



Towards a Remediation of Africa's Image: the Colonial Novel and African Reaction

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ABSTRACT

Colonialist literature and history are replete with lots of misrepresentation about Africa as a continent and Africans as a people. Understandably, the African experience of slavery during the era of the obnoxious trade in human trafficking as well as the later experience of colonialism gave reins to sentiments and beliefs held in the western world bordering on the cultural and racial superiority of the Caucasian race over the black race. This has been reflected in such disparaging expressions as: The black man is racially inferior to his white counterpart; Africa has no history, culture and civilizations and has therefore not contributed anything worthwhile to humanity; and finally Africans are heathens who indulge in fetishes and worship of dead gods etc. Many white writers who wrote on Africa and the black man even before and after Charles Darwin's monumental book on human evolution, *The Origins of Species* was published reflected these opinions. More contextually, in the realm of imaginative literature, white writers as diverse as William Shakespeare, Graham Greene, Joyce Cary, Joseph Conrad and others too numerous to list have reflected this attitude. This paper, therefore, examines the image of Africa presented in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as well as the bold and courageous countering of these misrepresentations in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural superiority and the attendant desire to proselytize the particulars of the English culture are strong points to note in coming to terms with the spread of British imperialism in Africa. This is beside the consideration of economic exploitation and political subjugation emblemized by the experience of colonialism, which started when European powers met in the Berlin Conference of 1885 to partition Africa amongst themselves. In fact, colonialism itself gave justification to the assumed cultural superiority of the white man over his black counterpart and made it possible for the white race to come to Africa to plunder the resources of the continent and denigrate the

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culture of the people under the guise of a civilizing mission. As part and parcel of the English society that legitimized the mandate to bring 'civilization' to the doorsteps of Africans, white writers as custodians of the values of the English society, necessarily gave vent to such sentiments in their writings, not only as a way of ensuring for themselves wider readerships and patronage by their own people, but also because they believed in such unfounded stories about the white man's superiority over the black man. Therefore, much of colonialist literature about Africa is stereotypic, modelled on this popular belief in the English home culture, which as we shall demonstrate, was shrouded in ignorance.

As S.E. Ogude has pointedly shown, the appearance of Africans as characters in European realistic fiction dates from the Renaissance period, despite the fact that the Greeks were already aware of the existence of the African continent as some studies have shown and the Romans had colonies on the northern coast of Africa before this period (Barton: 76; J. A. Ilevbare, xv – xvi). According to him: "this was possible because the great voyages of discovery of the Portuguese and the Spaniards during the 15th and 16th centuries had opened up a new world for Europe" (12). The very earliest of the English publications on these voyages in the New World is laced with sentiments reflecting the notion of white superiority and could thus be taken as the beginning of the institutionalization of a negative image for the black man. Take for example, the following account of John Lok's travels to Guinea in 1554 as quoted in Ogude (2000):

It is to be understood that the people which now inhabit the regions of the coast of Guinea... were in old times called Aethiopes and Nigritae, which we now call Moores, Moorens, or negroes, a people of beastly living, without a God, laws, religion or common wealth, and so scorched and vexed by the Sunne, that in many places, they curse it when it riseth. (13)

As one can surmise from the above statement, the reference here is to the "whole range of myths which the ignorance of Africa on the part of the Europeans had generated" (Ogude: 13).

In the African-American context where the forebears of the Black man were taken as slaves, sentiments such as this provided legitimization for slavery and the institutionalization of racism in the relationship between whites and blacks. It was therefore not surprising that Thomas Jefferson, a white slave owner who later became America's president declared, while pontificating on the African slave as a subject of discourse:

I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind... (As qtd in Ogude: 18)

With views such as these bandied about unchallenged by the cream of white intelligentsia, the ground was prepared in 1884 for the declaration by no less

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a compendious publication as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that: “No full-blooded Negro has ever been distinguished as a man of science, a poet or an artist, and the fundamental equality claimed for him by ignorant philanthropists is belied by the whole history of the race throughout the historic period” (Ogude: 19). This is without prejudice to the vibrant contributions of Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, two of the earliest black writers in English who were already published and had become household names in the literary circle in America by this time. The above examples, no doubt, constitute the intellectual context of European and white American racism and provided the background for the obvious racist attitudes in much of western literature.

However, there are other informed opinions provided by white scholars which counter the inferred monotone of approbation implied by the above views, thereby opening up new vistas in western understanding of Africa and its people. In fact, Melville J. Herskovits is seen by Ngugi wa Thiong’O as personifying this new approach, especially as formulated in his monumental book, entitled *The Human Factor in Changing Africa*. According to Herskovits:

Africa, when seen in perspective, was a full partner in the development of the Old World, participating in a continual process of cultural give-and-take that began long before European occupation. Neither isolation nor stagnation tell the tale. It is as incorrect to think of Africa as having been for centuries isolated from the rest of the world as it is to regard the vast area south of the Sahara as ‘Darkest Africa,’ whose peoples slumbered on until awakened by the coming of the dynamic civilization of Europe... In [the] spread of culture, Africa was a donor as well as a recipient. (3)

From the religious and spiritual realms, where Africans are thought of as ‘pagans,’ a people without a codified belief system comparable to the western Christian religion and who worship dead gods who are inferior to the Christian God, Bede Griffiths in his book entitled *A New Vision of Reality* provides illumination on the need to abhor labeling which tends to arrogate superiority or inferiority to the world’s religions based on the skin colours of their adherents or believers. As he says:

... Now we return to the spiritual order and the place of religion. This involves a return to the perennial philosophy, the ancient wisdom which underlies all religion from the earliest times. It will involve a respect for the traditional wisdom of primitive people, the Australian Aborigines, the American Indians and the tribal peoples of Asia and Africa. More and more today we are discovering the wisdom of these people, the harmony they have achieved in their lives and the very profound understanding they have of how human life is related to the natural world about them and to the world of spirits beyond them. Generally, such people evidence an integrated, holistic view of life. (As qtd in Omorodion Uwaifo: xviii)

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In the next section of this paper, we shall provide a brief discussion on the misrepresentations of Africa and its people as seen principally in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the patriotic countering of these in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which has come to be seen as a counter narrative to the literature of empire.

Heart of Darkness as a Racist Novel

As Ogude has shown, the economic exploitation of the African and his continent has been the theme of English writing set in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. Paradoxically, these novels as exemplified by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *A Burnt Out Case* (1961) and *In Search of a Character* (1962) "... preserve the master/servant, superior/inferior paradigm of relationships between white and black" (31) reminiscent of the colonial encounter between the whites and Africans. More contextually, *Heart of Darkness* best illustrates the European attitude towards their African colonies and the African population. In the words of Ogude, the novel "is perhaps the most telling account of the rape of Africa by the white man. So complete is the destruction of this portion of the continent that the only Africans represented in the novel are realized as shadows, mere shadows which are often felt merging with the immensity of dark impenetrable, tropical forest" (32).

Heart of Darkness belongs to the corpus of works characterized as colonialist novels which have an unmistakable influence on the growth of African literary creativity in the modern idiom, since African literature of the colonial phase sprang up basically to interrogate the misrepresentations portrayed in such foreign works about Africa and its people. The basic recurring concerns of works by European writers set in Africa and about the African people portray Africa as a 'dark continent' where there is a breakdown of law, order and ethics. This view basically tends to justify the white man's incursion into the 'heart of darkness' as a right venture. Consequently, Conrad's novel is rife with descriptions which show Africans as black, uncivilized, uncouth and dark with all the associating negative connotations. However, despite this rather stereotypic portrayal of Africans, which was in line with the general belief in Europe about the continent, Conrad transcends the blunt and undisguised Eurocentricism of Rider Haggard. Still, many African scholars have dubbed Conrad a racist.

The novel centres on colonial adventure in which the author attacks the obsession on the part of the Europeans to conquer the whole world and on their exploitation of Africa. Although the outer perimeter of the novel is defined by a notion of civilized advance in the service of political ideals, the core of its meaning is in Kurtz's subcivic reversion to savagery, and the terms of Marlow's experience in the end become such prepolitical terms as 'truth' and 'illusion'. At a higher level of thematic signification, the novel can be read as an attack on Leopold II of Belgium and his colonial policy in

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the Congo which was directed at the exploitation of ivory and other ornamental treasures in the Congo.

This focus is Conrad's way of identifying a particular target in his general attack on imperialism and colonialism. In the author's indictment of the false pretences and façade-civilizing mission of the whites, he was reacting to the humanitarian pretences of some of the white looters of ivory. In the novel, Conrad demonstrates the corruption of the Europeans by imperialism. The company men sink into mindless greed, and the initially idealistic Kurtz plunges beyond greed into other lusts, the most dangerous being his desire to become a god. Thus, the novel has its important public side as an angry document in absurd and brutal exploitation.

Laudable as Conrad's intention in this novel appears; his black characters are presented as inconsequential, timid and stripped of the least vestige of humanity. For instance, none of the African characters in the novel has a name and no African appears for more than a paragraph, except of course Kurtz's African mistress. The African terrain in the text is conceived as an impenetrable forest, riddled with sickness and peopled by cannibals, savages and rustic specimens in a primordial stage of existence. They are further depersonalized by the fact that the only language spoken by black characters in the novel is a chain of gibberish utterances and meaningless noises. Through Kurtz's subcivic patronizing attitude to the local religion of the people and his near apotheosis by the African characters, scholars have interpreted his descent as typical of a journey into the heart of man, the proverbial every man, although represented by a white man in this case. This interpretation may blur or attenuate the ignorance displayed by Conrad concerning the African continent and its people in the novel and universalize the novel's message, despite its African setting. Despite Conrad's objection to the acquisitive propensity of the colonial powers in Africa, certainly his biased portrayal of the African image in the novel smacks of racial superiority and reflects a subtle attempt at validating the widely acclaimed civilizing mission of white colonialists in Africa.

Chinua Achebe and the Notion of Progress in Fiction

The above novel of Joseph Conrad was one particular colonial novel that infuriated Chinua Achebe as a young writer, especially on account of its negative image and impression about the African continent and its people. He was peeved to the extent that he felt it obligatory on his part to set the record straight by employing the medium of the novel, just as Conrad had done; thereby reflecting what D. S. Izevbaye has characterized as 'progress in fiction'. This thematic concern was particularly rooted in the first phase of the novel in Africa because then, just like Achebe, other African writers wrote novels that were directed at cultural rehabilitation; a calculated and orchestrated crusade to reaffirm the cultural heritage and pride of Africans, which had been seriously hampered by colonialism.

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As said above, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a reaction to the image of Africa portrayed in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. To Achebe, the latter novel "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" (3). As Achebe says further:

I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the ground that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. (11)

Earlier in 1964, Achebe had argued in his essay, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" that Africans "did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain" (8). This declaration took concrete affirmation in 1965, when Achebe says in his other essay, "The Novelist as Teacher":

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet... The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. (3-4)

In a sense, Achebe's oeuvre, especially his novels set in the African past have been fashioned along this ideology, with lots of anthropological details meant to set right the distorted image of Africa presented in works by foreign writers.

Beyond the simple story of Okonkwo's rise to fame and his eventual tragic death when he tries to confront the monstrosity of colonial domination and subjugation in Umuofia, *Things Fall Apart* is replete with anthropological details reinforced by the structural design of the novel, divided as it is into three main sections. The first of these sections ranges from chapters one to thirteen and it establishes a composite picture of traditional life before the coming of the white man. For example, chapter 5 provides a detailed treatment of the Feast of the New Yam. In chapter 6, we see the whole village of Umuofia watching a wrestling match. In this society, wrestling is both an art as well as a mode of communal recreation. Amalinze, the Cat as well as Okonkwo who defeats the former in a keenly-contested match epitomize the craft of wrestling as an art.

Chapter 7 of the novel offers a glimpse in to the season when locusts return to Umuofia. This coincides with the period of harvest in the farms.

Chapter 8 takes us into the rituals and preparations that are attendant on traditional marriages. These include the gifts, the settling of the bride price and some other related issues. Chapter 9 explains the ogbanje phenomenon using Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, as a case study. The Igbos like other African people are highly superstitious in their belief in reincarnation as it is revealed in this chapter. In chapter 10, we witness a traditional trial adjudicated solely by the nine egwugwus, revealing that the Igbos and other African tribes had an intricate and complex judicial institution revered and respected by the people ever before the earliest of the Europeans visited Africa.

Furthermore, chapters 10 – 13 of the novel dwell on the religious lives of the Igbo people, disproving the European view that Africans had no religions or had religions despised by the colonizers when put against Christianity. The Agbala and the Oracles of the Hills and Caves are introduced as authentic African traditional religions with large bodies of devotees, cultic functionaries whether as priests or priestesses. The first section of the novel ends with a traditional funeral detailing how the Igbo people bury their dead compatriots. These various aspects of the Igbo culture are expressed in proverbs, parables and native idioms reflecting the oral traditions of the people.

The second section of the novel principally dwells on Okonkwo's expulsion from Umuofia to Mbanta, his mother's village on account of his sacrilegious accidental killing of a kinsman, while section three details the infiltration of the Europeans into Umuofia in Okonkwo's absence and their despoliation of the African culture with the introduction of Christianity and eventual mounting of a colonial government and Okonkwo's belated reaction on return from exile, leading to his death by suicide when he fails to rouse Umuofia to action in his bid to confront the colonial government.

What is apparent in the first section of the novel is Achebe's intention to present a composite picture of traditional Igbo life sealed off from any influence of western civilization. In the following chapters where he introduces the advent of the white man, we see how things started crumbling and falling apart due to the devastating effects of Christianity and colonialism proper on the people and their culture.

In line with the overriding ideological objective of Achebe as a writer, he sticks to the historical twists and turns of the colonial theme, not once over or under reporting these, but he is unpretentious in his defence of his people's culture, never for a moment conceding to any charge of inferiority. However, Achebe's objectivity as a writer is not in doubt. What he provides us in the novel is not a sterile cultural revivalism seen from one direction, but a dynamic view of African culture, truly reflected in the saying 'culture is dynamic'. This informs his castigation of practices such as killing of twins and their confinement to the evil forest. As aspects of the Igbo culture in pre-colonial Africa, the writer is unwavering in his denouncement of these hideous and cruel cultural practices.

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It is gratifying that some other previous studies have recognized *Things Fall Apart* as an appropriate text that is conceived by its author as a reply to the literature of empire. For instance, Hunt Hawkins sees the novel "as an important book to include as a corrective in a course on the literature of empire" (80), but thinks that Achebe's castigation and denouncement of Conrad as a 'bloody racist' is extremist. He finally concludes that in contrast to novels of empire, *Things Fall Apart* "honestly and dispassionately presents neither a Romantic utopia nor a corrupt backwater" (82).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps I should end this essay by reiterating the point that European writers who wrote works that have been characterized as 'literature of empire' presented stereotypic views that were in circulation in their respective western societies at the time such works were published. Such views were generally uncompromising and depicted a very negative image of the African continent and its people. It has also been argued that such views were generally products of ignorance about Africa and its people. But Achebe's novel, which we have discussed in this essay, has successfully served as a corrective, driving home the point which he articulates in his essay, "Teaching *Things Fall Apart*" that "Africans are people in the same way that Americans, Europeans, Asians, and others are people. Africans are not some strange beings with unpronounceable names and impenetrable minds.... The necessity even to say this is part of a burden imposed on us by the customary denigration of Africa in the popular imagination of the West" (21).

It is precisely because of this preponderant concern adumbrated in the novel and the writer's almost obsessive expression of it that has made the novel become a classic, variously identified as "Africa's most famous novel" by Bernth Lindfors, "first-rate literature," "the most read book of its time," "a key African literary text" etc. (Lindfors: 1991, 15). As a novel published more than half a century ago, and one that has been translated into more than thirty western and non-western languages, with more than three million copies sold till this moment, *Things Fall Apart* has truly earned the status of a modern classic.

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