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## THE PLACE OF CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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**Abstract:**

**T**his paper deals with the reception of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. The novella gains in importance in two respects: one, it introduces a path-breaking modern narrative trend; two, it creates a stir in the postcolonial literary domain. It succeeds in attracting notice both in terms of form and content; the former, by experimenting a novel mode of metanarrative in modern stylistics; and the latter, by prompting a controversy in the postcolonial literary arena. This paper zeroes in on the latter - the postcolonial dispute the novella has spawned. It highlights the controversy triggered off by Chinua Achebe's seminal rebuke of Conrad as a 'thoroughgoing racist' in the wake of the wide acclaim the novella has supposedly received from the Euro-centric world. Achebe comes up with the critique upfront to question and denigrate the supposedly famous work in the eyes of the West. Cedric Watts has his own reasons to put checks on Achebe, and attempts to make the pungent comment blunt by showing the remarkable side of the novella. This paper limits its area of focus to Conrad, Achebe and Cedric Watts given the fact of

the enormity of criticisms the work has so far attracted from a gamut of critics of various range around the world. The single intent that governs the article is to assess the increasingly significant reception of the novella in the backdrop of the criticisms the two aforementioned major critics of Conrad have come up with. The chief objective, in that sense, is to see whose argument outweighs the other in the evaluation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in furthering the reception. Achebe famously points up the schema supposedly laid out in the novella which makes use of tricky language that potentially generates pitfalls in the process of meaning-making to ultimately signify the reversal of what Conrad purports to build on. Cedric Watts comes to explain what Conrad is in fact doing. Thus, this paper succinctly provides a balance sheet based on the arguments each of them carry forward and what each has really contributed to the domain of Postcolonial knowledge production. It will also endeavor to elucidate the significance of the novel over the course of the argument.

**Keywords:** reception, postcolonialism, knowledge production, argument, racism, contribution

**Introduction:**

**A** highly controversial work like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has its own merits and demerits: it is cited frequently for its narrative excellence, and it is put down for its imperialist attitude. Chinua Achebe's tirade against Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* throws light on the subtleties employed in writing. Particularly in the postcolonial context, the role of writing is looked at with suspicion as its

potent has been realized of late. Whether the writing is intentional or unintentional, there needs to be counter-writings so that there would be space for those who differ. In addition, the process of knowledge production could be shaped by letting the reader himself/herself to make the decision. That way knowledge in association with a particular work is imparted. Thus a similar setting is created for the reader through these supportive and opposing writings. This article discusses the arguments of Chinua Achebe and

Cedric Watts one after the other, and then, put them into discussion.

#### Achebe's Critique:

**E**ncyclopedia of Postcolonial Literature's entry on Chinua Achebe states that "Achebe's purpose in writing has always been to provide for African readers images of themselves and to overturn the notion that writing and literature are concepts that come to Africans only from outside." Chinua Achebe identifies Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* as representing the Western desire to set up Africa as a foil. He accuses the work as part of the imperialistic manifestation of vulgarly parading the aggressive superiority of the West in comparison with the Africa. He states that the entire gamut of European literature does the same thing. As such, this has become taken for granted. Consequently nobody sees it as a fact when stated. In view of achieving this end, the Africa is projected as "the other world". The description of rivers such as the Thames and the Congo in the *Heart of Darkness* bears witness to this fact. The former is privileged over the latter. As well, Achebe accuses Conrad of engaging in systematic and artful denigration of the Africa by the use of adjectives. He

suspects that Conrad is upto some tricky underhand activity. Nonetheless he accuses Conrad of deliberately assuming the role of a creator of myths that pacifies the African despite being annoyed and his integrity challenged.

Achebe comes up with a quotation from *Heart of Darkness*, wherein he spots an element of racism visible in Conrad's reluctance to attribute humanity to the African. His use of 'humanity', a term which has been appropriated, as 'yours' and 'ours' refuses to grant the African the status of human beings. It reduces the African to the status of an animal and ridiculously questions the very fact of the African being a human being: "what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours. Ugly."

The description of a single African too is subject to parody as it is unlikely at all to a European that he could really be a human being. That the African cannot amount to the European's so-called civility becomes an object of ridicule, "Fine—cannibals—in their place."

Achebe points out Conrad's reluctance to offer language to the native Africans. He bestows them with mere grunts. Just fragments of sounds. No proper language is assigned to them in the novella as though to imply they are not the

ones to use full-fledged language. Achebe goes a further step by commenting that Conrad offers them language in its full sense only when he thinks that it is appropriate. That is, he confers them language only when the African performs self-denial, especially when there is a need to create an impression of African as a cannibal. Achebe warns not to deem such conferring of language as generosity on the part of the Colonizer.

Then comes the indication of not providing with an adequate clue for the interpretation of the identity of Conrad in the narrator; that is, who represents the ideas of Conrad?; is it Marlowe or the unknown narrator?; Achebe accuses Conrad of intentionally leaving it dark to create a safe ground for himself and thus he is being evasive.

Also, Achebe says that Conrad shows off his seeming liberalism and hides himself underneath to “sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people”. He supports this by bringing in Schweitzer’s statement that posits the European and the African as elder and younger brothers respectively. He further indicates the hesitation of Conrad to positively respond to the hurt African helmsman’s casting a look of claim of kinship.

Achebe says that the impression Heart of Darkness gives out is that the Africa, for Conrad, is luring the European towards destruction. It’s a real catastrophe. So Conrad advises the Colonials to keep away to avoid disintegration. It is this very concern that is foremost and predominant in the novella; and, not the dehumanization or depersonalization of African race, the colonized. Thus, it loses the status of a great piece of literature.

Achebe blames Conrad for his indulgence in not just racialism but the non-human description unbecoming of the human beings to the black people too: “A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms....” Achebe contrasts this description of the black man with that of the white man in Europe in order that the racist attitude of Conrad will be made clear.

Achebe draws the lines very clearly in his critique; he says that he is not speaking of pleasing people; instead he is speaking about a book that throws insults upon a section of humanity. He accuses the European attitude and the literature (including psychoanalysis) for having paved way for such a condition. This creates a prejudice that is detrimental to the wellbeing of the African native as such

prejudice has become all pervasive and percolated.

#### **Cedric Watts' Response:**

**C**edric Watts responds to the assaults of Achebe on Heart of Darkness.

He says at the outset that he would respond to some of the "strictures" of Achebe. Throughout his essay, he sees a determination for revenge on the part of Achebe to unsettle the White reader by being so willful. Cedric Watts says that he is "hard to please". He indicts him for inferring the meanings otherwise. In the mean time he doesn't deny the fact of the novella being paradoxical in other respects. He says that Achebe couldn't see any difference at all between Kipling and Conrad. For Achebe, both Leopold and Conrad are "bloody racists". He blames Achebe for seeing things reductively whereas phenomena around the world vary in range instead of being binary. He also finds Achebe and Conrad to be in the same side speaking for the rights of the suffering African native. He says that Achebe's Things Fall Apart is another Heart of Darkness from the side of the Black people. By being so fastidious and wanting to wreak revenge at the wrong target, Achebe risks the loss of friends of fair thinking from the European side.

He counters the arguments of Achebe citing examples from Achebe's Things Fall Apart. As to the nonhuman treatment of the African native in the novella, Cedric Watts says that it was not intended that way, and Achebe too does the same thing in his novel. On the other hand, he cites incidents from the novella where the Europeans are treated as same as the African natives are. He also cites examples when the European uses language to denigrate himself (that of Kurtz). He also points out how this could be seen as indictments against imperialism.

Besides Cedric Watts expresses his frustration at seeing Achebe finding fault with the liberalism he displays. Also, he shows how the two mistresses of Kurtz seem no different at all to Kurtz. This will clarify the equality offered to both the races. Moreover Cedric Watts adds to the comments made by Achebe by questioning the moral integrity of the White. The idea of "hollow men" is brought to the discussion. He brings out the fact of the European culture having been built on the same hollowness, fetish things, arbitrariness, etc. By this means European culture is in no way better. He brings support from Terry Eagleton who says the message of Heart of Darkness is that Western civilization is at base as barbarous as African society. Moreover he indicates



how boldly writers from the European world brave the prejudices of their society to speak for humanity.

Cedric Watts also wants to see the repeated pattern Conrad deploys in his narration. This recurrent pattern he says throws better light on the narrative. On the other hand, Cedric Watts sees a personalized bias in Achebe's comments:

"In his criticism of Heart of Darkness, Achebe's premise is that a literary work is good if it implies recommendations which he regards as humane, and bad (however great its incidental merits) if it implies recommendations which he regards as inhumane."

Nonetheless he accuses Achebe to be practicing ideological imperialism. He goes to speak of the parameters for a literary work spelling out the preferences.

#### Discussion:

Cedric Watts sees something willful in Chinua Achebe's lecture. Yet he does not deny the fact of the lecture having the value of arousing a rigorous debate. At the outset of the essay, when drawing attention to the tone Chinua Achebe is adopting in

his critique of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Cedric Watts points out Achebe's lacking of historical sense which unmistakably and undeniably shows up in his earlier works.

Cedric Watts slashes Achebe's wishing away of Kurtz's representative significance by reductively referring to it in the phrase, "break up of one petty European mind". Cedric Watts has an important generic critical point to make as he increasingly finds Achebe mounting scathing attacks on the novella. The very denunciations ironically draw the attention of the readers towards the very strengths of the novella which he misses. Nonetheless, Achebe's attacks boomerang on Achebe himself which Cedric Watts tacitly hints at as, "they suggest that a critic should not be deterred by its apparent obviousness from reiterating what is important in a work".

As to the remarks of Achebe about Conrad as a "purveyor of comforting myths", Cedric Watts turns tables by saying that Conrad is actually engaged in exposing those myths with utmost determination. He gives examples of those myths in relation to inevitable progress, moral superiority and altruistic imperialism.

Cedric Watts answers Chinua Achebe's question of leaving the reader in

confusion intending to create an ambiguity in interpretation. He says, "It is an organizational principle of Heart of Darkness that reassuring clichés are evoked and then subverted, just as salutary affirmations are sought, briefly established, and then undermined." Yet he does not rule out the fact of the novella abounding in paradoxes.

Confronting the charge of 'dehumanization' of the blacks, Cedric Watts declares that it is precisely against this very dehumanization that the tale registers its protest. He qualifies the quotation he cites as a *locus classicus*. This serves as the parameter for the evaluation of the Europeans, their colonial machinery and the natives' moral lassitude. He even substitutes this with Achebe's statement in 1966.

Moreover Cedric Watts claims that he speaks from realistic grounds:

"Marlowe..... cannot be blamed for lacking the benefit of Things Fall Apart, which appeared nearly sixty years after he told his tale and Conrad is offering an entirely plausible rendering of the responses of British traveler of c.1890 to the strange and bewildering experiences offered by the Congo. The

passage is patently justified on realistic grounds."

Cedric Watts insists on contextualizing the text of Heart of Darkness in order to make sense of the novella in its true sense. He is not ready to accept the fact of European civilization to be of superior quality. Or, for that matter, civilization as it was supposed by them is any better from the life Conrad describes in Heart of Darkness. In Watts' words, "The narrative obliges the reader to ask whether civilization is a valuable fragile improvement on savagery or a hypocritical elaboration of it". Whereas he does not refute the implication of the tale qualifying Africa as a pristine counterpart to Europe, Cedric Watts points at the cultural contamination of Africa effected as a consequence of intrusive Europe's destructive adventures.

Moreover, as for people to stay in their place, Cedric Watts stresses that the Whites should stay in their place rather than to interpret the statement otherwise. Native Africans' staying in their place is not at his focus. The pointer is towards the whites.

When mounting the attack on Joseph Conrad as a 'bloody racist', the predominant critique of Chinua Achebe with regard to Conrad's novella Heart of darkness is that Africa is being depicted as

an object of ridicule, a civilization of inferior standards, and as a tool that assists in sabotaging the European individual. This he does in order to show Europe as a place worthy of living rather than Africa which is a potential destructive element, Achebe goes on to imply. He says, Africa is being set up “as a foil to Europe, as a place of negatives in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest”. Achebe’s use of the phrase “antithesis of Africa” is thus self-explanatory.

In further asserting the point, Achebe is critical of the “whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose”. What is common about all these books is that “most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today”. Achebe will later accuse the entire European way of thinking as being taken for granted that no European could see any point in getting this idea highlighted or, showing this notion possessing a substantial meaning.

While acknowledging the fact of Conrad being a great writer, Achebe is of the opinion that *Heart of Darkness* is one of the best works devoted to the entrenchment of the West’s desire to dispirit Africa. He gleans descriptions from the novella to drive home his point.

The positive and negative ascriptions of the rivers to the Thames and the Congo set up a binary that represent the Europe and the Africa respectively. Achebe is very critical of Conrad’s description of Africa as barbarian, devoid of any attributes of civilization. Achebe grabs a point of disagreement in Conrad’s use of ‘adjectives’ with emphasis during the course of his deployment of rhetorical devices. He identifies this use of adjectives of Conrad to have been so artfully employed to project a tongue-in-cheek comment while pretending to be a sympathizer. And he does it so nimbly that once the suspicion originates the reader is made to forget it through an array of ostensibly well-meaning and sympathetic barrage of words: “he chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths”. This tongue-in-cheek criticism is manifest in “what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Yes, it was ugly enough”. The assumed reader is European. That there is a kinship between the European and the African ‘thrills’ the Conrad reader of Europe and what’s more this is ugly too and, therefore undesirable. For Conrad it’s a wild uproar. He suggests his refusal to identify himself with this ‘wild’ expression; he wants to show himself not part of this wilderness. The



exclusionist treatment comes to the fore when Conrad phrases "...the thoughts of their humanity – like yours. Ugly", quotes Achebe. Through this foregrounding, Conrad achieves the reversal of the whole apparently sympathetic language, charges Achebe. Cedric Watts responds to it citing descriptions used in Achebe's novel *Things fall Apart*. He says the same type of description is there in Achebe's novel too. Moreover it is not intended to be stereotypical either. The main defense is that he asserts his point on realistic grounds.

The description of the fireman, an African, is evidently a stereotypical representation. Achebe states that "tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place". "The author's bestowal of human expression to the European community and the withholding of it from the African natives" perpetuate the binary. The indictment becomes sharper and increasingly critical when that facility is endowed to them for the purpose of self-denigration.

The attitude of the European society during Conrad's times and the attitude of Conrad himself are being distinguished. Yet Achebe is put off by the fact of any clue being not given to think otherwise of the terms narrator employed.

Achebe says that providing there is a technical hint it will clarify the potential doubts and which would have done away with the ambiguities therein. The reader, instead, is forced to be in dark as to the identity of Marlow – i.e. whether the voice of Marlow could be seen as that of Conrad.

Another crucial impression one gets upon reading *Heart of Darkness* is that the novella laments the fact that it is "less charitable to the Europeans". Achebe explains that the point of the story is to speak for the oppressed but to check Europe's colonizers to be wiser asking them not to get stuck in Africa miserably. Thus what is of concern is not the subjugation or colonization of the Africans but the disintegration of a single European, and the ridiculousness of the Europeans very act of intrusion. In a nutshell, Africa as a human factor is neglected and what emerges is "dehumanization of Africa and Africans". Achebe alleges that "...there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people". This is heightened when favourable and positive association is given when describing a European, who "dazzled the beholder by the splendor of ....his illumed face....and triumphant eyes."

Achebe suspects that even psychoanalysis would refuse to see racism

that is manifest in Conrad, as racism had been normative across Europe. Achebe attributes Conrad's description of the African to the dominant European imagination and which, he feels, would have been a definite and formidable influence on Conrad. The Europeans resort to this humiliation of the African natives just to reassure themselves thereby asserting their superiority. Achebe says that, "they have a need for reassurance by comparison with Africa".

Achebe attacks Heart of Darkness as a book that "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...." For, he feels the dehumanization from the core of the heart of an insider, an African, unlike Conrad who lacks the 'African' experience of imperial rule.

Despite his chastising of psychoanalysis as governed by The West's attitude, Achebe himself describes and interprets the work through psychoanalytical terms. He characterizes the West's view of Africa as having come about involuntarily rather than a consequence of deliberate malice. This is how Achebe makes the case for not

including Heart of Darkness in the realm of permanent English literature.

Once the confrontation with Achebe's arguments was over on the same premise of Achebe, Cedric Watts continues to face Achebe's imputations of presenting the historical dilemmas as to which criterion to consider in the evaluation of a literary work. Then he charges Achebe as practicing ideological imperialism in refusing to commend democratic values which he doesn't believe in.

Nevertheless Cedric Watts speaks of the parameters by which the moral value of literary work may be assessed. He says that dialectical force is valued over exemplary force. That is, how far a work challenges the moral presuppositions without simply commending any acceptable moral position is what counts when evaluating a literary text. He says,

"We value some works for their challenges, some for their support, and for their mixture of both; vitality of embodiment is what counts in the works of merit. If we find ourselves enthusiastic over works whose religious, political, moral, or philosophical positions are not ours, it will generally be found

that the criterion is still truth to experiences.”

By way of buttressing this, he cites the methodologies of Kafka and Swift, in that the former’s strength lies in selective intensity of depiction which draws on dream, nightmare, fairy tale, bible, and fable; and the latter ensures that there is both endorsement and challenge.

In view of tackling the assaults of Achebe, Cedric Watts points out the fact that fiction and other forms of discourses such as the sermon or the political that should not be confused. He is very cleverly and clearly defining what he wants to convey. He says that “literature is morally and politically more complex than are such forms. And the complexity includes the element of retreat from life as well as scrutiny of it.” The benefit he explains:

“...experience is in some measure ‘aestheticized’; but nevertheless an experience aestheticized may often be an experience generalized as a result, and therefore may be related to us to a wider variety of actual circumstances.”

Cedric Watts explains the methodology deployed by Conrad. In view of this, he

draws supports from other novels of Conrad to illustrate it. Thus he comes with his observation: “there seems to be a general rule in Conrad’s fiction that the more forceful the expression of racial prejudice, the more corrupt is the speaker.”

Then he connects this with how a literary work generally makes use of such energy: “The reiterated detail undermines contrast and may encourage us to see a common humanity.”

#### Findings:

The two critics on Joseph Conrad cannot be simply ignored as the comments they come out with reveal what appears to be obscure about the novella to those who are not familiar with the issue in question. They contribute to a better illumination from both sides of the ethnicities that wrestle with each other. Since they provide a seminal impact on the work, they carry forward an important discussion in a world that lies torn apart in terms of racial prejudices.

#### Conclusion:

The novella Heart of Darkness set in motion a controversy with regard to its projection of a stereotyped African image. Chinua

Achebe's lecture reveals the latent racism. Yet Cedric Watts faces the arguments of Achebe and comes up with responses that account for the way description is done. He does not deny there are paradoxes. The arguments for and against the novella creates a bundle of discourse in postcolonial literature as the dispute entails subtleties of practices adopted in literary production and criticism. Hence, the novella marks a history whichever way the interpretation goes. For, it informs the history.

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