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In the Heart of Colonialism: Is Conrad's Heart of Darkness a Friend or Foe of Africa?

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Abstract:

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a novella that has received, and continue to receive, varied literary interpretation since 1899, when it was first published. The basis for such a mixed reaction to the novella is largely on the personality of the author as well as the time and place in which the novella was written. A Polish-English novelist, Joseph Conrad, writing about his voyage up the Congo River and into the Congo Free State, at a time when European Imperialism and colonialism were at their apogee. While many see the novella and the author as racist, others think he just presented the right picture of the Congo at that time, and therefore should be seen as a realist. This article examines the novella from the perspective of whether it should be considered a great work of art that promoted the African course, or that it demeans Africa and Africans. It adopts a review methodology to look at the works of people who have written for and against the book before drawing a conclusion. The paper seeks to answer the question; should the novella be considered a book that stands for Africa or against it? Is the book a friend or a foe of Africa? The article concludes that even though the book may have spoken against colonialism, it largely cannot be considered a friend in the canon of African literature because of its offensive and abusive use of language against African and Africans.

Keywords: Other theory, colonialism, post colonialism, fixity, stereotype

1. Introduction

Sometime ago, the literary image of Africans was created almost entirely by non-Africans. With their superiority complex, the West had a lopsided view of African literature. They considered it primitive largely because they had been using western standards to evaluate it. This attitude from the West created a situation of what I call 'double colonization': the one suffered by Africans with all its consequences of humiliating slavery, and that which was trying to impose Western norms and standards on African literature. The result is that few Africans would see any relevance in their own cultural system which is frequently said to be backward, or at best folkloric with a poor quality.

But centuries later, Africans themselves began, not only to write, but to write back at the West and to say to them; *what you said about us, is not it, this is it*. Chinua Achebe, who is regarded by many scholars as the father of African literature in English, declared that "the African writer has a responsibility different from that of his western counterpart" (cited in Amouzuo:330). This responsibility was not only to refute the Western propaganda, but also to present African literature as an alternative. The Euro-centric writers claim that the only legitimate model to African literature is and ought to be Europe, "but African societies include the world of spirits, the dead, the living, and even the unborn" (Amouzuo: 331).

No wonder Achebe, in his *An Image of Africa* (1977:1), recounts his interaction with a white guy who never thought something like African literature existed. He tells us about the guy, "It always surprised him. . . because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff". Because of this mentality, it would be rather surprising if there should be no divergences between African and European literatures. This is exactly what Christopher Heywood (1968:7) means when he writes that "the African writer must give back to the African character the will to act and change the scheme of things".

This 'will to change the scheme of things' is very apparent in the writings of Chinua Achebe. In Achebe's fiction, for example, the characters have a vital relationship with their social and economic landscape. Their whole views, their aspirations, have been shaped by a particular environment-the African environment. Thus, Achebe has paved the way in showing what should constitute an African Literature. He has succeeded in giving human dignity to his African characters. In defense of African philosophy and identity he (Achebe) has this to say:

If I were God, I would regard as the very worst our acceptance, for whatever reason, of racial inferiority.

It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us¹

To me, Achebe has not only defended Africa in this 'racial inferiority' outburst, but has also given back in equal measure against the "Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace" (*An Image of Africa*, 1977, p 1). By propagating in their writings what Achebe calls 'the Western psychology', they (the West) have succeeded in colonizing the minds of the African-the second and the most dangerous level of colonization. By colonization of the minds, I mean, quoting

Dascal," the subtle manifestations of political, economic, cultural and religious beliefs taking possession, and control of, victims' minds by the colonizers ((2007:1).

The purpose, by the West, of what I call the 'second colonization' was to introduce new forms of seeing reality and unconsciously or consciously relinquishing one's cultural norms and adopting new ones, and this 'new forms of seeing reality comes', According to Douglas (2007), on six levels: They are:

- a) the colonizer's intervention in the psyche of the subjects – the colonized, b) the intervention affects the mental sphere of the subjects, c) the effects are long-lasting and hard to remove, d) the result is asymmetrical power relationships between the parties, e) parties can live aware or unaware of the new acquired relationships, and f) parties can participate in the relationships voluntarily or involuntarily.

The process of decolonizing the African mind may have taken place through the presentation of African literature with a European vizard and other social structures over a long period of time. Social acts such as education and religion can serve as a crucial means of depositing colonial traits into the minds of victims as NgugiwaThiong'o (1986:384) has observed. Hotep (2008), cited in Selaelo T Kgatla¹, writing from an African-American background, equates the process of the colonization of the mind to deculturalization and mis-education.

By deculturalization, Hotep (2008), refers to a method of pacification and control while stripping the victims of their culture, history and their ancestral education. Shongwe (2016:1) associates the deculturalization to a system that takes away the identity of its victims to the extent that the victims become foreigners and strangers to their own culture. (cited in T Kgatla: p.148)¹. Following this, Yerxa(2013) opines that the ultimate results of the colonization process is to internalize the beliefs that the colonized are inferior to the colonizing race, diligently trying to 'mirror white as beautiful and black as backward and primitive'

Heart of Darkness is a story based on Joseph Conrad's own journey to the Congo in 1890. He had experienced colonialism as a child in Russian Poland, and had seen Dutch, English and Arab traders scrambling for advantages in the Malay Archipelago, so why would he have wanted to go and work in Africa? In the author's Note to the *Three Stories by Joseph Conrad*, Conrad himself provides an answer to this question. He writes

It is well known that curious men go prying into all sorts of places (where they have no business) and come with them with all kinds of spoil(pp.vi-vii)

I want to offer an understanding to what Conrad refers to as 'spoil'. This *spoil* possesses a dual meaning of what they came to literally scramble in Africa, which in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* will be Mr. Kurtz's much cherished *Ivory (the spoil brought back)*, and the spoil they left by the wayside-the long-lasting effects of colonization. But the book itself, *Heart of Darkness*, and the author himself, Joseph Conrad, present us with an interesting situation to interrogate. Conrad, obviously a European, writing in the heart of the colonised Congo, and his writings has since found a place in both the canon of African literature and in the discussions of post-colonial writings.

How is it, one may ask, that a non-African writes about Africa, and not just that, his weapon, literary, has found a place in the armoury of postcolonial African literature, and we would expect him to sound beautifully about it? Of course, when a witch cries in the night, and a child dies in the morning, we will not expect the soothsayer to be the one tells us who killed the child. In the same vein, when a European travels to the "Dark Continent" of Africa, and writing from the 'heart' of that "Dark Continent"-*Heart of Darkness* (. "we penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness"(*Heart of Darkness*, 63), we should expect that there is something more than just being "curious" and "prying into all sorts of places where he has no business"

And when one begins to study the book itself, you are tickled with delight, on one hand, about the few nice things the author says about Africa and against colonization, and on the other hand, you are stung and stabbed about his putrid and stinking description of the Congo and its inhabitants. One would, therefore, want to find out whether the book is for Africa or against it; is the book against colonization or for it?. Is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* a friend or a foe of Africa?

2. Theoretical Frame Work

The theoretical basis of this paper is the *Other Theory*. 'Other' is an ideological construction of colonial discourse that strives on the concept of 'fixity' and stereotype. K. Bhabha (1983b) writes that 'Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition' (The Other Question:18). Fixity is in the mind of the colonizer; he thinks of the African as uncivilized and backward, and so has his view remain-unchanging, and that is what gives way to stereotype.

According to K Bhabha(ibid), stereotype, which is the major discursive strategy of fixity, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved.(ibid: 19). Fixity together with stereotype create the 'Us' vrs 'Them' mentality. The West, with the Us and Them mentality sees the colonised(the Other) as K Bhabha puts it 'a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin,' and this paper argues that Conrad wrote with this mentality-We(the West) and Others.

Achebe in his *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*(1977:2) makes it very clear that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* 'projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' It is against the background of the 'Other world' mentality with which Conrad wrote that Achebe declares him as a racist.

It is not only Achebe who sees Conrad as racist, but also Edward Said. He (Said) writes of Conrad that even when writing about the oppressed, all he 'can see is a world dominated by the West, and—of equal importance—a world in which every opposition to the West only confirms its wicked power. What Conrad could not see is life lived outside this cruel tautology...[and] not controlled by the gringo imperialists and liberal reformers of this world' (Said 1988:70). David Maughan Brown (1985) details the extent to which even NgugiwaThiong'o's most radical fiction is affected by his liberal humanist education. It is not possible simply to assume that a work written by an 'Other' (however defined), even a politicized Other, will have freed itself from the dominant ideology. HomiBhabha says 'there is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer, which is an historical and theoretical simplification' (Bhabha 1983b: 25,citedin Bill Ashcroft:242).

3. A Friend?

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is considered one of the great works of English literature. The early responses to the novella praised the novella and called it one of the events of the literary year. One of the literary critics who wrote in favour of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is Edward Said .He argues in his *Culture and Imperialism*(1994:19) that we must not blame the Europeans for the misfortunes of the present. We should instead look at the events of imperialism "as a network of interdependent histories that would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand."

To Said, Conrad's narrative is bound to a certain *time and place*. Conrad does not see an alternative to imperialism, and the natives he wrote about seemed to be incapable of independence. He could not foresee what would happen when imperialism came to an end. Conrad allows readers today to see an Africa that is not made up of dozens of European colonies, even if he himself might have had a very limited idea of what Africa was like (Said 25). This is a particularly important point, Said sees the novella more as an important time-document which displays a vision that was seen as "normal" and correct at the time.

One would be tempted to agree with Said, especially when Marlow(a character in the book), and to a large extent Conrad himself, seemed to have shown some dislike for colonialism and imperialism. He(Conrad) says that "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly different flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (*Heart of Darkness*:34). Again, *In his Geography and Some Explorers*(1955:17), Conrad is more vociferous in his condemnation of colonisation. He describes European colonialism as " the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration"

In their Critical responses to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Morgan S, eta'l(2010) do not only agree with Said's time and place argument, they also take a swipe on Achebe for calling Conrad a racist. They write

Achebe claims that if Conrad wanted to add an alternative reference he would have done so. Instead, readers are forced to take what the characters say in the novella as the truth.

However, one should also remember that when a person reads a book, all of the information s/he has gathered during his life is taken into reference, a book might be narrow and short-sighted in its description but a reader does have some obligation not to take everything he hears as the truth.

To them, the burden is on the reader to have realized the situation and the context in which Conrad wrote because 'Marlow's knowledge when he enters Africa is limited and therefore he might give a more simplified picture'. They also claim that Conrad could not have been racist because most of his travels take place on a river, he can only describe what he sees, this gives limited information and not everything might be accurate. Perhaps, we really may have to develop a soft heart and sympathy for Conrad because he equally sympathizes with an African boy, and through him, he sympathizes with natives in general, even if this sympathy was just once. Marlow says :

The man seemed young -almost a boy- But you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket (*Heart of Darkness*:45).

Conrad's visit to the Congo, we are told, was significant in so far as it brought into light the atrocities that was going on there .In the Introduction of *Heart of Darkness and Other Stories*(P.x-xi), Gene, M. Moore, tells us that "the first denunciation of the brutality of the ivory-grabbing pilgrims was not written until Conrad was already there, and it was not published until shortly after Conrad had returned to Europe"

One would nod in affirmation to the assertion of Moore if one reads what Conrad himself had to say about the atrocities of the pilgrims. He tells us that

.. these chaps(the pilgrims) were not account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only a brute force-nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grab what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind-as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.(Conrad;34)'

On the heels of this , Moore concludes:

As news of Congolese atrocities began to spread after the turn of the century, readers came increasingly to recognize the importance of Conrad's story. It inspired by T.S Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men', which took Mistah Kurtz-he dead for an epigraph. Since that time, *Heart of Darkness* has come to be seen as one of the fundamental documents of literary modernism, and the title has become a media byword to describe the horrors of famine or war(ibid p.xii)

4. A FOE!

If what all the commentators have said, in an attempt to set Conrad free from Achebe's racist whip, is something to go by, then Conrad himself has led them down on the account of his use of language. Language is a powerful tool with which we communicate our thoughts, and nobody can attribute anything, positive or negative, in one's mind yet to be said. Indeed, Shakespeare is right, 'there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face'

What a man utters is but the construct of his mind. So, if Conrad had written and communicated what we are reading today, one can safely assume that it represented his mind's construct-his thought, and we will therefore not be prepared to exonerate him on the bases of Said's 'time and place', or Morgan's 'context' arguments. What he wrote is what he meant, period! It is against this background that I find him guilty of offensive and unfriendly use of language on the African, ostensibly to make the African look inferior, and if this what Achebe refers to as racist, then I am with him.

There are many others who see Conrad not as a racist, but as a realist. MezianiMeriem in her unpublished thesis argues that "readers cannot blame Joseph Conrad as a racist because he was just describing what he noticed in the Congo during the 19th century"(2010:43). So, to her, Conrad was a realist. Even so, he(Conrad) will still not escape my accusation of being offensive and sarcastic in his description of the Africa and its people.

Marlow and his compatriot walked round the forest in the Congo - 'we tore slowly along the over hanging in a whirl of broken twigs and flying leaves. And in walking he saw an African and describes him as, '...a mad helmsman, who was shaking the empty riffle and yelling at the shore'. He also saw, and describes in a language only available to him-doesn't he have any other option?, 'vague forms of men running bent double,leaping, gliding , distinct, incomplete, evanescent.(*Heart of Darkness*:73).

In a very subtle way, Conrad calls the African a monkey-men *running bent double, leaping*. In a book where Conrad has constantly referred to the African as 'savage'- 'perhaps you had better go if you have any friend among the savages'(*Heart of Darkness*:91)-one would not want to acquit and discharge him of the charge him of abusive and insulting language on the African. Severally has he referred to the African as 'primitive' also, and only once in the whole novella that he calls the African 'black fellow'(page 91),and even so, they were those Africans who had agreed to joined him(Marlow) and his friends in the ship, and these 'black fellows' were not even spared by Marlow's dehumanizing comment. He reports to us about the Africans when they came to him, "Certainly, they had brought with them some rotten hippo-meat, which couldn't have lasted very long" (page 68). How about his description of the African continent and its inhabitant? It is disgusting, to say the least. His thoughts are summarized below:

The prehistoric earth, covered with a feature of unknown planet. Where, the men were the ownership of an accursed legacy. But, suddenly, men had to struggle. Men glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly aghast. Gradually the earth has become unearthly. Due to ugliness of the mind of human, feral and obsessive uproar had increased. Man would admit that the faintest outline of a rejoinder to the dreadful forthrightness of that clatter, a diffuse misgiving of there being a connotation in it (pages 63-64).

So, Conrad thinks of Africa as 'the aspect of an unknown planet' and a 'pre historic earth', and they only came to take possession of what he calls 'an accursed inheritance'. If I may digress a bit, and stay a little while on Conrad's 'accursed inheritance'.

The whites in south Africa, during the Apartheid regime, claimed they had the right to lord it over the blacks because they (the blacks) were cursed according to the Bible, and this brought about the Apartheid system. They claimed that Africans are the descendance of Ham, one of the sons of Noah, and since Ham was cursed by his father, Noah (Genesis 9:22-25), all his descendance (Genesis10:6), the remnants of whom are Africans, have equally been cursed. For the cursed put upon the African race, they have therefore become 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' (Joshua9:23) for them -the Whites, because they(the Whites) are the descendance of Japheth, one of the blessed sons of Noah. Perhaps, this 'a cursed descendance of Ham' theory was what Conrad had in mind when he wrote that they had to take possession of an 'accursed inheritance'

Let us return to Conrad's putrefied description. We have seen of the African continent and what Conrad thinks about it. How about the Africans? He thinks they are made of 'whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying. For this reason, he does not think they were human beings. Conrad scales up his dehumanizing description of the African-as if not satisfied with the earlier one-when he and his friends saw some black people afar. He writes

We were within thirty yards from the nearest fire. A black figure stood up(*not a human being?, emphasis mine*),strode on long black legs,(*as if no human walks on the legs, or that a black man must walk with white legs*),waving long black arms(*but do human beings wave with their legs?, or that a black man must wave with short white hands*). . . It had horns-antelope horns, I think-on its head (Conrad: 93).

Readers must turn to pages 68 and 88 for similar negative descriptions, but for now let us turn our attention to Conrad's description of the African woman. I will charge Conrad again for another offense-for being an Anti-feminist. Throughout his Novella, Conrad does not speak about the African woman, except for one place where he sounds so sarcastic about her.

At the time Kurtz was being brought on a stretcher to meet Marlow and his friends, Marlow stood waiting for the manager of the company, and eventually 'the manager appeared silently in the door way". Immediately Marlow turned, and lo; he saw, and he writes

Dark human shapes. . . in the distance, flirting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall appears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skin warlike and still in statuesque repose. And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman (*Heart of Darkness*:88).

In the first instance, Marlow could not tell whether the human beings he saw were males or females, but he sarcastically refers to them as 'dark human shapes', and 'bronze figures', and one is at a loss as to which of the descriptions between the two is more dehumanizing-the former or the latter. Notice also that Conrad did not see a woman, he saw an 'apparition of a woman', and this 'apparition' is Not the apparitions in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but an innuendo about the African woman.

5. Conclusion

From the onset, the thrust of this article has been to examine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a friend or foe of Africa, and from the perspective of the Other theory. By a friend or foe, I mean; will the student of African literature kiss Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and put it beside his/her bed, just as he/she will do for Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, or better still as a Muslim will do for the Qur'an or the Christian for the Bible?. The yes is in the friend and the no is in the foe.

But a yes or no answer to the question will not come like a citizen of a nation ticking off a census form to be counted. It will come after a thorough and diligent study of the book and matching it against what other commentators have said about it. Many commentators view the book as a hall mark of English literature, and praising Conrad for not only exposing the atrocities in the Congo and Africa in the 19th century, but also the hypocrisy of the entire colonial efforts and how Europeans tried to justify their presence in Africa by the pretext of civilization.

Many are those who have also argued that Joseph was a realist because his description depended on words which were familiar during the 19th century. While some commentators see Conrad as a racist, others, including Africa critiques, think that Conrad should be praised because he portrayed European civilization as a corrupt one, and that his novel was not for abusing the Congolese but for its attack on colonialism and imperialism.

However, this article has argued that regardless of the things Conrad may have said against colonialism in the book for which reason we should praise him, we will still find him guilty of abusive, insulting, derogatory, dehumanizing, sarcastic and anti-feminist comments against Africa/ns, and through this, has made manifest *The Other* mentality against Africans. Therefore, his book cannot be a friend, but a FOE!

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