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Source: *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Sep., 1988), pp. 17-28

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784422>

Accessed: 25/03/2011 12:30

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# JOSEPH CONRAD AND CHINUA ACHEBE

## Two Antipodal Portraits of Africa

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Several critics of African literature have pointed out that one of the major reasons Chinua Achebe was inspired to become a writer was his desire to counter the demeaning image of Africa that was portrayed in the English tradition of the novel.<sup>1</sup> What is yet to be done is a systematic analysis of the manner in which Achebe's portrait of Africa and the Africans differs from those painted by the European novelists.

The aim of this article is to make a point-by-point comparison of the African image in Chinua Achebe's work with the image of the continent that is discernible in the work of Joseph Conrad. Conrad has been chosen as a case study because *Heart of Darkness* was one of the novels that helped to perpetuate the offensive image of Africa. For the purposes of this study, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1969 edition) will be compared with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1982 edition) not only because each of them is set in nineteenth-century Africa, but because both of them explore the meaning of the European colonization of the continent. We shall begin with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Joseph Conrad was deeply appalled during his six-month sojourn in the Congo in 1890 by the brutal and inhuman manner in which the Belgians exploited their African colony and its people. As the narrator in *Heart of Darkness* states euphemistically, "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it much" (Conrad, 1982: 10). Hence the novel is Conrad's portrait of the process through which the Europeans have conquered and colonized Africa. In his Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad (1961: 27-28) states that his goal as a writer was

to snatch in a moment of courage from remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life. . . . The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its color, its form; and through its movement, its form and its color, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment.

*Heart of Darkness* is indeed Conrad's effort to portray the pernicious effects of colonialism not only on the subjugated people but ironically on the colonial agents as well. Thus one would have expected an evenhanded portrayal of his European and African characters. Regrettably, Conrad was a veritable offspring of nineteenth-century European prejudices about Africa.

It is pertinent to point out from the very beginning that *Heart of Darkness* is not concerned primarily with Africans. On the contrary, the continent and its people are used merely as a background for this narrative, which is essentially Eurocentric. In this respect, the novelist is like a photographer; he chooses a particular background for his portrait to suit his special objective. It is this objective that determines whether or not the photographer should enhance the depth of field of his camera to such an extent that the details of his

background are clearly visible along with the subject of his primary focus or concern.

Conrad, like a photographer, deliberately set his novel in Africa because he—as well as his nineteenth-century European audience—believed that the continent epitomized savagery. Furthermore, by widening his depth of field to include vivid images of the African background, Conrad wanted to create—what he must have considered—the appropriate nightmarish atmosphere that could bring out the worst in men. Thus in *Heart of Darkness* Africa becomes an environment where irrational behavior is the norm; hence even a European such as the Swede hangs himself for no apparent reason.

As Albert Guerard (1958) has rightly stated, the main theme of the novel is the fear of the Victorian English that if whites were to be isolated from their secure environment and its refinement, they would degenerate into abominable savagery and become beasts of unspeakable lust. Kurtz, the demonic hero of this novel, is the embodiment of the worst fears of the nineteenth-century Europeans. Isolated as he is in the Inner Station from all but occasional contact with other Europeans, Kurtz's moral fiber snaps and he falls prey to all manner of evil. He loses proper perspective and begins to see everything as belonging to him: his ivory, his station, his river, and his intended.

The subtheme of the novel is the inhuman treatment that the Europeans mete out to the colonized Africans. In *Heart of Darkness* the Europeans use the Africans as beasts of burden whose sole value is the physical work they can perform. Consequently, the European taskmasters abandon the African laborers to die by the roadside when they are too frail to toil any more on such back-breaking tasks as railroad construction:

Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck,

and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking [Conrad, 1982: 22].

*Heart of Darkness* portrays Africa as a land of savages who do not have any worthwhile culture or civilization. For instance, Marlow unabashedly refers to the African characters as savages. Besides, the territory is depicted as a primordial jungle, where primeval chaos reigns, since the indigenous population has not established any form of social system or order. In yet another section of the novel, we read that "we were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (p. 51).

Language is another aspect of human civilization that the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are portrayed as lacking. What they speak is not recognizably human, and there is always an animal trait to their verbal communication. Hence whenever the African characters in the novel speak, their speech is described as yelling, or babbling, or howling:

They shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany [p. 98].

In addition, the novel refers to the language of the Africans as a form of babbling: "A violent babble of uncouth sounds burst out on the other side of the planks" (p. 27). This exonerates the Europeans, who have not made any effort to understand African languages, since no civilized person could be expected to learn the babbling sounds made by the savages.

The Africans' attitude to work in *Heart of Darkness* is akin to that of young children. They cannot be trusted to carry out tasks without the close and constant supervision of a European. For instance, the fireman on the steamer needs to be supervised all the time. The same situation is applicable to the helmsman, who steers

tirelessly when he is being watched, but sits by idly the moment the European is out of sight:

An athletic black belonging to some coastal tribe, and educated by my poor predecessor, was the helmsman. He sported a pair of brass earrings, wore a blue cloth wrapper from the waist to the ankles, and thought all the world of himself. He was the most unstable kind of fool I had ever seen [p. 63].

The portrait of the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* suggests that Africans are very gullible and are only too glad to worship anything that is out of the ordinary. Kurtz finds this out and exploits it to his own perverse advantage. He gets the Africans among whom he lives to worship him because he possesses a gun, which they have never seen before. As Kurtz's Russian disciple explains to Marlow: "He came to them with thunder and lightening, you know—and they had never seen anything like it" (p. 80) In other words, Kurtz mesmerizes these people with the lethal power of the modern gun into believing that he is indeed the god of thunder and lightening. Thereafter, he uses them to pillage their neighbors for ivory. But this eventually gets into his head and he becomes a victim of megalomania. After a while he begins to imagine that he is indeed some form of deity that needs to be appeased with human sacrifice; hence the macabre spectacle of the human heads that are mounted on the stakes under his window:

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, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish intimation [p. 69].

However, in keeping with European prejudices about Africa, the African woman must be wild, as is the case in *Heart of Darkness*:

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 clothes, 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 [p. 87].

This wild-eyed woman is portrayed as a leader of her community and men obey her. Needless to say, she also symbolizes lust and wild fecundity, which were overpowered by the rapacious European colonizers.

We shall now turn to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in order to make a point-by-point comparison of the concepts portrayed therein with those depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe's novel portrays a society that cannot be described as one of primordial chaos. On the contrary, it shows a society in which there are clearly defined parameters of right conduct on both personal and communal levels. The ethics of the African community portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* can be summarized as follows: Live and let live. This concept is repeated very often, especially during the prayers that accompany the breaking of cola-nuts:

He broke the cola-nut saying: We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and the egret perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wings break [Achebe, 1969: 2].

The ethics of the African community portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* encourage the individuals to work hard in order to succeed

in life; hence in Umuofia individual achievement is rated more highly than age or ancestry:

Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so ate with kings and elders [Achebe, 1969: 12].

Although the society encourages people to strive to be successful in life, it takes care to shield the weak from the strong by restraining the mighty from intimidating their less fortunate neighbors. This is exemplified by the people's reaction when Okonkwo calls his kinsman, Osugo, a woman at a kindred meeting. Everybody takes sides with Osugo; hence Okonkwo has to apologize for his unguarded remark. Furthermore, the African society that one sees in *Things Fall Apart* is so highly organized that it even has a week of peace when all are constrained to be at peace with their neighbors no matter what. Above all, this society is so ethical that it makes the distinction between just and unjust wars. As a result, although Umuofia is a warlike community, it never fights an unjust war:

And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle—the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves [p. 16].

Thus, unlike the African society in *Heart of Darkness*, which is portrayed as having developed no culture, the African society in *Things Fall Apart* has an admirable civilization.

The language of the African characters in *Things Fall Apart* cannot be described as babbling or animalistic in any way. On the contrary, it is a very effective medium for communicating the way of life that is portrayed in the novel. Furthermore, the language used by the Africans incorporates a complex variety of rhetorical devices, as is exemplified in the scene where Okoye asks Unoka to

repay the 200 cowries Unoka has borrowed from him. Okoye does not broach the matter directly. Instead, he uses proverbs to go round it until he finally mentions the purpose of his visit:

Thank you for the Kola. You may have heard of the title I intend to take shortly.

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten [p. 10].

Among these Africans, the art of private conversation is quite different from the histrionics of public speaking. Oratory here, as is the case throughout the world, demands a good speaking voice. Hence among the people of Umuofia a good speaking voice is sine qua non for orators. In *Things Fall Apart*, public addresses are generally introduced by loud, formal salutations, as is evident in Ogbuefi Ezeugo's address:

At last Ogbuefi Ezeugo stood up in the midst of them and bellowed four times, "Umuofia Kwenu," and on each occasion he faced a different direction and seemed to push the air with a clenched fist. And ten thousand men answered "Yaa!" each time. Then there was perfect silence. Ogbuefi Ezeugo was a powerful orator and was always chosen to speak on such occasions. He moved his hand over his white head and stroked his white beard. He then adjusted his cloth, which was passed under his right arm-pit and tied above his left shoulder.

"Umuofia Kwenu," he bellowed a fifth time, and the crowd yelled in answer. And then like one possessed he shot out his left hand and pointed in the direction of Mbaino, and said through gleaming white teeth firmly clenched: "Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder the daughter of Umuofia." He threw his head

down and gnashed his teeth, and allowed a murmur of suppressed anger to sweep the crowd [pp. 14-15].

In *Things Fall Apart*, the language used by the *egwugwu*—the masked ancestors—is quite different from both the language of oratory and that of everyday speech. These spectral beings use arcane language, which calls for formulaic responses:

“Uzowulu’s body, I salute you,” he said. Spirits always addressed humans as “bodies.” Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission. “Our father, my hand has touched the ground,” he said. “Uzowulu’s body, do you know me?” asked the spirit. “How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge” [p. 86].

In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the Africans are portrayed as not having developed a system of reckoning time, but the Africans in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* not only compute the time of the day and the day of the week, but also have a traditional technique for computing the month and even the year. They use natural objects such as the cockcrow and the position of the sun to compute the hour of the day and they know that four days make a market week and that seven market weeks make their lunar month. These characters use their lunar calendar to determine the date for their annual festivals, such as the New Yam Festival, which are central to their communal lives:

The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty—the new Year [p. 37].

Again, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* Africans are like children who must be closely supervised, usually by a European, before they

can do their work well. In *Things Fall Apart*, however, the Africans portrayed are very responsible people who do not need any supervision whatsoever. These Africans are very busy, and they work hard almost throughout the year. They clear the farms even before the rains begin, in readiness to plant their yams as soon as the initial rains arrive. Thereafter, they give their undivided attention to their farm work, often setting out daily for their distant farms before dawn and working there until dusk. During this season, the people hang up their musical instruments until after the harvest. Indeed, it is only the period between the harvest and the next planting season that may be regarded as the season of relaxation among these people. But even during this period, they are often occupied with the task of repairing their homesteads. This is their way of life even before the first Europeans ever set foot in Umuofia.

Admittedly, Chielo—the priestess of Agbala—has an extraordinary function in Umuofia. She mediates between the people and their great goddess, but that happens only when she is possessed by the spirit. Even then, she does not behave like a wild woman. For instance, when she takes away Ezinma to pay homage to Agbala at night, she carries the youngster on her back the way any ordinary woman in that society would. In normal times, however, Chielo is a widow who strives to cater to the needs of her two children and shares a shed in the market with other women:

In ordinary life Chielo was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market. She was particularly fond of Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma, whom she called "my daughter." Quite often she bought bean-cakes and gave Ekwefi some to take home to Ezinma [p. 48].

The portrait of the European colonizers in *Heart of Darkness* is the only aspect of the novel that is discernibly similar to any image in *Things Fall Apart*. In *Heart of Darkness*, these characters are portrayed as the inhuman exploiters of the Africans and their natural resources, and in *Things Fall Apart* the colonizers symbolize the malevolent force that destroys an existing African civilization. In

Achebe's novel, the lives of the Africans do not mean very much to these colonizers. Consequently, when the people of Mbanta kill a white man, the district commissioner razes the entire town to the ground and in the process slaughters men, women, and children.

The district commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* is in many respects like the monstrous Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*. Although the district commissioner does not lose his mind in the end, some of his actions are as ludicrous as those of the lunatic Kurtz. Take his treatment of the elders of Umuofia, for example. After using a trick to imprison them, he lectures them on the benefits of his new administration and his queen, who deals justly with everyone. It never occurs to him that these same men he is lecturing have been settling disputes and administering justice in the area even before he came to their homeland.

Thus, although more than half a century separates the publication of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from that of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the two novels have something in common. Both novels are set in Africa and are based on a major historical event that occurred in the continent toward the end of the last century—the European colonization of Africa. Where the two novels are as different as night and day is in their portrait of Africa. Conrad's portrait depicts many of the prevalent European prejudices about the continent. In *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is synonymous with darkness, which in this novel symbolizes chaos and unspeakably evil forces. In *Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, Achebe creates a more realistic portrait of the continent. As a result, we may rightly conclude that Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe present their readers with two antipodal portraits of Africa and its people.

#### NOTE

1. In an interview that Chinua Achebe granted to Dennis Duerden, Achebe indicated quite clearly that he was provoked into writing, first, by the undeserved praise heaped on the European novelists who wrote about Africa and, second, by the need to portray the

African perspective in the great debate on the European colonization of Africa. Since the publication of the interview in 1975, various critics have made reference to Achebe's statement in their own works.

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