

**TOWARDS AN AFRICAN PALIMPSEST: RE-TEXTUALIZING THE  
INFLUENCE OF CARY’S MISTER JOHNSON & CONRAD’S HEART OF  
DARKNESS ON ACHEBE’S THINGS FALL APART**

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*“The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time.”* Wole Soyinka, *The Writer in Modern Africa* (1968).

Since the earliest time of the development of narrative fiction amongst African writers, realism entailed, as a corollary to truth, the destruction of certain norms, the most crucial of which was European exotic and colonial literature with its manifesto of stereotypical portrayal of Africa and Africans. From the 1900 onwards, the novel form took a firm foothold in Africa as it did in Latin America, Asia and Australia. It became more so in Africa, because as Simon Gikandi points out, “modern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism” (Gikandi 54). One of the factors that ironically aided the development of the African novel is the devastating effects of colonization which became a recurrent motif in most African novels. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) describes the effects of colonization on traditional African society, and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in *The River Between* (1965) writes about the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1956) during which a group of Kikuyu people started armed struggle against the British imperialists who held sway in Kenya at the time. Even after most African nations had gained independence, the after-effects of colonialism still remained a concern. In South Africa, a major issue was apartheid, an official policy of racial separation that the government endorsed from 1948 to the early 1990s. In several of his works, including *A Walk in the Night* (1962), South African novelist Alex La Guma addresses the effects of apartheid on people’s everyday lives. Thus writers have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as advocates of radical social change. Their works both reflect and project the course of Africa’s Cultural Revolution (Lindfors, “Politics” 70).

Indeed, the growth of the novel became inevitable as a result of the resolution of foremost African writers to conjure up a more respectable image for the badly battered African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races. A variety of nineteenth century European texts where the social and cultural inferiority of Africa and Africans had been promulgated, resulted in a wounded ego on the part of many educated Africans and a resolve by some of them to counter such stereotypical portrayal through realistic fiction which taught Africans in the words of Chinua Achebe “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” (Lindfors, *Folklore* 73) but a glorious one of which they must be proud. Achebe believed that the central theme or concern for African writers should be directed in order to remind their audience “that African

peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had poetry, and, above all, they had dignity” (Lindfors, *Folklore* 73).

In his early (1979) comprehensive survey *The Growth of the African Novel*, scholar and critic Eustace Palmer writes, “Broadly speaking, the African novel is a response to and record of the traumatic consequences of the impact of Western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and institutions of the African peoples” (Palmer, *African* 63). This statement certainly applies to the narrative of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Palmer and others refer to Achebe’s novel as a response not only to the broad force of Western capitalist colonialism, but also to specific white European novelists’ portrayals of the people and culture of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Often enough to have become an assumption, *Things Fall Apart* has been considered a response to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). But is this, in fact, the case? Interviews with Achebe and one of his essays help to determine the literary object of the response.

In a 1962 interview after the success of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe stated in explicit terms that the author and portrayal that most affected his approach to his first novel were Joyce Cary and his portrayal of a young Nigerian civil servant in *Mister Johnson* (1939):

... I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel set in Nigeria, *Mr. Johnson* [sic], which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture of – not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside (Lindfors, *Conversations* 3-4).

His reference to Conrad was more general. When asked in the 1962 interview which writers he most admired, he answered, “I don’t really think that there’s any one I can say I admire all that much. I used to like Hemingway; and I used to like Conrad. I used to like Conrad particularly” (Lindfors, *Conversations* 6). As we will come to understand through later interviews and essays, there was deeper feeling beneath Achebe’s brief comment that he “used to like” Joseph Conrad, yet the point in time when Achebe changed his opinion remains a matter of conjecture.

One method of verifying the object of response is to examine the resemblances between *Things Fall Apart* and *Mister Johnson*, including the binary relationship of the central characters, who are clear opposites (thus suggesting the possibility that the second is a response to the first), as well as narrative elements that the novels seem to share. In the opening paragraphs of *Mister Johnson*, the author describes the effusive attention that Johnson pays to the ferryman’s daughter as she ferries him across the Fada River: “Johnson sat admiring her with a grin of pleasure and called out compliments, ‘What a pretty girl you are’” (Cary 1). The girl, Bamu, does not respond to Johnson’s efforts to gain her attention. She recognizes him as an outsider and treats him as one: “Strangers are still rare in the Fada bush and they are received with doubt” (Cary 1). Ostensibly through the eyes of Bamu, the novelist enumerates the features of Johnson’s strangeness:

Johnson is not only a stranger by accent, but by color. He is as black as a stove, almost a pure Negro, with a short nose and full, soft lips. He is young, perhaps seventeen, and seems half-grown. His neck, legs and arms

are much too long and thin for his small body, as narrow as a skinned rabbit's. He is loose jointed like a boy, and sits with his knees up to his nose, grinning at Bamu over the stretched white cotton of his trousers. He smiles with the delighted expression of a child looking at a birthday table and says, "Oh, you are too pretty – a beautiful girl" (Cary 1).

Cary's portrayal of Johnson as a caricature of an ambitious, yet inept young African man is reinforced by the image of Johnson on the dust jacket of the stated first American edition of *Mister Johnson*. Though the same image may not have appeared on the cover of the original British publication, it is worth describing in some detail. Tall and skinny, grinning broadly, wearing a pith helmet and white suit, holding an umbrella at his side that has a broken spoke, the figure of Johnson is similar to a character in a cartoon. He stands in mid-stride in the foreground of a scene behind him that is similarly cartoonish: straw-roofed huts, a gnarled Baobab tree indigenous to Africa, and a bare-breasted young African woman in an ankle-length wrapped skirt balancing an urn on top of her head.

Perhaps in deliberate contrast to the casual tone of the opening paragraphs describing Mister Johnson are the dignified opening paragraphs of *Things Fall Apart* that introduce Okonkwo. In the novel's famous first paragraph, Achebe provides this introduction to his central character:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (Achebe, *Things* 3).

It would appear deliberate when Achebe writes that Okonkwo threw the Cat as "a young man of eighteen" after Cary wrote of Johnson "he is young, perhaps seventeen." In this way, the two central characters are identified as chronological counterparts. Though Achebe's physical description of Okonkwo is reported "twenty years or more" after his fight with the Cat, we can assume that he was impressive as a young man if he was to mature into this adult man:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get the words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men (Achebe, *Things* 4).

Achebe describes Okonkwo in terms that are opposite to Cary's description of Johnson. For example, Okonkwo walks on the balls of his feet as if he is going to pounce; Johnson walks "at a pace between a trot and a lope. In his loose-jointed action, it resembles a dance. He jumps over roots and holes like a ballet dancer, as if he enjoyed the exercise" (Cary 4).

The characters differ in other ways as well. Where Johnson is glib, Okonkwo speaks with a stammer. Where Johnson is mostly talk, Okonkwo is a man of action. Where Johnson brags about his importance in the government despite being a lowly clerk, Okonkwo has earned his status as a leader in the village through warfare and economic success. In terms of commonality, both men meet a tragic end as a consequence of having committed a violent act; but Johnson's misdeed is a criminal murder in the process of committing theft while Okonkwo's crime is in defense of the rights of the village, even if committed on impulse. Based on central characters whose fates unfold within an approximate similarity of plot structure – a series of circumstances and actions (and interactions between black men and white men) that lead to a tragic end – I conclude that the opening of *Things Fall Apart* is a direct response to *Mister Johnson*, as are other aspects of the novel, for instance, the villagers' celebration of the wrestler Okafo in song (Achebe, *Things* 50-51) in opposition to Johnson's self-celebration of his imagined prowess in song (Cary 147-48).

In a second 1962 interview, Achebe's views on his influences are similar to those expressed in the first. He acknowledges his "debt" to Cary in more ambivalent terms than in the first interview, though once again citing *Mister Johnson* as the novel that most motivated him to write the two novels that he had published at that time. The second novel was *No Longer at Ease* (1960), which had been drafted as part of the same project from which emerged *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964):

I had been impressed by the works of Joyce Cary and especially by one of his books, *Mister Johnson*, in which he shows Nigerian characters. He is an excellent English writer who has lived here, for he resided in Northern Nigeria during his youth, but cannot see the Hausa like a proper Nigerian and, in fact, what results is more of a caricature than a true description. Also, reading Cary impelled me to show what was false in him and brought forth a desire to write that I've had for a long time (Lindfors, *Conversations* 8).

Achebe does not mention Joseph Conrad in the second interview, though it should be noted that an interview subject's answers depend on the information solicited by the interviewer's questions; nor is there mention of Conrad in a third interview conducted in 1963. In the third, Achebe continues to express his objections to *Mister Johnson*. One of the two interviewers asks Achebe if, when he attended University College, Ibadan, he found any "precursors in the West African novel – English people who had written novels about your society which you could use as a model" (Lindfors, *Conversations* 13). The author's response is direct and pointed:

There wasn't very much when I was at college. Joyce Cary had written some books. If I may say so, perhaps he helped to inspire me, but not in the usual way. I was very angry with his book *Mister Johnson*, which was set in Nigeria. I happened to read this, I think, in my second year, and I said to myself, this is absurd. If somebody without any inside knowledge of the people he is trying to describe can get away with it, perhaps I ought to try my hand at it (Lindfors, *Conversations* 13).

By the time of a fourth interview in 1967, Achebe had given up a full-time position as director of external broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation and was able to support himself from the income of his writing. *Things Fall Apart* had become a school text and



sold 120,000 copies (Lindfors, *Conversations* 21). He had published the third volume of the trilogy stemming from his original project, *Arrow of God*, and the hardcover edition of his fourth novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), had sold out. Perhaps success had softened his criticism of Joyce Cary, or so it appeared in the interview:

*Do you know of any European writers in Africa really able to portray African characters, really getting under the skin of their characters? Well, I can only talk about Nigeria. The most competent writer to try was Joyce Cary – a fine writer, but he didn't succeed. His famous novel Mister Johnson is highly praised, especially by Europeans, but it seems to be to portray not a character but a caricature. I mean Johnson does not begin to live for me (Lindfors, *Conversations* 25).*

Once again there was no mention of Conrad. Given Achebe's frequent and consistent references to *Mister Johnson* in the interviews, one might ask what the evidence is that has led some scholars and critics to assume that the desire to respond to *Heart of Darkness* played a significant role in Achebe's writing *Things Fall Apart*. I was able to bring the question to Eustace Palmer by e-mail, asking his informed opinion on whether *Heart of Darkness* had influenced Achebe, and to what extent the desire to respond to *Mister Johnson* might have influenced him. Palmer answered that on the previous day in his Introduction to African Studies class, he had told his students that Achebe had written the novel "in response to the negative views of Africa put across by some Western people, in particular by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and Cary in *Mister Johnson*" (Palmer, "Re: Considering").

Palmer made a distinction between the immediacy of the two influences on the Achebe work, yet felt that both were influential:

*While the immediate stimulus for writing the novel might have been Mister Johnson, I am quite sure that he was also responding to Conrad's portrayal of Africa in Heart of Darkness, which I am sure he had read while at the University of Ibadan [sic]. In fact, as you are probably aware, he has a famous article ... in which, among other things, he roundly condemns Conrad for racism, based on his portrayal of the African situation in Heart of Darkness. I also heard him deliver a lecture in which his main preoccupation was Conrad's view of Africa in Heart of Darkness (Palmer, "Re: Considering").*

Despite Palmer's certainty, it is difficult – if not impossible – to confirm that Achebe read *Heart of Darkness* while at University College, Ibadan, (1948 to 1953) or in secondary school. For one thing, as a result of Achebe's secondary school final examination, his guardian decided that he should study medicine, not literature. Achebe had scored higher in physics/chemistry, biology, geography, Bible knowledge, and mathematics (in which he received A's) than he did in English language and English literature (C's). Achebe's biographer, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, makes reference to one of the instructors in the Department of English teaching *Mister Johnson* to Achebe and other students (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44), yet there is no similar reference to *Heart of Darkness*.

In a 1998 lecture at Harvard, Achebe confirmed that he was required to read *Mister Johnson* at university: "... we find a class of Nigerian university students in 1952 having to study that book for their Bachelor of Arts degree of London University" (Achebe, *Home* 31). The author's reference to his degree being "of London University" is because University College,

Ibadan was modeled on – and supervised by – the British university (Achebe, *Home* 21). Once again, there is no parallel reference to having been required to read *Heart of Darkness*.

The biographer, however, suggests that in a general way, Achebe and his fellow students were gaining insight of the type that Achebe would later demonstrate in his critique of Conrad's short novel:

It was becoming clear to [the students] that there were different possibilities in the representation of characters that depended on the perspective of the writer. Achebe was one of the students who realized that there could be misjudgement and even straightforward discrimination and distortion. The European authors they read presented their works in such a way, according to Achebe, that the reader's sympathies were controlled: "We should have immediately identified with the Africans but this was impossible because the dice was loaded against them, the way the story was told, the way the author took sides. Achebe began to detect the distinct positions taken in the stories he had read and this realization began to erase his secondary school innocence, when he had read stories as mere adventures" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44).

Though undated in the biography, this paragraph is based on an interview with Achebe conducted in 1983. The account of the students' changing perspective on their reading leaves room for Achebe's having read *Heart of Darkness* in either secondary school or university, but does not confirm it.

In the interview, Achebe uses an anecdote to illustrate the transition that was occurring in his and fellow students' thinking:

We were able to say: I don't think this is fair or right! I remember one of the brightest students in my class, Olumide, saying something to the effect that the only moment he enjoyed Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* was the moment when Johnson was shot. This horrified our English teacher. But you can see that we were beginning to struggle out of the position into which we had been placed. And if one exaggerated, that should be understood (Lindfors, *Conversations* 113).

He was to recount this anecdote in a later essay.

The first reference in the biography to Achebe's possible objection to the work of Conrad appears in the chapter covering 1963-1966. The context is critic Gerald Moore's favourable review in 1964 of *Arrow of God*: "Moore's reaction is particularly interesting when considered of the displeasure Achebe had felt on encountering the fictional African characters of Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 100). Unfortunately, the biographer provides no additional information on the origins of Achebe's displeasure with Conrad, and only the anecdote quoted above in regard to Cary (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44).

The first direct reference to *Heart of Darkness* in the published interviews is found in an interview Achebe gave in April 1980 at the conference of the African Literature Association in Florida. One should note that the reference appears in the question rather than in the answer. The question and its rambling prefatory remarks are as follows:

Foreign commentators like David Carroll and Lloyd Brown appear to have got the message in your novels and this is why they have been able to write very brilliant essays juxtaposing your balanced view of Africa and

the prejudiced view of Conrad's Africa, "the heart of darkness." If you were to write a novel today, what would its message be? (Lindfors, *Conversations* 72-73).

Given the opening provided by the remarks preceding the interviewer's actual question, Achebe does not respond with criticism of Conrad or *Heart of Darkness* in his answer, even though he deflects the question about the hypothetical novel and responds instead to the introduction to the question. The information contained in the preface to the interviewer's question, which names commentators with whose writings Achebe appears to be familiar in his answer, suggests that Achebe might have begun to pay more attention to *Heart of Darkness* as the result of critical commentary on his growing body of work, rather than before or during the writing of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

That the critics juxtaposed Achebe's "balanced view of Africa" with "the prejudiced view of Conrad's Africa" may have suggested to Achebe a critical platform from which he could engage the work of one of the most widely read authors in English literature, rather than continue to object to a lesser-known novel by the less famous writer Joyce Cary. Achebe might have concluded that engagement with Conrad would enable him to escalate his objections beyond Cary's portrayal (or caricature) of Nigeria and Nigerians to the larger topic of racism.

The lecture that became Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" took place in February 1975 at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, five years before the interviewer's leading question in 1980. The timing makes it especially interesting that Achebe chose not to follow the interviewer's lead with a discussion of – or even a reference to – a perspective on *Heart of Darkness* that he already had voiced. Perhaps the mixed response that greeted his lecture, or the responsibility of justifying charges of racism against a canonical author, served to mute his public criticism of Conrad outside of the environment of a university lecture and subsequent essay. Another possible explanation for the omission of Conrad in Achebe's answer might be that he felt that he already had expressed his views on the subject at the conference.

When I asked Eustace Palmer where and when he might have heard Achebe's lecture on *Heart of Darkness*, he responded, "I think Achebe made the remarks at a meeting of the African Literature Association, but I honestly cannot remember which one now. However, he was making about the same points he made in the race article ..." (Palmer, "Re: Considering"). This may have been the same 1980 conference at which Achebe was interviewed. One can only imagine the impact of Achebe's 1975 lecture on the academic audience who heard it. Achebe recalled that an older member of the English faculty approached him at the reception following the lecture, admonishing "How dare you!" and walked away. Another listener accused Achebe of having no sense of humour (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 190).

In the lecture and essay, Achebe framed his argument toward Conrad as arising from "the desire – one might 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 spiritual state of grace will be manifest" (Achebe, *Hopes* 2-3). He continues:

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 competence to embark on this exercise with the tools of the social and biological sciences, but do so 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 (Achebe, *Hopes* 3).

Achebe's argument of Africa as binary to Europe bears a strong parallel to the critique Edward Said would express in *Orientalism*, which would be published three years later. In 1975, Achebe said that "*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 bestiality" (Achebe, *Hopes* 3).

Having described Conrad toward the beginning of his University of Massachusetts lecture as "undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story-teller into the bargain" (Achebe, *Hopes* 3), Achebe criticized both the style and the depiction of Africans in the story. In regard to style, he cited two sentences from *Heart of Darkness* as examples of Conrad's method: "a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy" (Achebe, *Hopes* 4). The first sentence was, "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (Conrad 28). The second was, "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy" (Conrad 36). Achebe commented: "Of course, there is a change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of 'inscrutable,' for example, you might have unspeakable, even plain 'mysterious,' etc., etc." (Achebe, *Hopes* 4).

In regard to the depiction of Africans, Achebe quoted a long passage that he believed illustrated Conrad's attitude toward them. The portion of the passage that particularly offended Achebe was:

... 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 suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you ... could comprehend (Conrad 45).

Citing additional passages – on an African who was the vessel's fireman, a boat "paddled by black fellows" who "had faces like grotesque masks" (Conrad 37) and contrasting descriptions of Kurtz's African mistress and a European woman – Achebe built carefully to the central point of his argument: "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" (Achebe, *Hopes* 11).

Given the power and politically charged nature of Achebe's argument against an esteemed literary figure, one can understand why there might be a perception that *Things Fall Apart* was Achebe's response to Conrad. Where Conrad depicted Africans as savages, Achebe wrote about them as people. In fact, in the version of his lecture published as an essay, he said he had hoped to end on just such a "positive note":

... 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 (Achebe, *Hopes* 18).

Upon further consideration of the West's view of Africa expressed in the media, school textbooks, and organized religion, he felt that he could not be that hopeful.

In opposition to the frenzied images conveyed by Conrad, Eustace Palmer describes in his book Achebe's portrayal of the orderly society in which Okonkwo and his fellow villagers lived:

The elaborate religious order correlated with an equally elaborate social and administrative system ensuring decency, justice and stability ... The administrative, social and judicial arrangements were interrelated and linked with the religious system. Through the social structure and the various initiation rituals, the individual came to learn the norms of behaviour (Palmer, *African* 66).

Through Achebe's descriptions of the personalities, customs, rituals, and governance of the villagers in almost anthropological detail, one can understand how scholars could interpret the novel as a response to *Heart of Darkness* as well as *Mister Johnson*. However, there is no specific evidence of this in the record of conversations with Achebe or in his biography. To arrive at this conclusion, one must make the assumption that he read *Heart of Darkness* before writing *Things Fall Apart* and had it in mind as he wrote. Given the lack of evidence for this in interviews and biography, it would seem more likely that Achebe might have glossed over Conrad's short novel in school readings or that it might not have been assigned at all.

While the question of response is of historical and biographical interest, it does not diminish in any way the power of Achebe's response to *Heart of Darkness* in his lecture at the University of Massachusetts or in his teaching of African literature, often in the United States. When asked in a 1987 interview about his experiences teaching African literature, he responded:

In America the problem is different. Here you are dealing with students who are coming out of a tradition where Africa is not really like anywhere else they know: Africa in literature, Africa in the newspapers, Africa in the sermons preached in the churches is really the Other Place. It is the Africa of *Heart of Darkness*: there are no real people in the Dark Continent, only *forces* operating; and people don't speak any language you can understand, they just grunt, too busy jumping up and down in frenzy. This is what is in the minds of these students as they come to African literature. So I find that the first thing is to familiarize them with Africa, make them think that this is a place of *people*; it's not the Other Place, the opposite of Europe or America. That is quite a task (Lindfors, *Conversations* 153).

Though the alternate silence and frenzy of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* create a powerful literary vision to which a powerful novel such as *Things Fall Apart* would be an equivalent response, Achebe's consistent interview comments and biography appear to indicate that his first novel was a response to *Mister Johnson* alone.

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