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Abstract

The standing of Joseph Conrad as a major novelist of his time has been for a long time unassailable. F.R. Leavis certainly regards Conrad as rightfully belonging to 'The Great Tradition' of English literature- minor misgivings notwithstanding. It is argued that he is one of those artists who have extended the frontiers of the novel and created more space and more possibilities for the exploration and depiction of human experience. This view is confirmed by David Daiches who in his book *The Novel and the Modern World* acknowledges the technical possibilities heralded by Conrad's multiple points of view in the art of storytelling. Albert Guerard's assessment of Conrad's work is in the same vein but at times uncomfortably specific. He regards *Heart of Darkness* as being 'among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language' (Guerard, 1978:9). This commendation is in fact far from being an eccentric one uttered by an over-enthusiastic critic. F.R. Leavis, who is generally a rigorous and censorious critic, writes '*Heart of Darkness* is, by common consent, one of Conrad's best things' (Leavis, 1973:174).

R. ZHUWARARA

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The standing of Joseph Conrad as a major novelist of his time has been for a long time unassailable. F.R. Leavis certainly regards Conrad as rightfully belonging to 'The Great Tradition' of English literature - minor misgivings notwithstanding. It is argued that he is one of those artists who have extended the frontiers of the novel and created more space and more possibilities for the exploration and depiction of human experience. This view is confirmed by David Daiches who in his book *The Novel and the Modern World* acknowledges the technical possibilities heralded by Conrad's multiple points of view in the art of story-telling. Albert Guerard's assessment of Conrad's work is in the same vein but at times uncomfortably specific. He regards *Heart of Darkness* as being 'among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language' (Guerard, 1978:9). This commendation is in fact far from being an eccentric one uttered by an over-enthusiastic critic. F.R. Leavis, who is generally a rigorous and censorious critic, writes '*Heart of Darkness* is, by common consent, one of Conrad's best things' (Leavis, 1973:174).

On the other hand, the African response to some of Conrad's work has been at best mixed and at other times openly hostile. Here is how one of the most influential novelists and critic-cum-thinkers describes his reaction to Conrad:

In the works of Joseph Conrad, which I studied as a special paper, I had seen how the author had used a variety of narrative voices at different times and places in the same novel with tantalising effect. With Conrad the same event could be looked at by the same person at different times and places; and each of these multiple voices could shed new light on the event by supplying more information, more evidence, or by relating other episodes that preceded or followed the event under spotlight. *Nostromo* was my favourite ... but on the whole I found Conrad's vision limited. (Thiongo, 1987:76)

Ngugi wa' Thiongo is, like David Daiches, fascinated by the way in which Conrad handles the technical aspects of creative writing but somewhat critical of his vision. Similarly, that doyen of the African novel in English, Chinua Achebe, admits that Conrad is 'a great stylist of modern fiction' and a good story-teller (Achebe, 1988:2) - in a sense a

writer who has produced a serious and therefore permanent literature. But Achebe's positive comment is qualified in the same essay by a vigorous and relentless attack on *Heart of Darkness* in particular. It is a novel, he argues with passion, which 'eliminates the African as human factor and parades in the most vulgar fashion, prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies...' (Achebe, 1988:10).

Indeed Achebe's indignant comments echo those of another African scholar Michael Echeruo. In a critical work specifically devoted to Joyce Cary's fiction, Echeruo digresses momentarily to make a disdainful swipe at *Heart of Darkness*. He writes: '*Heart of Darkness*, ultimately, reveals the mind of an imperial Europe at its day's end: it reveals nothing about the character of Africa itself' (Echeruo, 1973:5).

Why, the reader may ask, is the African reader vehemently critical of *Heart of Darkness*? The text seems to elicit an unusual degree of criticism especially from highly influential voices from the African continent. Is it a failure, on the part of the African reader and writer, to appreciate the subtleties of an acclaimed European masterpiece or is it that African readers are victims of a prejudiced and wilful misreading of the novel? This article is an attempt to account for the African reaction to the novel in the process of underlining the following:

- i) The fact that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad sets out to question the nature of man in a specific historical context characterized by imperialism.
- ii) That what starts off as a subversion of the ideals of imperialistic discourse is in turn subverted by an artistic process which becomes too dependent on stereotypes of the time, especially when Marlow starts sailing up the Congo River.
- iii) That these stereotypes are part of a long standing tradition which has been harmful to blacks for centuries.

It is helpful to recall that Conrad writes *Heart of Darkness* barely thirteen years after the Berlin conference of 1884 has officially sanctioned the partition of Africa into specific spheres belonging to various European powers. These powers did not bother at all to consult the inhabitants of the African continent; neither were they concerned about the ethical basis of their momentous decision. Had famous missionaries such as David Livingstone and well known travellers like Henry Horton Stanley not made it obvious that Africa was a vast continent waiting to be blessed with the virtues of the Christian gospel as well as the benefits of western trade and commerce? Apart from the writings of David Livingstone and others, Europe had an opportunity to whet its curiosity with the writings of Stanley whose books had obliging titles such as *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *Darkest Africa* (1890). Soon Europe assumed an Adamic role which entailed banishing the darkness of Africa, giving new names to its features and people and taming the African wilderness into

a garden bereft of the proverbial biblical snake. Often the rhetoric of imperialism as well as that of the Christian gospel became indistinguishable, and so messianic as to gloss over the economic interests of those involved. Alongside this historical phenomenon there developed in Europe a literature which, consciously or unconsciously, was aimed at justifying the whole process of colonisation and Empire building as a noble undertaking.

Writing about the nature and function of popular literature in Britain at the turn of the last century, David Daniell has this to say in his essay titled 'Buchan and "The Black General"':

It becomes aggressively, and defensively imperialistic. It leaves the Christian family ambience and becomes all male and public school: military values invade and take over stories; white dominates black with cool superiority of a god - now in the name of something called civilisation... Between 1880 and 1900 a hundred children's journals were founded, over half of them devoted to 'manly' adventure for boys - privileged boys at public school, preparing to be officers in the armed forces. (Dabydeen (ed) 1985:141)

Indeed, the narrator in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) claims that his narrative is an adventure story for his mischievous son at home. It is a story in which the aristocratic values of Europe represented by Sir Henry Curtis and those of the military represented by Captain Good triumph over the values of a superstitious and gullible African people. Africa becomes a playground for Europeans keen to exhibit their manhood and superiority in the face of a challenging environment. Similarly in John Buchan's *Prester John* (1910) we witness how David Crawford together with his fellow whites subdue a legendary African general, Laputa, thus all the more vindicating the superiority of whites over blacks. Both *King Solomon's Mines* and *Prester John* are adventure stories shamelessly Eurocentric and racist. In the penultimate chapter of *Prester John* Crawford defines the white man's burden in Africa as follows:

I knew then the meaning of the white man's duty. He has to take all risks, reckoning nothing of his life or his fortunes, and well content to find his reward in the fulfilment of his task. That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility, the power of being in a little way a King, and so long as we know this and practise it, we will rule not in Africa alone but wherever there are dark men who live only for the day and their own bellies. (Buchan, 1910:230)

Considering the fact that *Prester John* and *King Solomon's Mines* have been, over time, accorded the status of minor classics, and made into films, it can be argued that they typify the kind of popular fiction which touched the hearts and excited the imagination of many European citizens who would have been condemned to a routine and rather drab existence. Such a literature becomes a vicarious rite of passage for those entering

into their phase of manhood. More importantly, however, such books spurred many into embracing the cause of imperialism in Africa and other parts of the world.

The publication of *Heart of Darkness* in 1902 can be seen as an integral part of the development of that literature spawned by the European expansion into other parts of the world. In fact there is a way in which *Heart of Darkness* has elements of an Edwardian adventure story. Marlow himself is driven into Africa by his desire to fulfil a childhood dream about the Congo. By the time he returns he is an entirely different man - he has grown up! Kurtz himself sets out for Africa as an archetypal figure representing those departments of civilisation in which Europe is perceived as having taken a lead over the dark peoples of the world. Rumour has it that Kurtz is a musician, an orator, a poet-cum-painter, an agent of science and progress and a trading official into the bargain. According to fragmentary bits of information which reach Marlow, Kurtz has the talent and the will-power, in fact everything which Europe could give to such a man of destiny. As such Kurtz becomes the embodiment of those ideals which imperialism often proclaimed as part of its Crusade to civilize savage continents. For Kurtz, Africa is part of a challenging frontier to be tamed and controlled.

What almost rescues *Heart of Darkness* from becoming a political romance in the Rider Haggard school of imperialist propaganda is the inherently sceptical and ruthlessly questioning stance assumed by Marlow right from the beginning of his journey to Africa. In addition there is an attempt by Conrad to distance himself from Marlow through a careful narrative strategy. Unlike the unreturned Kurtz of the earlier journey, Marlow is disdainful and scathing in his attitude towards these very ideals cherished by the European public. He is taken aback upon discovering that his brainwashed aunt regards him as:

Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the company was run for profit. (Conrad, 1989:39)

It can be argued here that Marlow as an artistic creation enjoys the insight of Conrad, the writer who visited the Congo in 1890, and had an opportunity to see for himself Leopold II's Congo Free State. It must have become obvious to Conrad that there was a gap between the discourse of imperialism with all its clichés and idealistic sentiments and the actual sordid business of exploiting Africa. Also there is the biographical fact that Conrad himself grew up in a part of Poland dominated by Russia and, as such, he did not find it easy to share the European euphoria about empire

- more so when his numerous journeys to what John McClure calls 'the raw edges of the empire' (Dabydeen (ed) 1985:154) had enabled him to see the whole business of empire from a slightly different angle.

A passage which reveals more clearly the attitude of Marlow, and perhaps that of Conrad himself, towards imperialism is the one often cited by critics. Marlow stumbles upon dying blacks in Africa and says:

They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient and were allowed to crawl away and rest. (Conrad, 1989:44)

Being confirmed by Marlow at this instance is the fact that whites in Africa are not pilgrims of progress as is claimed by the protagonists of *King Solomon's Mines*. Often they are actors in a barbaric and destructive drama which inflicts untold havoc on the very inhabitants of a continent which the rhetoric of imperialism claims to redeem. Far from being 'pilgrims', 'apostles' and 'emissaries of light', they are, ironically, a callous and vicious lot propelled by base motives of selfishness and greed. In other words, the supposedly heroic deeds celebrated in the boy's adventure story are revealed as fraudulent, often with consequences horrifying to look at. Marlow's comments at this stage are a direct indictment of imperialism: the blacks become the proverbial victims they have always been in history, trampled upon by the wheels of empire.

What seems to have interested and fascinated Conrad, however, is not so much the fate of the non-white as a victim of imperialism but rather, what became of the character and fate of the so-called superior race the moment it left the shores of a supposedly 'civilised' western world and came up face to face with the dark people of an alien culture and environment. In the stock drama churned out by the Haggards and Buchans of the pro-imperialist world, that point of contact and conflict with other races becomes an opportunity to vindicate white supremacy. As for Conrad, that moment is fraught with perilous contradictions and disabling anxieties. For instance, the moment Kurtz reaches the interior of Africa, he becomes a ruthless ivory collecting brute. His passion for ivory becomes a demonic obsession which knows no moral boundaries. He raids the locals with the supreme confidence of a god. Far from spreading the seeds of European civilisation in a supposedly dark and malevolent wilderness, Kurtz becomes a sinister figure - indeed an integral part of the very darkness he is meant to banish from Africa. The messianic zeal and idealism often displayed in the boy's adventure story and which we initially identify with Kurtz, is brutally undercut. That impressive and more or less romantic public profile which Kurtz enjoys in Europe and before those who know him from a distance is pitilessly undermined by

what Marlow discovers about him in Africa. He becomes a sinister and resounding mockery of those ideals which man has always parroted, often as an unwitting justification of his own latent and selfish needs.

The implication of the degeneration which takes place in Kurtz is that the moment he leaves Europe with its restraining order and civilizing influences he becomes overwhelmed by the forces of darkness which have always lurked beneath European civilisation itself right from those centuries predating Roman influence in Britain. His convictions and ideals dwindle into embarrassing sentiments rudely cast aside by the beast in him. One can even claim that by hinting at the darkness which Europe still harbours in its breast and which the nineteenth and early twentieth century European reader was readily prone to see in the otherness of non-whites, Conrad is deliberately assaulting the all too often simplistic moral inanities of imperialistic discourse with its insistence on the crude dichotomies between darkness and light, black and white, savage and civilized. This is more evident in that even Europe is associated with metaphors suggesting incipient darkness and death. In *Heart of Darkness*, the manichean mode of perception and expression becomes destabilized as conventional symbolic language becomes invested with uncustomary associations. The colour of ivory and the sinister resonance it acquires in this novel is a good example here.

If it is accepted that the symbolic role of Kurtz is to question and subvert European modes of perception and thinking, the question that arises pertains to the consistency and effectiveness with which this is done in *Heart of Darkness*. Put in another way, to what extent does *Heart of Darkness* succeed in undercutting and displacing the popular ideas and prejudices of its Edwardian readership? Does this novel succeed in creating enough space for new thinking to take root, for new attitudes and feelings to emerge? To address these questions, we have to examine the mode in which the spiritual disintegration of Kurtz is described. Marlow continues:

The wilderness had patted him on the head and behold, it was like a ball, an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and lo! he had withered; it had taken him, and got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation... (Conrad, 1989:84)

In order for Conrad to describe the intangible but real world of the spirit associated with the moral decay of Kurtz, he transforms Africa into an active, symbolic persona possessing those anarchic Dionysian energies which are forever locked in combat against the Apollonian principles underpinning western civilization. Africa and its ivory become an objective correlative acting out the role of a demonic Vampire which is pitiless in its hold over the seduced and hapless Kurtz.

One way of regarding the role which Conrad assigns to Africa is to take the continent as merely an appropriate setting on which to dramatize the moral dissolution of Kurtz - it is an environment whose supposed wilderness is meant to perform a small task - that is, elicit the darkness deeply buried within the heart of the protagonist himself. On the other hand, African readers are painfully conscious of the wicked archetypal role often assigned to the so-called frontier societies which are non-white. Here is how Richard Slotkin describes the stereotypical role of the Red Indian in the psyche of North American whites:

They are our ecological link with our biota - the organic environment which we strive to *repudiate and destroy*...the flooding tide full of turmoil and whirlpools of the unconscious; or id, or the dark forces of the blood...the actual savage environment that reason and order and human relationships can penetrate but cannot control. (Slotkin, 1973:18)

In a sense Africa and its inhabitants are reduced into a threatening symbol which, like the symbolic role of the Red Indians, harbours an anarchic potential which the civilized world has striven to 'repudiate and destroy'.

It appears as if critics such as Frederick R. Karl, Albert Guerard, F.R. Leavis and others have been quite content to regard the symbolic role assigned to the Congo as appropriate in expressing the darker and more menacing side of European culture. Such an artistic process appears to them as a helpful and indeed a legitimate free play of the imagination which singles out Conrad as a genius. However, most of those African readers who have been on the receiving end of imperialism find such a symbolic role unfortunate in the extreme. If we take into account the politics and attitudes of Conrad's readers at the turn of the last century, readers whose imagination was steeped in theories of racial superiority of whites over blacks, the symbolic darkness of Africa and its supposed barbarism and savagery are the very stuff which the empire builder and the purveyor of popular imperialist literature needed most. Conrad's desire to underline the existence of what John McClure calls a 'radical moral and epistemological darkness' (Dabydeen (ed) 1985:162) in terms inherently African and black is counterproductive in that it confirms pernicious myths which were cherished by missionaries, explorers and empire builders who sought to establish a European presence in Africa in one form or other. Far from subverting the simplistic moral categories of imperialistic discourse Marlow's perception of Africa confirms the worst about Africa.

Conrad himself seems to have been aware of the over-dramatization of evil and sought to justify it in the following terms:

Heart of Darkness is experience, too; but experience pushed a little, (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the *perfectly legitimate*, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers. Its theme 'had to be

given a *sinister* resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.' (Daiches, 1962:7)

By implying that his fictional process is ultimately rooted in the actual experience of his visit to the Congo in 1890, Conrad is in fact insisting that his narrative be seen as a credible version of the white experience in the Congo. One cannot quarrel about his assessment of the calibre of those fortune seekers who flocked to the Congo during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Marlow is right in exposing the crassness and moral vacancy of those who descended upon Africa like vultures. The history of Leopold II in his Congo Free State is testimony enough. However, it is when Conrad tries to create what he calls 'a sinister resonance' that he lapses into a controversial process of myth-making which denies blacks a recognisable humanity. In a letter to Elsa Martindale alias Mrs Ford Madox Ford Conrad confessed: 'What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all. But the story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions I gave free rein to my mental laziness and took the line of least resistance...' (Karl, 1975:28) Frederick R. Karl regards the somewhat self-effacing comments by Conrad as referring to the 'tardiness of Kurtz's vitality?' One can actually argue here that the line of least resistance entailed a reliance on ready-made images and stereotypes about Africa which ultimately overshadow the anti-imperialistic thesis implicit in Marlow's original stance. The symbolic and pre-historical Africa of his novel naturally demands a protagonist who operates at a symbolic level, too.

Thus the Congo which Conrad visited is skilfully transformed into a primeval terrain which Marlow claims to be 'the beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were Kings.' (Conrad, 1989:66) It is a pre-historic Africa peopled by cannibals with filed teeth addicted to superstition and weird ceremonies of the devil. Unlike Marlow, the 'pilgrims' and the Russian who converse in a respectable and recognisable language, the African is reduced to an almost pre-verbal creature whose dialect is a hotch-potch of 'screeches', 'howls', 'babbles of uncouth sounds' and 'grunting phrases': sometimes the blacks merge with the environment as part of the flora and fauna; at other times they become part of a weird and sinister mood - a menacing presence. The evocation of this sinister world is so vivid and so new as to transport the reader into a nightmarish world inhabited by alien species but bearing the shape of humans. It is riveting poetic conjuration of sinister images intimating the outlines of a world inhabited by a lunatic breed of primeval blacks and a few stray whites. The sensational character of this world with its shifting moods and elusive certainties has dazzled western readers no end. But for the black reader that bewitching success of Conrad places his identity beyond the pale of human civilization - that is, in the minds of people

whose societies have not hesitated in the past to wield excessive power over the African's fate in an unfair way.

Even Marlow, whose point of view is central in the novel, and who seems to be morally awake and conscious of the moral travesties which abound cannot help but betray his own prejudice against blacks. Those who assist the white buccaneers are regarded by Marlow as, 'reclaimed', or 'improved specimen' or 'poor devils'. Marlow, who alone could provide that yardstick by which readers can judge those around him, makes it clear that he prefers the 'black cannibals' rather than the 'improved specimen' who, according to his prejudice, are often guilty of forgetting their natural position in the scheme of things. He describes the black fireman as follows: 'to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs' (Conrad, 1989:70). Such a description speaks volumes about his antipathy towards blacks. In fact instead of being seen as part of the human family, the black man is projected as being much nearer the animal world.

When Conrad deliberately opts for a version of Africa based on myths and prejudices of his age rather than one based on his experiences in the Congo of the 1890s, he is in fact pandering to the predilections of a readership whose imagination and sensibility have been for a long time indisposed towards anything black and anyone non-white. The stereotypical roles of Aaron in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1590) and the daughters of Niger in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605) come to mind here. More disturbing is that antipathy towards non-whites was rooted in a theology of an earlier era and the pseudo-science of the Victorian period. Brian Street writes:

The central ordering device for a long time prior to the nineteenth century Britain was the concept of 'a chain of being', whereby nature was taken to be a unified whole, ranked in a hierarchy from angels to insects. In the nineteenth century this essentially theological notion was adapted to scientific descriptions of nature and refined by Darwinian theories of evolution. The application of evolutionary theory to the ladder meant that researchers could expect to find examples of earlier stages of their developments by examining living contemporary societies. The comparative method enabled travellers and scientists alike to examine living creatures and fellow men for evidence of their own past. (Dabydeen (ed), 1985:97)

Thus when Marlow describes the black assistants on the boat as belonging to 'beginnings of time' he is in fact invoking as well as eliciting the concurrence of a seemingly valid evolutionary paradigm which underpins what Michael Echeruo has dubbed the 'conditioned imagination'. In such a paradigm, those who hail from the 'dark' continent occupy a position perilously close to the bestial world, which Europe has long since left behind. By regarding blacks as primitive primates Marlow is in fact suggesting the incalculable and normally unbridgeable gulf separating Europe from the dark primitive Africa. The latter becomes an

indispensable existential condition of absurdity against which we can measure the monumental distance which Kurtz has had to cover during his fall from the topmost rung of the ladder of civilization. His fall becomes complete the moment he embraces the moral abyss conceived as being inherently a Congolese phenomenon.

Of primary significance is the way darkness is described as being epistemologically African, a phenomenon whose perils may catch up with the unwary European of the likes of Kurtz. The fact that Kurtz is engulfed by darkness does not necessarily mean that darkness has become an oppressive part of Europe: the darkness remains a potent threat rather than the overwhelming nightmare that it is in the Africa of Conrad's narrative. As such the image of darkness remains an African burden and Kurtz is simply part of an ominous cautionary tale which Europe has to heed if it is to keep the ever-threatening terrors of the wilderness at bay. Put in another way, the process of identifying Europe with darkness is done in a teasingly tentative manner as to be weaker than the process of imbuing Africa with a menacing darkness. At this level Kurtz's darkness together with that of the lesser 'pilgrims' is exceptional while that of the blacks is typical. In a sense Marlow's narrative is banking on the concurrence of the popular imagination of the period which dismissed black cultures in distant lands as backward. What Conrad does is to succumb to the habitual myth-making process which automatically identifies the outward colour of the black man with the worst of moral associations. In *The Nigger of the Narcissus* for instance, Conrad is eager to go for the blackness he sees in Jimmy Wait and to make him a menacing symbol whose diseased and disabling enigmatic presence becomes the yardstick by which we can assess the moral health or lack of it of the whole crew.

It is quite tempting to those who have enjoyed reading *Heart of Darkness* in the past to point out that it is no use for the African reader to get worked up ninety years after the book was published: after all the Africa of *Heart of Darkness* is a mythical one and, as such, illuminates very little about the realities of Africa of the 1890s. The only problem here is that in the history of black people myth and reality have often collided very much to the detriment of the children of Africa. For instance a well known powerful gentleman of culture, Lord Chesterfield, argued in a letter to a son of his who was probably troubled about the morality of the slave trade: 'blacks are little better than lions, tigers, leopards, and other wild beasts which that country produces in great numbers.' He went on to argue that blacks had no arts, sciences and systems of commerce and, as such, it was acceptable 'to buy a great many of them to sell again to advantage in the West Indies' (Dabydeen, 1985:29). In other words Conrad is peddling myths about blacks which have been manipulated in the past by those who sought to exploit them for material gain.

An interesting stereotype which some critics have positively commented upon at the expense of the rather lifeless presence of Kurtz's Intended is centred on the savage African woman. She is a personification of the whole continent and is described as follows:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments; she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire, gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glassbeads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witchmen, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad, 1989:101)

Here the African woman symbolizes a barbaric magnificence: she is majestically alluring yet with a gaudiness which is gratuitously repellent; she is the ivory which beckons fortune seekers but only to destroy the morally unwary. Her vitality is as seductive as it is sinfully corrosive: it is part of that sexuality hinted at by the words 'passion', 'mysterious' and 'fecundity' but a sexuality which is demonic and therefore morally dangerous. Later in the narrative Kurtz is said to have been part of unspeakable sexual deeds of a lurid and debauched nature. As F.R. Karl claims, her 'demanding display of sex' is provocatively tempting but fatal to the likes of Kurtz lacking in restraint. She is the darkness which awakens the primeval instincts in Kurtz and as such, part of the black peril which casts a dark menacing shadow across the width and breadth of the whole land. In a way she becomes an African version of the legendary femme fatale, the proverbial temptress of the African wilderness.

According to the metaphysical language of the narrative, the fall of Kurtz is a moral crime caused by his singular lack of restraint. Unlike Captain Good who rejects the gentle but equally tempting black beauty, Foulata of *King Solomon's Mines*, Kurtz goes native the moment he embraces the savage African woman and indulges in sexual orgies of an inexpressible and abominable kind. In falling from grace he dramatizes the extent to which imagination, vitality and resolute will-power and restraint - all qualities identified with the construction of a European civilization and with Kurtz - can easily be destroyed by those primeval instincts which have always hounded man. These instincts can express themselves through an unbridled lust for sex, unrestrained greed for wealth and a passion for a godlike power over other fellow creatures.

Given a chance to choose between the rather pale and lifeless Intended and the savage African mistress, the reasoning part in Kurtz would opt for

the former: but of course the anarchic beast in him opts for the seductive but vengeful African mistress and in doing so he loses his soul in the Faustian manner. Incidentally, even the language of the story becomes very scriptural at this point. In other words, in spite of the assiduously cultivated sense of mystery and vagueness which F.R. Leavis describes correctly as being achieved through an 'adjectival insistence', one senses the crude outline of a morality play of the medieval period embedded in the novella, but of course rendered in the cynical idiom of a theologically more uncertain nineteenth and twentieth century environment. The African mistress embodies those regressive primeval instincts which, in the story, overwhelm the idealism of the ambitious Kurtz. Evil, this time, triumphs over the good.

It can be argued that as an artist Conrad is entirely free to offer us a mythical version of Africa, as long as this version suits his artistic purposes. Unfortunately for Africans, the cliché-ridden description of the savage mistress with her dark and tempting sexuality is part of a long standing stereotype in which blacks are perceived as possessing a lustfulness and bestiality associated with the animal Kingdom. According to Ruth Cowhig, the belief in the excessive sexuality of blacks 'was encouraged by the widespread belief in the legend that blacks were descendants of Ham in the Genesis story punished for their sexual excess by their blackness' (Dabydeen (ed), 1985:1). As such black as a colour becomes a symbolic badge proclaiming the moral condition of a whole people. Consequently, the unspeakable sexual excesses of which Kurtz is accused become credible once they are identified within an African context as Conrad does here successfully. On the other hand very few people would deny the fact that such sexual stereotyping has been very harmful to black-white relations on a global scale. One can cite the abysmal black-white relations and the lynching which went on during as well as immediately after the slavery period in the Deep South of the United States. Fear of miscegenation and other numerous sexual horrors of an abominable and unspeakable type haunted the fathers of settlerdom in Southern Africa so much that statute books were filled with laws forbidding sex relations between blacks and whites. The fate of Mary Turner in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* comes to mind here. So the sexual stereotyping that is related to the savage mistress is far from being a harmless exercise of the imagination. Together with other historical factors, such a sexual image has been very successful in needlessly widening the racial and cultural gulf separating whites from blacks and much damage has been done to both races, but more so to the blacks who are noted historically for their powerlessness and vulnerability.

Apart from the rather raw and unmediated process of stereotyping Africa and its blacks, a process which denies them a recognisable social order, there is also a certain moral inconsistency which is bound to puzzle many an African reader. One of the crimes which Kurtz is alleged to have

committed is that, according to Marlow 'he had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land - I mean literally' (Conrad, 1989:85). By projecting the African as a sub-human primate devilish in character, Marlow violates a sense of poetic justice which the blacks would rightfully regard as owing them. In Marlow's narrative the African Native is in fact the victim of a double injury: the historical victim of the European buccaneers who brutalize him during the nineteenth century and the hapless victim of an artistic process which, while condemning imperialism, uses him and abuses him in the same breath. This does not only indicate a contradiction in Marlow's character but also the limitations of a writer without a clear moral standpoint or alternative.

If the fortune seeker is gaining materially from his exploitation of the African, there is practically no way the likes of Marlow can persuade him to desist from such an exercise since he has pronounced the black people as devils. Christian history, of which the so-called 'pilgrims' are part, has never been very accommodating to devils of any kind - be they real or metaphorical. A good example here is the Papal Bull which authorised the opening of one of the first black slave markets in Lisbon in the first decade of the sixteenth century (Bitek, 1970:3). The reason given for such an unprecedented act was that slavery would redeem blacks from the evils of paganism. Even the cult of African savagery and primitivism which Conrad's so-called masterpiece needs so desperately for its success is not the harmless affair as it might look from a distance. Here is how one of the holy fathers proposed to solve the problem of darkness and African primitivity almost at the same time that Conrad was writing his book.

'Father Biehler is so convinced of the hopelessness of regenerating the Hashonas', wrote Lord Grey from Chishawasha in January 1897, 'whom he regards as the most hopeless of mankind...that he states that the only chance for the future of the race is to exterminate the whole people, both male and female, over the age of 14! This pessimistic conclusion,' Grey continued, 'I find it hard to accept'. (Ranger, 1967:3)

The presumed African darkness seems to have elicited a whole gamut of human feelings - especially in Europeans, ranging from the most noble to the frighteningly ignoble. Kurtz with his chilling utterance: 'exterminate the brutes' is a good example and Marlow too. The latter's anti-imperialistic stance becomes more muted the moment he begins his long awaited journey up the river Congo. In fact Marlow's anti-imperialistic discourse becomes subordinate to the imperatives of a story which, so one can argue, degenerates into a sensational melodrama. As the language becomes more abstract and metaphysical the very victim of imperialism is, by a strange twist of logic, turned into a devil and, as such, he becomes a scapegoat as well as the author of his own misfortunes. It may sound old fashioned and simplistic but it needs saying nevertheless: there is something of a moral untidiness that sits at the heart of Conrad's

masterpiece. This has all to do with the moral conception of the whole story. Conrad makes Marlow equivocate on a very crucial moral issue here and this makes him remain as ethnocentric and self-centred as the pilgrims he is so disdainful of. Marlow is simply incapable of acknowledging the humanity of those blacks conscripted by the forces of history to take part in an imperialist drama. The grossly exaggerated and luridly sensational barbarism associated with Africa is very much the kind of stuff characteristic of the boy's adventure story of the Victorian era - and this is the genre which the novel promises to outgrow at the beginning!

It is interesting to observe that Chinua Achebe's bitter criticism of *Heart of Darkness* as well as Michael Echeruo's unceremonious dismissal of it ironically betray the importance they attach to the novel. In fact *Heart of Darkness* is placed, both historically and imaginatively, at a strategic position from which African writers and scholars can ponder the magnitude of their predicament as they try to communicate across cultures. Conrad's metaphor of darkness with all its ironic implications, is, ultimately, based on a pejorative and fundamental oversimplification of a whole continent which Africans know has never been that simple and mysterious either. They also share the painful knowledge that Conrad is harping on myths which are ultimately rooted in and originating from societies whose relationship with Africa has hardly been based on what is truthful and mutually beneficial. These are societies associated with conquests of other parts of the world during the seventeenth century; societies which embarked on slavery during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and spearheaded imperialism of the nineteenth century. Throughout those centuries myths about Africa have either grown or diminished in relation to the economic role assigned to the inhabitants of the continent at a particular time in history.

In addition, anyone familiar with the emergence and growth of modern African literature will know that one of the factors which has inspired African writers, thinkers, and even politicians is the desire to address a whole battery of stereotypes about blacks which have remained lodged at the centre of the western imagination. In 1965 at Leeds University, Chinua Achebe said:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (Achebe, 1988:30)

One of the factors which sparked off Chinua Achebe's creativity was his encounter with Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* - a book which, unfortunately, harps on some of the myths propagated by Conrad's book. One can even go so far as to say that ideas associated with Negritude, African

Personality and indeed African nationalism itself have much to do with the desire on the part of the African to confront and refute a long standing tradition of abuse against blacks.

It is important to underline the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that Conrad tried to justify imperialism. The opposite seems to be more probable in fact. However his rather lazy over-dependence on metaphors and stereotypes which in history have been used to justify the physical and spiritual mutilation of non-whites cannot be counted as the strength of a great artist. Shakespeare may have initially accepted such stereotyping of black people in *Titus Andronicus* but towards the end of the same play the humanity of Aeron comes across in a way which modifies somewhat the earlier stereotype. In *Othello* the image of the black general transcends the prejudices of the Elizabethan era so as to enhance and extend our own vision of humanity. The same applies to the *Merchant of Venice* - a play in which stereotypes about Jews are indirectly questioned by the nature of the human interaction on the stage. As for Kurtz, he may be humanized by Africa and come to recognise his own hollowness, but that Africa remains physically and morally grotesque. The fact is Conrad allowed the prejudiced and popular imagination of his time to run away with his story of the Congo and in the process he prevented a whole continent from occupying its rightful place in the human family. His treatment of the Congolese setting and its people can only harden racist attitudes of his European audience. It is a paradoxical achievement that in order for Conrad to revitalise Europe spiritually he has to dehumanize and distort Africa beyond recognition first. His handling of the African dimension of his story amounts to a very cheap way of entertaining a jaded Europe afflicted by self-doubts; but, ultimately, every broad-minded reader has to come to terms with a story notable for its harsh exclusions and embarrassing racism.

Some critics have argued that the image of Africa portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow's version. It is true in so far as through Marlow's ironic inconsistencies Conrad seems to have placed the whole sin of Europe on Marlow's shoulders. For instance, while trying to detach himself from the sin of his people Marlow becomes deeply steeped in their prejudices and ends up regarding blacks like any other whiteman of his time. As such, there is no moral lesson to learn from him as regards the European attitude to Africa. Ultimately, however, readers have to talk about the author's vision as it is revealed in the text, and it is a vision which, while critical of imperialism, reinforces unpalatable stereotypes about Africa. The moral revulsion of both Marlow and his mentor, Conrad, at the sordid nature of imperialism is not strong enough to transcend racial boundaries. There is an element of the Brabantio of *Othello's* world in both of them - that pseudo-liberalism from which racism is never far beneath the surface. It is only fair to state that Conrad remained as much a racist as his European tradition allowed him, a

tradition one of whose philosophical spokesman was to declare with disarming confidence:

Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained - for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world - shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself - the land of childhood, which lying beyond the days of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.

The negro as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality - all, that we call feeling - if we would rightly comprehend him; There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character... [Africa] has no movement or development to exhibit. (Quoted by the West Indian writer and critic, George Lamming from Hegel's, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*; Lamming, 1960:31-2)

Hegel remains one of the most exciting minds to contribute to the development of western philosophy, yet one wonders if his greatness can be based on the nauseating opinions he displays in the instance above. So much for the prejudices and ignorance which have been dutifully handed down to numerous western generations as acquired wisdom! By the same token, *Heart of Darkness* can be called great but one wonders at what price! The novel has been accorded the status of a classic in the western world but such a status is based on its capacity to peddle racist myths in the guise of good fiction.

Conrad's novel presents, regrettably, a powerful convergence of most of those stereotypes which have been bandied about in regard to the nature and status of black people in the world. These stereotypes concern their supposed ignorance and barbarism, their assumed simple-mindedness, their being childish and childlike, their irrationality and excessive lustfulness and their animal-like status - to name only a few. African writers and thinkers have been labouring under the burden of such false images for a long time, and it would be surprising if anyone familiar with the suffering and history of black people can label *Heart of Darkness* a masterpiece when it distorts a whole continent and its people. There is a terrible parallel here between the economic rape which Africa suffered and the artistic loot that Conrad gets away with!

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that *Heart of Darkness* betrays the fallibility of some of the so-called great writers and critics. As for African scholars and general readers, it is important to know that texts which are canonized as classics need not be regarded as such by all peoples at all times. These texts are rooted in specific societies at specific points in history and can sometimes, in a most unexpected way, nourish the very prejudices which any society in its right mind should struggle against. More significantly, writers such as Joseph Conrad can help in starting a debate about the fate of the oppressed, but, ultimately, they cannot be a substitute for the voice of the oppressed themselves. The discourse of liberation belongs to them. Finally, it is of vital importance that future

generations of Africans are sensitized to how peoples of other nations perceive Africa. Only then can they be well placed to relate to other races in a meaningful way.

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