

Things Fall Apart and *Heart of Darkness*: A Creative Dialogue

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The distinguished Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, cares passionately about dialogue between black people and white people. He returned to this theme in a recent Viewpoint article in the *Times Literary Supplement* and there renewed his attack on Conrad for being a racist.

As it happens, most of the monologue is not brilliant but foolishly sensational and pretentious, for example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which, I understand, is regarded as a masterpiece. I have no doubt that the reason for the high rating of this novel in Europe and America is simply that there it fortifies fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all. And yet it is set in Africa and teems with Africans whose humanity is admitted in theory but totally undermined by the mindlessness of its context and the pretty explicit animal imagery surrounding it. In the entire novel Conrad allows two sentences in broken English to Africans: the cannibal who says "Catch 'im, eat 'im," and the half-caste who announces "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."¹

Achebe concluded the article by lashing out at the Caribbean novelist V. S. Naipaul and the American critic Elizabeth Hardwick for being Conrad's heirs in cruelty to Africa. It is an extraordinary performance.

About the same time, C. P. Sarvan of the University of Zambia, in an article entitled "Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*,"² patiently defended Conrad from an earlier attack by Achebe. Quoting excerpts from Conrad's novel and from a personal copy of a lecture called "An Image of Africa" which Achebe had given at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst on February 18, 1975, Sarvan answers Achebe's charges with cool elucidation of Conrad's irony (familiar enough to most readers of *Heart of Darkness* but repudiated by Achebe as a feint). "An Image of Africa" has, incidentally, been more widely available for several years, in the *Massachusetts Review*.³ Reading it, one appreciates Sarvan's tact in filtering the image: Achebe is laceratingly aggressive, and gratuitously so. For instance, he does not call Conrad a "racist"; he calls him a "bloody racist" (p. 788). Not only is Conrad coupled with Hitler in degree of inhumanity, Albert Schweitzer's mission in Lambarene is dismissed as a show of white patronage and miracle-making (pp. 787-89). No credit is given to the separateness of Conrad from Marlow, or to Marlow's trip as being a painful lesson in humanity, black and white. Thus an interim thought of Marlow's, when he first sights real (i.e. not "civilized") Africans, is pounced upon as having his author's sanction as final and literal truth. Halfway through *Heart of Darkness* Marlow says "what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly

¹Chinua Achebe, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 Feb. 1980, p. 113.

²C. P. Sarvan, *International Fiction Review*, 7, No. 1 (1980), 6-10.

³*Massachusetts Review* (Winter 1977), pp. 782-94.

enough.”⁴ Achebe pronounces on this, “Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind” (p. 785)—and that is that! As to Conrad scholarship and critics—Guerard’s judgment, for instance, that *Heart of Darkness* is “among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language”⁵—they are merely an aberration and part and parcel of the white conspiracy.

What is one to make of these things? How can a man so obviously intelligent and articulate be so perniciously wrong about a fellow writer and truth-teller? What can it be but a form of political jingoism that pushes Achebe into this anti-creative stance? Certainly nothing is accomplished in the crusade to promote dialogue between black and white. Worse, Achebe undermines his credibility and spoils the magnificent contribution he has made as a novelist and as founding editor of the African Writers Series. At the close of the Massachusetts lecture he refers to his “privileged position in African and Western culture” (p. 792). It is a privilege he has earned. But privilege entails responsibilities—as Conrad, Polish exile, wouldn’t have needed telling.

Rather than dwell on unwholesome negatives, however, I wish to stress Achebe’s value as novelist, and to suggest that his brilliant novel *Things Fall Apart* engages richly with *Heart of Darkness* to promote the kind of dialogue Achebe seeks. But, first, some simple reminders about *Heart of Darkness*.

If Conrad is a racist here, it is surely on account of his treatment of whites rather than of blacks. If anyone should have been howling indignation at this book, it is surely the white man. If nothing more, *Heart of Darkness* is a devastating critique of white progress, white idealism, white materialism, white exploitation. It is the European, Kurtz, who is hollow at the core, his city which is the “whited sepulchre” (“full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness,” as St. Matthew’s text goes on). White pilgrims lust for blood by the bullet on the steamship which loses its way in a white fog. In short (in Kurtz, one might say), white civilization—Conrad could not have been plainer—is repressive and deadly. And black people, to be sure, are its victims, brutish, criminal, evil—for all, save Conrad and an awakening Marlow. For these two, on the contrary, black is repeatedly associated with energy, vitality, natural dignity: thus the cannibals are “dignified,” the helmsman “athletic,” the African woman “savage,” yes, but also “superb,” “magnificent,” “gorgeous.” Blacks, in other words, manifest life qualities from which the whites are cut off, or have cut themselves off. And Marlow, pitiable white specimen as Conrad makes him appear, is the perceiver and reporter of these things. Whiteness symbolizes anemia, and Conrad provides through his symbolism a diagnosis of white humanity that recalls Blake and D. H. Lawrence.

Professor Sarvan comments aptly on the African woman and Achebe’s misreading of her:

Achebe also noted that Kurtz’s African mistress is the “savage counterpart to the refined, European woman.” But the European woman is pale and rather anemic whilst the former, to use Conrad’s words, is gorgeous, proud, superb, magnificent, tragic, fierce, and filled with sorrow. She is an impressive figure and, importantly, her human feelings are not

⁴Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1977), p. 51. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviated title *H.o.D.*

⁵Introduction to the Signet Classic edition (New York, 1950), p. 8.

denied. The contrast, however, is not simply between these two, but between Kurtz's African mistress on the one hand, and Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's "Intended" on the other. The aunt glibly believes that he who goes to the Congo is "a lower sort of apostle": "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways' . . . The darkness which is often mentioned, refers not only to the darkness within man, to the mysterious and the unpredictable, but also to ignorance and illusions: it is significant that as Marlow talks with Kurtz's Intended, the "darkness deepened." The African woman faces the truth and endures the pain of her dereliction, whilst the illusions of the two European women are also the fond illusions of European society.⁶

This is true and elegantly expressed, and can be taken further, I think, without fantasizing Conrad's text. Sarvan wonders whether Conrad's "story may be seen as an allegory, the journey ending with the sombre realization of the darkness of man's heart."⁷ Surely it may. But *Heart of Darkness* also partakes of myth—ancient myth of initiation and rebirth—with Conrad saying through Marlow's voyage up the Congo that civilized man needs to regain contact with the real energies of life and with life's mysterious sources. We remember how Marlow reacts to seeing the Congo on a map in a city shop-window: "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird" (*H.o.D.*, p. 12). Then deep into the coils of the snake-river he, by now a wiser little bird, seems to come face to face with the heart of its fascination (we note the dark/light symbolism, significant here as everywhere in the novel):

Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skins, warlike and still in statuesque repose. And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men 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 own tenebrous and passionate soul. (*H.o.D.*, p. 87)

This is clearly more than the gawping of an astonished tourist. Marlow sees and senses between the bronze sentinels on "the lighted shore" much more than Kurtz's African mistress. This is a mystical moment, in which Conrad seems to

⁶Sarvan, p. 9.

⁷Sarvan, p. 8.

hint at a chthonic energy or deity. The gorgeous, regal woman seems to be more than the Congo's counterpart to "serpent of old Nile": more like an African composite of Persephone and, with the helmet-shaped hair, Artemis, goddess of learning as well as of hunting. Certainly, we have here a focus of vital power which awes Marlow, and which evidently overpowers those who are unequal to it, like Kurtz the "Short" white lord. And we note that Marlow dilutes the awe, perhaps for the benefit of his incredulous audience aboard the *Nellie*, perhaps a little for himself, with the insertion of the uneasy humorous "She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her."

Professor Sarvan takes the African woman to be the impressively human contrast to the pale and anemic European women. Yes, and we may add that pallor and anemia are here symptoms of an obsessive and fatal materialism, epitomized by Kurtz's maggot-like grubbing for ivory. Conrad's symbolism and irony are unsparingly grisly; and nowhere grislier than when Marlow, with all the significances of the Congo trip accumulating behind him, meets Kurtz's Intended: "'You knew him best,' I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (*H.o.D.*, p. 107). Kurtz's ultimate prize—human ivory! And yet at the same time Conrad allows us to appreciate the positive value of the Intended's fidelity. In *Heart of Darkness*, then, Conrad touches, does not merely gesture at, mythic depths, which another kind of genius might have explored and articulated more fully. One would think that no serious reader could fail to see that his novel is a subtly symbolic and psychologically complex work, which has deep truths to deliver about civilization.

Psychological complexity, yes—anthropological fullness, no. For this we turn with joy to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In this brilliantly simple, yet poignantly human, tale of an African tribe before and after the appearance of the white man, we get what we missed in Conrad: African life from the inside. The community of Umuofia, ordering its life to the rhythms of nature and the seasons, is marvellously actualized by Achebe:

At last the rain came. It was sudden and tremendous. For two or three moons the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to breathe a breath of fire on the earth. All the grass had long been scorched brown, and the sands felt like live coals to the feet. Evergreen trees wore a dusty coat of brown. The birds were silenced in the forests, and the world lay panting under the live, vibrating heat. And then came the clap of thunder. It was an angry, metallic and thirsty clap, unlike the deep liquid rumbling of the rainy season. A mighty wind arose and filled the air with dust. Palm trees swayed as the wind combed their leaves into flying crests like strange and fantastic coiffure.

When the rain finally came, it was in large, solid drops of frozen water which the people called "the nuts of the water of heaven." They were hard and painful on the body as they fell, yet young people ran about happily picking up the cold nuts and throwing them into their mouths to melt.

The earth quickly came to life and the birds in the forests fluttered around and chirped merrily. A vague scent of life and green vegetation was diffused in the air. As the rain began to fall more soberly and in smaller liquid drops, children sought for shelter, and all were happy, refreshed and thankful.⁸

⁸Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 118. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviated title *T.F.A.*

Style and imagery are perfectly suited. Achebe rouses us through sentences of biblical simplicity and vividness to feel the physical and emotional contact between man and nature. The images ("two or three moons," "sand like live coals") vivify a culture without a trace of sentimentality or nostalgia. "Like fantastic coiffure" is a marvellous simile, mediating as it does between the "sophisticated" reader and the vibrant creativity of the tribe. And through such touches as "the young people ran about happily" and "the earth quickly came to life," we catch the spirit of Achebe's achievement: bringing Africa and new life to the novel. Lawrence would have relished that "quickly," and Conrad would surely have acknowledged that the old, old words have here been given fresh vigor, while doubtless lamenting that he had no white community to celebrate in like terms. And herein lies the positive richness of *Things Fall Apart*: the novel reminds us what it feels like to live in a true community.

Achebe renders the speech of the tribe in simple, grammatical English enlivened with Ibo idiom and proverb; and the people speak with the refreshing economy and directness of the preliterate. Here is a representative exchange between mother and daughter:

Ezinma was always surprised that her mother could lift a pot from the fire with her bare hands.

"Ekwefi," she said, "is it true that when people are grown up, fire does not burn them?" Ezinma, unlike most children, called her mother by her name.

"Yes," replied Ekwefi, too busy to argue. Her daughter was only ten years old but she was wiser than her years.

"But Nwoye's mother dropped her pot of hot soup the other day and it broke on the floor."

Ekwefi turned the hen over in the mortar and began to pluck the feathers.

"Ekwefi," said Ezinma, who had joined in plucking the feathers, "my eyelid is twitching."

"It means you are going to cry," said her mother.

"No," Ezinma said, "it is this eyelid, the top one."

"That means you will see something."

"What will I see?" she asked.

"How can I know" Ekwefi wanted her to work it out herself.

"Oho," said Ezinma last. "I know what it is—the wrestling match."

At last the hen was plucked clean. (*T.F.A.*, p. 37)

Here, to be sure, we have an artistic and dignified alternative to the rudimentary speech of Conrad's Africans. Yet it is hardly fair to accuse Conrad of being reductive and offensive. For it is implicit in his novel that the white man en masse denied the black man education. Indeed, the monosyllables uttered by the cannibals are another element in the critique of a white imperialism which compensated the African merely with lengths of brass wire. And we may reflect, uneasily, that it would be another fifty years before the African's English would be such as to make possible the writing of *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe couldn't have written his novel in 1900, and no one can blame Conrad for that.

And it is astonishing that Achebe should impute the delay to so piercing an ironist as Conrad, especially when we think of the wonderfully ironic close of *Things Fall Apart*. The way the vividly moving human drama of Okonkwo and his tribe is tidied by the District Commissioner into the files of history is worthy of Conrad. In fact, it could very well have figured in the report which Kurtz was entrusted to make for "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (*H.o.D.*, p. 71).

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (T.F.A. p. 187)

The exposure of bureaucratic vanity over detail is perfect, and we see from this that the critique of white progress in *Things Fall Apart* is enacted by creative means (as it is in *Heart of Darkness*). The reader has no sense of being directly manipulated by the author. It is not a simple matter of the tribal community being divided by the invading white man. We see that its fate, subtly tuned by Achebe's art to the fate of the protagonist, Okonkwo, is also determined by internal pressures.

Things Fall Apart is a rare and mature work, unique and at the same time universal, speaking to all men. For these qualities, for its tragic and tribal interest, it engages very well in comparison with acknowledged classics; and it reminds us that truth is spoken through art, rarely through political moralizing. We must listen to Achebe's art, and to Conrad's.