

CHINUA ACHEBE

"AN IMAGE OF AFRICA: RACISM IN CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS" (1975)

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987. London: Heinemann, 1988. 1-13.

Achebe's interest here is in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness which exemplifies, in his view, the "desire – one might say, the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and yet vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (2). It "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (2).

To this central end, Achebe argues, the river Thames is contrasted to the river Congo, its "very antithesis" (3), where the action in the novel is centered. Achebe argues that what worries Conrad is

not the differentness . . . but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings. (3)

A key technique in this regard is what Leavis terms an "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" (3). Achebe argues that duplicity inheres in this: when a writer

while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. (3)

Rather, Achebe argues, Conrad is performing the "role of purveyor of comforting myths" (3).

However, Achebe is most interested in the novel's characterisation, that is, its portraits of African people. Achebe notes Marlow's (the narrator's) comments about Africans en masse: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours . . . Ugly" (qtd. in Achebe, 4). Assuming perhaps wrongly that Conrad and his narrator are one and the same, Achebe argues that in his portraits of particular Africans Conrad prefers that things remain in their appointed "place" (5). He may not admire so-called "savages" (5), but he resents and even despises the pseudo-civilised African, described by Marlow as a "dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs" (qtd. in Achebe, 5). Other Africans who are painted as savages (e.g. the Amazonian mistress of Kurtz) are less disturbing because they function in their appointed place. Achebe resents most of all, however, that Conrad grants white Europeans the capacity for language ("human expression" [6]) which he denies the African, permitting him only grunts and the "violent babble of uncouth sounds" (6).

Achebe then turns his attention to an obvious criticism of his argument, one that Wilson Harris himself takes up in his own defence of Heart of Darkness. It might be argued, he admits, that

the attitude to the African . . . is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be

holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. . . . [However,] he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. . . . Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. (7)

Achebe's point is simply that "Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (8), a "simple truth" (8) which is "glossed over in criticism of his work" (8) because "white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (8). The Africa *constructed* (not mirrored) by Conrad is

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanisation of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanisation, which depersonalises a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No. (8-9)

Achebe believes that "there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain" (9). "Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word should be of interest to psychoanalysts" (9), Achebe argues, such as Fanon.

Achebe admits that Conrad is now dead and that one can do nothing about his personal attitudes. However, what concerns him is the popularity of the text in literature departments in the English-speaking world given that it is 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 in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question. (10)

Achebe refuses to accept the alleged "evidence of a man's eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's" (10). For Achebe, "Conrad's picture of the peoples of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilisation of Central Africa" (11). This is borne out, he argues, by the fact that at the very moment Conrad is describing, as a noted art historian has written, a mask made by the Fang people who lived north of the Congo and are "among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form" (11) was proving very influential upon the work of Picasso and company who, with it, initiated a revolution in the form of European art.

Achebe concludes by pointing out that Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilisation and to have a need for

constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilisation, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray--a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa or else. Mr Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning. . . . But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! The darkness found him out. (12)

Achebe does not hold out much hope that the West will rid its mind of old prejudices and [begin] to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people--not angels, but not rudimentary souls either--just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. (12)

Achebe is pessimistic because of the "grip and pervasiveness, . . . the wilful tenacity with which the West holds it in its heart" (12). Indeed, what may be worse is that such beliefs may not today be consciously chosen through "calculated malice" (13) but by something "more akin to reflex action" (13).