How Achebe Included the African People in the Story of Imperialism

- A Comparison of *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*

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Introduction

Heart of Darkness (1902) by Joseph Conrad was written at the turn of the 19th century when the atrocities of Belgian colonialism under the rule of Leopold II had begun to be revealed to the world. In his novel, Conrad describes the journey of his main character Marlow who travels along the Congo River at the end of the 19th century. The novel has been greatly commended and is likely to be the most reprinted short novel in English (Hochschild 142). One reason for its popularity is, as Adam Hochschild expresses it, because it "remains the greatest portrait in fiction of Europeans in the scramble of Africa" (147). According to Watts, another reason for its popularity is because it has been said to be ahead of its time in the sense that it anticipates many 20th century preoccupations (45). *Heart of Darkness* is today part of the British literary canon.

Despite the accolades, one problem with *Heart of Darkness* is that it expresses implicit racist views of Africa and its people ("An Image of Africa"), which were rather common at the time when the novel was written (Hochschild 147). After the independence of the African colonies, voices from countries around the continent started to be heard. Works like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* began to become reinterpreted. In the novel, colonialism is portrayed from a European perspective. The significance of this perspective and the racist elements it implies became of interest within the theory of postcolonialism.

As a response and critique of *Heart of Darkness,* Chinua Achebe published his debut novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Achebe was one of the first Africans to publish a novel receiving international acclaim that looks at Africa from an African person's perspective. With the novel he also contributed to the literary sphere of postcolonial literature. With the increasing interest in postcolonial theory, many critics have analysed Conrad's novel from a postcolonial perspective, for instance Abdelrahman, Abiaziem Okafor, Mwikisa and Maier-Katkin.

Achebe uses postcolonial theory to criticise the novel in his lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's '*Heart of Darkness*'." "An Image of Africa" is one of the most famous critiques of *Heart of Darkness,* where Achebe goes as far as to condemn Conrad as a "bloody racist." Achebe comments further on *Heart of Darkness* in an interview and tells the listener that it was when he studied the novel at university level that he realised its racist nature because he was one of the savages in Conrad's novel jumping up and down on the beach, an image that he as an African could not relate to (Achebe, youtube.com).

In the first section of this essay, I will give a short introduction to colonialism. I will also give a short introduction to the theory of postcolonialism where I will present the terms

that I will use in the analysis of the works. The analysis consists of three different sections. In the first section I will look at how the novels' attitudes towards colonialism are portrayed. In the second section I will analyse how the concept of 'othering' can be used to develop an understanding of the novels. Finally, I will investigate the difference between the native characters' ability to speak in *Heart of Darkness* and in *Things Fall Apart*. In each section, I will first provide an analysis of *Heart of Darkness* and then show how *Things Fall Apart* responds to *Heart of Darkness* by portraying Africa and its people differently. By doing so, I will be able to answer the question of how Achebe, through his novel, included the African people in the story of imperialism. Moreover, *Things Fall Apart* will be contrasted to *Heart of Darkness* which denies the African characters to play a significant role in the same story.

From Colonialism to Postcolonialism

Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* deal with the theme of imperialism. In this chapter, the period from the start of colonialism on the African continent to the rise of postcolonial theory will be reviewed. It will be discussed how the colonial project was considered in the beginning of the 20th century and the change in thinking that took place with the development of postcolonial theory. The most important part of the development is how the focus was moved from the colonial agents to the native population, which has an impact on how imperialism is viewed.

Heart of Darkness takes place during the period of imperialism when Europe competed for power in Africa. At the end of the 19th century, both Europe and the USA found that it was possible to make a profit from the raw materials that could be found in Africa (Hochschild 27). Hence followed the period called the 'Scramble for Africa', which lasted from about 1880 until 1914, when western countries claimed pieces of the continent (Brantlinger 262). The vast interest in Africa prepared ground for conflicts. Therefore, the Berlin Conference was held as an attempt to play down these conflicts by diplomatically dividing Africa between the powers of Europe. King Leopold II of Belgium managed to seize the Congo by outplaying Britain against France (Hochschild 86).

King Leopold was a ruler "much admired throughout Europe as a philanthropic monarch" (Hochschild 1). It was assumed that Leopold II was to act out of humanitarianism as he had previously stated that, "[t]o open to civilisation the only part of the globe where it has yet to penetrate…It is, I dare to say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress…I was in no way motivated by selfish designs (qtd. in Hochschild 44). However, it turned out that he was going to be the main figure in one of the largest international atrocity scandals of all time (Hochschild 4).

It became widely accepted to protest against the atrocities in the Congo (Hochschild 4) and people in Britain were shocked by what had begun to become revealed there. For instance, "[i]n London, one letter of protest to the Times on the Congo would be signed by eleven peers, nineteen bishops, seventy-six members of Parliament, the Presidents of seven Chambers of Commerce, thirteen editors of major newspapers and every lord or mayor in the country" (Hochschild 2). To organise the protests, The Congo Reform association was formed by, among others, E.D. Morel who had been involved in the discovery of the atrocities (Hochschild 180). Famous writers, including Conrad, also supported the Congo Reform Association (Zins 58).

Interestingly, Conrad did not protest against Britain's colonialism equivalently to

Belgium's colonialism. When Conrad later wrote *Heart of Darkness* it became "one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature" (Hochschild 146), nonetheless, Conrad curiously supported England's imperialism (Hochschild 146). It is true that Leopold had treated the Congo like it was "a piece of uninhabited real estate" (Hochschild 101) but that was not different to how other European countries treated Africa who "talked about Africa as it were without Africans" (Hochschild 101). Therefore, it is noteworthy that Conrad did not protest against British imperialism.

Yet, Conrad's lack of protest against British imperialism could be explained by the fact that the Europeans saw themselves as being at the top of civilisation (White 186). Similarly, all colonising states promoted the necessity of the civilising mission. The concept of the civilising mission is based on a progressive worldview that has been termed the meta-narrative of enlightenment[1]. As a result of this way of looking at the world, it was commonly thought that the African people were less developed than the Europeans (Brantlinger 173-174). Further, as the Europeans saw themselves as being at the top of the civilisation ladder, many considered it to be their vocation to spread civilisation to other places perceived as primitive in relation to the European way of living.

Britain was one of the countries committed to the civilising mission. In other words, they supposedly "brought civilisation to the barbarian, enlightenment to the heathen, prosperity to the impoverished [as well as] law and social order to the brutish primitive" (Christ and Hurley). Hence, Britain's presence in colonies was often seen as something positive since it was widely believed that due to Britain's national, racial and cultural superiority it was well suited for carrying out the civilising mission (Christ and Hurley).

Thus, it is clear that, by most people, it was not seen as a brutal act in itself to travel to Africa and decide how those living there should live their lives. Because, "[t]o see Africa […] as a continent of coherent societies, each with its own culture and history took a leap of empathy, a leap that few, if any European or American visitors to the Congo were able to make" (Hochschild 101). Therefore, it did not seem to occur to the European imperialists that the people of the African countries had something to say about their experience of colonisation even though they were the main victims of it (Hochschild 53). It was not until much later that the stories of imperialism began to be told by African people.

By the middle of the 1960s, almost all countries on the African continent had become independent. The people living in the former colonies started to express their subordinate role

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[1]The meta-narratives were founded by the French philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard. He implied that there is a difference between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. Scientific knowledge always needs to be valued in terms of legitimacy. On the other hand, narrative knowledge is to a large extent based on knowledge that has been passed around people that not necessarily have to have any scientific foundation (Woodward).

in relation to the colonisers, their growing consciousness made the basis for postcolonial theory. From the beginning, postcolonial theory was a reaction against the way history was written from an elite perspective since the way ordinary people experienced history was not taken into consideration in written form.

Postcolonialists developed a way of thinking that focuses on the subaltern, which became one of the concepts within the theory of postcolonialism (Baylis, Smith, and Owens 186). The subaltern is a term coined by Antonio Gramsci literarily meaning 'of inferior rank'. The subalterns are those of society who are inferior to the ruling hegemony and could form any group which is denied access to society (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin *Postcolonial Studies* 209). In an essay called "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses how the elite does not listen to what the subaltern has to say about its culture and instead judges the culture of the subaltern from its own perspective. Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak. In the relationship of coloniser and colonised, it is always the colonised who is the subaltern and it is its story that comes to light with postcolonial theory (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin *Postcolonial Studies* 210).

Another concept in postcolonial theory is the term 'othering'. In the context of postcolonialism, a case of 'othering' involves an attitude expressing that the colonised can only exist in relation to the coloniser. The term also relates to how postcolonial countries are seen and judged from a Western perspective. Therefore, postcolonial countries become characterised as primitive only because they are compared to Western countries, which are perceived as civilised. Additionally, 'othering' deals with the idea that the Western world needs the image of the primitive 'other' in order to claim itself to be civilised. Moreover, the way of thinking that puts colonisers and the colonised people on opposite poles helped to create the myth about Africa as the 'Dark Continent' and the antithesis of Europe (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin *Postcolonial Studies* 167). The term 'other' also involves a binary relationship that exists between imperial Europe and the African colonies. What constitutes the binary relationship between the coloniser and the colonised has further been defined as being the centre and the margin, with the centre being the colonisers and the margin being the colonised (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin *Postcolonial Studies* 36).

In the process of writing back, colonial texts are re-written in various ways in order to kill the myths and alter the stereotyped roles that colonial literature conveys. As a way to redeem themselves from the way history and culture of the colonies were described in literature during the colonial era, postcolonial authors, like Achebe, have used the technique of writing back. In *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe writes back to *Heart of Darkness.* The concept of writing back will be present in each of the following chapters when showing how *Things*

Fall Apart is opposed to *Heart of Darkness.* Most importantly, *Things Fall Apart* puts the focus on African culture and history by using the technique of writing back.

Concepts such as the 'other' or the subaltern were not considered when the European powers quarrelled about the African continent. As Hochschild points out, the African continent was mostly regarded as uninhabited land that was free to claim because of its uncivilised population (101). The postcolonial consciousness was created when people such as Achebe raised his voice about his past. When looking at texts like *Things Fall Apart* that writes back to the centre, in other words a colonising state, it is fair to suggest that there has been a shift concerning the way the colonial project is perceived. It is the postcolonial consciousness that is the most prominent difference between *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*. In the next chapter, the colonial and the postcolonial perspectives will be discussed more in-depth when analysing the two novels' attitudes towards imperialism and the civilising mission.

How the Novels Respond to the History of Imperialism

In this section it will be discussed if and how the colonial project is condemned in the two novels. It will also be investigated how *Heart of Darkness* portrays imperialism from a European perspective while *Things Fall Apart* exposes what consequences imperialism has on the African characters. These two perspectives are essential since they mirror the difference between a colonial and a postcolonial way of thinking.

Starting with *Heart of Darkness,* the novel lets its main European character Marlow define what imperialism is, namely: "The conquest of the earth, which means the taking away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (4), in other words, the conquering of land. Moreover, Marlow considers the conquering of land not to be "a pretty thing" (4). Hence, it can be assumed that he condemns colonialism. However, the conquering of land is just a minor part of the colonial project which actually is comprised of more aspects, aspects which *Heart of Darkness* does not take into consideration.

On the other hand, when Marlow talks about different colonising states, it is clear that he sees some differences. In the beginning of the novel Marlow says, "[t]here was a vast amount of red [British territory] (Luscombe) – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there." He compares it to the yellow Belgian territory (Luscombe) by saying that "I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre (7). The extract

mostly helps to defend British colonialism. The most interesting part though is why and on what grounds British territory is "good to see at any time" (7) and why British colonialism can be judged differently.

Hawkins discusses the reason why Marlow judges British colonialism differently. He notices that Marlow makes a similar comparison between Roman and British imperialism as Marlow exclaims: "what saves us [the British] is efficiency" (4). It is fair to argue that when making both of these comparisons Marlow opposes himself to, as Hawkins expresses it, "wasteful and selfish imperialism" while he seems to support British imperialism mainly because of its efficiency (286). Hawkins concludes that Marlow condemns the actions of Belgium and not imperialism as a project conducted by all major states of Western Europe.

Hawkins also suggests that the criteria of efficiency was, "well suited to condemning the type of imperialism practiced in the Congo" (288). Achebe argues similarly in the following extract:

> 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 [...] the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. ("An Image of Africa")

Marlow's view of imperialism confirms the idealism held during the beginning of the 20th century in England discussed in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, his idealism is destroyed when he travels to Africa and witnesses Belgium's actions in the Congo and above all when he meets Kurtz (Spegele 327).

It is on the criteria of efficiency as a definition of good imperialistic work that Marlow seems to judge Kurtz. Kurtz came to Africa in order to civilise its people but instead he turned native and adapted to the, as perceived by Marlow, primitive customs of the Africans (Hawkins 295). Because of that, in the eyes of Marlow, Kurtz is an inefficient, decadent coloniser who has abandoned the very idea of why he came to Africa (Raskin 127).

Be that as it may, it is important to remember that Kurtz is judged through the eyes of Marlow whose interpretation of Kurtz, to a great extent, mirrors his view of colonialism. Because, what if the roles were reversed and Kurtz were the hero of the story as somebody who crosses cultural boundaries by accepting and understanding other cultures as Mwikisa argues? The alternative interpretation of Kurtz suggests that the author had the possibility to focus on other aspects of imperialism. The focus on Kurtz's decadency and primitive behaviour takes away focus from more serious matters. For instance, the crimes against humanity could have become more central to the story if the focus was shifted (Maier-Katkin 602).

Many literary critics have judged *Heart of Darkness* to be anti-imperialistic (Hawkins 286). Judging the novel's view of imperialism by simply looking at how Belgian imperialism is condemned or how colonialists like Kurtz acts inefficiently only takes few aspects of colonialism into consideration. Often people see imperialism as a phenomenon that is similar everywhere when in fact there could be a great difference depending on "imperial aims, systems of administration, degrees of exploitation, and even types of exploitation" (Hawkins 288). Therefore, it is possible that Marlow might not even see Britain's actions as imperialism at all. Further, the fact that Marlow gives Belgian imperialism a harsh judgment does not say anything about his judgment of the imperialistic project in general or the civilising mission as a crime against humanity (Hawkins 288). Along these lines, although *Heart of Darkness* is considered anti-imperialistic, all aspects of the imperial project are never questioned.

The devastating effects of the civilising mission are acknowledged to a great extent in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe shows how the European ideal of society undermines the customs and beliefs of Igbo society just to replace it with European culture which they, the Europeans, believe is better because it is according to them, a more civilised way of living. Hence, by showing how the European power destroys an already well-functioning society, Achebe criticises the civilising mission and conveys to the reader that a violation does not necessarily have to be violent.

The culture of the Igbo characters in *Things Fall Apart* holds Igbo society together and therefore the civilising mission becomes devastating for the Igbos. As Champion states, "through its rituals, ceremonies, and communal drama, the author reveals those qualities which merged the individual and his community into a vibrant and cohesive living texture [which] give[s] the reader an insight into the tribal law and custom which bind the people together" (275). The culture connects the Igbo characters to each other which also makes them vulnerable to anything that could destroy this bond.

However, when the European characters of *Things Fall Apart* come to the village of Umuofia they do not only challenge the culture of the Igbos but slowly manage to gain more and more Igbo characters to their side. First, they introduce their religion and in the process of recruiting new members to the church, they are very accepting to all the outcasts. All of those from Igbo society who have been rejected for unfair reasons, for instance Nneka who has been forced to kill her new-born babies, are welcome to join the church. This is an example of how a non-violent action becomes devastating for Igbo society.

The introduction of the European religion means that the clan is split up in two different beliefs. Not united through their religion anymore, oppositions are created between the Igbo characters who have joined the church and those who still practice the Igbo beliefs. As one of

the characters expresses it, "[t]he white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully 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 like one. He has put a knife on things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (166). Hence, Igbo society is no longer able to stand up united against European society, which causes Igbo society to weaken.

After the Europeans have convinced Igbos to join them, they can slowly introduce more elements of power like a government with a European leader. Corruption becomes a major part of society as the European characters seek new ways to gain power. For instance, they give advantages to those who are loyal to them like in the following extract: "What has happened to that piece of land in dispute? asked Okonkwo. The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messenger and interpreter" (166). This is an example of how the Europeans use unfair methods in order to gain power over a society. By exposing how the Europeans slowly introduce different methods of gaining power, Achebe provides the reader with an image of how an African society is taken over and slowly falls apart.

To give an illustration of the destructiveness of the civilising mission, Achebe uses the allegory of locusts. Just like the narrator tells the reader how the locusts "eat all the wild grass in the fields" (51), the colonisers feast on - and exploit - the resources of the Igbo characters. What is interesting though is the Igbo characters' reaction when the locusts come to the village of Umuofia: "And then quite suddenly a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud" (52). The sentence points towards something ominous being underway, which in an allegorical sense is the arrival of the colonisers. Nevertheless, the paragraph continues: "almost immediately a shout of joy broke out in all directions […] 'Locusts are descending,' was joyfully chanted everywhere, and men, women and children left their work or their play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight" (52). Yet, the locusts are suggestive of the colonisers that also descended on the village of Umuofia. The allegory illustrates how the colonisers, just as the locusts, would act as a dark cloud hiding the sun for more than a hundred years (Champion 274). Additionally, the villagers are happy because they can eat the tasty locusts but in reality the locusts are most likely to destroy more for the villagers than the villagers will gain from eating them. Similarly, those of the characters who blindly convert to the European traditions do not see the dangers of abandoning their own traditions even though they do gain power in doing so.

By showing the reader the destructiveness of the civilising mission, Achebe questions how imperialism is portrayed in *Heart of Darkness*. In contrast, *Heart of Darkness* focuses on the decaying coloniser and the inefficiency of King Leopold II's colony. Consequently,

Conrad's novel lacks the African perspective and makes the African characters play a minor role in a story which concerns them greatly. Therefore, Africa as a place of culture and knowledge stops to exist and instead becomes, as Mwikisa describes it, "a setting" where Marlow is able to portray the decadence of European imperialism. In the next chapter the concept of 'othering' will be used in order to explain *why* the African characters play a minor role in *Heart of Darkness*.

The 'other'

The primitiveness of the African characters establishes them as the 'other' in relation to the European characters. Oxford dictionary defines the word primitive in the following way: "Relating to, denoting, or preserving the character of an early stage in the evolutionary or historical development of something." The idea of the primitive African people is a constructed idea which presupposes that there is also another people that is civilised. By establishing African society and its people as primitive, the novel denies the Africans the culture and society that they have and makes them the 'other'.

Throughout the novel, Marlow reinforces the primitiveness of the African characters. According to Lawtoo, "Marlow, […] seems to share the evolutionary belief that Africa represents an earlier stage in human evolution, a primitive, barbaric, and thus inferior stage equivalent to the prehistoric past of Europe" (411). In a few passages Marlow confirms Lawtoo's statement when he says: "the prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?" (32) and "I don't think a single one of them [the African characters] had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time" (36). These excerpts strengthen the idea that the African characters in *Heart of Darkness* are established as primitive.

As the novel develops it becomes clear that the primitive behaviour is exclusively appropriate for the African characters. Because interestingly, when the same kind of primitive behaviour is acted out by a European character it becomes an abomination. When Marlow finds out that Kurtz has adapted to the African culture, Kurtz becomes the antihero of the novel and is castigated by Marlow (Maier-Katkin 587). The reason why Kurtz's behaviour is condemned could arguably be because Kurtz came to Africa on a mission and with a belief to civilise the Africans but instead he converted to the primitive behaviour himself. According to Marlow, civilised behaviour is the ability to control "powerful desires and impulses" (Maier-

Katkin 588), which Kurtz fails to do.

On the other hand, the civilised behaviour is also exclusively appropriate for the European characters. While Kurtz is condemned for the primitive behaviour and his lack of self-control, Marlow condemns the African character which he calls an "improved specimen" (33) for adapting to, what Marlow considers to be, civilised behaviour. Achebe argues that Conrad "liked things to be in their place," that Conrad promoted the idea that the African characters are essentially primitive while the European characters on the other hand are civilised ("An Image of Africa"). Thus, there are obvious stereotypes of the African and the European characters in *Heart of Darkness*.

It could be argued that *Heart of Darkness* promotes the stereotypes of the Africans and the Europeans in order to preserve a hierarchal order between them (Abdelrahman 189). The educated native is problematic because he or she "forms a threat to the traditional, hierarchical system and is able to return the gaze of power upon its white beholders in ways that jeopardise their [the Europeans'] cultural authority" (Abdelrahman 189). Abdelrahman's argument suggests that there is a motive behind the creation of stereotypes. Namely, preserving the African characters as the primitive 'other' serves to emphasise the image of the civilised European characters. Therefore, Marlow insists on maintaining the hierarchal order.

Emphasising the "remote kinship" between the African characters and the European characters, which Marlow does in the following extract, does not necessarily make them equals since it says nothing about the hierarchal order emphasised in the previous passage.

> It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not 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 passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you the 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 – so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend. (32)

The howls, leaps and spins are unpleasant characteristics and actions which through the novel are associated with the African characters. These are not characteristics of or actions performed by the supposedly civilised European characters of the story; Marlow or any of the other European characters do certainly not make horrid faces, howl, leap or spin.

To state that the African characters belong to a prehistoric time, meaning that they have not reached civilisation yet, infantilises the African characters in relation to the European characters. Infantilising the African characters gives the impression that they might be able to reach the same level of progression as the Europeans but that they are not there yet (Radhakrishnan 458; Achebe "An Image of Africa"). In *Heart of Darkness*, "Africa and its

people [are] representing a stage in human development that is anterior to that of the European societies" (Abdelrahman 184).

Heart of Darkness tells the reader that African society and its people are simply primitive. Nowhere in the story does the reader get to see another version of the African characters or their society. Because, all through the novel they are condemned to be primitive. Therefore, their place in the hierarchal system is fixed and the novel contributes with no alternative to the image of the primitive African characters and their primitive society. Additionally, looking at African society as a younger version of European society denies the fact that there could have been any unique society to be destroyed in Africa.

To show that African society was not a primitive version of Europe, Achebe describes an African society just as it is, with all the flaws and faults all societies have. Important to note is that Achebe has chosen Africa as the starting point instead of Europe for *Things Fall Apart*. By describing life in the Igbo village and the organisation of its society, Achebe kills the myth about the primitive African society and its inhabitants. Furthermore, most of the novel is dedicated to African society before the arrival of the Europeans which helps to deconstruct the belief that Africa had no history or culture before their arrival which he refers to in the beginning of his lecture "An Image of Africa." Most importantly, Achebe manages to show how it is just a matter of two different cultures which cannot be compared and put into a hierarchal system.

In *Things Fall Apart* the Europeans are as strange to the Africans as the Africans are to the Europeans, which proves that it is just a matter of two different cultures. Achebe shows how Europe is not the centre and Africa is not the margin meaning that the African characters do not have to be the 'other'. A few examples can be found when discussing the arrival of white missionaries to a neighbouring village. Okonkwo initially thinks they are talking about albinos, who are the only white people he has ever heard of (130). To portray further how odd it is for the characters of Umuofia hearing of people with a different skin colour coming to their land, Obierika says, "Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us" (133). Achebe shows how the lack of knowledge is mutual which makes the European culture and the African culture, which are opposed to each other in *Heart of Darkness,* compete on the same level in *Things Fall Apart.*

By showing how the creation of stereotypes works, Achebe is able to expose the process of 'othering'. He shows how the European characters fail to understand the African characters: "the Commissioner did not understand what Obierika meant […] One of the most infuriating habits of these people [the African characters] was their love of superfluous words and thoughts" (195). Similarly, the African characters fail to understand the European

characters like in the following excerpt when a missionary is trying to explain the religion to the Igbo characters: "[A]t the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine" (139). By writing about the culture clashes between the African and the European characters, Achebe is able to show that stereotypes are formed due to a lack of knowledge about the other culture. The culture clashes also show that the lack of understanding is mutual which deconstructs the idea that one culture has a better set of ideas.

The ultimate critique of the Eurocentric attitude towards Conrad's novel is made in the last chapter of *Things Fall Apart* when the District Commissioner explains how he is planning to write a book about his experiences in Africa. It becomes clear that the District Commissioner does not see the characters as individuals since he reduces them to be simply the 'other'. He is planning to write about the man who hanged himself, who the reader knows is Okonkwo, and says that "[o]ne could almost write a whole chapter about him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate" (197). Since Achebe has written a whole novel about Okonkwo, he shows how the District Commissioner's view of the African characters is very narrow. Achebe proves that one needs to have an insight and a deep understanding of a society and its people in order to write about it equitably. Having that said, Achebe provides an example of how *Heart of Darkness* is in fact a blind version of Africa and does not mediate a fair image of the continent. Described previously is also the ultimate tragedy of *Things Fall Apart* that the characters of Umuofia, whom the reader has learnt to recognise as humans and individuals, had to become pacified and filed under 'Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger'.

As the European characters in *Heart of Darkness* carry the light of civilisation, the African characters become the 'other' when they are portrayed with the unwanted characteristics of the European characters. According to Champion, the Commissioner's part of the novel is "symbolic of the loss of identity of Africans for a hundred and fifty years. To the District Commissioner, Okonkwo ceases to exist as a person; he is only part of the mute backcloth without form, figure or voice" (277). Along these lines, *Heart of Darkness* reduces the African characters' identity to be no more than primitive and therefore the Commissioner's description of Okonkwo is very similar to the way Marlow describes the African characters as the primitive 'other'. In the next chapter the similarity between Marlow and the Commissioner will become even clearer when the lack of voice of the African characters of *Heart of Darkness* will be discussed in-depth.

Asking the Question: Can the Subaltern Speak?

The African characters of *Heart of Darkness* are exclusively portrayed as a great mass of unidentified individuals. The following extracts from *Heart of Darkness* are just two examples of the image of the African characters that the book conveys, "I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes" (41) and "[b]lack figures strolled listlessly, poured water on the glow" (22). The African characters are to a great extent described like a flock of animals, which appears to consist of a mass of black bodies and an innumerable number of limbs. The same pattern of masses of people acting in animal-like ways, whose conversational abilities reach no further than grunting phrases, is repeated throughout the work.

Though the African characters are generally described unfavourably in *Heart of Darkness*, the most prominent way they are subordinated and dehumanised in the novel is by the lack of a voice. The conversational abilities of the African characters in *Heart of Darkness* reach no further than "grunting phrases" (65), a "babble of uncouth sounds" (117) or like "sounds of some satanic litany" (112). Marlow never mentions that these sounds could simply be a foreign language that he does not understand as he says that the sounds of the African characters "resembled no sounds of human language" (112). *Heart of Darkness* denies the African characters the ability to speak and therefore they have no possibility to express themselves about their situation as colonised subjects.

Because the African characters of *Heart of Darkness* lack the ability to speak, their situation is described through the eyes of Marlow (Abdelrahman 182). Therefore, it is necessary to ask the question "can the subaltern speak?" just as Spivak does in her essay. While reading *Heart of Darkness* the answer is obvious since the African characters are not, in any part of the story, given the possibility to speak. Instead, it is the European characters who speak for the African characters and the lack of voice makes any dialogue impossible.

In "An Image of Africa," Achebe argues strongly that *Heart of Darkness* celebrates the dehumanisation of the African people. Watts argues against Achebe and points out that the native characters are described as happier and healthier than most of the European characters (198). Yet, the real problem is not whether the African characters are portrayed as happy or sad, healthy or not healthy. The real problem is that they are not allowed to express these feelings or any other feelings or opinions themselves. In that way, Watts' claim undermines the African characters' right to express themselves as thinking human beings by indicating that they should be satisfied by at least being portrayed as happy and healthy.

The lack of an African voice might also invite the reader of *Heart of Darkness* to draw

the conclusion that the African characters are not really important to the story. Without the possibility to have an opinion, the African characters become objects and are at the same time deprived a part of their humanity. Accordingly, Abiaziem Okafor claims that the inhuman treatment of the African characters is a subtheme of the novel (19). Achebe comments on this aspect in his lecture "An Image of Africa." According to Achebe, Conrad only sees Africa as a set piece to throw light upon the madness of European colonialism. The least that can be said is that the African characters are not the subjects of the story and the deprivation of their culture is not an important theme since, as was argued previously in the essay, it is taken for granted that the African characters are primitive and therefore have nothing to say.

In response to Conrad's grunting and mute characters, Achebe stresses the importance of the oral tradition within Igbo culture. He portrays the oral tradition throughout the novel as in the following example: "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (7). Also, as the narrator explains to the reader, Okonkwo thinks that, "in the absence of work, talking was the next best" (48). Achebe manages to show how "the art of conversation" (7) is important to Igbo society. By providing the reader with a part of the Igbo characters' great collection of proverbs and stories, Achebe shows how the illiterate Igbo society is able to function without the written word but with a well-developed system of spoken words, stories and phrases instead (6, 98).

The African characters' ability to speak in *Things Fall Apart* also creates the opportunity for dialogue. On the other hand, when rephrasing Spivak's question and asking if the Igbo characters can speak, it is fair to suggest that the answer is no. Throughout the novel, there is no trace of any dialogue between the African and the European characters. The Igbo characters are not, irrespectively of having a voice or not, able to have a conversation with the European intruders because the European characters do not listen. However, instead of making the African people mute creatures like in *Heart of Darkness,* Achebe shows how the Europeans simply ignored the African voice.

The fact that the European characters are still unable to hear the voice of the African characters in Achebe's story is very important since the subordination of the subaltern is largely done by ignoring the subaltern's story and culture. As Spivak explains, "[i]f the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more" (158). Therefore, the ignorance of the European characters concerning the voice of the African characters is essential in order to portray the unequal relation of power between the Africans and the Europeans. Even though Achebe's Igbo characters are not able to communicate with the European characters, Achebe "clearly realises the consequences of being excluded from a text that claims to define one's identity" (Abdelrahman 182). So, Achebe dedicates his novel

to showing that, through him, the subaltern can speak.

Even though Achebe aims to give a voice to Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart,* he chose to write the novel in English and not in the Igbo language. One reason for writing the book in English is arguably because English is a larger language and more people would hence be able to read the novel. In addition, Achebe sees English as a language with many possibilities and as an effective weapon:

> In the logic of colonisation and decolonisation it [English] is actually a very powerful weapon in the fight to regain what was yours. English was the language of colonisation itself […] [I]t is something that you can actively claim to use as an effective weapon, as a counterargument to colonisation. (*An African Voice*)

Giving the Igbo characters the opportunity to speak in English, Achebe provides them with a powerful voice which gives them the ability to claim their place in the story of imperialism.

Achebe is also very careful not to give away his African characters completely to the English tradition. In order to maintain the dignity of the African culture, some words in Igbo language are used. For example, Achebe uses the word obi, which is the word for hut. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin describe the phenomenon, of using some words that are very specific for the native language and hence cannot be translated, as glossing. Glossing is a technique that both shows cultural inheritance and clarifies that these words are not synonyms but convey slightly different meanings to the English equivalent (*The Empire* 61).

By using glossing, *Things Fall Apart* was unique at the time it was written for how it managed to incorporate Igbo language into English and for its extraordinary method of allowing the African characters to speak to the world without losing their origin (Adéèkó 39). Adéèkó also explains the use of language in *Things Fall Apart* by saying that: "the narrative voice gives a sympathetic platform to the speech rhythms of its African characters […] [The African characters] use proverbs unapologetically to lend the authority of tradition to their words" (Adéèkó 39). Hence, *Things Fall Apart* does not only convey an important story but it also promotes a culture that has been neglected for more than one hundred years.

To provide a voice to those who was denied it for decades might be the most important achievement of *Things Fall Apart.* The novel made it possible for the Africans to "explain themselves to one another," and to give them the possibility to be proud of their culture. (Adéèkó 35). Achebe does not only show that African people are important and have something to say but also that they are capable to regain their dignity and place in history that they were denied during the colonisation of Africa and through the stories about imperialism that they were excluded from even though they were the main victims.

Conclusion

In this essay it has been discussed how Achebe manages to give a different image of Africa and its people than the image presented to the reader in *Heart of Darkness*. In Achebe's novel, the African characters are no longer presented as primitive or mute characters, instead they have been given their humanity and voice back. Moreover, Achebe challenges the mystification of Africa as a dark continent by giving the reader a nuanced image of those living there through his characters.

Additionally, it was concluded that *Heart of Darkness* only criticises some parts of the colonial project and not the colonial project in general. On the other hand, *Things Fall Apart* shows the essential part of the colonial project, namely the destruction of another culture, by exposing the devastating effects of the civilising mission on African society. While Marlow highlights the immorality of the colonial agents who are seduced by the African primitiveness, *Things Fall Apart* focuses on a society that falls apart due to the civilising mission.

In *Heart of Darkness* the African characters are the 'other' in relation to the civilised European characters. On the contrary, Achebe subverts the idea that the African people are primitive and need to become civilised. While the African characters are portrayed as a primitive mass of people in *Heart of Darkness,* Achebe portrays his African characters as individuals who the reader learns to sympathise with. *Things Fall Apart* highlights the qualities of one African society while *Heart of Darkness* promotes the idea that the African people are living in utter chaos. The difference is striking but also important when showing how the Europeans destroyed an already well developed society.

Finally, the African characters of *Heart of Darkness* are not given a voice, which could be said to be a deprivation of their humanity. In this sense Achebe is right in his claim that *Heart of Darkness* celebrates the dehumanisation of the African people. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe takes a clear stance against *Heart of Darkness'* portrayal of the African characters as mute creatures by enhancing the oral tradition of the Igbo. In doing so, he shows that the African people have a great amount to say about their situation as colonised objects but were not listened to by the Europeans. It might have been sensational to write about the native characters as happier and healthier than the European characters in Conrad's time. Be that as it may, as a thinking human being, one should not be satisfied as being merely happy and healthy.

To show from the inside how a society falls apart like Achebe does, lets African society play an important role in the story of imperialism. Further, Achebe proves that the African people were not just a primitive version of the Europeans. Instead he shows that their situation

as civilised subjects was important in order to understand the story of imperialism. Most importantly, Achebe lets his main characters tell the story of imperialism themselves so that the reader is able to see the story of imperialism from an African person's perspective.

It is important that canonised works like *Heart of Darkness* continue to be challenged, both through literary contributions like *Things Fall Apart* but also through criticisms such as "An Image of Africa." These contributions can start a debate that creates a consciousness about a novel's out-of-date ideas which do not have to exist in a timeless vacuum just because they come from a timeless literary work. In this way, the African people will become included in the story of imperialism.

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