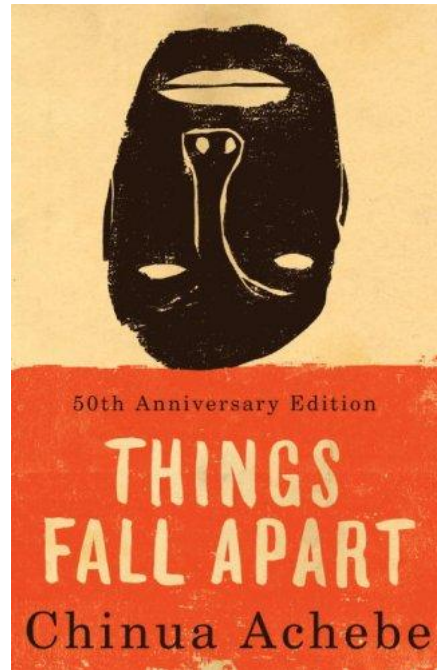


novelist Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) loved stories and he loved reading. Like many children, he was particularly fascinated with tales of adventure, exploration, and discovery. In an [interview with the Paris Review](#), he described his reading experience:

Then I grew older and began to read about adventures in which I didn't know that I was supposed to be on the side of those savages who were encountered by the good white man. I instinctively took sides with the white people. They were fine! They were excellent. They were intelligent. The others were not ... they were stupid and ugly. That was the way I was introduced to the danger of not having your own stories. There is that great proverb – that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. That did not come to me until much later. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail – the bravery, even, of the lions.



Achebe's story illustrates that reading is a powerful mind-altering technology: at its best, reading allows us to leave our own selves behind and see the world through someone else's eyes. For example, reading Achebe's novel *Things fall apart* enabled me to experience the world through the perspective of a 19th century Igbo tribesman. Stepping out from our own identity and into someone else's place in this way extends us in multiple ways. It increases our capacity for empathy and our understanding of the breadth and diversity of human experience.

However, as Achebe points out, there is a dark side to reading as a shaper of minds and identities: stories that never feature people like ourselves or only depict them as negative stereotypes – as “stupid and ugly” – are deeply alienating.

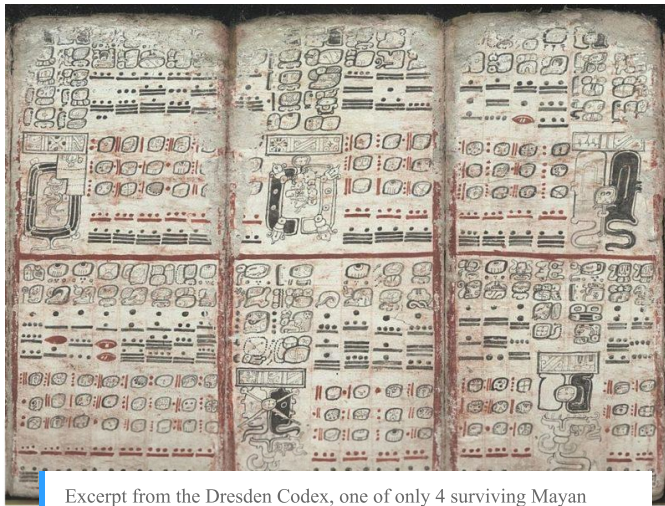
People who have learned to see themselves exclusively through the eyes of others are easily controlled. All regimes of domination make use of these forms of mind control by restricting the circulation of stories.

The annals of colonialism are full of these attempts at mind control via control over literacy. Some are of breathtaking barbarity, such as the burning of the Mayan books by the Spanish conquerors. The destruction of the flourishing and advanced Mesoamerican civilizations was so complete that today few people even know that the precolonial Mayans had developed a writing system and were recording their scientific knowledge, particularly of astronomy, in books.

Les quemamos todos | We burned them all | Usavan tambien esta gente de ciertos caracteres o letras con las quales escribian en sus libros sus cosas antiguas, y sus sciencias, y con ellas, y figuras, y algunas señales en las figuras entendian sus cosas, y las daban a entender y enseñavan. Hallamosles grande numero de libros destas sus letras, y porque no tenian cosa en que no uviessen superstición y falsedades del demonio se les quemamos todos, lo qual a maravilla sentian, y les dava pena. (Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, ca. 1566)

Destroying the books of the Mayans – and thus consigning their writing system and their knowledge to oblivion – paved the way for the colonizers to re-invent the colonized as an abject people without history and independent identity whose “agony, travail and bravery” remains untold, unnoticed, even unimaginable.

The technologies of the 16th century made the destruction of the Mayan codices a relatively straightforward undertaking. As Bishop de Landa states, “we



Excerpt from the Dresden Codex, one of only 4 surviving Mayan books (Image credit: Wikipedia)

burned them all.” And when he says “all”, he literally meant “all”. Today, only four Mayan codices are known to survive. To add insult to injury, none of these are (easily) accessible to the descendants of the Mayas. Three are located in European libraries in Dresden, Madrid, and Paris, and the fourth in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

Burning books has always been a crude way to control minds. Keeping the stories of the lions out of circulation has always been a more efficient and subtle strategy.

For a long time, the possibility of resistance to mind control via keeping stories out of circulation was severely curtailed by technology. Even when Achebe decided that he

would become a writer to tell the story of colonized Nigerians in the middle of the 20th century, getting his stories published was incredibly difficult. There was no African publishing house and, in fact, not even a typing service. He had to entrust the hand-written copy of his first novel – and the only copy in existence – to international mail and send it all the way to London so that it could be typed up for manuscript submission to a publishing house.

We have come a long way since then. Postcolonial literatures have established themselves, women writers have entered the canons, and, in many contexts, the dominated have found ways to not only tell their own stories in their own words but also to get them published. New technologies are lowering the barriers to circulating the stories of the lions to ever larger audiences.

Do you find yourself in the books you read? And do you make an effort to seek out the stories of those who are different from you?

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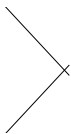
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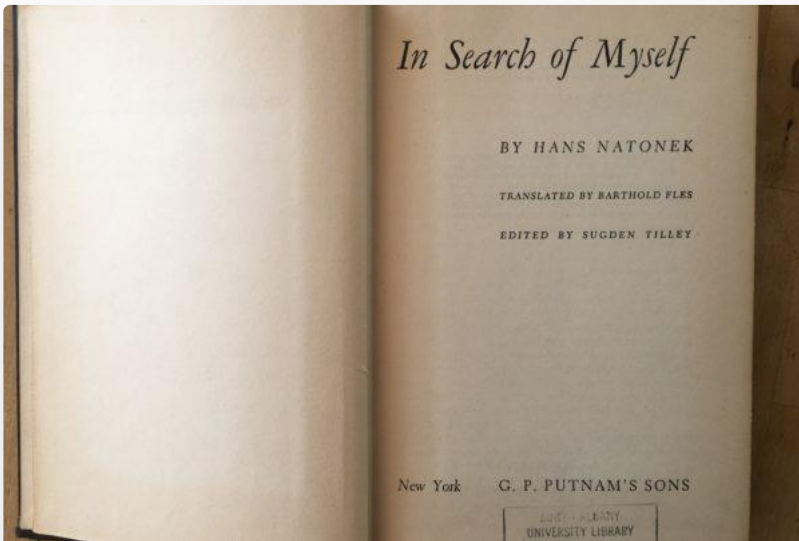
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