

## Stereotypes in *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*

*Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* illustrate the different ways of presenting Africa in literature. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad shows Africa through the perspective of the colonizing Europeans, who tend to depict all the natives as savages. In response to Conrad's stereotypical depiction of Africans, Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* through the point of view of the natives to show Africans, not as primitives, but as members of a thriving society. *Things Fall Apart* follows Okonkwo's life as he strives for prestige in his community. When European missionaries come to Umuofia, Okonkwo's clan, Okonkwo tries to protect the culture that the missionaries would destroy in the name of "civilizing" the natives. However his rigid mentality and violent behavior has the opposite of its intended effect, perpetuating the stereotype of the wild African in the eyes of the European readers.

European prejudice against Africans is clearly present in *Heart of Darkness*. In traveling through Africa, the protagonist, Marlow, describes all the natives he encounters as savages, comparing them to animals or the wilderness of the jungle itself. In one instance, Marlow discovers a death pit—literally an open grove where natives go to die. He describes the men there saying,

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth... in all attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair... they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation... One of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink. (Conrad 17)

This portrayal shows the natives as "shadows" and unearthly "creatures," not as dying men. The men are not individuals, but rather formless shapes with no humanizing characteristic to distinguish one man from another. None of the men are shown personally and so it is difficult to discern where one man ends and the next begins. This creates the effect that the men are nothing more than elements of an amorphous form. Marlow's depictions originate from a stereotype that

says all Africans are made of the same, non-descript characteristics, unlike the descriptions of Europeans who are expressed in great detail.

Furthermore, the way in which the man crawls on hands and knees to the river to drink is animal-like and degrading. To Marlow, not only are the Africans indiscernible from each other they are also all inhuman. The man crawls on the ground like an animal walking on all fours to drink from a river, whereas a European would never drink from anything but a well or a tap. Marlow also compares the natives to animals in describing one of the workers on the ship. He says that “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” (Conrad 36). This man demonstrates that the savages might be tamed because, “He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank” (37). Yet he has been domesticated in the way one would train a dog to do a trick. According to Marlow, despite this native’s knowledge, he is still an animal pretending to be civilized. Marlow assumes that the worker is the same as the other natives: he is too crude to be truly sophisticated like a European. Marlow continually generalizes the barbarian nature of the natives to describe one individual in a way consistent with his preconceived beliefs—the very definition of a stereotype.

Marlow further belittles Africans by depicting the natives as prehistoric and simple. “The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?... we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a mad house” (Conrad 35). The natives are so primitive that they are denied language. Marlow resigns to wondering “who could tell?” instead of attempting to understand the native’s message because he believes the man’s thoughts are either too trivial to be taken seriously or that the native is too insane to have anything legitimate to say. For most of the

novel, “In the place of speech, [the natives] made ‘a violent babble of uncouth sounds’” instead of expressing their opinions (Achebe, Image 341). Conrad chose to exclude native dialogue because, like his character Marlow, he may have been influenced by the European stereotype of Africans. This omission of language suggests that the Africans are not sophisticated enough to have anything important to contribute to the plot. During the few moments where the natives do speak, they discuss subjects that further imply their barbarianism, such as cannibalism: “In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad’s purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts” (341). Generally, the Africans of *Heart of Darkness* are too underdeveloped to control language. Only during moments where language can support the image of the savage native does the reader hear the Africans speak. Conrad’s technique of limited exposure to native voices ignores anything that might contest the stereotype and presents only the moments that support it.

Marlow combines the ideas that Africans are indistinguishable, savage, and primitive and reflects this image in the representation of Africa. Like the stereotype that all Africans are indistinguishable formless shapes, so too is Africa a structure-less continent. Marlow describes Africa with references to the banks “rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded [by] the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair” (14). Like the men, Africa is comprised, not of clear or distinct lines, but of formless elements like mud, sludge, and roots and both Africa and the Africans are portrayed in terms of death (“rotting” mud) and disease (the epidemic-like take over of the roots). Since Africa and Africans are only framed in this context of death, Marlow creates the stereotype that Africa is constantly in a wild and deplorable state. In fact, in his critique on *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe

wrote, Africa is “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor... devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (Achebe, Image 343-4). Marlow’s description removes distinguishing characteristics, like the depiction of the Africans themselves. Instead, the Africans are nothing more than duplicates of each other who serve no other purpose than to be a part of the scenery for the Europeans.

In response to the European’s stereotypical depiction of Africans, Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, which portrays Africans in a structured and civilized society. Although the clan defies the European stereotype, the protagonist, Okonkwo, does not—confirming the European beliefs more than contradicting them. While Igbo culture reveres strength and masculinity, Okonkwo’s behavior is hyper masculine, typically manifesting itself through violence (Iyasere 378). Okonkwo is described as “a man of action, a man of war” (Achebe, Things 8), and while his achievements are honored, his violent nature is extreme. Also, Okonkwo is entirely inflexible. He believes that “one is either a man or a woman: there can be no compromise, no composite” (Iyasere 380). Combining this obsession with masculinity and the inability to be both masculine and feminine creates a character that fears anything feminine:

[H]is whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness... It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy, he resented his father’s failure and weakness... And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (Achebe, *Things* 10)

This fear of anything feminine explains Okonkwo’s constant need for action and distaste for “idleness.” In fact, Okonkwo is unable to deal appropriately with situations that call for such a balance and so it seems as though he cannot act in any other way but with violence, further supporting the European stereotype of Africans as violent and savage.

Contrary to this strict adherence to masculine values, the village of Umuofia is able to be flexible and compromise between masculine and feminine. “Many of the qualities which to Okonkwo were marks of femininity and weakness are the same qualities that were respected by the society Okonkwo wished to champion” (Iyasere 377). For instance, although Umuofia’s laws are clear, the people “can adapt their code to accommodate the less successful, even effeminate men, like Okonkwo’s father” (374), demonstrating Umuofia’s tolerance where Okonkwo would never accept such “weakness.” Also, whereas Okonkwo is resistant to change, Umuofia is more open and responsive, as later demonstrated by Umuofia’s reaction to the missionaries in comparison to Okonkwo’s. Umuofia is able to determine whether action or thought or compromise is needed. This is a capacity that Okonkwo does not share with his clan and these moments of disagreement result in Okonkwo’s exile from the rest of the clan.

One such clash of ideals between Okonkwo and Umuofia is the stern way in which Okonkwo treats his wives and family. Okonkwo beats his family without restraint. The tone used in narrating the beatings of his wives and children suggests that this practice was fairly commonplace in Umuofia, but extreme violence was not tolerated. When Okonkwo beats his wife during Umuofia’s Week of Peace, it is sacrilege: “Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess... It was unheard-of to beat somebody during the sacred week” (Achebe, *Things* 19). His complete disregard for a practice that is so significant to the clan further illustrates the conflict between Umuofia and Okonkwo. Unlike his clan, which places importance on peace, Okonkwo is unable to deviate from his strict code of punishment for even a week, especially when confronted by a feminine force such as his wife. His masculinity and fear of inactivity are so ingrained in him that he needs to punish his wife although he knows that this breaks a very important practice. From the European

perspective of *Heart of Darkness*, this lack of self-control is one of the elements that makes Africans savage.

Another instance of Okonkwo in conflict with Umuofia's wisdom is when he kills Ikemefuna, who has come to regard Okonkwo as a father figure. Okonkwo is warned not to take part in Ikemefuna's death. Ikemefuna is not killed for any wrong he has committed against Okonkwo; he is killed for an offence that occurred between the tribes that was unrelated to Okonkwo, so it is not necessary for Okonkwo to participate. However, "he is forced by his own dogged insistence of masculinity to deal the fatal blow" (Iyasere 378). He refuses to listen to the advice not to participate because he "was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe, *Things* 38). Despite the fact that Ikemefuna looked to him as a father, and Okonkwo may have even felt a bond with Ikemefuna, his beliefs towards strength are so inflexible that he feels that he needs to kill Ikemefuna.

Okonkwo's friend Obierika presents the more logical and less violent perspective on this situation. Obierika says, "You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home... If the Oracle had said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (41). Obierika shows that he has the masculine traits revered by Igbo culture yet action is not always his first instinct. Okonkwo is incapable of "blending the masculine and feminine" like Obierika— he believes that Obierika's "idleness" is weakness, so he must always act and usually act violently (Iyasere 378). This uncontrollable need for violence and inability to logically balance male and female thought adds to the European stereotype that Africans are unsophisticated brutes.

Finally, Okonkwo's last attempt to save Umuofia from the Christian Missionaries actually completely severs ties between Okonkwo and Umuofia. As in earlier scenarios, Okonkwo looks to violence as his answer. After hearing of the Abame massacre, Okonkwo says, "They were fools...They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their machets even when they went to the market" (Achebe, Things 81). However, since the Missionaries had said nothing on arrival, Umuofia wisdom says, "Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of Abame [who reacted violently] were fools... 'There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts'" (81). Okonkwo does not see the wisdom in refraining from action before knowing the full extent of the threat and so the only lesson he learns from the massacre is that, in dealing with missionaries, it is better to preemptively defend himself.

Once the missionaries come to Umuofia, Okonkwo is completely unwilling to compromise. In fact, "He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (104). He sees the clan's attempts at peaceful co-existence as weak because it does not take an active role in eliminating what he perceives as a threat. When confronted with a European messenger, Okonkwo kills him in hopes of starting a noble war against the missionaries, but rather than rally to the attack, his clan only asks, "Why did he do it?" (116), illustrating that Okonkwo's beliefs are so different than the clan's that the clan has pushed him away.

Although the ties between Okonkwo and Umuofia are severed, Okonkwo's image is what comes across the strongest to the Europeans. After Okonkwo fails in uniting his clan against the missionaries, he hangs himself. When the European District Commissioner sees his body, his

thoughts are described: “In the book which he planned to write... The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading... He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*” (117).” The very title “*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes*” demonstrates that the District Commissioner is already prejudiced against the native Africans. Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are also described as “primitive” beings that must be “pacified,” illustrating that the European’s stereotype of Africans is universal enough to be portrayed identically in two separate works.

Furthermore, if this scene is what makes “interesting reading” then it will be included in a book that will, presumably, be published throughout Europe. With the publication of this book, Okonkwo’s violent, and perceivably savage, actions will be read all throughout Europe, thus spreading this stereotypical image. Based on earlier interactions between the missionaries and Umuofia, it can be assumed that Europeans rarely take the initiative to explore Igbo culture. Their only exposure to this culture is what they already believe to be true (the stereotypes) and moments that affect themselves. Typically, the actions that involve confronting the Europeans, such as killing a messenger, only enforce the stereotype of the primitive native. Europeans are never exposed to elements of Igbo culture that defy the stereotype, like Obierika’s sophisticated balance between masculine and feminine situations.

*Heart of Darkness* illustrates the European notions that all Africans are the same: savage, primitive, and inhuman. To contrast this stereotype, Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, showing a civilized and structured African society. Unfortunately, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* was not an accurate representation of a civilized African. Yet, since he was a prominent



member of society, rather than destroy the stereotype, his violent behavior and unwillingness to yield merely strengthens the European's beliefs about the natives.

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