

**The Difference in the Representation of the “Black” Protagonist in**

***Oroonoko and Things Fall Apart***

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**I n s p i r i n g   E x c e l l e n c e**

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***Oroonoko and Things Fall Apart***

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## Abstract

Colonialism is a historical phenomenon which was established a long time ago where a nation proceeds to extend and retain its authority over other people and territories. It was a policy followed by a number of European countries in a quest for conquering parts of the world. The drastic aftereffects of colonialism are seen even today evidently through the struggles of several post-colonial countries. At a certain point, it appeared to be established that the number of colonies of a country was the symbol of the strength of the country. This inspired voyagers to go out and find new lands to conquer, in order to establish their power and dominance. The European colonial period is the time period from the 16th century to the mid-20th century when several European powers established colonies in Asia, Africa, and America. Colonialism affected the countries in a number of aspects, including the social, political and economic parts of the people's lives. Colonialism had a massive impact on literature as well. There are a number of works of literature which have been affected due to the outcome of colonialism.

Literature has always been and always will be a door to events that take place in the world. Thus it is very apparent that the events of colonisation will have a huge effect in the field of literature. This is exactly what we see in the selected two novels by the well-respected authors. This paper focuses on the protagonists of Aphra Behn's acclaimed novel *Oroonoko* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both the novels focus on a member of a black community and show how that person is affected by the process of colonialism. Behn's novel revolves around the central protagonist, Oroonoko who was born a prince but because of a series of unfortunate events, ends up as a slave. The story is an account of what happens to this great black prince.

Achebe's novel tells the story of a warrior and a respected member of his community Okonkwo, who finally comes to realize the extent of the power of the British government. He gradually sees that all the great warriors of his village are preparing to give up without a fight and that all his traditions and customs are slowly coming to an end. It is this realization that in the end causes him to take his own life, even though the act of committing suicide is seen in a very negative light in their culture. Thus, we see this once great and brave man decide to take a cowardly way out in life. This paper will show the difference between the British author Aphra Behn and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's representation of a black protagonist in their respective novels. In order to show this distinction between the two novels, we will take a thorough look at how the two novels vary in the narration, the description of the homeland and finally how the two authors explore the ultimate fate of respective protagonists.

The paper is divided into six chapters which will explain in details how the two authors portray the same concept in very different manners. The paper will revolve round the lifestyle and several events surrounding the protagonists, which the authors have portrayed in very different lights in the two novels. By taking an elaborate look at the two novels, what this paper intends to establish is how the two authors focus on a similar concept and yet show a very different perspective surrounding the concept.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

*“Turning and turning in the widening gyre,/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”* this is the introduction of Chinua Achebe’s renowned novel *Things Fall Apart*. It is a stanza from W.B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming”, and is used as an epigraph in the novel. This paper will be focusing on the representation of colonialism in literature through the two novels *Oroonoko* and *Things Fall Apart*. The novels revolve round a series of events which gives the reader a clear insight of the phenomenon of colonialism as well as the effects it had on the people. The selected lines of the poem hints at the turmoil the people of African tribes had to suffer because of the European colonisation practice. The poem is one of W.B. Yeats’ most frequently quoted poems in Western literature; even the Nigerian author finds a fascination for the poem. The poem was first printed in *The Dial* 1920 during the aftermath of WWI. Yeats tried to show in his poem how much of the European society appeared to be broken down after the war and the poem also serves as a prediction of future violence. For instance, the line “the center cannot hold,” refers to political implications and the struggles of the European civilization at that time which Yeats pointed out to his readers. This poem by Yeats has been relevant ever since the publication of the poem, even in current times. A 2016 analysis by Factiva shows that in the first seven months of 2016, in the aftereffects of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s selection, lines from the poem were quoted more often than in any of the preceding 30 years. With Trump being elected, the number of hate crime has increased to an enormous extent and to the general public pretty much every Muslim is essentially a terrorist. However, it can be pointed out that to the people suffering in Syria, the Americans are the ones who are committing violent activities. Just

like the outlook on any act of terrorism is based on a particular person's perception of events, colonialism also reflects a particular perception of the people.

A well-known African proverb goes "Until the lion learns how to write every story will glorify the hunter" What this proverb tries to tell us in essence, is that there is always two sides to any story. Before writers like Chinua Achebe started telling their side of the story of colonisation, most of the stories reflected the perspective of the colonising nations. For the colonisers, the act of traveling to far off places and finding a colony was in fact an act of patriotism. However, from the point of view of the colonised, the entire phenomenon was a dreadful experience. This paper will focus on showing the difference in the perspective of the two authors regarding colonialism through the representation of the black protagonist in the novels *Oroonoko* and *Things Fall Apart*.



## Chapter Two

### A Look at the Two Novels

The selected novels, *Oroonoko* and *Things Fall Apart* focus on a Black protagonist, but the representation of the protagonist is done very differently by the two writers. A comparative look at these two novels shows how the same concept can be represented in completely different ways by different writers. This paper will show the difference between the British author Aphra Behn and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in the representation of a black protagonist in their respective novels.

*Oroonoko* is a seventeenth century novel written by the prominent female novelist Aphra Behn. In this novel, Behn is the narrator and tells the story of how she met the protagonist of the novel, Oroonoko, a black prince who was sold off as a slave in Surinam. The novel is written in the form of first person narration from the author herself. The author chooses to narrate her novel in the form of a historical fact, i.e. she narrates the events of the novel as if they were a part of a true story. Historically the data she provides holds a strong ground, as we see the events of the novel took place at a time when slave trade was a fairly established policy. George Jay Smith talks about the genre of the novel in his article “A Long Forgotten ‘HIT’” stating “Perhaps we may call the book, then, historical fiction--the earliest example of a type that has been in recent times exceedingly popular.” (Smith 266) The narrative of the novel hints that the events described by the narrator might be true. In fact, while talking about some female writers in the article “Some English Women Novelists”, writer Alice A. Smith states “Mrs. Aphra Behn gave ballast to the extravagance of the heroic romance by introducing real incidents from her early life

in the Colonies.” (Smith 799) In her opinion, the events described in the novel *Oroonoko* are truly from her experience, proving further that the novel truly is a work of historical fiction, telling the tragic tale of an African prince.

The first character this paper will focus on is Oroonoko, who is the protagonist of the novel *Oroonoko*. Behn is often cited as the first known professional female writer and has a number of notable contributions to English literature. The novel *Oroonoko* was published less than a year before the author died and is sometimes described as one of the earliest English novels. The book tells the story of its protagonist Oroonoko, an African prince from Coramantien who is tricked into slavery and sold to British colonists in Surinam. The novel begins at a very high point in the life of the protagonist and gradually shows how he falls into despair. The readers get to see the once-great prince gradually fall a victim to a series of tragic events. The story begins with Oroonoko winning a war and taking slaves to the daughter of the general who had died in that war. This is when Oroonoko meets the daughter Imoinda for the first time. The character Imoinda is a truly historical character in English literature. In fact it is such an important character that Joyce Green Macdonald references to this character in the article “Race, Women, and the Sentimental in Thomas Southerne's "Oroonoko"” stating “Imoinda, the "beautiful black Venus" of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), is probably the most well-known of the few representations of dark-skinned African women in early modern literature.” (Macdonald 555) Imoinda is truly a beauty and the protagonist immediately falls in love with her. Imoinda also appears to reciprocate his feelings. However, the readers get to see what appears to be a string of bad luck that the protagonist has to face throughout the novel, beginning from the moment when the king, too, falls in love with Imoinda and gives her the sacred veil, thus commanding her to become one of his wives even though she was already married to Oroonoko.

However, after finding out about a tryst between Oroonoko and Imoinda the king becomes furious and sells Imoinda as a slave. Afterwards the guilty king lies to Oroonoko about the fate of the girl, saying that she has been executed, since death was thought to be better than slavery. This is a very high point of the novel as the author shows how bad the process of slavery truly was. In the article “The Evolution of the Slave Status in American Democracy” author John M. Mecklin writes “Slavery, which came in time to be known as the "peculiar institution" of the South, gradually shaped the social, moral, economic and political ideas of that section to fit its genius.” (Mecklin 105) The practice of slavery was a small incident that gradually turned into the cruel practice and spread worldwide. The world of slaves was so cruel and devastating that even death was considered a much better alternative. This is why the king chooses to lie to Oroonoko about the fate of his beloved. The news of Imoinda’s death devastates Oroonoko greatly. After such a tragic event, while still in mourning for his great loss, something far more terrible happens to the unsuspecting protagonist. He was betrayed and captured by an English captain, who planned on selling him and his men as slaves. Thus the young prince and his men were brought to Surinam, an English colony based in the West Indies, to be sold as slaves. It is in Surinam that the protagonist meets the narrator. The hero reunites with Imoinda in the plantation. Oroonoko is treated as an honored guest in the island and lives with Imoinda as husband and wife. After Imoinda becomes pregnant, Oroonoko does not want his child to be born a slave and as a result he plans a rebellion. Of course, all his attempts fail and the novel ends with him being killed off by the white people.

During that time period several rebellions against the colonials had failed for a number of reasons. Katharine M. Rogers talks about the major reason for failure of the rebellions in her

article “Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn’s ‘Oroonoko’” stating “Often the rebellions failed for the same reason Oroonoko's did, from disunion among the slaves because they came from competing nations.” (Rogers 8) Rogers talks in great detail about the reasons that caused the tragedy of Oroonoko. As the slaves were from different tribes, often being born enemies of each other, they found it difficult to let go of their bad blood and cooperate with each other. Of course in Oroonoko’s case the added reason for his failure was his depression after the death of his wife and unborn child.

Oroonoko’s tragic tale is told in the first person narrative by the author Aphra Behn herself. She had her own style of writing a story. In “English “Femmes Savantes” at the End of the Seventeenth Century” author A. H. Upham writes about a number of the remarkable female authors of the past, without whom the current English literature would not be what it is today. Regarding Aphra Behn, Upham writes “She wrote fiction, as did Mlle, de Scudery, and wove herself into the story and colored the facts of her life with romance, after the approved manner.” (Upham 264) Behn’s story about the black prince and her role in the story is a mixture of fact and fiction. However, this story does a great job in presenting the tale of the tragedy of a black prince and the readers get to see the image of colonisation from the point of view of a White person. It should be pointed out that Behn or the narrator of the story is not completely unsympathetic towards the Black people. In fact, if we read the novel, it becomes quite clear that the narrator forms a strong bond with the protagonist. She is also disheartened by the fate of the protagonist. She writes “Some have commended this act, as brave in the captain; but I will spare my sense of it, and leave it to my reader to judge as he pleases.” (Behn 50) It should be pointed out that the writer probably would have helped the hero out of his situation had she had the

power to do so. She is unable to take any action against the events of which she is a witness to simply because she did not have the power to do so. However, it is also apparent that the only reason the narrator is sympathetic towards the protagonist is because of his princely status. The other slaves were not so lucky to have their story engraved as a part of history. Being a royalist, she persistently felt terrible seeing the bad condition of a prince.

Comparing this to the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, if we focus on the protagonist Okonkwo of the novel *Things Fall Apart*, we see how the narrative and description is completely different from Behn's account. One of the reasons for the change in the writing style and representation may be pointed out to be a result of the time difference, seeing as *Oroonoko* came out in the seventeenth century while *Things Fall Apart* was written in 1958. However, a major reason for the different sensation readers get after reading *Things Fall Apart* is because it is telling the story of a Nigerian protagonist, from the point of view of a Nigerian writer. In his lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", Achebe clearly points out how the narrative of a white writer can be unwittingly racist. It is also interesting because the narrative follows the style of oral storytelling, a tribute to the oral style of stories prominent in that region. When reading Achebe's novel, we get an image of what the lifestyle of the people is really like instead of getting the account from an outsider.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* is from a third person omniscient narrative and tells the story of the Umuofia clan leader Okonkwo. This short novel tells the story of a great man who was a well-respected leader and gives detailed descriptions of the culture and traditions of the tribe. Achebe writes the novel beautifully inserting Nigerian words within the narrative and also

talking about different proverbs and stories of the culture. The story soon takes a tragic turn as we see the white people establishing their government in that region and how there is a struggle between the tribe and the white people. When the novel begins, Okonkwo is introduced as a hero in his village and an honored leader. He is selected by the village elders to be the guardian of Ikemefuna, a boy taken by the village as a peace settlement after Ikemefuna's father killed an Umuofian woman. The boy lives with Okonkwo's family and Okonkwo grows fond of him. Soon however, the oracle of Umuofia states that the boy must be killed. Okonkwo is warned not to do the killing himself since it would be like killing his own child - but to avoid seeming weak and feminine to the other men of the village, Okonkwo disregards the warning and strikes the killing blow himself. This is a recurring theme in the novel. The protagonist constantly tries to get away from the shadow of his unworthy father and as a result he is always conscious not to show any weakness in his actions. Okonkwo does feel guilty about the event afterwards. Shortly after Ikemefuna's death, things begin to go wrong for Okonkwo.

During a gun salute at the funeral of the village elder Ezeudu, Okonkwo's gun accidentally explodes and kills Ezeudu's son. As punishment for this crime, Okonkwo and his family are sent into exile for seven years to appease the gods he has offended. Okonkwo goes away to his mother's village in Mbanta. This is the point in the novel when the white people are introduced and the protagonist learns how they have arrived in Umuofia with the intent of introducing their religion, Christianity. Soon the number of converts increase, and the white government finds a strong footing in the village. Returning from exile, Okonkwo finds his village changed by the presence of the white men. Religion is a major concept in this novel. An increasing number of people turn to Christianity since the religion is more accepting of people's

weakness unlike their religion. For example, in one chapter, we see that the villagers are surprised at the acceptance of the outcasts into the church. The outcasts were always neglected by the villagers and they had no place to belong to in the village. Achebe writes about an outcast in the novel stating “He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart--a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste--long, tangled and dirty hair.” (Achebe 111) Even such a person was accepted in their religion. This made the religion very appealing to the people in the village who were struggling from a sense of belonging. All of these changes brought forth by these outsiders were the main reason why the peace among the people of the tribe gradually began to shatter. During an annual ceremony, a convert unmasked an elder, which is an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. In retaliation, the locals burnt the church to the ground which upset the district commissioner, who in turn had the leaders of the tribes handcuffed and thrown in jail. After the prisoners were released, the clansmen held a meeting, during which the protagonist Okonkwo begins to realize that his clan is not willing to go to battle with these white folk. Seeing how weak his tribe has turned, it is at this moment he feels that he has no other choice but to take his own life.

The novel is a wonderful story of the protagonist gradually coming in to realize the effect the white people are having over the local people and also realizing that he has no power to stop this change. Unable to come to terms with the inevitability, Okonkwo, a once brave and strong leader, commits the biggest act of cowardice by taking his own life. Thus, we see in the two

novels, how the two protagonists face a tragic end and end up with a collapsed legacy which is the result of the process of colonisation.

A comparison between these two great novels shows how the two writers succeed in portraying a similar concept in very different manners. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the major differences which appear from a thorough look at the two novels. This will be done firstly by looking at the narrative style of the novels selected by the two authors. In *Oroonoko* the novel is told from the perspective of the author. Thus the reader gets a look at the series of events from the author's point of view, not the protagonist himself. On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative is third person omniscient. In this novel we see the development of the protagonist Okonkwo as well as a documentation of the life of the people of his tribe. The next major difference this paper will be focusing on is how the two authors describe the homeland of the protagonist. While Behn's portrayal of Oroonoko's homeland is very exotic and at times portrayed in a very negative manner, in *Things Fall Apart*, novelist Chinua Achebe portrays the home and the customs of his protagonist in a very positive light. Through Achebe's novel, readers are able to look at the culture and customs of the homeland of the protagonist and learn how the people of the country feel about their customs. Also we get to see their despair when the colonisers arrive in their village and start changing these customs. Finally, this paper will also look into the deaths of the two protagonists, and how the authors represent the two deaths in very different manner. The death of the protagonist and its impact on the people surrounding him is portrayed in very different lights by the two authors and this paper will look into the portrayal of death in the two novels.



## Chapter Three

### Narration

Despite having some major similarities in the plot of the two novels, the style and content of the novel contains some major dissimilarity. This paper will focus on the differences these two novels have to offer. One of the biggest differences we see between the two novels is in the narration. The way the story of the protagonist is told varies in the two novels and this has a huge impact on the way the reader perceives the actions of the protagonist. One of the things that should be pointed out is that in neither of the two novels, we get the voice of the protagonist. The reader does not get to know the thoughts of the protagonist as the events unfold gradually in the novels. However, through the style of the narration of the novel itself, the readers do get to understand the perception of the writer regarding the events that take place in the novel. And one of the focuses of this paper is to show the difference in the perception of the two writers in the two novels. Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko* is a very short novel which focuses on its protagonist Oroonoko, the royal slave. Behn begins the novel by including a short Dedicatory, written in the form of a letter from the narrator to a Lord. In the letter she introduces the protagonist by saying "This is a true Story, of a Man Gallant enough to merit your protection; and, had he always been so Fortunate, he had not made so Inglorious an end." (Behn 6) This shows that the author respected the unfortunate prince.

The narrative of the novel is slightly unreliable, since the narrator states that she was there when the series of events took place, and yet if we consider the narrator to be Behn herself, then there is no record of her visiting the area. Regarding this writer Ernest Bernbaum tries to shed some light on the author's life, stating in his article "Mrs. Behn's Biography a Fiction" that

“No relation of hers was appointed lieutenant-general of Surinam; her description of the colony was stolen from George Warren's *Impartial Description of Surinam*; and the events in which she says she participated were imaginary.” (Bernbaum 434) Thus we see that Bernbaum does create doubt into whether Behn was telling the truth while giving the account of the events surrounding the unfortunate prince. However, it appears that the reliability of the novel was not the aim of our novelist, the aim of the novel is more a way of telling a story rather than recounting a series of true events. Thus, the significance of the historical aspect of the novel is not so much important as is the fate of the protagonist. The narrative of the novel is a mixture of first and third person narration, where the narrator is presumably Aphra Behn herself. Throughout the novel we get to see the events from the perspective of the narrator herself. The novel was published back in the seventeenth century. From historical sources, we know for a fact that slavery was abolished in England only after the publication of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, an act which came directly from the Parliament of the United Kingdom abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire. This act was in effect a whole one hundred and forty five years after the publication of the novel. Hence, we understand that black people did not have any rights or power at the time this novel was published. They most certainly did not have enough presence in history to be able to tell their own story. This is one of the major reasons why a number of historical accounts of events in the past are brought into questioning since the authenticity of the documents cannot be verified.

The novel gives an account of a very tragic event, from the point of view of a white British lady. The narrator of this novel, presumed to be Behn herself, gives a very telling account of the events that takes place in the novel. The way the narrator talks about the colored

people is truly interesting. The native Africans are so much of a mystery to the author and the contemporary readers that Behn finds it necessary to point out that “A Negro *can change* Color: for I have seen 'em as frequently blush, and look pale, and that as visibly as ever I saw in the most beautiful White.” (Behn 28) The author puts a firm focus on the words ‘can change’, as we see they are italicized, emphasizing that these people are able to react to a situation just like their white counterpart. The author has to explain the fact that these people are human too, they have their fears, their joys, their sadness; she points out that these people are capable of feeling the same emotions as a white person. In the novel, it should be taken into account that the author probably is not aware of all the facts surrounding the tragedy. She most certainly cannot imagine the struggles the protagonist had to go through. She cannot presume to have any idea what the protagonist Oroonoko went through, from the moment he was being tricked into the ship to becoming a slave and all the hardships he had to endure while he was there in the plantation. Also, it should be taken into account that the only reason she was comfortable enough to spend time with the protagonist Oroonoko was because of his royal heritage. Even while working in the plantation, the protagonist Oroonoko gets special consideration and his owner treats him very differently from the other slaves. Readers get an insight about the character only from the perspective of the narrator.

One of the established stock characters in novels or even fairytales is the presence of a valiant and brave prince. However, in *Oroonoko*, despite the hero being very handsome, the prince’s backstory is not very inspirational. Of course, Oroonoko is a valiant and true leader and easily wins the war with his fellow soldiers. When it comes to being compared to his fellow tribesmen, he is immensely superior; there is no match for his bravery. However, when it came

to his British counterparts, Behn's portrayal of Oroonoko was anything but stellar. This is more than apparent in the novel through the descriptions of the different characters in the novel. At the very beginning of the novel, the author gives a prolonged description of the protagonist. However, she is explaining these features of the character as if he were an animal described by a hunter. If we compare this description to the owner of the slave Caesar (for that was the name given to the slave Oroonoko), Trefry the distinction is very difficult to miss. In the novel, Trefry's description features his wits and knowledge. She writes "The gentleman that bought him was a young *Cornish* gentleman, whose name was *Trefry*; a man of great wit, and fine learning." (Behn 56) Here we can see no description of his features, because he is a human being of wit and intelligence and should not be brought down to simple description of physical features. Yet, when the author is talking about the protagonist, we rarely get a glimpse of his wits and strength.

The way the narrator recounts the story of this great prince being tricked into the captain's ship and sold off for slavery at the beginning of the novel portrays the protagonist as a person of little wit who was easily tricked and was no match for the British counterpart. Any other story, especially stories focusing on a white protagonist would not show the lead character to be so foolish. When a story or novel focuses on a white character, he is very rarely shown to be so easily gullible. Generally, the hero introduced is always very intelligent and beyond all tricks of the villain of the story. The best example would be if we focus on the writings of the greatest literary person of English language for all times, William Shakespeare. The wits and knowledge of the heroes of his stories are generally beyond the match of any other character. However, in this novel, if we consider the British government to be the antagonist (since Oroonoko is the protagonist), we see that British are able to outwit Oroonoko at every single step

he takes. Behn portrays members of her own ethnicity in a higher standard than the slaves at the plantation. Oroonoko is shown to be irrational and foolish. In other words, Behn's portrayal of the character showed that even though the protagonist might have been a prince, and a highly respected member of his tribe, he was no match for fellow British counterparts. Of course, for the most part, we do see the narrator being open-minded and not entirely bigoted in her opinions of the natives of the European colonies. However, while she detests how Oroonoko is treated, she never seems to be against the institution of slavery itself. In fact, the only reason the narrator bonds with the protagonist, and finds his story worth telling is because of his heritage. When the narrator talks about her experience in the plantation, there were a huge number of slaves in that field. However, she only sympathizes and bonds with the prince of the tribe. Even the love of Oroonoko and Imoinda is presented in a different light. In the article "Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*", Katharine M. Rogers writes "The love of Oroonoko and Imoinda is presented with an exaggerated sentimentality and a precious language totally remote from African culture. (Rogers 3) The love between the two characters is exaggerated beyond bounds in her novel. If the novel was focused on American or English characters, chances are the love story would be portrayed in a very different light. It was a common style to portray characters other than the white people in a negative light in literary works. In fact, it was Chinua Achebe who brought into light the entire matter of portrayal of black people by white writers to the attention of people. Before the publication of his notable essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", it was always considered that Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* was a novel about the colonised. Readers only realized the blatant racism the novel features towards the natives after Chinua Achebe pointed out the fact. Considering this point of

view, it is quite clear that Aphra Behn does not give an unbiased point of view of the tribal people in her novel.

On the other hand, in the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tells the story from the perspective of the leader of the tribe, thus giving us a fresh new perspective of the events that takes place. The narrative of the novel is third person omniscient. In this novel we see the development of the protagonist Okonkwo as well as a documentation of the life of the people of his tribe. The character has depth and plays a great role in the events of the novel. We also get to see the perspective of the colonised people when the colonisers took over their land. The narrator begins the story of the novel by introducing the character Okonkwo as a strong leader of the tribe. Unlike the narration style we see in Behn's novel, we actually see the features of the protagonist highlighted in a manner that the audience immediately acknowledges the prowess of the tribe leader. At the very beginning of the novel the narrator describes the protagonist for the readers as "He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look." (Achebe 3) In this description, readers get a glimpse of a warrior, a hero, not a mysterious creature. Instead of describing him as a shadowy figure, Achebe chooses to portray the character as a respected warrior. We get to see how much he honors the traditions and culture of the tribe. This novel is a very rare instance where we get to learn about the tribes and impacts of the entire process of colonisation from the perspective of the tribe. Throughout the novel, readers get to see how important the traditional lifestyle is for our hero and how much he is affected when the white people come to change this way of life. Through this novel, readers get the rare chance to see the destructive implications of the white invaders instead of them being the superior people most novels portray them to be.

Whenever someone mentions Africa, people tend to envision a single country with the same language and culture. We generally tend to forget that it is in fact the second largest continent and is composed of more than fifty countries. Each of these countries consists of its own set of tribes and own set of language, culture, beliefs, religion, rules, norms, etc. In Achebe's novel readers get an idea of how different these tribes truly are. Even during the time of colonisation, the white people just assumed people of all the tribes were same. This caused a lot of problems in communication. Achebe gives an instance of this in the novel when the white people first come to the village of the protagonist. They bring a man from another tribe to help translate their words for the people. However, the people from the tribe had a hard time keeping up with the translation and we see that "Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely."(Achebe 102) Thus, we see the author convey a very basic information to the readers, how these people belonging to different tribes and castes are not the same, they have different language, culture, tradition and all in all a completely different way of life. This is how the author of this novel creates a distinction for the African culture and succeeds in showing the value of their lifestyle, a fact that many authors fail to establish.

The narration style of the two novels by the two authors makes the distinction between the two novels quite clear. In Behn's novel *Oroonoko*, readers get the perspective of a tragic tale of a black prince from the perspective of a white writer. The details are blurred, and the readers do not get a chance to immerse themselves in the culture of the protagonist or get an unbiased opinion of the protagonist. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* the narration, though is in third person, the reader gets to experience the sentiment of the people and the tribes who were affected by the invasion of the British Empire on their land.

## Chapter Four

### Description of Homeland

Another major difference which is inevitably portrayed in the two novels is the description of their homelands. The difference in the representation of the protagonist is highlighted greatly through the description of their lives. In African culture, love of their homeland is a very significant part of their culture. Both the novels give an insight to the homeland of the protagonists. Through these descriptions the reader gets a general idea of the culture and tradition of the protagonists. The homeland and family play a great role in making the protagonist behave the way he does. It establishes his belief, his culture, his character, every aspect we see in a protagonist is the result of the impact the homeland has on the hero. As we have already seen from Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", the portrayal of Africa in Joseph Conrad's renowned novel *Heart of Darkness* is that of a dark corner on earth. In the novel, Africa is the dark other, a shadowed mystical realm which is the world of the savages. Conrad puts a glorious England in contrast to its dark counterpart and his opinion about the dark jungles of Africa is quite clearly very negative in the novel. It is very difficult to do justice to the representation of black characters by a white author. In "Tracing the Visible and the Invisible through African Literature, Publishing, Film, and Performance Art" authors Zoe Norridge, Charlotte Baker and Elleke Boehmer write "It is true that media stereotypes of Africa can have seriously negative consequences, as explored by critics speaking in terms of overarching principles from a distance, such as Susan Sontag, and by others mapping exact national and international media representations of events, such as Alan Thompson." (Norridge, Baker and Boehmer VII) Very few media representation of the land of Africa is from



a positive light, in most cases the media portrays Africa as the 'dark other', a world full of mysteries and chaos. Rarely do we get to see the lifestyle of these people from a hopeful and progressive point of view

From the two novels, by looking at the descriptions of the homeland, we see how both writers have their own style while portraying the home of the protagonist. When taken into retrospect, the description of the homelands of the two protagonists is portrayed in a very different manner. Both authors have their own style while portraying the world of the protagonist. In Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko*, the novelist claims to have experienced the events herself before producing the account of the fate of the protagonist. However, there is very little proof supporting her claim. Her version of the story and the description of the native land of the protagonist might be a little farfetched. Regarding this Katharine M. Rogers writes in her article "Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*" that "This was, of course, no more dishonest in her than was Daniel Defoe's development of the real adventures of Alexander Selkirk into the fictionalized ones of Robinson Crusoe. The factual elements in Behn's romantic story are her use of a narrator much like herself and a wealth of local color detail from both Surinam and Africa." (Rogers 1) There is a lot of debate regarding Daniel Defoe's racist portrayal of tribal character Friday, how he needed to teach him the proper ways of manners and etiquette. The origin of the novel is also often brought to question, and it is often considered that it was rather a retelling of the tale based on the life of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish castaway who lived for four years on a Pacific island. Author Daniel Defoe takes a lot of liberty while telling the tale in his own language. Similarly, there are a lot of inconsistencies with the portrayal of the tale written by Aphra Behn. Especially in her novel, the birthplace of the protagonist is described in a very exotic manner.

The novel begins with a vivid description of Oroonoko's homeland and the way the author describes it, it is quite clear that this land is strange land for her. In Chinua Achebe's short essay, "An Image of Africa Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", the writer points out to the readers how in the novel Conrad is actually portraying Africa as a very dark and shadowy place. Achebe is the first to point out the inconsistencies in Conrad's portrayal of Africa and London. He points out a number of controversies about the novel, through the comparison of the two women, the portrayal of the hero Kurtz and also the comparison of the sceneries of the two continents. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad gives amazing visual accounts of the two rivers, Thames and Congo. It is the renowned writer Chinua Achebe who points out the massive difference that rises from the depictions of the two rivers. He writes "The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames." (Achebe 2) This shows Achebe pointing out how the descriptions of the two rivers were complete opposites. One was the image of a bright hopeful Thames; the other was dark and mysterious Congo. A similar distinction can be made in the descriptions of the homelands given in the two novels *Oroonoko* and *Things Fall Apart*. Aphra Behn begins the novel *Oroonoko* with a description of Africa. This description makes the world of the protagonist seem very much uncivilized. For example, in a paragraph in the novel, the author describes the nature as "Then for little paraketoos, great parrots, muckaws, and a thousand other birds and beasts of wonderful and surprising forms, shapes, and colors." (Behn 9) It is as if the author is describing a place which is muddled and dark and beyond the reach of civilization. The lifestyle of the people in that land is completely incomprehensible to her. Her description of the natives is just as confusing. This is somewhat similar to what Achebe points out about Conrad's narrative

of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*. In “An Image of Africa Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” Achebe points out Conrad’s representation of the natives as “Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description: A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms. . . . as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms!” (Achebe 7) Conrad simply wrote the natives as moving arms and limbs. Behn’s description of the people is not so much to the extreme; however she does not portray the natives in any positive light either. Granted that Behn’s novel came full two centuries before *Heart of Darkness*, and racism was much more prominent during her time. Still her portrayal of the natives does raise some questions. For example, regarding the king and his wives she writes “The king of *Coramantien* was himself a man of an hundred and odd years old, and had no son, though he had many beautiful black wives: for most certainly there are beauties that can charm of that color.” (Behn 14) The fact that she points out about the beauties of that color is truly offensive, she is pointing out the fact in a manner such that it is an impossible feat to have beauty in that color. Behn’s depiction of Africa in the novel *Oroonoko* is not very much different from her future counterpart Conrad. The novel *Oroonoko* portrays the protagonist and his tribe as savages. The culture and traditions of the tribe are portrayed as being unnatural. Even when she describes the protagonist’s lifestyle and fighting skills it feels more like she is describing a glorious animal rather than a human being. She even glosses over the tragic end of Imoinda as if it wasn’t so much significant. When Behn is talking about the old king, who is the grandfather of our protagonist, she portrays their norm of otans and multiple marriages as if it is something very unnatural. She does not try to get an understanding of that culture. It might be pointed out that since the entire story is a part of a letter to an English Lord, she perhaps amended her letter so as not to appear on the side of the African

slave. It is understandable that perhaps the writer could not be completely honest in her letter seeing as it was addressed to a British lord, presumably someone who would not sympathize with her main character. However, her portrayal of the natives of the land is portrayed in a slight negative atmosphere.

Another issue that should be kept in mind is that in the novel, the narrator appears to be sympathetic only towards the protagonist Oroonoko. It is noticeably clarified in the novel that Oroonoko, despite being a slave, was given special status and even his owner, Trefry treated him differently because of his royal status. Thus, it can be easily seen that the only reason the writer came even in contact with the protagonist was because of his royal status. It was also because of his royal status readers get to know about his story, even though there were a number of other slaves in the same island. Countless natives had their lives turned upside down because of the entire process of slavery. Slaves had to suffer unbearable consequences and had to adapt to constituencies completely different from theirs and had to work hard in order to survive the horrible conditions. However, we do not get to know their stories. No one knows about the pain and sufferings that these people go through because presumably their story is not worth it. Yet, since our protagonist is a member of the royal family who has been unluckily placed in this situation, his story is a tragedy and is worth telling, while the stories of countless others goes untold.

On the other hand, we see completely different type visualization in Chinua Achebe's representation of the protagonist and his homeland and family. The customs and traditions of Okonkwo's tribe is portrayed in a very positive light and readers can even learn to love this part of the world which is completely different from which we usually see in American and English

storybooks. The village from where our protagonist is from is introduced in a grand scale in the very beginning. The tribe is also introduced and readers are quickly engulfed into the novel as they learn about the history of the tribe. Achebe describes the strength of the tribe by saying “Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country.” (Achebe 8) This part of the novel lets the readers understand why the protagonist was so proud of his homeland and why he was fixated on maintaining his stance as the hero of such a great society. The author does not just drop the reader in an unfamiliar situation in the novel; he gives a description of the tribe, of the people, their customs and then do the readers get introduced to the plot of the novel. This shows that they were not just a barbaric tribe; they were well educated people who had their own customs and traditions.

Achebe’s novel is a masterpiece because he uses the English language, but includes terms that refer to the Nigerian culture, making the language of the novel his own. For example, he essentially points out a convention of the natives when he says “A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string.” (Achebe 7) This might seem like a superstitious rant, but it is also an example of the custom of the people of that tribe. The writer introduces the customs of the tribes rather than looking down upon them. The writer also gives readers a glimpse of the lifestyle of these people. He writes “On a moonlight night it would be different. The happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard.” (Achebe 7) Another good example of the activities of the tribe would be the explanation given in the novel about the tapping of palm trees. In the novel, through the conversation of the characters Okonkwo and Obierika readers learn that people with high titles are not allowed to tap their palm trees. Thus the novel gives an idea of the general activities of the people of the tribe along with

the value of their titles. This also leads to a conversation about their ozo titles as Obierika says “In Abame and Aninta the title is worth less than two cowries. Every man wears the thread of title on his ankle, and does not lose it even if he steals.” (Achebe 48) These little anecdotes given in the novel beautifully captures the essence of the tribe and gives the readers insight to what the tribes are really like. Very few novels contain such wonderfully built in examples which allows the reader to understand such intimate details about the culture of the different tribes in Africa as this novel does. Not only does the novel portray the significant cultures of the tribes, it also portrays significant events in the lives of the people. One of the best examples of a grand event in the lives of the people comes when the locusts arrive in the village. This happened right before the villagers decided to kill Ikemefuna and the downward turn began in Okonkwo’s life. The narrator recounts the event as “And then appeared on the horizon a slowly-moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining star dust.” (Achebe 39) The residents of the village were overjoyed. It is events like these in the narration that allows the reader to relate to the people of the tribe as they learn about their joys and sorrows. In *Things Fall Apart*, the homeland and family and multiple marriages are shown to be not things of bizarre manner, rather simply different culture from the British counterpart. The readers not only get a chance to get to know the culture better, they view it in a much more positive light. The novel begins with a celebration and we get to see how important the festivities are in their culture. Every aspect of the tribe is portrayed in such a positive light that it is impossible to look down upon those people. The tradition of multiple marriages is shown in a very natural way. This is what is normal in their culture. Simply because Okonkwo married three times does not make him an uncivilized person. This also does not mean that he does not love all his wives.

There is an entire chapter showing the beautiful love story between Okonkwo and his second wife Ekwefi. This novel makes us realize something we often tend to ignore, that these people can love too, their stories are important as well. In *Oroonoko*, when we read about the great king and his huge harem of multiple wives, this concept resonates to us in a very negative manner. Behn's narrative makes the concept unworldly to readers. This is not the case in *Things Fall Apart*. The writer of the novel respects the difference in the culture of these people. Various other issues are represented in a positive light in this novel as well. Thus we see how the two novels portray the culture of the natives in completely different manners.

## Chapter Five

### Death of the Protagonist

A common denominator in the two novels is that the protagonist dies in the end. Written so many years apart, these two novels focusing on the radical subject of a black protagonist maintains certain similarities and several dissimilarities. Yet, the fate of the protagonist in both the novels is unavoidable. Even though Okonkwo's death was tragic, at least Achebe kept his spirit alive in future novels *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, focusing the two novels on the same setting and the characters were related to Okonkwo. Oroonoko's tale however is more tragic as he is unable to leave behind anyone to carry on his legacy. Oroonoko's tale shows the protagonist's gradual downfall as he is bought as a slave in the island of Surinam and now has to lead a life of misery and unhappiness. His luck seems to take a positive turn, as he meets Clemene in the same plantation, who is really his lost love Imoinda. When he realizes that he is about to have a baby, and this child will be born a slave, he begins a tireless battle to change the fate of his unborn child. Unfortunately, he is unable to do so as the British government showers him with false promises but never delivers. The narrator even states that the government gave her the task to occupy the protagonist's mind so that he does not begin a riot among the slaves. The reality was that government was not prepared to give Oroonoko his freedom. Oroonoko realizes this a little too late and decides to fight for his freedom. In order to save his wife from the savageries of the white people he himself is forced to kill his wife and unborn son. This task however, is too much for him and he goes down on a spiral of depression. Thus the landowners capture him and he is brutally killed at the end of the novel.



Behn tells the story of this unsung hero as objectively as she can; however the brutality of the kill of the protagonist shows that he never really had the chance for a happy life. His tragic fate shows the reader that he would not have been able to be free even if he did wait for the governor. His son would have been born a slave and would have had to lead this horrible life instead of the life of royalty into which he was born in. Thus the lineage of an honorable and noble family ended in the most gruesome manner possible. Similar to the fate of the protagonist of Behn's novel, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* also dies at the end of the novel. However, his death is very different from that of Oroonoko. Of course, the first major difference is that Oroonoko was killed while Okonkwo chose to commit suicide. However, it appears that the question that the readers should be asking about the protagonist is why did he choose to take his own life? Okonkwo was the leader of his tribe, his name was hailed by the people of surroundings and he was well known for his bravery and his leadership qualities. Achebe's novel helps readers look into exactly how much the process of colonisation affected the people of the different colonies.

Before getting into the details of the death of our protagonist, this paper will show how the concept of death exists in Okonkwo's village. Death is a prevalent theme in the novel and there are two other stories of death which helps the readers realize how the death of different people is treated in the village. Death in their tribe was treated differently depending on the achievements of that person in their lifetime. A prevalent idea throughout the novel is that Okonkwo works as hard as he does in order to get away from his father's bad legacy. From Okonkwo's point of view his father was a lazy good for nothing and a coward. His entire lifelong struggle to become a great warrior was to prove that he was nothing like his father and he tried

his entire life to establish himself as a great man among his fellow tribesmen. Umuofia is the kind of tribe where 'good for nothing' people like Okonkwo's father Unoka were not given a respected burial when they died. The narrator exclaims "Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die." (Achebe 13) This shows us how the deaths of different manners are treated differently by these people. This in turn helps us understand the ultimate fate of the protagonist when he commits suicide and as a result cannot be given the burial of a traditional hero despite all of his life's work. Death is a very prevalent theme throughout the novel. Another incident regarding death can be seen in the book during the Week of Peace when some of the villagers are talking among themselves. One of them says "If a man dies at this time he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding. They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial. And what is the result? Their clan is full of the evil spirits of these unburied dead, hungry to do harm to the living." (Achebe 23) This shows the difference in customs and rules among the tribes. Thus we see how the concept of death differs according to the activities of the person during his lifetime. This is what makes Okonkwo's act of taking his own life all the more discouraging.

Chinua Achebe dedicates the entire final chapter focusing on the aftereffects of the act of the protagonist. If we take a closer look at the life story of Okonkwo, it is apparent that his string of bad luck was the result of him taking in the young boy Ikemefuna. Even though the boy was

not his own son, he forms an unlikely bond with the child. As a result, when he kills the boy with his own hands, he is emotionally very shocked which is why he accidentally kills someone at the funeral of village elder Ezeudu. This is what results in the seven years move to his motherland. This is when the white people appear in the village and gradually begin to start spreading their religion in their village. However, throughout the novel, Okonkwo is represented as a fighter and a leader. He would never give up and take his life simply because the white people were beginning to change so much of their ways. The reason Okonkwo decides to take his own life at the end of the novel is because he realizes that he will not be able to fight these outsiders. A number of people had already accepted Christianity and given up on the traditional tribal views (including his son). Most people found the religion more accepting which is why the religion attracted mostly outcasts from the society. The other members of the tribe were not willing to fight against such a big threat as the white people. Thus Okonkwo saw that there was no place for the people like him. Becoming frustrated, he decided to take his own life, even though that kind of death was much more painful. It also goes against everything he had struggled for his entire life to build. All his life he worked hard and constantly tried to improve the condition of his life so that he could be an honorable person in his tribe. He wanted to leave behind a legacy of his life's work. And in the end, all he got was mention in a chapter in the District Commissioner's book. His friend Obierika's reaction to the event makes the readers realize how disheartening the end of this great warrior really is. Thus we see how the deaths of the two protagonists are completely different.

After Okonwo has already committed the act, a group of white people lead by District Commissioner arrives at his house to find that he is dead and his friends are surrounding him.

The reaction of the district commissioner regarding such a brutal tragedy is what truly resonates with the readers. When they arrive at his compound, Okonkwo's friends have gathered and they are truly in mourning. For the district commissioner however, this act was incomprehensible. He could not understand why this man would take his life. When he arrives and learns that the reason they are not touching him or bringing him down is because it is a part of their custom he seems more amused rather than feeling sympathy for the protagonist, thinking to himself this will be a great story in his book. To the commissioner, Okonkwo is just another person whose death carries no effect whatsoever. To him the act of Okonkwo taking his own life is more amusing as he cannot imagine why he would end up taking his own life. His reaction to this great tragedy is dictated in the book simply as "Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him." (Achebe 147-148) For him the death of this great hero meant nothing. This was a man who would have been talked about for a long time and his stories would have been passed on from people to people, generation after generation, from one tribe to another. And yet now, he will only be remembered from a chapter in a book of white people. This abrupt death of someone who could have been a legend in their village is what makes the death of this great protagonist so tragic.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

Representing a black protagonist is a very difficult task. In the article “Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature” author Richard L. Jackson points out a fact regarding the representation of a black protagonist in literature. He writes “Frederick Douglas, I believe, once wrote that Blacks can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists.” (Jackson 470) There are a massive number of books revolving round a character of black descent, yet very few do the character justice. It’s not just in books, in several media outlets we see how the black character is not portrayed in the proper. In fact, Hyder E. Rollins talks about the various stories focusing on a black protagonist. In his article “The Negro in the Southern Short Story” he writes “Southern short-story writers have been particularly fond of negro characters, and if they have described no houris like Imoinda or Prince Charmings like Oroonoko, they have also avoided the abnormal and unjust pictures that have, at various times, disfigured American novels.” (Rollins 42-43) We understand from this that AphraBehn’s thriving novel *Oroonoko* has set the precedent for portrayal of black characters in media. The two main characters of the novel set the instance which is followed in future portrayals of black characters in literature and media.

Ever since the publication of the novel *Oroonoko*, a vast number of stories have been released which revolve around black characters. One of the most successful brands in America, Disney was once immensely criticized for the movie *Song of the South*. The movie was released all the way back in 1946 and it is a live action animated musical film based on a collection of

stories. The film is set in the southern United States during the Reconstruction Era, which was a time period right after the end of the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The film has been a subject of controversy among Americans since the very release of the film. This is because critics have described the film's portrayal of African Americans as racist and offensive. The controversy had gotten so bad that Disney has never released the movie in home video and rarely mentions the movie in several of their announcements. However, when the movie was being made, it was not the intention of the director to portray the characters in a negative manner. The film was only meant to tell a homely story about a boy and his unlikely friendship with a black man. However, it appeared that the portrayal of the black character seemed to be very negative for many people and the organizers in Disney rarely talk about this movie. Another notable example of inadvertent racism is found in Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The author wrote the novel specifically to give voice to the character Bertha Mason, a character who was more of a hindrance for the readers when the character was introduced in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Rhys takes it upon herself to write the story of this unfortunate woman, a character who barely gets a voice in Brontë's novel. In this novel, we see how the Jamaican character is completely ignored and it is only when Rhys tells her own version of the story that readers are able to connect and sympathize with the character.

The two novels *Oroonoko* and *Things Fall Apart* focus on two black protagonists and tries the very best to portray the two characters in a fair light. However there's a great amount of difference in the manner in which the two protagonists are portrayed. The writers have their own methods when it comes to the style they are following to tell their story. The way Behn's novel *Oroonoko* features a black prince so prominently might show that the author truly empathized

with the hero. However, regarding this in the article “Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko” the writer Anita Pacheco states “These textual features give support to the contention that what some have taken to be emancipationist outrage is in fact concern for the prerogatives of class, that Behn is repelled not by slavery per se, which is unobjectionable when it involves common people, but by the enslavement of a prince, born and brought up to command others.” (Pacheco 493) She was more distraught for the character because of his royal status rather than his skin color. If he was any common African man she had the chance to be acquainted to, she probably would not have paid attention to that person. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, readers get to see a completely different aspect from this. We see the story of a great man whose amazing tale comes to a very tragic end as he falls victim to the terrible set of events and is not even worthy of having an entire chapter to his name in the white man's book. The author writes the story of a protagonist with whom he is able to relate to. The portrayal of the character and the story is completely different in the novel *Things Fall Apart* as it tries to show the life and struggles of the protagonist in a very genuine manner. Thus we see in this paper how there is a difference between the British author Aphra Behn and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in the representation of a black protagonist in their respective novels.

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