

THE IMAGE OF THE WHITE MAIM IN THE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL

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I. Introduction:

The white man had attracted the attention of almost every West African writer about the African past and present. The novelists, like their counterparts in other parts of Africa, give the white man conspicuous places in their novels. They assign to him various roles and portray him in various shades of light and characters. This paper surveys broadly the kinds of image the white man cuts in some of the novels. The image varies according to the attitudes and vision of the individual novelists. (In the context of this paper, Europeans and Arabs are regarded as white men).

European and Arab attitudes to the African peoples and to the communities they administered are important because they have shaped the attitudes of the novelists and of the communities to the white man. The Arabs wanted African territories. While they tried to convert the people to Christianity and their style of political administration they made use of the local leaders. The French adopted a policy of total assimilation and tried to make a Frenchman of the African.

James Ngugi (a Kenyan novelist) discussing 'Satire in Nigeria' describes the background this way: 'Economic and political institutions are moulded on those of the metropolitan power. The aim is to create the good docile native — a willing source of raw material and cheap labour. And if he is not willing? There is always the police and the army to do a little pacification. The native is a clean slate on which, anything can be scribbled.' On the French policy and attitude Ngugi says further, 'France went further than Britain: she wanted so to scribble on the slate that all the black surface would be covered with the white chalk of French culture. 1

The West African novelist's intention therefore is a kind of protest against what the white man has done to his people. Most of the novelists put up a satiric attitude and often tend to ridicule the white man and his administration. This has in effect given the white man the image of an alien and an impostor. The following shades are easily discernible in the novels and are discussed in this paper:

- a) The white man as missionary intruder, an agent of European Christian and Arab Islamic imperialism.
- b) The white man as civil administrator, soldier and an agent of social disruption.
- c) The white man as an oppressor.
- d) The white man as an alien.

Each of these images will be discussed in turn. On the whole, one finds that the 'at-inbutes' are scattered through the novels considered and one novel may portray the white man in many images.

ii. The White Man as missionary intruder, an agent of European Christian and Arab Islamic Imperialism:

The white man's mission as a religious missionary marks his initial intrusion into tint West African environment. At first he is regarded by the antives in the same way as one looks on a strange animal that has lost its way and stumbles into the farm area. Chinua Achebe presents this coming of the white man in *Things Fall Apart* in the most humorous manner through other characters. Obierika goes to visit Okonkwo in exile and tells him the news of how one of the neighbouring villages, Abame, has been wiped out. That incident recalls the coming of the white man for Ahefirst time to Abame.

"During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan." 'An albino, 'suggested Okonkwo 'He was not an albino. He was quite different.' He sipped his wine. 'And he was riding an iron horse. The First people who saw him ran away, but he stood beconing to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them.' Obierika again drank little of his wine.' And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends. I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him.'

'What did the white man say before they killed him?' asked Uchendu, 'He said nothing,' answered one of Obierika's companions. 'He was something, only they did not understand him,' said Obierika. 'He seemed to speak through his nose.'(pp. 125-1362

Achebe has gone far back to present the West African scene just about the time the earliest missionaries arrived. The African scene is represented by the traditional Ibo society. At first the white man is a 'nameless abomination', his white skin equated to leprosy? When he has settled as a missionary he takes on a name such as Mr. Brown, the white missionary (p. 144), Rev. James Smith (p. 164) and so on. In his presentation of the white man Achebe hardly betrays authorial sentiments. He creates characters out of that society and leaves them with various individual and collective reactions to the earliest white man. Machi and Obierika at first see the white man as a mysterious abomination (p. 65)

"It is like the story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk, said Obierika. 'And these white men, they say, have no toes.' 'And have you ever seen them?' asked Machi. 'Have you?' asked Obierika. 'One of them passes here frequently', said Machi. 'His name is Amadi. Those who know Amadi laughed. He was a leper, and the polite name for leprosy was the 'the white skins.'"

The white man's first attempt to convert the people by trying to impress upon them the idea of the existence of the Christian God is welcomed as a great joke and a ridiculous idea.

"If we leave our gods and follow your god," asked another man, 'who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?'

'Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm' replied the white man. 'They are pieces of wood and stones'. When this was interpreted to the people of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Agwugwu too? And some of them began to go away... Okongwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said: 'You told us with your mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then. The crowd agreed. The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was made. He shrugged his shoulder and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine'". (p. 131-132.)

In Oyono's *Houseboy* the figure of the white missionary is equally curious. Toundi, the houseboy, gives us this funny image:

'In fact I just wanted to get close to the white man with hair like the beared on a maize cob, who dressed in woman's clothes and gave little black boys sugar lumps..... He knew a few words of Adjem but his pronounciation was so bad that the way he said them, they all had obscene meanings.' (p.9)³

These are some of the earliest images of the white man as a missionary in-truder. As he settles down among the natives he carefully unfolds what he has hid-den behind his religion — a government and prison and soldiers! This is to enable him do a bit of pacification in order to plant his religion. But, as Achebe portrays him, he. is ignorant of the ways of his hosts and the people do not understand his ways either. Thjs mutual ignorance results in conflicts and confrontations which Achebe dramatizes with a touch of irony and satiric humour in spite of their tragic consequences for both parties.

The white man's religious imperialism overwhelms the natives in a subtle man-ner. Nothing seems to be really imposed. In *Things Fall Apart* Obierika tells Okonkwo in retrospect.

The white man is very clever, he came quietly and peacebly with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power. They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame'. I pp. 157-158)

But Ayi Kwei Armah's image of the white missionary is more indicting and repugnant. In **Two Thousand Seasons** the white Christian missionaries are seen as "Killers who from the sea came, holding death of the body in their right, the mind's annihilation in their left, shrieking fables of a white god and a son unconcieved.' (p.3)⁴ The Arabs too from across the desert had come with their Islamic religion even before the European missionaries intruded from the sea. Armah's violent reaction is against their physicial and mental oppression of the West African peoples. He rebukes the natives' hospitality as he paints the pictures of the whites as beggars and ungrateful strangers. 'A ruinous openness we had, for those who came as beg-gars turned snakes after feeding.' Just as Achebe's wise elders have their suspi-cions, there are the wary in

Armah's own society: The suspicious among us had pronounced fears incomprehensible to our spirit then, words generosity failed to understand.' (p.3). (The image of the white man as an oppressor will be discussed in a later section).

The coming of the Arabs is like the coming of the European Christian missionaries. 'We laughed at the fearful ones, gave the askers shelter and watched them unsuspecting, watched them turn in the fecundity of our way, turn into the force that pushed us till the proper flowing of all our people, the way itself, became a lonely memory for abandoned minds.' In Armah's novel one sees the Christian as well as the muslim missionaries wanting to impose their religion on the African who has been their host.

In *Houseboy* the white man is not really a 'holy' missionary he appears to be. Toundi gets quite close to him to be able to see some of his human weaknesses. He reports one in his diary: Today Father Vandermayer came from the bush. He has brought five women with him. It seems they are Christians that he has taken away from their polygamous husbands. Five more boarders for the six. If they knew the work that is waiting for them here, they would have stayed behind with their husbands.' (p. 15). In the *Old Man and the Medal* (Oyone's other novel). M. Fouconi, the chief Administrator, keeps an African woman whom he usually hides in the store room on the ground floor when he has white visitors, (p. 46).⁵

III. The White Man as Civil Administrator, Soldier and Agent of Social

Disruption:

In one of his rare authorial comments in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe gives us the picture of the white man as civil administrator. His religious imperialism has merged into political control.

'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. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial.' (p. 156).

The white man has now fully arrived to impose white political authority over the traditional Ibo society. This cleverly cuts in roads into the strong bond of clan relationships and undermines the authority of the elders. The people of Umuofia regard him as an agent of social disruption. As Obierika laments, 'Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no

longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.'

That is the thematic centre of **Things Fall Apart**. To Achebe the white man has come, though as a disruptive force, to accelerate changes already inevitably set-ting in in Ibo traditional society, but he has come to establish white authority over the domain of his host, ironically with a remote head (the queen) in faraway England! As the District Commissioner, Mr. Smith, tells the elders of Umuofia, 'We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice as it is done in my own country under a great Queen, the most powerful in the world.' (p. 173). That is how the white man has cleverly stolen power from the native elders, the climax of which is marked by Okonkwo's suicide and Obierika's subtle indignation. That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.'

In **Arrow of God** the white man has fully settled as Civil Administrator. The white men supervise their political and religious dominion over the natives with a sort of smug self-pride and satisfaction. The line-up is interesting: There were only five Europeans living on Government Hill: Captain Winterbottom, Mr. Clerke, Roberts, Wade and Wright.' Chinua Achebe's satiric humour is unmistakably as he arraigns the white men before the reader. 'In such a place the District Officer was something of a school prefect, and Captain Winterbottom was determined to do his duty', (p.326. The comparison has a tone of ridicule and seems meant to deflate the bloated air of self assurance with which 'Wintabota' tackles the problems of native administration. G.D. Killam puts it this way: 'Achebe's treatment (of Captain Winterbottom) is ironic and his intention is to suggest and confirm at the outset the very real lack of apprehension among European of Ibo customs and to counterpoint this with the assurance, not to say arrogance, with which they involve themselves and control Ibo life/7

In **Aluko's One Man, One Matchet** the picture is not much different. While his satire is mostly directed towards the black white man' — the product of the white man's contact with the natives — he has also satirised the smug assurance of the white administrator who believes religiously in the efficacy of British administra-tion. The young Agricultural Officer and the District Officer have ideas that are not at variance with the ideas of the natives. They want the natives to cure their cocoa diseases by destroying those of the trees they describe as 'ill.' Chief

Momo puts the conflict this way: They say that the White Man knows everything. Yes, he knows everything. But can, the White Man himself in all his knowledge change the ap-pointed day? If therefore we cannot prevent a man from dying why should we worry so much because a tree is dying?' Gegory, the white Agricultural Officer even wants natives who oppose his policy to be jailed because such natives stand in the way of progress. Like the others the white administrators are ignorant of the African way of lilo and theirs is the only road to civilisation.

It is the same kind of smug self-pride and arrogance that tempts Winterbottom to invite Ezeulu to accept a chieftaincy title from him, and when he rejected the of-fer, to lock him up and so, humiliate the Chief Priest of Ulu!

IV. The White Man as Oppressor:

Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* has painted a repugnant image of the white man as an oppressor. Armah calls the Arabs 'white predators from the desert' and has a long chain of epithets to describe them: destroyers, conquerors, revelers, killers, hollow-eyed beggars, and so on.

Armah's thesis centres round Arab traders from the desert and Europeans who off Africans as slaves and cheated the natives out of their natural resources, their hands the Africans suffered* not only physical but also mental and enslavement. Like their missionary counterparts from Europe, the Arabs convert Africans to the Muslim religion and through that enslave them. They use the African women to gratify their sensuous desires by keeping them in harems and playing sexual games with them.

Armah's reaction is violent and his portrayal of the white man is undercut by his personal anger and venom. He has no room for the subtle irony of Achebe nor the satiric humour of Oyono, not even the detachment of Camara Laye. In his vitupera-tion he consigns the whole white race to hell and damnation.

'The white destroyers: what a scene of carnage. What utter desolation they -have already left stretching over this land!. What a destruction of bodies, what a death of spirits! But the rain of the destroyers cannot reach beyond these two thousand seasons. The predators from the desert, they who found so much to do among us turning living bodies to carrion, what are they now? A bizarre sort of egrets feast impudent on their eyeballs in other deserts they once called their own', (p.318)⁴

Oyono has a different shade of the image of the oppressor. He portrays Mr. Gullet, the Superintendent of Police, as a notoriously oppressive administrator who imprisons natives on the slightest excuse. No African dare venture to the top of the hill that borders the location. Meka ironically suffers under his authority after he had received and lost the white man's medal! He comes back rushing to his village almost exhausted, "The whites! Just the whites. I'm finished," he whispered. "The whites have very nearly killed me. Even if I died in another hundred years, I should know I died in Gullet's prison", (p. 145)⁵

But how does Meka take his suffering? He throws it back at the white man with contemptuous laughter as he sees the image of the white man reflecting in that of a pig.

"I see now," he panted. 'Why didn't I think of it before? It's the profile of the chief of the Whites. The world comes from the hand of God,' he repeated. 'No one can deny the same workman made the Chief of the Whites and this pig. "

In the end of the whole incident of the medal and Meka's suffering is washed off with palm-wine!

In *Houseboy* we see the picture of the chief of Police stealing banana from the house they have raided! Toundi Joseph, the houseboy, puts the raid down in his diary: 'Last night the location had a visit from Gullet, the Chief of Police. He gets his name from his long flexible neck like a tick-bird's neck.' (p.243) It is not just a visit, it is a raid that leaves fear, disruption, agony, nervous panic for the natives! In the end Toundi is wounded in one of the oppressive measures against the natives and as he lies dying his indignation is irrepressible as he exclaims to the narrator in agony.

"'Brother,' he said, 'Brother, what are we what are we black men who are called French?'
His voice grew bitter. I had never asked myself the question. I was younger then and thoughtless. I felt myself grow stupid.
'You see, brother,' he went on, 'I'm finish.... they 've got me...' He showed me his shoulder, 'Still I'm glad I'm dying well away from where they are.'" (p.4P)

V. The White Man as an alien:

Almost everywhere in the novels the white man's position as an alien in the African environment is emphasized. He is not only physically a stranger, he is socio-logically an outsider. In spite of everything, his stay, his authority and outward show of superiority, the African regards him as an alien and looks at him as such. Okonkwo puts the question mildly. 'Does the white man understand our custom about land?'

Camara Laye has created the figure of Clarence in *The Radiance of the King* as a direct humiliation of the white man as an alien, for a direct assault on the French policy of assimilation, Laye chooses a poor representative of Europe and puts him in direct contrast to the radiance of the African King. Clarence is a bankrupt European and this is not a welcome image for a white man in Africa! that is a severe contrast to the figure of the white man as District Commissioner or Police Superintendent or any other colonial figure. Clarence has no means of earning a living. He cannot even pay his bill at the restaurant. His decision to seek employment in the court of the African king is strange. Laye provides him with a beggar and two boys whose names even confuse him — Magoa and Moaga. These people take him through a kind of purgatorial experience, through the African township, savanna and forest, in his attempt to get to the king — a kind of eerie experience.

The more he tries to get near the king the more he remains on the outside as a stranger. The question being asked is 'why did he want to cross the reef that barred the coast of Africa at all costs?' (p.38)⁸ Here and there, there are signs and symbols to show that he does not belong. The dialogue between him and the beggar emphasises this truth. Not sure what kind of work he could do for the king he wants to serve, Clarence suggests drum beating. The beggar tells him the stark truth, 'Even if you had been allowed to beat a drum, your drumming would have had no meaning. You have to know how... You see, you're a white man',... (p.39); and so Clarence cannot comprehend the African way of life.

Clarence is swallowed up by the inscrutable forest of the south and the beggar tries to help him keep his sanity by pointing out the truth each time. 'A white man can't see everything either, because this land is not a white man's land.' (p.96). Jeannette Macaulay rightly sums up Clarence's dilemma this way: "He has to adapt himself to a new society, a society which does not need him in any way, a society whose conceptions of life, of the value of life and the values in life are completely different from his own."⁹

Clarence goes through series of suffocating and Kafkaian experiences in the African jungle and forest villages until he is completely sapped of his 'whiteness' or overwhelmed and strained by the force of African womanhood. He loses his mission. He loses his sanity and seems destroyed in the end because, when he is finally embraced by the King, he is already a changed man in his nakedness!

VI. Conclusion:

The image of the white man as cut in the West African Novel is an interesting one. We have seen him in various shades as he tries to interact with and convert the African to his own way of life. In many cases it is a funny shade the novelist's focus produces. Irony, satire and undisguised venom have produced these shades. On the whole the white man does not cut a contemptible figure. Often he acts in ridiculous ignorance and we laugh at him because he has always been and will remain a stranger on the African land.

Notes and References

1. James Ngugi, 'Satire in Nigeria' in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, (ed) Cosmo Pieterse & Donald Munro London: Heinemann, 1969, pp. 56-69.
2. James Ngugi is an East African novelist who writes about similar experiences with the white man in Kenya.
3. All page references to the novel are to Heinemann Educational Books Edition (African Writers Series) 1962.
4. All page references to the novel are to Heinemann, London 1966. (Translated from the French by John Reed).
5. All page references to the novel are to the East African Publishing House Edition, Nairobi, 1973.
6. All page references to the novel are to Heinemann, London, A.W.S. 1969. Translated from the French by John Reed.
7. All page references are to Heinemann, London, Second Edition, 1974.
8. G.D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*: (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.71.
9. All page references are to the Fontana Modern Novels Edition, 1956 (translated from the French).
10. Jeannette Macaulay, 'The Idea of Assimilation' in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, p.84.