

THE ISSUE OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S (ANTI)RACISM: BEFORE AND AFTER ACHEBE

Dimitrie Andrei Borcan
PhD Student, "Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: After the publication of Chinua Achebe's article vehemently accusing Joseph Conrad of racism and requesting his exclusion from the humanist canon on these grounds, the latter's literary career has come to be divided into two periods: before and after Achebe. The present study presents Achebe's arguments and other authors' (counter)arguments in this still open debate.

Keywords: (anti)racism, reversed racism, (anti)colonialism, (anti)imperialism, humanism

Conrad's anti-colonialist position in *Heart of Darkness* is similar to that of his story "An Outpost of Progress," which won the eulogy of Cunninghame Graham, an avowed Marxist and an admirer of Friedrich Engels, and to that of Roger Casement, an MP who drew a Report for the British Parliament on the atrocities committed by the Belgian colonialists. However, in *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (2000), Nicolas Tredell divides Conrad's criticism into two periods: "before and after Achebe" (Tredell 2000:71).

In 1975, a Nigerian-American lecturer in literature and writer, Chinua Achebe, delivered a lecture which he published two years later as the famous article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1977; 1988: 251-261). In it, he accuses Conrad of being a "bloody racist," which was later turned into "thoroughgoing racist." His accusations / allegations are so vituperative that they verge on invectives in tone, and are very serious in content. "It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry" (Achebe 2). Achebe accuses Conrad of using a narrative method consisting in repeating images of either silence or frenzy describing the blacks (2). Conrad would be "engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words" (2). Achebe accuses Conrad of "showing Africa in the mass." (3) If Conrad approves admiringly of the crew "being in their place" this is an insult (3): "Fine fellows - cannibals - in their place" (*HD* 58) Even the detailed eulogistic portrait of the black mistress annoys Achebe: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" (*HD* 87) because "first, she is in her place and so she can win Conrad's special brand of approval and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman" (Achebe 4). Achebe upholds that instead of speech the Africans are "grunting" and when talking, they ask to eat the victims of the armed conflict or announce the death of the wayward white Mr. Kurtz. They demonstrate their cannibalism "by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their mouth" (5).

Achebe attacks white liberalism, which "managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people." (5). There follows an accusation of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous benefactor of the blacks, who "epitomizes the ambivalence," saying "the African is indeed my brother but my junior brother" and building "a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being" (5). Achebe accuses Conrad for not using the word "brother" like Schweitzer, but the word "kinship" (6) and he

quotes Conrad's displeasure at the kinship, "the thought of their humanity - like yours. . . Ugly" (*HD* 51). "White racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (6) Africa is reduced to "props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (6). He accuses "the dehumanization of Africa and Africans" as an "age-long attitude," therefore Conrad should be excluded from the humanist canon, which is a prejudiced claim. Conrad actually does affirm racial kinship, but he finds it disturbing, he needs to be "man enough" to "admit" the "ugly" truth of common darkness linking humans of the two races (*HD* 51).

And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art.[...]

His

obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!
(Achebe 6)

Then his attacks go against a quotation from the Author's Note to *Victory*: "A certain buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards" (Author's Note *Victory* 1920).

Achebe comments again that "Conrad's heart of darkness plagues us still"(6). He denies the "offensive and deplorable book" the status of being "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language,. . .the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities"(7) and he voices allegations against the book:

I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.
(Achebe 7)

He goes on accusing Conrad with psychoanalyst author Bernard Meyer's words of being "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history"(8).Then he ironically prides for the beginnings of Modernist art, of Cubism, due to Vlaminck being given an African mask in 1905 (8). Achebe's reversed racistic hatred addresses great white personalities white alongside Conrad: he attacks both Dr. Schweitzer and Marco Polo. He accuses all the travellers of being "closed minds," "blinkerred, like Conrad, with xenophobia," "astonishing blind" (8). And he digresses about Marco Polo's journal of his journey to China, which does not mention the Chinese Wall or the printing press (9). Achebe is hypercritical in detecting Conrad's racism: "Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. *It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry*" (Achebe 1). Conrad does not compare the two rivers ethically. To him the whole nature is animistic and, throughout history, rivers are similar in their attitude to man. The ancient Thames is very similar to the present Congo river. Common ancestry is, indeed, according to Ian Watt, a disquieting issue for the first godless generation after Darwin's *Descent of Man*: "Conrad and his contemporaries belonged to the first generation that had not felt supported by the traditional view of man's flattering eminence of history, as well as the design, of the cosmos" (Watt 1979:154).

Achebe accuses Conrad for his black characters lacking speech (Achebe 5). However, Marlow does not know the Africans' language, even so, he communicates with them non-verbally. He talks to his aids, he feels kinship with his helmsman, he pities and is admirably intrigued by the cannibal crew, prevents the whites' use of guns by using the ship whistle to scare the blacks away, is deeply troubled by the blacks toiling in chains and by those agonizing in the grove of death and has an inefficient spontaneous reaction of pity giving a starving black a biscuit. He acts out of empathy, not for antiracist reasons.

Achebe complains that the novella does not treat the blacks individually, portraying indistinct Africa, in a dehumanizing generalization. Conrad's "universalism," bridging cultural gaps in the phrase "brotherhood of all humans because their land like one lies under the inscrutable eye of the Most High," (*Almayer's Folly* vii) is attacked as "covert racism." In *The Modernist Self in Twentieth Century English Literature* (1989), Dennis Brown sees the African society as essentially communitarian, not individualistic, and contrasts the Africans' "tribal self-in-community quite outside Western conceptions" and "harmonious communality" to "the hollow egotism of the Imperialists" (Brown 2).

Achebe accuses Conrad of intentionally lacking clarity in order to discard African culture. Agreeing, Edward Said finds that most western orientalist "relegate" "inferior" races to aculturality. He refers to the tendency "to treat the whole of the world history as viewable by a kind of Western super-subject, who either takes away or, in the post-colonial period, restores history to peoples 'without history'" (Said 35). "Orientalists, and other specialists about the non-European world - anthropologists, historians, philologists, - had that power, and . . . it went hand in glove with a consciously undertaken imperial enterprise" (48). Said writes of exoticism stamped on an alien culture in order to assimilate it (xviii).

In his essay "A Bloody Racist": About Achebe's View of Conrad" (1983: 196-209) Cedric Watts responds: Achebe claims that "the blacks are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesque or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths" (Watts 197). Watt remarks that Achebe forgets about the historic moment when *Heart of Darkness* was published and of the special courage Conrad had to write it.

If Achebe had but recalled that *Heart of Darkness* appeared in 1899, when Victoria was on the throne, when imperialistic fervour was extreme and the Boer War was soon to begin, he might have been more prepared to recognize various unconventional qualities of Conrad's tale[...]. Far from being a 'purveyor of comforting myths,' Conrad most deliberately and incisively debunks such myths. The myth of inevitable progress, for example; the myth that white civilization is necessarily morally superior to savagery[. . .]: all these are mocked by the tale. It is an organizational principle of *Heart of Darkness* that reassuring clichés are evoked and then subverted[. . .] 'And this has also been one of the dark places of the earth' - which completes perhaps the most brilliant 'false start' in literature. (Watts 197-8)

Watts contradicts Achebe's accusations of "dehumanization of the blacks." In the book, the healthiest and the happiest are the black canoeists. 'They wanted no excuse for being there'" (*HD* 20; Watts 198). Conrad wrote encouraging letters to Roger Casement, who was preparing for Parliament a Report of King Leopold's operations in the Congo: "And the fact remains that in 1903, seventy years after the abolition of the slave trade (because it was cruel) there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European powers, where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of commercial policy" (Najder "Conrad's Casement Letters" in *Polish Perspective* Warsaw, 17 Dec. 1974 25-30). However, to Achebe

King Leopold and Conrad “are both bloody racists” (Watts 199). Watts observes that Conrad starts with a contrast between the jungle woman and the civilised Intended, but the contrast is systematically eroded and they end up equal and “tragic” (Watts 201).

Achebe proceeds to talk “sneeringly” at liberalism, at Albert Schweitzer (201). However, Schweitzer’s hospital “was a big improvement on no hospital at all” The Europeans’ barbarism was referred to in Casement’s Report and in Morel’s *Red Rubber*, as well as in the MP Cunninghame Graham’s “denunciation of cruelty inflicted by white on black, whether the white were Belgian or British” (202).

Watts observes the importance of the theme of “hollow men” for Conrad, and the fact that the hollow men are only white (203). Then he mentions the spiritual community expressed by Conrad in the similarity of the drums and the Christmas bells. and also of the African darkness and the London “gloom” (203). He mentions that

In *Criticism and Ideology*, Eagleton claims that ‘the message’ of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilization is at base as barbarous as African society[...] In *Janiform Novels (English, 24/1975: 40-49)* I claimed that it was becoming increasingly fashionable for critics to reduce complex works to binary oppositions and to assert that each text is, accordingly, self-contradictory. This reductive procedure is [...] very sterile [...] In fact literary works never do have the neat symmetry the self-cancelling equipoise that such an approach implies; that way post-structuralism lies.” (Watts 204)

Watts remarks that “Kurtz’s multi-national ancestry[...] erodes any comforting sense” because the British “include England in that Europe” that produced Kurtz (204). Watts’s vision of Conrad’s racial outlook is all-comprehensive co-habitation, reciprocal toleration and mutual acceptance of differences. “Each man is most fully present in his best literary work, and the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* is the brother of the Achebe of *Things Fall Apart*” (204). Moreover, Achebe’s obsession with Conrad is obvious both in his reversed racist attacks on the author of *Heart of Darkness*, and in his imitation and desire to emulate Conrad’s style in *Things Fall Apart*. Conrad is to Achebe a model he cannot equal and whose name he tries to stain. Watts explains that Kurtz, “a cluster of paradoxes,” whose talents are in the jungle “corrupted into parodies of themselves,” but “unlike the more crudely rapacious Europeans, he initially had ideals (205). He is morally both hollow in the sense that he seems to lack “moral backbone” and full because he “gratifies the appetites that other men lack”(205) His cry is either “an indictment of his own corruption” or “an indictment of the horrible nature of the universe[...] Satanic existentialism” (205). Then Watts defends Marlow for representing “the complex and humane outlook” of European civilization (206). Watts notices that, similarly to Swift and Kafka, Conrad satirically exaggerates “the absurdity and incommunication in the world” (207). He reproaches to Achebe that he does not note “the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger’s soul” in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (NN 11). Also, he reproaches to Achebe his failing to note the anti-Semitic references in Conrad’s and Graham’s letters, transcended by final pro-Semitic sympathies in the best works of both authors (Watts 208). Watts makes an interesting remark about Conrad’s anti-racism expressed indirectly through the characterisation of certain characters who are both racist and corrupt, or by his sympathy to characters belonging to other races: “the more forceful the expression of racial prejudice, the more corrupt is the speaker: the bullying captain in *Lord Jim* refers to the Moslem passengers as ‘dese cattle’ and it is a sign of Kurtz’s moral collapse that he refers to the blacks as ‘brutes.’”(209) Cedric Watts also upholds the ideas of “A

Bloody Racist” (1983) in “A Preface to Conrad” (1982) and “A Preface to *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*” (1993).

Conrad’s (anti)racist ambivalence is evinced in Hunt Hawkins’s works “Conrad’s Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*” (1979), “*Heart of Darkness and Racism*” (1982) and “Conrad and the Psychology of Colonialism” (1985). He concludes the 1982 article stating that in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s “lasting political legacy, more than any confirmation of racism, has been its alarm over atrocity. . .Far from condoning genocide, Conrad clearly saw humanity’s horrific capacity and gave it a name”(Hawkins 1982:375). Jeremy Hawthorn also remarks Conrad’s anti-colonialism in *Joseph Conrad’s Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (1990).

Edward Said’s response to Achebe is : “There’s no reason for me to perform acts of amputation on myself, intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic, simply because in the experience of other people from the Third World, a black novelist from Nigeria like Achebe [...] can make my[...]Conrad into someone who is only despicable” (Mallios interview 2005). Said is reported by William Atkinson to have stated: “as a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite the severe critique of imperialism that enslaved them” (Atkinson 2004:368).

In “A Picture of Africa: Frenzy, Counternarrative, Mimesis” (2013) Nidesh Lawtoo notes: “Underneath the first layer of straightforward opposition, we find an underlying mimetic continuity between Conrad’s colonial image of Africa and Achebe’s postcolonial representation in *Things Fall Apart*”(2013:1).

In “Impressionism: Conrad” in *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (1932) Joseph Warren Beach writes about the Malay’s reversed racism (1932:353-56). Conrad’s racism is historically and circumstantially determined, it is dual and humane, being intertwined with his anti-racist and anti-colonialist views and it would be better defined as his tendency to see races on a eugenic scale, with the white British at the top, the Belgians inferior to them and the blacks at the bottom. We find no exclusion of the blacks from the human race in Conrad, quite the opposite. Besides, a great writer’s work of genius cannot be denied its literary status on the racist criteria, which would be a mere act of censorship of a jealous imitator belonging to another race and filled with reversed racism.

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