is rooted in the effable heritage passed on to us from generation to generation. Mr Chambuleni belongs to that old order of intellectuals in their own right who never stepped foot into a classroom, like Meka of Oyono's novel *The Old Man and the Medal*, who slit the sides of a new pair of shoes to accommodate their toes that have naturally grown hampered outward! If formal education had failed, no worries—traditional wisdom would do just fine, if not better, Chambuleni seems to advise his son. (**Hint:** What was it that Okot p'Bitek said in his incisive manner about the new intellectual's testicles being smashed by volumes of books in *Song of Lawino*?) Your guess is as good as mine—the intellectual associated with reading and writing, the Wizas and the Ocols of this world, were the lost generation indeed once they turned their backs on tradition!!!

Marry, my son, and avoid calamity. This is the third part of the adage. Not only does Chambuleni indicate the sanctity and security of such a union, but he goes a step further by doing what any father would do in order to save the life of a wayward son—choosing a bride for his son, and not just a bride, but one rooted in tradition and culture. As he intoned, such caliber of a wife would firmly anchor his son in life as opposed to 'the jokes of marriages in town' (pg. 136). Never was there a more appropriate passage in the text to depict the subtle struggle between tradition and the onslaught of modernity, I daresay! (**Hint:** Compare Chambuleni's choice of a bride for his son vis-à-vis the views of Lawino in Chapter 2 of the text *Song of Lawino*).

As fate would have it, however, Wiza seems to be impervious to tradition from the get-go. In fact, instead of having the humility to embrace and consider his father's timely counsel, quite the contrary, this development breaks his spirit and resolve finally. The world dissolved into nothingness. Neither matter nor phenomena of any kind seemed to exist—only vacuum and emptiness, as the text described it on page 138. This should not be shocking to the avid reader, though, as the tell-tale signs are numerous in the text which all point to the fact that Wiza was quite a stubborn and independent-minded character, not least when he had made up his mind about something. To be specific, one such thing he had convinced himself of already was a sophisticated marriage with a beautiful modern wife, like Evi—the 'eighth wonder of the world!' Not a village, school drop-out like Gelina! The contrast could not be any farther than the north is from the south indeed! Evi—who represented a sophisticated, modern, beautiful wife—was Wiza's second fixation, after formal education, I argue.

Towards the close of the text, Wiza marries Gelina, or rather, is coaxed into marrying her, signaling once and for all the death of his shattered dreams.

Hint:
Compare and contrast Wiza's wedding and marriage to Gelina with Medza's wedding and marriage to Edima in *Mission to Kala*.

The toll of it all becomes too heavy for Wiza when his elder brother, Kocha shows up just a day after the wedding. The very next day after his elder brother's arrival, Wiza is discovered to have taken his own life (**Hint:** Scrutinize the reasons that led to Wiza committing suicide. Contrast these with the death of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). Again, the death by suicide of Wiza should not surprise the avid reader of the text at all, because the writing was always on the wall:

First, the manner in which Wiza reacted after being advised by his father to settle down and marry portended disaster in itself. It was like something 'snapped' in him, and he felt the heaviness that made him a man. In truth, Wiza was still an idealist; holding on to fancy thoughts about school and marriage, whilst the reality of his circumstances was the exact opposite. In essence, Wiza failed to successfully reconcile his dreams (of a successful academic and professional career, plus a sophisticated marriage to a beautiful, educated wife like Evi) with his reality (himself a school drop-out, married to a traditional, simple village girl—Gelina). In the end, he opts to hit the 'self-destruct' button. This is a classic id[entity] crisis of Freudian proportions (refer to the words in exegesis at the beginning to this section), an epitome of those considered to be the lost generation, or more poignantly, a reminder of those labeled as a 'missed call' in the humorous strains of a local hit song by the Oga Family. Maybe things could have turned

out differently for Wiza if he had not been so obsessed with his 'dreams' and had instead put in a little more 'effort' to see life from his father's perspective (pun intended)! The irony of life—Who dares to say they know better?

6.5 Conclusion

The quest for identity is a very prominent theme in postcolonial studies and literature. This identity is shaped by the colonial experience together with traditional experiences. These experiences mixed together create a hybrid of characters with an identity crisis. Postcolonial writers like Beti and Sinyangwe try to depict this quest for identity in their literature through concepts such as place and displacement, home and Otherness. All these elements are very important in the making on the identity of people. So through their writings they attempt to depict these notions and their effect on the postcolonial subjects.

6.6 Summary

This unit has looked at the question of identity in postcolonial societies. It has presented unique perspectives on how characters like Medza in *Mission to Kala* and Wiza in *Quills of Desire* were beset by a unique set of conditions in their postcolonial societies, creating an identity crisis reflective of the hybrid society they existed in. The next unit investigates feminism and gender issues in African postcolonial literature.

6.7 Reflection

It is said in one cliché that "change is the only constant in life." This change is occurring so fast that the past is becoming irrelevant. With the onslaught of technology and the advent of social media and other such platforms, what do you think is the best way to determine one's identity?

6.8 Activity

1. From your reading of the above sections, compare and contrast the role of parents in the upbringing of their children in *Mission to Kala* and *Quills of Desire* respectively.

2. The use of irony to depict realism is central in both *Quills of Desire* and *Mission to Kala*. Show to what extent both Binwell Sinyangwe and Mongo Beti use this literary trend in their novels to achieve their desired aims respectively.

3. Apply any of the critical approaches to literature from the knowledge you acquired in Year Two of your program to both *Mission to Kala* and *Quills of Desire* to determine their validity.

UNIT 7: FEMINISM AND GENDER ISSUES IN…

7.1 Introduction

This unit is a continuation with our exploration of African trends and thematic concerns in selected novels. In particular, we shall specifically deal with feminism and gender issues as espoused in two texts, namely Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. Feminism, as we must have garnered from our previous experience so far, is a topic which in itself almost always divides opinion, in my opinion! (pun intended). In this spirit, it is hoped that the perspectives I shall offer herein will spur more deliberations on the matter. What is it that Wole Soyinka (1967: 1) mentions in his classic play *Kongi's Harvest* about "Ism to ism for ism is ism"? Feminism? Let us begin our deliberations on this score with the great poet's lament: "…oh there's a harvest of words…" Indeed.

7.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you are expected to

- Identify common literary trends used in the selected novels and techniques of the African authors
- Explore the relationships and make comparisons and evaluations of relevant material from the texts being studied with other literary works and life in general
- Exhibit competence in examining the thematic concerns portrayed in the selected classic African novels
- Appreciate and critically assess a variety of African literature

7.3 The Portrayal of Women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

What is it that Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Ghandi and Chinua Achebe had in common? If your answer to this simple, yet profound question is that "They were all human", then you are probably a very intelligent student (and I am not even joking!) To understand your answer to the above question, let us begin our discourse with some considerations of what has made these political and literary scholars to be considered 'great' and/or as 'giants among men'. Take a look at the following quotes:

Reflection:

"Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed." Abraham Lincoln

"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." –
Nelson Mandela

As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world – that is the myth of the atomic age – as in being able to remake ourselves." –
Mahatma Gandhi

"Once you allow yourself to identify with the people in a story, then you might begin to see yourself in that story even if on the surface it's far removed from your situation. This is what I try to tell my students: this is one great thing that literature can do - it can make us identify with situations and people far away." –
Chinua Achebe
(Quoted at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/)

From your consideration of the above quotes, have you now determined why your answer to the earlier question on the 'greatness' of these men is very valid? **Exactly**: all these men, regardless of other mitigating factors such as time, race, culture, religion etc., are at the very core all concerned with the betterment of 'humanity', which makes them very 'human[e]' indeed and highly exceptional in their various fields of calling, I daresay.

If, on the other hand, you somehow do not agree with my interpretation above, because for some reason or other you feel my choice of archetypes are "*all men*" and exclude the contribution of gallant women (like for instance, Oprah Winfrey, Mariama Ba, Michelle Obama or even Virginia Woolf with her classic essay *A Room of One's Own*) to humanity, and you see this as being blatant sexism on my part; then you are also right! And in my defence, allow me to take you back to the introduction section where I made myself very clear that this topic always divides opinion. And if you are already talking and feeling like this just in the initial stages of our discussion, then we have achieved the first objective I set out in the preamble: that of spurring more deliberations on this sensitive topic. Worse, if you have even accused me of 'sex[ism]' already, then indeed the great poet Wole Soyinka (1967: 1) is a genius in his observation "Of isms and isms on absolute-ism…oh there's a harvest of words" already. Welcome to third year literature, ladies and gentlemen.

From my 'all-embracing' salutation above, I hope you begin to lose some of the misgivings you may have started to form about me. Let us now get into the nitty-gritty of our topic, however, which is the portrayal of women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. To be sure, a lot has been said and written on this score already, with opinion as usual being divided. Some have said the novel praises masculinity and portrays women as being inferior and weak compared to men, while others have even called the author a downright sexist. From a cursory glance at the text, it is not difficult to see why some people can arrive at such a conclusion. Let us consider some of the aspects from which they could have drawn their criticism in the text.

Firstly, Okonkwo's relationship with his father, Unoka. Okwonko is portrayed as a dynamic protagonist, who has immense belief in success and who resents failure, while Unoka had always been a failure and a debtor. Okonkwo is a self-made man who has risen above his father's disreputable life to achieve success and power in his village. "He had no patience with his father." In the text, his father, Unoka is portrayed as a lazy man who enjoyed his life and was happiest when he played on his flute. To this effect, one of Okonkwo's friends had called his father '*agbala*', a term in the text which means 'woman', or as in this case, it denotes a man without titles, since women had no titles. Okwonko's fear of failure is thus deeply ingrained in him and throughout the novel, he fears his father's deeds coming back to him.

Another instance where women are portrayed in less favorable light is when we consider that the division of gender roles was seen in the classification of crops into women's and men's, with yam—the king of crops—signifying manliness, while crops likes beans, cassava and millet were left for the women.

Worse, in terms of considering the 'greatness' of a man, the prominence given to a man's masculinity is to be noted in the text through things like how many women a man married showed that man's strength of arm—that is, providence. From an early age, boys are forced to emulate the behavior of their fathers. The culture of the village is such that the man is the provider of the family, and so he needs to be tough, hardy and resourceful. Control over the women folk is also an essential characteristic of a masculine man because "no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man." Therefore, jokes are made at women's expense and reveal how easily it is for wife-beating to be condoned in a society where women are inferior to men. In fact, Okonkwo himself followed this to the letter because he would inflict a beating on his wives at the slightest hint of provocation. (Consider how he beat his youngest wife, Ojiugo during the Week of Peace, and also Ekwefi for 'killing' the banana tree).

Let us round up our examples of how women are portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* with that of the incident where Uzowulu had taken his wife to appear before the *egwugwus*, the epitome of power in the Igbo society comprising all men—with Okonkwo being one of them. Critics have argued that the dismissive attitude one of the elders shows for a trial of this kind reveals the lack of power and respect that women had in this society. Not only does the woman's brother speak for her, but she has no say in the verdict handed to her husband. Whether or not she wants to return is overlooked by the larger economic reason for her return. Her husband's hand is slapped for being so violent but other than that he is not punished for his crime, simply fined.

The novel is rife with many other examples one can pick from and argue for or against women, whichever the case may be. However, let us put things in perspective with the wider aim of this course, which if may remind you, is 'To acquaint students with a variety of African fiction and cultural identity with special emphasis on the role of the writer in presenting historicity.'

Stop and Think:

"Stories serve the purpose of consolidating whatever gains people or their leaders have made or imagine they have made in their existing journey through the world."—

Chinua Achebe

In the profound essay, 'The Novelist as a Teacher', Achebe describes an interesting dynamic between author, text, and reader that is hard to define. The gist of the article, however, bodes well with his role as a "middleman" in relaying the message to his readers, but how the reader "relates" the text is entirely something different. Such is the complexity facing us today, where the same text can have a variety of interpretations depending on a variety of factors. But stripped down to its essentials, Achebe makes the point that his role is not to be responsible for the reader's interpretation of his text, his role is to simply 'tell it as it is.' In his own words, he indicated that "Once a novel gets going and I know it is viable, I don't then worry about plot or themes. These things will come in almost automatically because the characters are now pulling the story" (Read more at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/chinua_achebe).

To use the words of his argument in the foregoing quote, the portrayal of women in the text need not raise so much of a debate, whichever way you look at it. For, in the strictest sense, Achebe was simply trying to depict how women were treated in Igbo culture once upon a time. His duty is to bring the story. It is not for us to judge whether his portrayal was sexist or not, for the truth is that once upon a time in Nigerian Igbo society, 'that was how women were treated.'

Another angle to consider is that while it offers a certain perspective on colonial history, *Things Fall Apart* is not a strictly historical novel. Historical novels, by definition, fictionalize historic events and bring them to life with invented details, characters, dialogue, etc. And while *Things Fall Apart* does situate itself within a specific historical *context* (Nigeria at the moment of colonization), it does not attempt to recreate actual events or re-characterize real historical figures. In other words, while it is engaged with the historical theme of colonialism in Nigeria and Igbo culture, it is wholly fiction, and should be understood and taught as such. In addition, it is very important to keep in mind the historicity of the novel itself: the book is set in the 1890s, but was first published in 1958, 2 years before Nigeria was granted full independence from British rule. This means that we are bringing a postcolonial sensibility and perspective to the text and should bear in mind the many ways in which Nigerian politics, culture and attitudes have changed in the last 50 years (**Hint:** Compare this with Achebe's statement in the dialogue box above). So the novel is not wholly historical, nor wholly contemporary, as much as it can help us learn about both the past and understand themes of value to the present. (Bourenane, *Teaching Things Fall Apart in Wisconsin: A Resource Guide for Educators*).

It is clear already from Achebe's essay in 'The Novelist as a Teacher' that the expectations of author and reader do not always line up. So to what extent it is the readers' responsibility to derive meaning from a text is entirely another subject of debate, since people react differently to stimuli. However, on the subject of how women are treated in *Things Fall Apart*, the spectrum of debate is very wide indeed. We can discuss in a number of ways on this issue, and never reach a conclusion. For instance, on the

examples highlighted above, let's take for example the case of Uzowulu and his wife before the *egwugwus* where critics have argued that it showed that women had no voice since it was Mgbafo's brother who pleaded her case against her abusive husband. Granted, that was probably the way of things in the Igbo culture in those days, and Achebe simply had to stick to presenting it as it was. But a closer look at this incident can show that Achebe was actually 'defending' and 'speaking' for the women. How? You may ask.

Well, consider this: Culturally, since it was considered unacceptable for women to voice out their opinions on things (and historically, this culture was not unique to Africa only), Achebe realistically depicted a man (Mgbafo's brother) defending his sister from abuse. Further, the ruling itself that was given by the *egwugwus* afterwards was indicative of the fact that 'abuse' of women in the society was not the norm, despite it being prevalent. Look at the words uttered by the most senior *egwugwu*: "Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and *beg* your wife to return to you. *It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman*." (**Hint:** Compare this with Niam's case in Beti's *Mission to Kala*). Ladies and gentleman, I propose, this is a landmark ruling in every sense of the word! Firstly, the very fact that the ruling is coming from the highest authority in the land, the *egwugwu*, lends it such weight. Secondly, it addresses the 'misconception' held by so many men at that time (including, albeit ironically, Okonkwo who was an *egwugwu* himself) that beating women would make them 'men' able to control their wives. Look at the words uttered by the two elders just after the ruling was passed, which critics have rightly pointed out as being dismissive of women:

> *'I don't know why such a trifle should come before the egwugwu,' said one elder to another.*
>
> *'Don't you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision,' replied the other.*

I will contend that the above anecdote is reflective of Achebe's genius as writer in that he portrays that this kind of behaviour was so rampant that people took it for granted that beating women was a normal thing and by implication, could be resolved easily away from the public glare (just like when Okonkwo beat his wives in the confines of his compound, and the neighbours and his other wives only intervened with an occasional 'that is enough'). To the two elders in question above, therefore, such a case did not warrant coming before the *egwugwu*. But Achebe uses the stubbornness of Uzowulu to drag the issue into public glare, in essence acting as a reporter to the world of the abuses women suffered silently under what was considered as 'culture', while he also acts a mouthpiece for the women through the landmark ruling given by the highest cultural court (or is it constitutional court?—the *egwugwu*.

The ruling by the *egwugwu*, is in fact, double entendre: at first glance, it castigates Ozuwulu for his heavy handed manner of behaviour towards his wife. Secondly, it can be taken as a censure of Okonkwo's behaviour towards his own wives too, who lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper (especially the youngest wife, Ojiugo). Thirdly, and probably more appropriately, this incident proved that there were limits with regards to just how much men could take advantage of the culture to subjugate women. Lastly, to the wider audience, the reader, the fact that you have picked on this incident and reacted to it however way shows that indeed, diversity (of opinion) is the spice of life. As one great person said:

"The world is big. Some people are unable to comprehend that simple fact. They want the world on their own terms, it's peoples just like them and their friends, it's places like the manicured little patch on which they live. But this is a foolish and blind wish. Diversity is not an abnormality but the very reality of our planet. The human world manifests the same reality and will not seek our permission to celebrate itself in the magnificence of its endless varieties. Civility is a sensible attribute in this kind of world we have; narrowness of heart and mind is not."

Get that quote above, right! If you tend to readily agree with me simply because I have not mentioned the gender of the person, then you may be guilty of "Irrationalism." You see, the trouble with these "isms" right? Simply because I mention or do not mention the identity of the person above does not take away from their fundamental insight on life. As Mahatma Ghandi once put it:

Food for Thought:

"All compromise is based on give and take, but there can be no give and take on fundamentals. Any compromise on mere fundamentals is a surrender. For it is all give and no take." –

Qtd at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/mahatma_gandhi

That is exactly what Achebe makes a point of through his literature; that depicting situations, (even though through fiction) as they were should not limit our perspectives into a narrow debate on the wider goal of life—to be better in every facet. That is the fundamental of literature—which *Things FallApart* has proved to be time and again—and the hallmark of a great writer—which Achebe has demonstrated to be!!! Whether you agree with me or not, let us just end this section by agreeing to disagree. That is life.

7.4 The Portrayal of Women in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*: A Case of Cultural Cul-de-sac?

As already alluded to in earlier sections of this course, themes of subalternity of the African female subject and of her oppression by traditional and patriarchal ethos run through a number of works by African authors, among these being Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* (1958). A novel set in the Cameroon Republic in the late 1950s before it gained independence, Beti depicts the condition of traditional African women who seem to be caught in a cultural cul-de-sac.

Food for Thought:

"***The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all this great diversity - that it's this or maybe that - you have just one large statement; it is this.***"

Chinua Achebe

Qtd at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/chinua_achebe

Using the scholar Ramonu Sanusi (2011) insightful article on the same issue as a guide, let us now examine the portrayal of women in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. From the onset, female characters referred to in this text are confronted with traditional attitudes and patriarchal mores in their societies which are vehemently denounced by Beti. Testament to this is the central plot of the story itself, which is Medza's mission to kala to fetch his cousin Niam's decamped wife. In the opening stages of the novel, Beti cleverly sets the stage with regards to how and why Niam's wife ran away from her matrimonial home. Through a flashback, we learn how deeply imbedded traditional customs are in the psyche of the native inhabitants with regards to issues of the treatment of women, especially married ones. For instance, Medza learns through his aunt Amou how Niam used to treat his wife and the effect her departure had on him:

> But, as Aunt Amou told me, when she actually did disappear, Niam's home-life became chaotic. He got in a frightful state. What was worse, said aunt Amou, he was a coward.
>
> "Fancy the way he treated her, the stupid brute! No better than a dog. She worked hard enough, too. Worse than a dog, really, because a dog – a bitch, anyway – can always have litters, but she never had a child. Niam thought that gave him the

> right to insult and maltreat her all her day long. *Men*! Stupid, pretentious, conceited beasts –" (Beti, 1958: 7)

The above quote is most appropriate in all intents and purposes for our discussion, because it encapsulates everything that concerns 'stereotypes' (Refer to the quote of Achebe in the dialogue box above). By way of definition, the online American dictionary Merriam Webster (2018) defines a stereotype as "something conforming to a fixed or general pattern especially: a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment." This definition of a stereotype, applied to the situation above, is twofold. Let me start with the first implication:

The mention of Niam's wife being a hard worker is in tandem with the first part of our definition of a stereotype, since it was (and still is, actually) typical of the role women play in the society as shown in the text, from running household chores to their exertions in the field, matching or even besting their men (as in the case of Niam, who is said to be quite lazy). Thus, this is stereotypical of what was expected from the women in such traditional societies (**Hint:** compare this score with *Things Fall Apart* and *Song of Lawino*).

The second part of the stereotyping has to do with Niam's wife being barren; here, the words of Aunt Amou that "Niam thought that gave him the right to insult and maltreat her all her day long" depict a long held traditional belief with regards to the treatment of a barren woman in this very traditional society. In fact, the text soon gives more information on this aspect to back up Niam's actions. For instance, Medza notes with a curious kind of amusement that:

> My mother's prejudice against Niam's wife, however, was chiefly due to the fact that, after years of marriage, the woman for some inscrutable reason had still failed to produce a child. It is the usual thing among our people for all childless wives to suffer a curious kind of communal anathema, the origins of which must be sought in the spiritual beliefs of our Bantu ancestors. Once a married woman has had a child, all her caprices and infidelities are excused. But you know all about that. (Beti, 1958: 7)

From the foregoing quote, it becomes very, very apparent that traditional beliefs and practices weighed heavily against the women, particularly those who were considered barren. According to the text, the pervasion of this cultural atrocity was so insidious it did not matter who perpetrated it, whether men (like Niam) or women (Medza's mother), as it involved the entire community (i.e. communal anathema above). Beti's intelligence as a writer who understands such profound phenomena is brought to the fore in light-hearted fashion by his allusion to our Bantu ancestors as the origin of this cultural cul-de-sac!

Ladies and gentleman, this is where history meets fiction, and the role of the writer in presenting historicity was never more conspicuous as presented here by the genius, Mongo Beti.

Let us end our dissection of stereotypes with a note on the attitude of Aunt Amou towards Niam's treatment of his wife. The fact that she calls Niam 'a coward' could be seen as the author's way of disapproving this longstanding traditional abuse of women at the hands of their husbands. What is more, Beti uses this incident of matrimonial difficulty to weave the plot of his entire novel; like the mythical evil eye of the Dark Lord, Sauron in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Ring Trilogy*, our gaze is also squarely and firmly fixed on the ultimate resolution of the plot with regards to Medza's mission to kala, which I will come to very shortly.

But for now, let me direct your attention back to the former quote above which ended with Aunt Amou's seemingly innocuous words of "*Men*! Stupid, pretentious, conceited beasts –." By generalizing her contempt of the behaviour of Niam to "all men", Aunt Amou is in essence stereotyping men, and by extension, the author here again shows his tacit understanding of human nature and behaviour on such phenomena (cf. with Achebe's definition of a stereotype above). This oversimplification of the problem at hand is symptomatic of human behaviour, and the author makes this observation through Medza who notes that "I am convinced today that Aunt Amou had a personal obsession about all this because she had never managed to conceive herself…" (p. 7). Need I say more?!

Let us now come back to our main discussion, which is the portrayal of women in Beti's *Mission to Kala*. From the foregoing excursion into the nuances that informed this typical traditional society, Beti was revolutionary in his views with regards to how the women in the novel (epitomised by Niam's wife) attempted to free themselves from the yoke of centuries of traditional and patriarchal ethos. Consider the following quote by Mahatma Gandhi with regards to the issue of oppression:

Reflection:

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

Qtd at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/mahatma_gandhi

The foregoing quote is appropriate. It plumbs most deeply to grasp that which is usually considered only on the surface: the gamut of oppression! Let us see how this fits into our discussion.

In the case of Niam's wife, the initial part of "First they ignore you…" is very evident in that whilst she was still with her 'excuse of a husband' Niam, no one bothered to consider her plight, probably because as already alluded to, it was a very prejudiced society in terms of the predicament of barren women. The irony, however, is that once she decided to take action by running away and vowing to never return to her abusive husband (which was very highly unusual, as the text reveals), only then did the society become fully involved in the matter. In fact, Medza himself makes this point in his unsuccessful attempt not to undertake the mission:

> "You've made it quite clear, and I accept the fact, that this woman was our common possession—though one would hardly have guessed it while she was among us—and that the affair is therefore the concern of our tribe" (Beti, 1958: 13).

Going forward, the second part of the quote which is "then they laugh at you" is implied in the earlier quote where Medza's mother showed how prejudiced she was against Niam's wife and the mention of "communal anathema". The implication of the community ridiculing her because she could not bear children is even equated to something that originated from antiquity in Bantu ancestry!

Let me bring out the next part, which is "then they fight you." In the case of Niam's wife, the community, and by extension, the entire tribe becomes involved in the attempts to bring her back due to very extraordinary circumstances indeed. Firstly, we learn of the fact that Niam's wife was committing adultery. But among these people, adultery was not really considered with the heavy puritanical implications as in the West. In fact, adultery itself was prevalent in this society, but only to the extent that it is practiced by members of the same tribe or those who were considered to be 'socially' close:

> …The seriousness with which any adultery is regarded is in exact proportion to the physical or social 'distance' between the two tribes –those, that is, of the cuckolded husband and the intrusive lover respectively. For a woman to grant her favours to a man from a neighbouring tribe is bad enough; if she goes with some rootless stranger she is, in all intents and purposes, deliberately giving the most deadly insult possible to her own kin. (Beti, 1958: 7)

Thus, judging from the foregoing quote, Niam's wife had committed the unpardonable sin of giving her favours to a man who was considered a 'stranger' among this tightly-knit community. Therefore, they declared a cultural crusade of Homeric proportions to bring her back, a comical crusade which has nevertheless drawn parallels to Homer's epic depiction of the Trojan War in *The Iliad*.

To round off the quote by Mahatma Ghandi above, let us now consider the last part of it, which is "then you win." To beg your indulgence, I will call it a 'win' in favour of

Niam's wife here—Period! In the end, she won the battle, or is it the crusade, in my opinion. Hold on, time out!! Which book was I reading, you quickly ask. Because anyone with a cursory understanding of the text knows that in the end, Niam's wife was forced to go back to her husband, regardless of her protests against her abusive treatment at the hands of her husband and the society, right? So, how then, can anyone in their right mind or senses even slightly suggest that she could have won this battle in the end???

Well, sorry to disappoint you, or more appropriately, to burst your drum just as Daodu did in that famous play of Wole Soyinka, *Kongi's Harvest* (1967: 60), leaving his bewildered father to ask, "Efun!" (Translated as: are you out of your senses!). Or perhaps more aptly, Oba Danlola's summation of his nephew's action as follows:

> I know the drums were silenced long before you, but you have split
> The gut of our make-believe. Suddenly the world has run amok and
> Left you alone and sane behind. (Soyinka, 1967: 61)

Likewise, I never did claim to be normal in the first place. In my opinion, **Literature is the stuff of above normal people, I propose, who see the world as it is, but endeavour to seek a better and creative way of addressing the injustices therein through their art!!!** Let me prove how this is so just now:

Firstly, the fact that from the title itself, Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* hinges on the recovery of Niam's wife is triumph enough for her and the countless women in very similar positions in that the author brought to light an aspect of the culture which could have otherwise been swept under the carpet of tradition and patriarchal ethos. In linking the plot of the story to the oppression of Niam's wife and her eventual departure, followed by the subsequent efforts to bring her back, the reader is always forcefully made aware of the injustice women like Niam's wife were forced to endure and experience.

Even more, some critics have argued the fact that Niam's wife remains nameless throughout and is referred to only by her husband's name (Mrs who, somebody?) is indicative of how tradition has always put women in a subaltern condition. (**Hint:** Compare with Nwoye's mother in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). True. But consider here that the author's role is not to placate the reader or his audience through writing that will be considered "politically or morally correct." No. The author's role is to present the story as it was (historicity), in a manner that is true in all intents and purposes to its authenticity. The fact is that historically, women were considered a little less than men and thus abuses against them were ingrained in tradition and encouraged by centuries of cultural hegemony (Cf. Read Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*). As Chinua Achebe aptly put it, "When a tradition gathers enough strength to go on for centuries, you don't just

turn it off one day" (Quoted at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/chinua_achebe). It takes one step at a time to

Hence, Niam's wife, though nameless, was through her rebellious actions probably the best forerunner to today's women movements (**Hint:** Compare with the contemporary #metoo campaign by women who have suffered abuse hitherto silently until one) and the gains that women have achieved in this regard to redress centuries of cultural and patriarchal hegemony. Consider the following observation made by that great man, Abraham Lincoln:

Reflection:

"It has so happened in all ages of the world that some have labored, and others have, without labor, enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits."

Abraham Lincoln

Quoted at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/abraham_lincoln

To up the ante, the very fact Niam's wife remains nameless is in itself symbolic of the revolution that awaits all societies where abuses of women still remain a reality. It just takes one person, and then boom! Like Daodu who suddenly moved with decision by grabbing the ceremonial whisk and breaking the royal drum which had stood for centuries, disrupting the make-believe world of the Oba in the process, Beti uses the same literary technique by using a nameless woman to flagrantly go against long standing traditional beliefs and patriarchal ethos, confounding the make-believe world of chaps like Niam in the process. As Abraham Lincoln aptly concludes for us, "Don't worry when you are not recognized, but strive to be worthy of recognition" (Quoted at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/abraham_lincoln).

Thus, even though Niam's wife is forced to go back to her husband in the end, an aspect which in itself denotes the cultural cul-de-sac which has stood for centuries against women, the fact that she at least made an effort to 'free' herself speaks volumes of the paradigmatic shift in the way women would be treated in successive generations and places Mongo Beti at the vanguard of such revolutionary writers. As her father aptly noted in the text when approached by Niam's agents to ask for her to return (p.9): 'My daughter,' he declared, 'is quite old enough to know what she wants – and more to the point, what she *doesn't* want.' Need I say more???

7.5 Conclusion

Admittedly, women today are treated and regarded much better by their counterparts, the men compared to may be a century ago. However, despite the significant strides taken in this regard, differences still (and will) exist between the genders. This should not be taken as an affront or an abnormality, as Achebe mentioned in a dialogue box above, but rather embraced as a function of life. What should not be embraced are the rather extreme views and abuses of one sex by the other—that should be the exception!

7.6 Summary

This unit has highlighted the apparent domination and subordination of the female subjects inherent in most traditional African societies since colonial times, as well as the perceived prejudices or biases and misconceptions thereof. It has attempted to present a unique perspective in defence of the role of the author, while maintaining a balanced view of such phenomena which almost always divides opinions between the genders. The last part of this module is a selection of the critical essays written by the great Chinua Achebe to consolidate your understanding of pertinent issues raised in this course. Till our next meeting, adios!!!

7.7 Reflection

Do you think issues of gender discrimination are no longer as applicable or as prevalent today in the modern world compared to maybe 60 years ago? Why do you say so?

7.8 Activity

1. From your reading of the above unit, outline the similarities and differences in the way Achebe and Beti portray women in their texts.
2. Do you agree with the perspectives given above with regards the portrayal of women vis-à-vis gender issues in both highlighted texts? Give reasons why you agree or why you do not agree.
3. Compare and contrast the theme of gender inequality portrayed in either *Mission to Kala* or *Things Fall Apart* to any other African text you have read in this course.
4. Discuss the role of the writer / author in addressing issues that are pertinent to society.

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Appendix 1: THE TRUTH OF FICTION- By CHINUA ACHEBE

One question one should ask himself is; Are there such things as good and bad fictions? In Chinua Achebe's essay 'The Truth of Fiction' (1978), he writes, 'The greatest virtue of literary fiction is that it is able, by engaging our imaginations, to lead us to discovery and recognitions by an unexpected and instructive route. It helps us locate again the line between the heroic and the cowardly when it seems must shadowy and elusive, and it does this by forcing us to encounter the heroic and cowardly psyche. The life of the imagination is a vital element of our total nature. If we starve it or pollute it, the quality of our life is depressed or soiled. Belief in superior and inferior race; belief that some people who live across our frontiers or speak a different language from ourselves are the cause of all the trouble in the world, or that our own particular group or class or caste has a right to certain things which are denied to others; the belief that men are superior to women, and so on. All are functions generated by the imagination.

Chinua Achebe writes that everyone creates fiction for themselves in order to make our worlds livable. By 'Fictions' he means the story that make sense of things and connect the dots of life. Some of these fictions are beneficent and some are malignant. Achebe is saying that whether these fictions are true or false, good or evil, they have power because they shape the way we see the world. The power to make a story that others will live in is a great power, which begs the question: How can people use their power well? .....With love and with humanity.

Now consider the next appendix carefully:

Appendix 2: "AN IMAGE OF AFRICA: RACISM IN CONRAD'S 'HEART OF DARKNESS" - By CHINUA ACHEBE

Massachusetts Review. 18. 1977. Rpt. in *Heart of Darkness, An Authoritative Text, background and Sources Criticism*. 1961. 3rd ed. Ed. Robert Kimbrough, London: W. W Norton and Co., 1988, pp.251-261

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. "Oh well," I heard him say finally, behind me: "I guess I have to take your course to find out." A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high school children in Yonkers, New York, who -- bless their teacher -- had just read *ThingsFall Apart*. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them. But only, I hope, at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person being fully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor Roper, also pronounce that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful inexperience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire -- one might indeed say the need -- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new; which should relieve us all of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the wish nor the competence to embark on the exercise with the tools of the social and biological sciences but more simply in the manner of a novelist responding to one famous book of European fiction: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just referred to. Of course there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class -- permanent literature -- read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language." I will return to this critical opinion in due course because it may seriously modify my earlier suppositions about who may or may not be guilty in some of the matters I will now raise.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

These suggestive echoes comprise Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration his method amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. We can inspect samples of this on pages 36 and 37 of the present edition: a) it was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention and b) The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. Of course there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of inscrutable, for example, you might have unspeakable, even plain mysterious, etc., etc.

The eagle-eyed English critic F. R. Leavis drew attention long ago to Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery." That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw; for it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such under-hand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well -- one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in Heart of Darkness are, however, about people. I must crave the indulgence of my reader to quote almost a whole page from about the middle of the stop/when representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa.

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us -- who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign -- and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there -- there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were .... No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it -- this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you, was just the thought of their humanity -- like yours -- the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you -- you so remote from the night of first ages -- could comprehend.

Herein lies the meaning of Heart of Darkness and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity -- like yours .... Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity -- and he had filed his teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

"Fine fellows -- cannibals --in their place," he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to like a peep into the heart of darkness.

Before the story likes us into the Congo basin proper we are given this nice little vignette as an example of things in their place:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks -- these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and hue as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.

Towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little liberty) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent ....She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning .... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming."... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subfile ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds." They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

"Catch 'im," he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth -- "catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them? "Eat 'im!" he said curtly. . . .

The other occasion was the famous announcement:"Mistah Kurtz -- he dead."

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway" what better or more appropriate finis could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence -- a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever.

Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were dying slowly -- it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which has often been quoted Schweitzer says: "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother." And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberene, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word brother however qualified; the farthest he would go was kinship. When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory -- like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "... the thought of their humanity -- like yours .... Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point.Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor.Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments:

The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across tile water to bar the way for our return.

Its exploration of the minds of the European characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last fifty years. His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!

Conrad was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms. . . .

As though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession. As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in A Personal Record what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman" and describes him in the following manner:

"(his) calves exposed to the public gaze . . . dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory. . . . The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men. . . illumined his face. . . and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth. . . his white calves twinkled sturdily."

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In his lengthy book Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-cutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's anti-semitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language." And why it is today the most commonly prescribed novel in twentiethcentury literature courses in English Departments of American universities.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have aid so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveler's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even off man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

Gaugin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze. . . The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. The event Frank Willett is referring to marks the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art, which had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's lnternational Association for the Civilization of Central Africa.

Travelers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad with xenophobia, can be astonishing blind. Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travelers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled Description of the World his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. But there were at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He said nothing about the art of printing, unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever the reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly 4,000 miles long and already more than 1,000 years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon! Indeed travelers can be blind.

As I said earlier Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray -- a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people -- not angels, but not rudimentary souls either -- just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in its schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was, in any case, something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word willful a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

The Christian Science Monitor, a paper more enlightened than most, once carried an interesting article written by its Education Editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in America, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadrilingual phenomenon in Malaysia, and so on. And all this while the article speaks unequivocally about language. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.

I believe that the introduction of dialects which is technically erroneous in the context is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects!

In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress. Look at the phrase native language in the Science Monitor excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer means something else -- something appropriate to the sounds Indians and Africans make!

Although the work of redressing which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin. Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.

Appendix 3: THE NOVELIST AS TEACHER - BY CHINUA ACHEBE

WRITING OF THE KIND I DO is relatively new in my part of the world and it is too soon to try and describe in detail the complex of relationships between us and our readers. However, I think I can safely deal with one aspect of these relationships which is rarely mentioned. Because of our largely European education our writers may be pardoned if they begin by thinking that the relationship between European writers and their audience will automatically reproduce itself in Africa. We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society—wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything.

All that is well known, which is why some of us seem too eager for our society to treat us with the same hostility or even behave as though it already does. But I am not interested now in what writers expect of society; that is generally contained in their books, or should be. What is not so well documented is what society expects of its writers.

I am assuming, of course, that our writer and his society live in the same place. I realize that a lot has been made of the allegation that African writers have to write for European and American readers because African readers where they exist at all are only interested in reading textbooks. I don't know if African writers always have a foreign audience in mind. What I do know is that they don't have to. At least I know that I don't have to. Last year the pattern of sales of *Things Fall Apart* in the cheap paperback edition was as follows: about 800 copies in Britain; 20,000 in Nigeria; and about 2,500 in all other places. The same pattern was true also of *No Longer at Ease*.

Most of my readers are young. They are either in school or college or have only recently left. And many of them look to me as a kind of teacher. Only the other day I received this letter from Northern Nigeria:

> Dear C. Achebe, I do not usually write to authors, no matter how interesting their work is, but I feel I must tell you how much I enjoyed your editions of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. I look forward to reading your new edition *Arrow of God*. Your novels serve as advice to us young. I trust that you will continue to produce as many of this type of books. With friendly greetings and best wishes.
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> I. BUBA YERO MAFINDI

> It is quite clear what this particular reader expects of me. Nor is there much doubt about another reader in Ghana who wrote me a rather pathetic letter to say that I had neglected to include questions and answers at the end of Things Fall Apart and could I make these

available to him to ensure his success at next year's school certificate examination. This is what I would call in Nigerian pidgin "a how-for-do" reader and I hope there are not very many like him. But also in Ghana I met a young woman teacher who immediately took me to task for not making the hero of my *No Longer at Ease* marry the girl he is in love with. I made the kind of vague noises I usually make whenever a wise critic comes along to tell me I should have written a different book to the one I wrote. But my woman teacher was not going to be shaken off so easily. She was in deadly earnest. Did I know, she said, that there were many women in the kind of situation I had described and that I could have served them well if I had shown that it was possible to find one man with enough guts to go against custom?

I don't agree, of course. But this young woman spoke with so much feeling that I couldn't help being a little uneasy at the accusation (for it was indeed a serious accusation) that I had squandered a rare opportunity for education on a whimsical and frivolous exercise. It is important to say at this point that no self-respecting writer will take dictation from his audience. He must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be. But I am for choosing my cause very carefully. Why should I start waging war as a Nigerian newspaper editor was doing the other day on the "soulless efficiency" of Europe's industrial and technological civilization when the very thing my society needs may well be a little technical efficiency?

My thinking on the peculiar needs of different societies was sharpened when not long ago I heard an English pop song which I think was entitled *"I Ain't Gonna Wash for a Week;"* At first I wondered why it should occur to anyone to take such a vow when there were so many much more worthwhile resolutions to make. But later it dawned on me that this singer belonged to the same culture which in an earlier age of self-satisfaction had blasphemed and said that cleanliness was next to godliness. So I saw him in a new light —as a kind of divine administrator of vengeance. I make bold to say, however, that his particular offices would not be required in my society because we did not commit the sin of turning hygiene into a god.

Needless to say, we do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name. If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance—for whatever reason—of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us.

Let me give one or two examples of the result of the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races. I remember the shock felt by Christians of my father's generation in my village in the early 1940s when for the first time the local girls' school performed Nigerian dances at the anniversary of the coming of the gospel. Hitherto they had always put on something Christian and civilized which I believe was

called the Maypole dance. In those days—when I was growing up—I also remember that it was only the poor benighted heathen who had any use for our local handicraft, e.g., our pottery. Christians and the well-to-do (and they were usually the same people) displayed their tins and other metal-ware. We never carried water pots to the stream. I had a small cylindrical biscuit-tin suitable to my years while the older members of our household carried four-gallon kerosene tins.

Today, things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry.

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the "African personality"; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is, after all—as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his African Image—the sensitive point of his community. The Ghanaian professor of philosophy, William Abraham, puts it this way:

> Just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa; why should African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves recognize as genuine?

I for one would not wish to be excused, 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. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive. In a recent anthology a Hausa folk tale, having recounted the usual fabulous incidents, ends with these words:

> They all came and they lived happily together. He had several sons and daughters who grew up and helped in raising the standard of education of the country.

As I said elsewhere, if you consider this ending a naive anti-climax then you cannot know very much about Africa.

Leeds University, 1965

First published in *The New Statesman*, London, January 29,1965; subsequently in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1975.