Colonial Legacies

-Ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity in Chinua Achebe’s

*Things Fall Apart* and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*


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Introduction
All over the world there are different cultures, and in every culture most people share compatible rules and values. These values make society function and provide its inhabitants with a sense of belonging, and this is one piece in the puzzle of how our identities become both similar and yet unique. Although every society is full of people with different personalities, most of them live by the rules and norms of the society they belong to. Many people do not even reflect upon these rules and norms and the values and traditions that they contain are handed down from one generation to the next. With this cultural structure comes the feeling of security and stability. However, what happens when the pressure of change from another society, with contradictory values, is so great that the world as we know it no longer exists? We need to adapt to this social change, and we all have unique ways to adjust to the new way of life. This sometimes problematic change in life is something an author can use, and relate to in a novel. Every author who writes a novel has the power to give their characters different personalities, all with unique ways to deal with life. These characters act differently whether they are invented to live under peaceful conditions or during colonialism. The fact that many cultures have been under pressure from other cultures during the Colonial era is something that the authors Chinua Achebe and Louise Erdrich have used in their novels *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe) and *Tracks* (Erdrich). Both novels describe colorful characters who have different methods of coping with life during and after the colonization of their countries. A way to compare the two novels is to use a postcolonial critical approach and it is then possible to find out how each character reacts to those changes in life. Okonkwo, Nwoye, Enoch, Pauline and Nanapush are all caught up in the societal changes that are caused by the colonial or postcolonial influences, but they react to them in different ways. Nanapush and Nwoye accept the changes reluctantly, but resist in whatever way they can, Okonkwo does not change and becomes increasingly alienated, and Pauline and Enoch attempt to become like the colonizers and achieve status.

Aim and approach
By way of a postcolonial approach and close reading this essay will analyze and compare *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich. The two novels have been written by authors who come from different backgrounds, but they share similar experiences growing up in a country which has been under colonial rule.
Postcolonial theory is a way to critically discuss and analyze literature written by authors from countries that have been former colonies. It also discusses the problematic way in which the colonized people gain a sense of belonging with a strong national feeling. In many ways it is ‘us against them’, and with this comes the feeling of a superior/inferior way of life. A binary set, like the one in the former sentence, is a concept that is when discussing and analyzing literature from a post-colonial perspective. Robert Young the author of *Postcolonialism- an historical introduction* (2001) claims that”postcolonial theory is always concerned with the positive and the negative effects of the mixing of peoples and cultures” (Young 69). This mixing of culture is something this essay will focus on when analyzing the two novels.

The effects of colonization on the characters can be discussed and analyzed with the help of other concepts. This essay will look into and use the concepts of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity. Ambivalence is defined as a person who experiences opposing emotions and attitudes. I will use this concept to analyze the characters’ mixed feelings and the authors’ way of describing them. Mimicry is the second concept that I will focus on- Mimicry is when someone tries to copy someone else in some way and the result can become almost ridiculous: “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122). Here I will focus upon the characters’ difficulties in finding a place in society during or after the societal change; that is, whether they try to become like the colonizers or how they feel when someone else mimics the colonizers. And finally the concept of hybridity is a blending of cultures or traditions. Peter Barry states that:

“hybridity /.../ that is the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the colonizer, through a colonial school system, and that through local and oral traditions” (Barry 2002).

The concept is important since it describe the unstable environment that the colonized is forced to either adapt to or work really hard to reject. The colonial power is strong and the possibility to become a member in a hybrid community is more or less inevitable. Here the focus will be on how the characters react when the two cultures mix and whether or not they adapt to this hybrid environment.
With the use of the three concepts it is possible to find out how each of the characters is affected by the colonial domination. I will analyze the two novels in relation to ambivalence and then summarize the analysis, and repeat this pattern for mimicry and hybridity.

**Previous research and material**

**Primary sources:**

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe was his debut novel and it was published in 1958. The edition used in this essay was published for the first time in 1996. The novella is written mainly in English, but some expressions used are still written in Achebe’s native tongue; Igbo. This shows the impossibility of being fully able to translate all the Ibo words into English. Some words described in Igbo are closely related to local customs and faith. The fact that Achebe first wrote his novel in English is something that has been under discussion. Some critics argue that Achebe has not been true to his native legacy. Another way to discuss the mixture of two languages could be as Ashcroft et al write in *The Empire Writes Back*:

> “Ultimately, the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act” (Ashcroft et al 65). The authors think that this is a statement and by doing so it diminishes the language of the western culture.

*Tracks* by Louise Erdrich was first published in its full version in 1988. Erdrich’s father was a German and her mother was of the Chippewa tribe, which indicates that she was aware of the tribal life and its customs. Her novel has been praised by critics. In *Tracks* she points out the troubles people have to go through when they are exposed to threats from the outside world.

**Secondary sources:**

I have mostly used *Beginning Theory* (2002) by Peter Barry, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) by Ania Loomba and finally *Nation and Narration* (1990) by Homi Bhabha in this essay. However Albert Memmi’s (2003) and Frantz Fanon’s (2001) books have also helped to understand the complicity in the connection colonizer-colonized.

**Previous research**

There is much material written about postcolonial criticism and it discusses whether or not to regard some material as postcolonial. Furthermore, postcolonialism is not a crystal clear theory because some claim that colonial literature needs to be written by people who have lived in a country that has been under colonial rule, whereas others claim this to be wrong.
Ania Loomba writes:”It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of post-colonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism/…/ but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba 12). She thinks that it is important to be able to use the postcolonial approach when it comes to people who have been moved to other places in the world due to colonialism, and not just people who live in a country where they are, or have been, under colonial rule.

There is material written by people who have lived under colonial rule; two prominent titles are the books Colonizer and the Colonized by Albert Memmi and The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon. Memmi lived in Tunisia under the French rule. His societal position as a colonized person who belonged to a privileged minority provided him with the ability to be aware of the position of the colonizer. He thinks this makes him a candidate to be able to discuss both sides of the colonizer-colonized question. Furthermore, he discusses the problematic situation when it comes to language:”The entire bureaucracy, the entire court system, all industry hears and uses the colonizer’s language./…/make the colonized feel like a foreigner in his own country”(Memmi 150-151). This alienation is a way for the colonizer to more easily control the colonized and to minimize their importance, thus making them inferior. Fanon was a psychiatrist and in a chapter entitled “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” he informs the reader about the effects the colonial rule had on some citizens. He discusses the influence that the colonizers have over the colonized, and he is not afraid of using harsh words or accusations. In one section he writes: “The well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races” (Fanon 76). Fanon raises many thoughts and emotions, and his comments and statements have been discussed by many theorists.

Another author who is mentioned frequently when post colonialism is discussed is Edward Said. In Orientalism he discusses the connection that the East and the West have: “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 2). He describes the way the West needs the East to have something to compare them against, where the Orient is the mysterious and strange.

The previously mentioned material is important to this essay it involves cultural mixing and with this comes the colonizer’s way to adapt to or reject the colonial rule. The authors also discuss the three concepts which this essay will use when analyzing the two novels.
There has been a great deal of research carried out on *Things Fall Apart* and also some on the novel *Tracks*. However, I have not been able to find any material where they compare the two novels in the combination with the aim to focus on the three concepts.

**Analysis**

**Personal Ambivalence in *Tracks***

In *Tracks* the postcolonial situation forces the colonized to live in an unfamiliar mixed culture where the new society brings new rules and customs. People need to find a way to adapt and it is easy for a person to become emotionally confused as they adjust to the new cultural conditions. This emotional ambivalence is something both Nanapush and Pauline experience and live with because of the cultural change.

Nanapush is a proud stubborn man where his stubbornness makes it hard for him to adapt to the new situations. The postcolonial effects he is forced to experience when the new society’s rules and habits need to be followed makes him feel ambivalent; he is not sure whether to reject the new system or not. To fully adapt to the new government’s ways would be to betray his legacy because he believes the government is responsible for the hard life he and his tribe have to go through.

The new rules and regulations that include the use of documentation in society is something that he is troubled by, because by doing so he is no longer in control - the government is. However, he is forced to accept the fact that although he is against all the paperwork, he needs to find a way to get passed his feelings in order to get the information he needs; that is, the information concerning where his granddaughter Lulu is. Nanapush describes his mixed feelings: “To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only way that I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home” (Erdrich 225). He needs to adapt to the new rules to be able to get what he wants out of the system. His strong feelings of rejection towards the new government provide him with conflicting feelings; he feels that he needs to change position and he reluctantly accepts the new culture’s traditions.

Pauline on the other hand has no problems with the colonizers’ traditions and customs. She is confident that she would be happier if she would be of the same skin color as them since she desperately wants to find a position where she could fit in. The fact that she is of mixed blood makes her ambivalent and she has difficulties accepting her life in the tribal
society: “I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian” (Erdrich 14). She feels a change in skin color would help her feel important and superior, such as the colonizers, instead of an “invisible” member of the tribe. Her desperate need to find a place in the society makes her a perfect candidate for falling under the pressure from the people around her. This gets her placed in positions where she has trouble rejecting things she feels she ought to reject. Her decision to become a nun places her in situations that she cannot say no to and when she is asked to teach children her first thought is: “I do not like children very well/././. Through perseverance, I will overcome my instinct” (Erdrich 205). Her own feelings need to be put aside to be able to do as she is told, even if it makes her miserable. The need to belong somewhere is stronger than her instincts and this means that she is a part of the colonizer’s world.

**Individual Ambivalence in Things Fall Apart**

In *Things Fall Apart* the Umuofian village is under colonial rule and each member of the village has different ways of reacting to the societal change and control; whereas some embrace it others do not. Okonkwo is a man who never would embrace a new culture. To surrender to the colonial power would mean to let go of a culture he feels is competent and just. He is a man who would never go against village customs and rules. For example, when Okonkwo is forced to leave the village to live in exile he does it without any objection. When he returns back to the village after seven years he finds his fellow tribe members more or less adapted to the colonial power. He feels ambivalent towards the people he used to know and trust and he is unable to adapt to the new cultural change. He commits suicide which is taboo in his village; “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen” (Achebe 151). Okonkwo would not be able to commit suicide if he followed the village rules. He respects the village laws yet he violates them in the strongest possible way. He is ambivalent in his actions.

Nwoye is confused about his own culture’s customs. He finds some aspects of it to be wrong. One such example is when someone gives birth to twins and they are forced to kill them, which is something he considers to be cruel. When he learns that the new religion is more compassionate towards twins being born he becomes curious: “Nwoye passed and re-passed the little red-earth and thatch building without summoning enough courage to enter” (Achebe 110). He is ambivalent, he wants to know the message and context of the religion but he struggles with his emotions whether to be a part of the new church or not.
Enoch is a man with a strong religious belief and he shows no ambivalence at all. When he starts a conflict between the church and his old traditions, he reacts against the church way to solve the problem: “They decided that Enoch should be hidden in the parsonage for a day or two. Enoch himself was greatly disappointed when he heard this, for he had hoped that a holy war was imminent” (Achebe 137). He has no second thoughts about breaking the old traditions he has lived by earlier. He turns his back on his old community.

Summary and conclusion of the concept Ambivalence
Either all the characters showed different forms of ambivalence, as in Enoch’s case, did not feel ambivalent at all. The pressure from the colonial power makes them react differently. Nanapush in *Tracks* is ambivalent in his feeling towards the new government’s way of using documents and paper. He reluctantly adapts to the new society in order to get the information he wants. Pauline on the other hand is ambivalent within herself. Her longing to belong to the white community places her in positions where she betrays her own instincts. In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo is ambivalent in his actions. He celebrates and respects the village customs and laws, but when he commits suicide he violates the Umuofian customs in the worst possible way. Furthermore, Nwoye is ambivalent whether or not to join the new religion and become a part of the new community. Finally, there is Enoch who is not ambivalent at all, and he has no second thoughts about turning his back on his old traditions.

Mimicry

Violence and Mimicry in *Tracks*
When a person feels his personality is of lesser importance in the society one possibility is to imitate another person’s behavior and way of life; to become a mimic of someone else. In *Tracks* Pauline has problems finding her place in life- her struggle to become someone of importance, like the colonizers, leads her into situations where her efforts become questionable. Nanapush on the other hand dislikes a person who mimics the colonizer’s way.

When Pauline decides to become a nun she tries hard to get salvation and she feels she needs to try harder than the other nuns. She wants to suffer like Christ; therefore, she decides to wear her “shoes on the wrong feet” (Erdrich 146). Her efforts become ridiculous, and it is possible to consider her as trying to mimic someone or something else without success: “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122). The psychological pressure she puts on herself to become like the colonizers makes her feel she
needs to prove to them that she can be like them, and the only way to do this is to exaggerate their ways. Her struggle to become like them places her in situations where her efforts to reach her goal is impossible. She will never become like them.

Nanapush does not want to change; he is content to be like he is. However, he dislikes Pauline’s efforts to become a nun and he mocks her ambitions in any way he can. When he finds out that she wears her shoes on the wrong feet he says, “God is turning this woman into a duck” (Erdrich 145). He feels she is wrong to try to become like the colonizers and he ridicules her exaggerated efforts. Furthermore, he feels that people who find positions in the new society to be ridiculous: “our tribe policeman, Edgar Pukwan Junior, decided to conduct what he delighted in calling an investigation. It sounded so important, this long white word the war has taught him” (Erdrich 216). He thinks Pukwan is ridiculous when he takes on the habits of colonial power.

Ambivalent Mimicry in Things Fall Apart
In Things Fall Apart mimicry is also present. Enoch mimics what he believes a faithful Catholic should be like and Okonkwo resents men who are weak; he feels they mimic their mothers. In Nwoye’s case it is his ambivalent efforts to become a man.

Nwoye had since childhood constantly lived under his father’s watchful eyes. He tried hard to become the man his father wanted him to be, strong and masculine: “Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell” (Achebe 39). He feels he needs to be a man even if it does not match his feelings. He does not have the ability to be emotionally hard and angry. His images of how a man should act and behave do not agree with his personality. However, he tries to mimic what he feels a man should be able to do; therefore, he nags about women’s inability to do some tasks. He gets his father’s approval when he does this, and he ends up having contradictory feelings. His effort to mimic his father’s ideal man becomes difficult for him and to uphold it pushes him away from his father and the old culture. He finds peace in the new religion.

Enoch is a member of the new Church and he lets everyone knows that his faith is strong and he has no second thoughts about pointing fingers when he feels someone does not measure up to his standards. Enoch feels he needs to be a person with a stronger faith than anyone else; otherwise he cannot point fingers at the other members of the congregation. His personality is described to be “erupting in quarrels and fights” (Erdrich 135). His temper gets
him and the church into trouble when he breaks the village old traditions: “Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion” (Achebe 136). The outcome is that he turns the new society against the village clan members, something he almost welcomes. He is not content when things stay on an even level, it has to be exaggerated. To become a faithful Christian he needs to mimic the others, but it ends up being wrong.

Okonkwo dislikes weak men and he thinks that they mimic their mothers. He is worried that his oldest son Nwoye will become a weak man and he thinks: “I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him” (Achebe 48). Even though he loves his son, he is worried about him and he feels Nwoye mimics his mother’s behavior, which Okonkwo cannot accept. A man who shows emotions is a sign of weakness and therefore he rather pushes his son further away from him than approving Nwoyes ‘womanly features’. When he hears that Nwoye is attending church he cannot accept it and he throws him out of his home.

**Summary and conclusion of the concept Mimicry**

Mimicry can be found in different forms in both novels but what they have in common is that they describe how the characters feel a person should act and behave to fit into the old or new society. Pauline feels she needs to become another person to get something out of life. Her struggle to be a part of the new religion and the colonizer’s world gets her in a position which makes her efforts ridiculous in the eyes of the people close to her. Those exaggerated efforts to become someone else are something Enoch also experiences. When he violates the old traditions he gets the church into trouble. He wants to be an important and prominent member of the congregation. Nanapush is against people who try to mimic someone from the new world, and tries to mock them in any way he can. He wants them to be true to their old traditions.

Nwoye tries to mimic how a man should act and behave, at least according to his father’s standards. He pushes himself to become a man and yet he feels out of place. He finds that he betrays his own values and he finds comfort in the new religion. Okonkwo on the other hand dislikes weak men; he feels they mimic their mother’s behavior. Although he loves his son he finds it hard to accept his personality. The fact that his son does leave the old culture to join the church is something he cannot accept.
Hybridity

Hybridity and learning in *Tracks*
The conflicts which can surface when two cultures mix is something both Nanapush and Pauline experience. The combination of living in a society where a new one is also present can cause difficulties, or as Peter Barry describes it: “the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture” (Barry 199). The Native population’s sometimes interchangeable mixture of cultural differences can create problematic situations. Nanapush describes this cultural mix as follows: "Our troubles came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step" (Erdrich 4). This is a rather determined and strong statement, where there is no question about who is to blame for the complicated life he and his tribe members need to adapt to.

Furthermore, Nanapush’s reluctance towards the new government can be linked to his hate of documents: “our long fight west to Nandouissioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government paper” (Erdrich 1). He feels that the American government has forced his tribe to sign the treaty. The fact that they are forced to adapt to another government is something that he regards to be wrong and the ‘storm of papers’ are the new rules and laws that he and his people need to live under. He feels that the new laws are unnecessary, they will only make his life, and his tribe member’s life’s, more complicated. Nanapush is reluctant to sign any documents, because he believes his name will eventually disappear if he signs it many times. Each time he is forced to sign documents his chances of control diminish. The fact that the new way of life includes much paperwork is something he finds disturbing: “but once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the papers starts flying,…/ That’s when I began to see what we were becoming, and the years have born me out: a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates/…/ A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match” (Erdrich 225). This quote explains how he realizes what is happening, and how he in a way gives up fighting against the government’s way of running the community. He thinks that it is almost impossible to beat the new system. However, he finds himself forced to work within the system to get what he wants: “I produced papers from the church records to prove I was your father” (Erdrich 225). He is no longer just a member of the tribe, but also a member of the new society.
Another example of hybridity could be the feature of old mysticism and cult combined with the ‘new’ Catholic religion. Some characters use both their new faith in combination with spells of witchcraft. One of them is Pauline; her inability to find a solid position in society makes her a perfect candidate to represent unstableness. Her longing to fit in makes her try almost anything that will get her what she wants. She casts a spell on a couple, but afterwards believes it to be wrong: “I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits” (Erdrich 84). She wants the attention from the people around her and she wants to feel important. She used magical spells earlier in her life to get what she wants but along the way she finds the Catholic faith to be stronger and she becomes a nun. Her change in personality makes her unstable and hybrid.

Division and Hybridity in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart* hybridity can be discussed through different characters because they are all more or less affected by the colonizer’s ways and rules. Even the novel’s name *Things Fall Apart* implies the complicated situation of combining new traditions with old ones. It indicates the problems which arrived together with the missionaries. The Igbo population is forced to increasingly accept the new standards: “Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life” (Bhabha 314). Hybridity stops the old traditions and way of life and creates a mixture of a new one; something the people in the village of Umuofia learn when the missionaries and government bring new rules, regulations and religion to the land. However, they do not see it as a tremendous threat because: “many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man’s god would not last” (Achebe 105). They underestimated the new culture. Some of the villagers embraced the new culture and some resisted it.

Okonkwo’s resistance against the new culture alienates him in his own village. When he arrives, after seven years in exile, he has troubles understanding why the villagers have not fought the colonial power: “What is it that has happened to our people? Why did they not fight back?” (Achebe 128). His rigid attitude towards the colonizers and his lack of understanding towards his fellow tribe members brings him into a position where the colonial power becomes even stronger. He finds himself in a position where his attitude makes him lonely and confused. He becomes more and more a loner in the old society.
Nwoye finds comfort in the new religion and finds it to be more compassionate than his old society’s values. He is unsure about attending church at first, but his curiosity and feelings of loneliness make him go to mass. His advancement in the church gets him a new position and he becomes a teacher. At first the students who were sent to church were not prominent members of the community. However, the people changed their mind and sent more people to school: “If Umuofia failed to send her children to school, strangers would come from other places to rule them” (Achebe 132). They need to surrender to get some kind of control. Nwoye becomes a part of the villagers’ adaption to the colonizer’s way.

Enoch on the other hand loves the position he has gained in the new society. He feels he is a powerful and a prominent member in the congregation: “On Sundays he always imagined that the sermon was preached for the benefit of his enemies” (Achebe 135). He is quick to pass judgment on the other members of the church. The new community has placed him in position where he is content with his life. When he violates the old traditions he hopes it will start a holy war. He has no second thoughts about turning against his old community.

Summary and conclusion of the concept Hybridity
Hybridity is not difficult to detect when using a postcolonial critical approach and reading a novel which describes the problematic situations when two cultures mix. Both Achebe and Erdrich have presented many different ways to express such cultural mixing. It is possible to find it effecting most situations, whether it is Nanapush, who needs to get passed his fear of signing documents, or in Pauline’s case it is the new religion that replaces the old mysticism. The church and education play an important part in the societal change. Nwoye and Enoch become a part of the new religion. Okonkwo on the other hand resists the new world in every way he can and he finds it difficult to understand his fellow tribe members’ choice when they do not want to fight.

Conclusion
When using a postcolonial critical approach it is possible to detect similarities in Tracks and Things Fall Apart. Even if they describe different experiences from two different continents, both novels describe the complicated situations people need to adapt to when things change. With the help of the three concepts ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity this essay has focused upon how the characters react to the colonial and postcolonial pressure.
Nanapush reluctantly lets the new society into his life. He overcomes his resentment of signing documents and he finds a way to work within the system. This way to find a way to adapt to the system is something Nwoye also does when he finds a position in the Catholic Church. His complicated family situation drove him towards the new society. Two persons who try hard to become members of the new community are Pauline and Enoch. They embrace the colonial power and they try so hard to resemble the colonizers that it becomes almost absurd. Okonkwo on the other hand cannot adapt to the new rules and customs and his efforts to stay the same lead to him becoming alienated in his own community. He goes against his own traditions and commits suicide, which is the ultimate proof of his ambivalence.

Finally, it is proved that Nanapush and Nwoye accept the changes reluctantly, but use the changes to resist however they can, Okonkwo does not change and becomes increasingly alienated, and Pauline and Enoch attempt to become like the colonizers and achieve status.
Works cited


