

Aula 4

POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE: CHINUA ACHEBE

META

Introduce students to Chinua Achebe's life and work

OBJETIVO

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

Outline a short biography of Chinua Achebe, placing some emphasis on his contribution to what could be loosely called 'African literature'.

Make a concise presentation of Achebe's novels and a list of his short stories and poems.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the historicity of the concept of literature;

Notions of the process of formation and institutionalization of Literary History and literary theory as disciplines that have in Literature its object of study.

Notions of the relationship between Literary History and literature teaching.

Luiz Eduardo Oliveira
José Augusto Batista dos Santos

INTRODUÇÃO

In this lesson, we will be studying Chinua Achebe, a very important author in African literature. He was born in Nigeria on November 16th 1930 in the Igbo village of Ogidi. His real name was Albert Chinualumogu Achebe. Although his parents had been converted into Christianity by missionaries from the Protestant Church Mission Society (CMS), Achebe's father seemed to respect his ancestor's traditions, of which fact the name Chinualumogu is a reminder, since it is a prayer for divine protection and stability that could be translated as "May God fight on my behalf". Having to live between two worlds, namely, that of Christianity and that of traditional beliefs has no doubt played a significant role in Achebe's education and, later, in his work.



He was born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, 16 November 1930 – 21 March 2013. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe

Achebe's family as well as himself belonged to an ethnic group known as Igbo, who was one of the largest in Nigeria. In their tradition, storytelling was an integral part of the community. As a child, Achebe would be told many stories by his mother and sister, a habit which he seemed to enjoy. Certainly, this fondness towards storytelling helped him excel in school, particularly at writing and reading. In 1936, Achebe entered St. Philips' Central School and was quickly moved to a higher class when the school's chaplain took note of his intelligence. He also attended Sunday school as well as other evangelical services weekly along with his father. When he was 12, his family moved to the village of Nokede, where he attended the

Central School. In 1944, he managed to get accepted by notorious secondary schools such as the prestigious Dennis Memorial Grammar School in Onitsha and the Government College in Humahia.

The experiences he lived in the latter would be targeted by his critiques, as he grew older. The Government College was modeled on the British public school, and funded by the colonial administration, and aimed to educate Nigeria's future elite. For that reason, it had rigorous academic standards, which Achebe seemed to be able to meet without much effort. Furthermore, given that English was the only language which should be used in the institution, he was able to develop his proficiency as well as get in contact with pupils who did not speak his mother tongue, however, not without going under some sort of punishment for speaking Igbo at particular occasions. Later, such an imposition of the English language to the detriment of students' native languages would go under heavy criticism in some of his works.

Despite the strictness of the rules in the Government College, Achebe soon stood out from the others, having been able to complete two years in one, which allowed him to finish secondary school one year earlier. He read extensively in the school library where he discovered books like *Up from Slavery* (1901) by Booker T. Washington as well as classic novels such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Treasure Island* (1883), and alike. Later in life, he would talk about how most of these works portrayed the natives in a negative light, as it seemed to be the case with *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad against which he leveled heavy criticism in a lecture delivered on February 18, 1975, at the University of Massachusetts, entitled *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*.

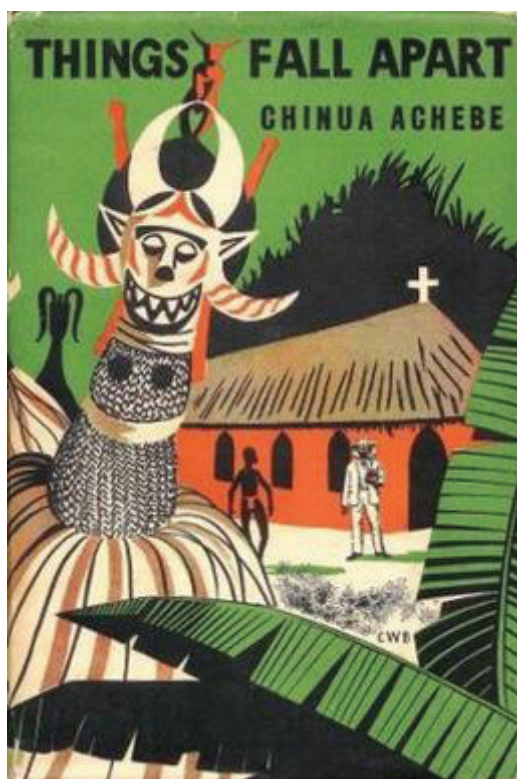
Apparently, it was during his time in college that Achebe finally made up his mind as to becoming a writer. Originally, he had been admitted into the University College, the first Nigeria's higher education institution, to study medicine for which course he was given a bursary. During this time period, he became more and more critical of what European writers wrote about Africa and, at some point, encountered *Mister Johnson* (1939), a work by Joyce Cary which portrayed Nigerians under so depreciating terms that he decided to abandon medicine and turn to English, history and theology, losing, however, his scholarship and having to pay tuition. While in college, he wrote his first short story *In a Village Church* in which one can already see a style taking shape. Achebe makes extensive reference to life in rural Nigeria as well as to Christian institutions and icons. Such elements would also be found in his later works.

After finishing college, Achebe taught for a short time before joining the staff of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos, where he worked as director of external broadcasting. In 1967 he did some publishing work with the poet Christopher Okigbo, who died shortly thereafter in

the Nigerian civil war for Biafran independence. In 1969, Achebe toured the United States with fellow writers Gabriel Okara and Cyprian Ekwensi, delivering lectures at universities. After an automobile accident in Nigeria in 1990 that left him partially paralyzed, he moved to the United States, where he taught at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. In 2009, Achebe left Bard to join the faculty of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

CHINUA ACHEBE: THE NOVELIST

In the following paragraphs, you will see a short description of Achebe's novels. We should start with the one that put Africa on the map. Its title, *Things Fall Apart*, comes from a line in the poem *The Second Coming* by W.B. Yeats. It became one of the most important books in African literature. It sold over 20 million copies around the world, being translated into 57 languages, making Achebe the most translated African writer of all time.



Things Fall Apart is a novel written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Published in 1958, its story chronicles pre-colonial life in the Southeastern part of Nigeria and the arrival of the Europeans during the late nineteenth century. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart

As it is suggested by its title, the novel narrates how the Igbo society, along with all its beliefs and traditions, disintegrated after the arrival of the European during the late 19th century. The fall of the community coincides with the protagonist's death, Okonkwo, an Igbo man and local wrestling champion in the fictional Nigerian clan of Umuofia. The book can be divided into three sections. The first one is dedicated to the description of Okonkwo's family and how he had been able to move his way up to notoriety by working hard and being persistent. Also, the customs and traditions of Igbo society are laid out therein. It is consistent picture of what social life was like among the Igbo people.

In the second part of the book, there is an account of how the first white missionaries arrived at the region with the intent of spreading their religion. During such a period, the protagonist was exiled for having killed a clan member by accident. It is interesting to note that the strategies put in effect by the missionaries seemed to be the same employed in other regions where Christian groups intended to make converts. At first, they arrived in small numbers peacefully asking for a plot of land. Then, they set up churches, schools and hospitals apparently aiming to assist the local community. As a result, within a short period of time, they are able to make followers and, once they feel they have a firm grip on the community, colonial administration comes in and sets their own rules. The control of the community, therefore, is shifted from the hands of the local chiefs to those of the colonial masters.

The third part of the novel narrates Okonkwo's return to the village of Umuofia and the incidents which led to the story climax. A convert to Christianity unmasked an elder while he embodied an ancestral spirit. Such an act was unacceptable in the Igbo tradition, for which reason they retaliated by setting fire on the local church. So, the colonial administration leader ordered the arrest of Okonkwo as well as other native leaders. They were taken to prison, whipped, had their heads shaved, which was considered an extreme act of humiliation and were only released under ransom. For Okonkwo, who known for his courage and warrior pride, this was an ultimatum. Soon after their release, the people of Umuofia gathered to decide on the matter. The meeting, however, was interrupted by government messengers one of whom is beheaded by Okonkwo. An act that in the past would praised by the people of Umuofia was taken with great apprehension. That is when Okonkwo realizes that his people had been softened by the white men and their ancestral traditions had been forgotten. The world they once lived in had fallen apart. In order to avoid being trialed by the colonial administration, he decided to commit suicide, leaving a stain on his name, since this practice was against Igbo customs.

Many critics say that the novel is an account of an African people given by an African writer. Until Achebe, most of the novels about Africa which

achieved some visibility had been written by Europeans, *Things Fall Apart* is definitely a successful attempt to provide a narrative told by a different perspective, according to which African natives are more than savages. And indeed there is a humanizing effort throughout the story. However, interestingly enough, Achebe seems to be able to shift the angle from which Africans were seen by Europeans (as less than humans) without committing a common mistake: that of picturing them as perfect beings.

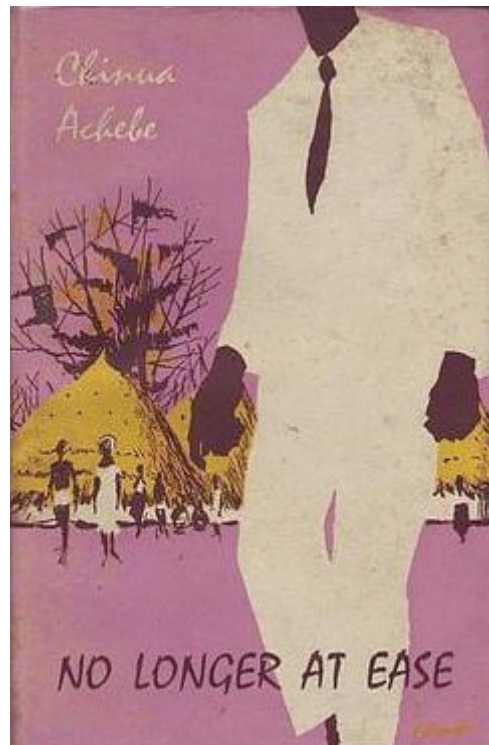
Okonkwo, for instance, is notably violent – he even beat his wife once during a sacred week, breaking tradition –; he hates everything which resembles his father, whom he was ashamed of for he was idle and a debtor. He feared failure more than the community's gods. He is far from perfect and that is humanizing to some extent. The same could be said about the Igbo society, which was clearly structured according to a patriarchal hierarchy. So much so that the term “agbala”, in addition to being another name to “woman”, it could also refer to a man who had not been able to take any title, as the following passage from the novel suggests

Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title (p. 7).

Achebe does not try to idealize the Igbo community. It had its issues and conflicts just like any other community be it from Africa or any other continent. The book has different layers as well as subplots which make it even more interesting and thought-provoking.

NO LONGER AT EASE (1960)

Published in 1960, this novel tells the story of an Igbo man named Obi Okonkwo, who left his village for an education in Britain and then a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service, but is conflicted between his African culture and Western lifestyle and ends up taking a bribe. The book is part of a trilogy sometimes referred to as the “African trilogy”, formed by *Things Fall Apart*, *The Arrow of God* and itself. *Things Fall Apart* concerns the struggle of Obi Okonkwo's grandfather Okonkwo against the changes brought by the English.



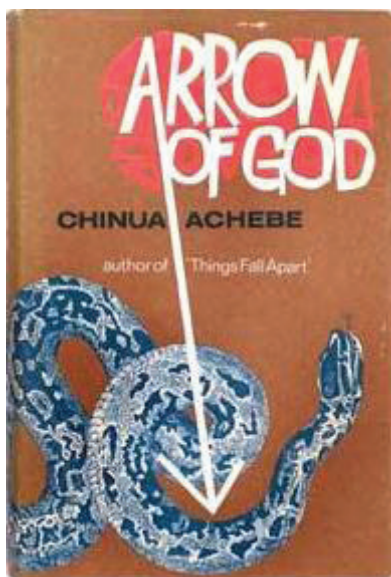
No Longer at Ease is a 1960 novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. It is the story of an Igbo man, Obi Okonkwo, who leaves his village for an education in Britain and then a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service, but is conflicted between his African culture and Western lifestyle and ends up taking a bribe. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Longer_at_Ease

No longer at Ease is a tragic story. Its main character is Obi Okonkwo, whose fatal flaw is his arrogant belief that he can change an entire culture and its norms. He thought he could change the culture of corruption in Nigeria and, at first, he was very passionate about fighting this social evil, which placed him at odds with his countrymen from Umuofia. Over time, however, he changes and ends up becoming corrupt, too, a mistake that eventually made him from grace publicly. The novel closes as Obi takes a bribe and tells himself that it is the last one he will take, only to discover that the bribe was part of a sting operation. He is, then, arrested and taken to court.

The book continues to work the themes present in *Things Fall Apart*, such as the conflict between European and traditional cultures and how Obi tries to conciliate these apparently opposing worlds. There is also a direct connection between the characters of both novels, since Obi is Okonkwo's grandson, and seems to have taken some of his grandfather's traces such as his outspokenness and confrontational behavior.

THE ARROW OF GOD

This is an award-winning novel, published in 1964, completing the abovementioned African trilogy. It keeps most of the themes and settings from the two previous ones and centers itself on a character named Ezeulu, the chief priest of several Igbo villages in Colonial Nigeria. As its title suggests, religion is a central topic throughout the story. In fact, the book narrates how Christian missionaries managed to make the local people abandon their traditional beliefs and embrace Christianity as their new faith.



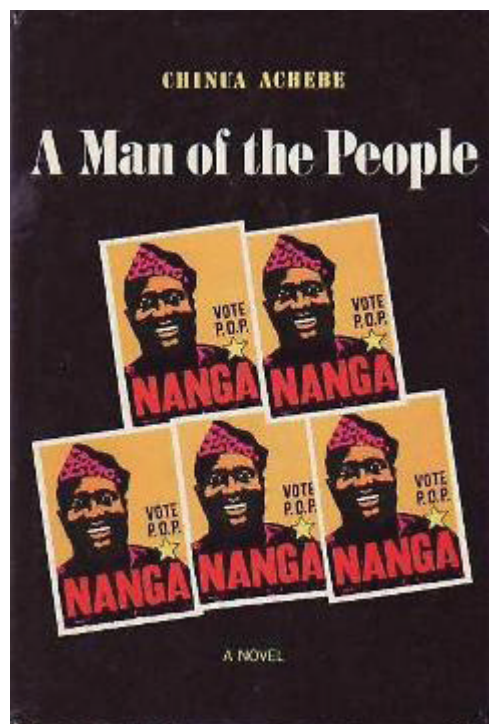
Arrow of God is a 1964 novel by Chinua Achebe, his third. It followed his book Things Fall Apart. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow_of_God

For this end, a missionary called John Goodcountry was sent to the village by the British administration to persuade locals to forsake their traditional “bad customs” and turn to the true religion – Christianity. Ezeulu, a respected priest in the region, was invited to work for the colonial administration, but he refused to be a “white men’s chief”, which cost him his freedom for several months. Eventually, missionaries managed to persuade the people to abandon their faith in favor of Christianity, at a moment in which Ezeulu’s credibility was low for he was blamed for the famine that hit the area. In some respects, the story echoes some of religious clashes that can be seen in Things Fall Apart.

A MAN OF THE PEOPLE (1966)

Corruption, revenge and politics are constant themes throughout this novel. Its title refers to Chief Nanga, a former teacher who became a powerful but corrupt Minister of Culture. As a public figure, Nanga's job is to protect the traditions of his country especially when he is known as "A Man of the People". Instead, he takes advantage of his position to increase his personal wealth and power that proves particularly alluring to Odili's girlfriend; she cheats on him with the minister. Seeking revenge, Odili begins to pursue the minister's fiancée. Odili agrees to lead an opposition party in the face of both bribes and violent threats. Then there is a military coup.

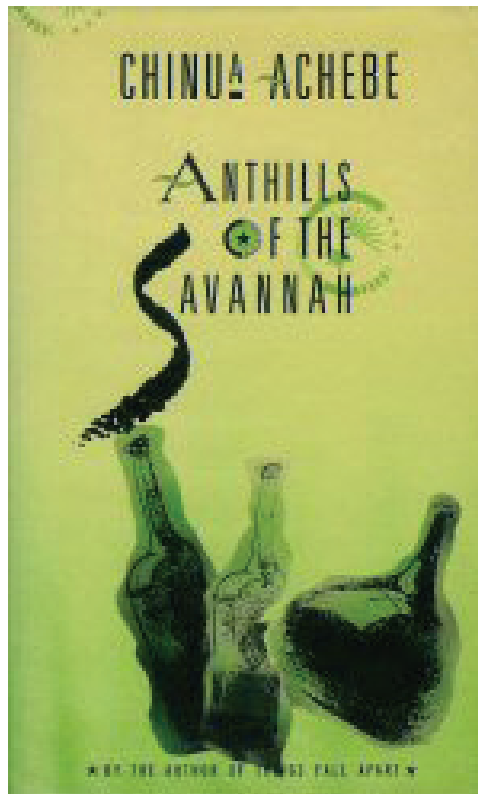
The novel offers a critical perspective on the nature of politics, power, and greed. Achebe assumes an "outside" perspective in order to illustrate the profound effects of governmental corruption. Although the story takes place in an anonymous African country, it is clear that Achebe was profoundly influenced by his own experiences with Nigerian politics. However, with this geographical anonymity, Achebe aimed to portray more generally the conditions and struggles of neocolonial Africa.



This satirical novel is a story told by the young and educated narrator, Odili, on his conflict with Chief Nanga, his former teacher who enters a career in politics in an unnamed modern African country. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Man_of_the_People

ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH (1987)

Published 21 years after *A Man of the People*, the novel *Anthills of the Savannah* is a socio-political commentary set in the fictitious nation of Kangan. It has been described as the most important novel to come out of Africa in the 1980s. The story begins with the readers being treated to an inside look into a presidential cabinet meeting. It is revealed that the country has had a shaky two years of existence, having come from a chaotic political upheaval, ousting a dictator from the highest office of the land. Achebe describes the political situation through the experiences of three friends: Chris Oriko, the government's Commissioner for Information; Beatrice Okoh, an official in the Ministry of Finance and girlfriend of Chris; and Ikem Osodi, a newspaper editor critical of the regime. The novel culminates in the assassination of Ikem by the regime, the toppling and death of Sam and finally the murder of Chris.



It was his fifth novel, first published in the UK 21 years after Achebe's previous one (*A Man of the People* in 1966), and was credited with having "revived his reputation in Britain". Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthills_of_the_Savannah

ACHEBE: THE SHORT STORY WRITER

Achebe also published a series of short stories, as you will see as follows:

- Marriage Is a Private Affair (1952)
- Dead Men's Path (1953)
- The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories (1953)
- Civil Peace (1971)
- Girls at War and Other Stories (including "Vengeful Creditor") (1973)
- African Short Stories (editor, with C. L. Innes) (1985)
- The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories (1992)
- The Voter (1965)

Achebe: the poet

- Beware, Soul-Brother, and Other Poems (1971) (published in the US as Christmas in Biafra, and Other Poems, 1973)
- Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo (editor, with Dubem Okafor) (1978)
- Another Africa (with Robert Lyons) (1998)
- Collected Poems – Penguin Books, 2004.
- Refugee Mother and Child
- Vultures

CONCLUSÃO

As we hope you were able to see, Achebe has a significant as well as diverse work, which includes novels, short stories, poetry, critical essays that have not been mentioned in the lesson for the sake of space limits, and children's books like Chike and the River (1966), which narrates the story of a Nigerian boy who leaves his village, Umuofia, to go and stay with his uncle in the big city. Given its relevance and reach, Achebe's work became representative of authentic African literature to the extent that he started to be considered by many as its father and main promotor.



RESUMO

In this lesson, you will be introduced to a short biography of Chinua Achebe as well as some his work. We will make some concise remarks on his novels, by placing some emphasis on Things Fall Apart, given its popularity and widespread positive critical response. As for the others, only some mention of their main themes will be made. Lastly, you will see a list of his short stories and poetry collections.



Write a short text (at most two pages), using 12-point font size, Times New Roman, and 1.5 line spacing, summarizing the main points of this lesson.

ACTIVITY COMMENT

This activity aims at building a text-synthesis of the main points addressed in this lesson. It will also allow the student to develop his/her text-making skill as well as better assimilate what was discussed throughout the lesson.



PRÓXIMA AULA

Post-colonial Literature: contributions of Edward Said

REFERÊNCIAS

Bibliography on Postcolonial studies

- Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**. New York: Anchor Books, 1994
- Booker, M. Keith. **The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia**. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Franklin, Ruth. **“After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the Great African Novel”**. *The New Yorker*, 26 May 2008. Retrieved 7 December 2010.
- Holger G. Ehling. **Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah**. The Netherlands: Rodopi, 1991. 1
- “Mbari Mbayo Club”, Encyclopædia Britannica.
- Mackay, Mercedes (October 1961). **“No Longer At Ease by Chinua Achebe”**. *African Affairs Lerner*, Arthur (Summer 1961). “No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe”. *Books Abroad*.
- Mkapa, Ben (January 1962). **“No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe”**. *Transition*.
- Nnamdi Ken Amobi (13 April 2013). **“Chinua Achebe: Ogidi man first, Ogidi man last”**. *Vanguard*. Lagos. Retrieved 18 January 2014.
- Rogers, Philip (1983). **““No Longer at Ease”: Chinua Achebe’s “Heart of Whiteness””**. *Research in African Literatures*. <https://www.gradesaver.com/anthills-of-the-savannah/study-guide/summary>