



Whispers of Racism: Analyzing Critical Responses of Chinua Achebe and Edward Said to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

This paper explores how African people are viewed and presented in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and how this author is charged with racism by Chinua Achebe after fifty years of writing this much-debated text. It also clarifies Edward Said's critical response to this novella which is considered as a defense of Conrad. Analysing both the responses of Said and Achebe, this research tends to assess Achebe's allegation objectively and non-judgmentally situating the text more as a product of time than as an instance of racist tale. This paper presents an idea that the authors of postcolonial literature are literally driven to analyze the multi-layered aspects of race and racism that have accelerated a flow of postcolonial novels based on the concept of race, color, sex, and identity. However, this paper also suggests that the presence of race and racism in literary studies occur instinctively and effortlessly although the early responses to *Heart of Darkness* simply ignored that idea because the literary critics and scholars of that period hardly talked about racism.

Keywords: Imperial Force, Racism, Colonialization, White Supremacy, African People

Introduction

Joseph Conrad presents Africa in his *Heart of Darkness* as mysterious, barbaric, and obscure that left an inappropriate impression of dark continent that appeared as "a blank space of delightful mystery" or "a place of darkness" (Conrad, 1899, p. 43). Fifty years later, Chinua Achebe responded to Conrad's work in *Things Fall Apart* presenting African people as ordinary and relatable that questions Conrad's demonstration of Africa in his novella written in 1899. In his much-debated novella Conrad perceives African culture, religion, and customs as superstitions rather than an alternative form of cultural and religious practices that might be a conscious denial of African practices. However, a vast number of critics have already entered the debate about *Heart of Darkness* while a substantial number of essays are already published that either accept or deny the claim that Conrad is a racist author. This paper neither defines Conrad as a racist author nor does it refuse that Conrad's novella entails Black people as savage based on the context of racism. Nonetheless, my paper aims to oversee the stances of Achebe, Said, and Conrad

objectively. Some of the notable critics of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* involve Albert Guerard, Chinua Achebe, Ian Watt, Hunt Hawkins, Peter Brooks, Patrick Brantlinger, Marianna Torgovnick, Jeremy Hawthorn, Wilson Harris, Edward W. Said and J. Hillier Millis. It is interesting to note that the early responses to this text praised the novella and perceived it as one of the significant accomplishments of that literary period. In 1977, that perception changed significantly when Chinua Achebe harshly criticized the book for being racist. As a response to Achebe's claim of racism in a highly commended work, Said defended Conrad in 1993 in his "Two Visions in Heart of Darkness" (Said, 1994) where he states that the Europeans should not be blamed for today's misfortunes while we should instead look at the events of imperialism "as a network of interdependent histories that would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand." (Said, 1994, p.19). However, the primary goal of my paper is to analyze the critical response of Achebe in line with Said's defense of Conrad in his essay "An Image of Africa" (Achebe, 1993).

Postcolonial narrative is not a recent phenomenon in literary studies while racism and discriminations are portrayed since the period of Shakespeare. Not only the Black authors have portrayed the implication of race, color, identity, and class whilst a large number of white authors have persistently focused on the color-obsessed white supremacy that imply the existence of race and racism in real life. Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Tempest* are thought to be written on post-colonial predicaments as they reflect racial and cultural otherness. In *Othello*, the postcolonial perspective presents a Black protagonist into a white society who marries a white woman but finally stripped off from his white association and gets back to the traditional role of a "moor." *The Tempest* is also considered as a crucial example of post-coloniality while many colonial theorists focus on the character of Caliban who represents savagery and vicious attributes as a native. Nevertheless, racial discrimination is a theme that runs throughout postcolonial discourse and particularly connects South Africa where white Europeans directly imposed their superiority over darker-skinned people. Nadine Gordimer's novel *My Son's Story* (Gordimer, 1990) is a vivid example of racially victimized people where the author presents a Black family struggling hard to survive in a white dominated society. Being a white author Gordimer proves Edward Said's contention that the white people can organize and re-organize the ideological beliefs of the black so that they (white people) always remain superior to their eyes. The author vividly portrays a Black man's love and obsession with a white woman along with his passion for Shakespeare that evidently shows his intense desire to become one of the white masses. Like Gordimer, Achebe upholds Said's Orientalist theories in *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958) that clarifies how the colonizers control the natives by implanting colonial ideology into them. It also explains how the natives are made to give up their own culture and customs and follow the colonial way of living by losing their own sense of identity and individuality. The same concept of

losing one's identity has also been taken up by Derek Walcott in his poem *The Sea is History* (Walcott, 1978). Walcott's poem talks about how the natives are clueless about their history, their roots, and their identity. The poem reveals the native's plight of not knowing their past and thus being unaware of their sense of identity. Walcott emphasizes that one of the ways to dominate the natives is to obliterate their sense of identity through the process of controlling their ideology. However, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970), race and racism are examined in a far greater scale. As the most celebrated Black author Morrison not only defines race by the color of one's skin, the shape of one's features, or the texture of one's hair, but also by one's place of origin, socio-economic class, and educational background. She argues that "whiteness" represents virtue, cleanliness, and value, while being black is associated with dirtiness, and worthlessness. These striking ideas of race ultimately leads to racial self-hatred among the characters of *The Bluest Eye*. In her essay "Making America White" (Morrison, 2017), Morrison notes that unlike any nation in Europe, the United States holds whiteness as the unifying force. Here, for many people, the "definition of 'Americanness' is color" (Morrison, 2017, p. 128). The author also comments sarcastically that the white people have now lost their long-standing conviction of "natural superiority" because they have started considering non-white people as "people of colour" in order to restore whiteness to its former position as a marker of national identity. As the definition of Americanness is always "color" thus the impact of "race" has become an enduring phenomenon in postcolonial literary criticism.

Between Racism and Colonialization

It is important to define colonialism in the perspective of racism to unravel the hidden connections between racism and colonialism. This paper has already made useful discussion about the impulsive presence of race and racism in notable works which do not categorize Conrad a racist author because racism emerges spontaneously, effortlessly, and instinctively in our social, political, economic, and psychological prejudices. As a political philosopher and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon raised a strong voice in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1961) which identifies racism as an inevitable component of Colonialization. He defines colonialism as an inherently racist and violent practice that can only be overcome by using violence in return. He emphasizes that colonialism simply divides the world into light and dark, or into black and white. Fanon explains that a colonized individual is considered as the "quintessence of evil" (Fanon, 1961, p.76) who is devoid of any morals or ethics because the very concept of colonialism is rooted in this basic racist belief. A line from an essay of Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1967) strengthens his perception of racism where Fanon shares his own experience, "When people like me, they like me 'in spite of my colour'. When they dislike me; they point out that it isn't because of my colour. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle" (Fanon, 1967, p.45). That decisive line of Fanon reveals his personal experience how he is

victimized by the hard blow of hatred by white people. A study of Achebe's childhood experience also reveals how he was forced to abandon his inherited social and cultural identity by the same hard blow of racism during colonial intervention. It is important to note that Fanon gives an utmost importance to the phenomenon of language of the white when he states, "White men always claim to possess all knowledge of the world and believe in hallucinating black, because of their own means." (Fanon, 1967, 0.70). It is obvious that Marlowe, the protagonist of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* directly or indirectly generates a controlling role of a colonizer, but he presents both the sides of dark continent- the vulnerability and the barbarous aspects of the tribes. Marlowe has never used any strong voice to protest racism like Fanon or Achebe while he has a rather patronizing notion as to how the Africans should be treated. Marlowe knows that the universal image of the colonized is one of repression and servitude, thus he is not the only person who holds a patronizing attitude towards the colonized. However, only this trait of Marlowe's character does not reflect Conrad's own opinion. How far can we suggest that a fictional character embodies the author's own notions of the world? Marlowe could just be the embodiment of an ignorant Westerner with a misguided superiority complex. Conrad might have purposely portrayed him this way to suggest how damaging the Westerner's point of view was. There is also the consideration that the colonized does not really have an intelligible voice throughout the novel because the whole novel is technically a white man's monologue. The novel holds all reported speech rather than direct speech thus everything Marlowe says could be biased or could be slightly twisted with his perspective. It is a bit difficult to conclude who Marlowe represents. It is also intricate to tell whether Marlowe is an accidental suggestion of Conrad or a deliberate attempt to satirize the Western man. This text is incredibly dense with conflicting interpretations thus it is difficult to define it as a racist example of world literature while Conrad often makes harsh criticism of colonialism. Conrad reveals that the Westerners exploit the tribes to grab their ivory, to possess their wealth, and to rouse their wrath by causing war between neighboring villages. Ironically, the Westerners shape the culture of the colonized but eventually destroy it. Conrad provides an image of a society that totally obsessed with monetary gain through the evil practice of Imperialism. Kurtz enters the heart of the jungle and becomes completely corrupted which suggests that the so called "savagery" of the tribe folk is the result of the white men's system where Kurtz has been collapsed and ruined. I think the downfall of Kurtz could be attributed to the evils of colonization rather than the Black man's influence. If both cultures could have become ruined, then the text could be read as a suggestion that colonization is detrimental to all. Conrad describes, "They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force - nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got" (Conrad, 1899, p.56).

So, Colonization is not fair in the eyes of Conrad, but does this mean he can no longer be considered a racist? If the Black people want to get rid of servitude and pull the white man out of the jungle, does this mean that this display of liberty ignores the difference between skin colors? No, it does not. Marlowe makes explicit reference to the “differences” between the white man and the Black man. He does not do this violently or purposely to offend; he does it in a patronizing manner. He views the Black man as a little brother, someone to be taught and led around. Indeed, the passage I am going to quote is one that is used in numerous occasions to suggest that Conrad is racist:

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. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings (Conrad, 1899, p.51) Here black men are shown by Conrad as animals because Marlowe describes them as having tails and remarks on their bodies in a way that suggests that they are beasts; they are mere tools for work in which the effectiveness of their body is their stock and trade. The dualism of Marlowe is that he despises the ridiculousness of treating men inhumanly that can be also viewed as a harsh criticism of Colonialism. But that same person (Marlow) patronizes and promotes a less Black man as a supervisor who is employed by the Colonizer simply because he is less Black. This is blatant evidence that Marlowe/Conrad views African people in a patronizing manner. I think Conrad tends to show that Marlowe opposes Colonialism, but he (Conrad) instinctively presents the Black men as less than his white characters. This is the crucial point why Achebe takes this as direct evidence of Conrad’s own opinion and decides to write *Things Fall Apart* as response to *Heart of Darkness* that represents a universal image of African culture.

Biographical Influences on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's works are influenced by various facets of African culture. He is considered as pure voice of modern African literature who has opened up the public eyes to the predicaments of African culture that is tainted as barbarous and savage since the inception of white supremacy. Achebe grew up in the Igbo society in Nigeria where he was influenced by a large number of social, cultural, and racial constraints due to his racial and cultural identity. Early in his childhood, a representative of the British government that controlled Nigeria had convinced his parents to abandon their traditional religion and follow Christianity. His parents then named him Albert, after Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria of Great Britain. Achebe attended the Church Missionary Society's school where the primary language for the first two years was Igbo. However, Achebe's childhood experience is clearly reflected in *Things Fall Apart* where he talks about an African culture that is being forced to respond to the changes of the European colonization. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents a fraternity of Igbo people and their way of life during the beginning of colonization in Africa. Through the representation of the Igbo peoples' way of life and their reaction to the colonizing forces that enter their villages, Achebe presents a recurring theme of identity of African people that can be traced back to Achebe's background as a native of the Igbo community. The novel investigates aspects of identity through its main character Okonkwo's views of what it means to be a man and what it means to be an African. When the white Christian colonizing forces invade the protagonist's village, he sees this as a threat to his entire community's and their identity as Africans. The English bring with them new religion, new language, and new forms of government that threaten to breakdown the previously established culture that Okonkwo and other villagers were accustomed to. In fact, these constant threats to Okonkwo's identity in *Things Fall Apart* comes from Achebe's personal experience of identity crisis that is created through the invasion of the European colonizers. Achebe expresses himself through his narrator that "The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds. There were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else..." (Achebe, 1958, p 493). The novel suggests that Okonkwo was "deeply grieved" by the changes that had taken place in his village, but this grief was not only for himself but he also "mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart" (Achebe, 1958, p. 943). Much like Okonkwo, Achebe's parents were living in an Igbo village during the colonization and creation of Nigeria. They had to suffer many of the changes inside their homeland that caused severe alienation and hostility between tribe members. This alienation from native culture and the imposition to European culture caused Achebe to face many of the feelings of identity crisis. It is noticeable that his characters also encounter same estrangement

in *Things Fall Apart*. It is also important to note that the British colonization had decisively obstructed the education system, the oral literary traditions, and religious practices of Igbo people. As Ogbaa Kalu describes, “before the natives realized what had happened, their land, their culture, their wealth, their gods and goddesses, and their own people had been won over by the alien agencies. Hence it became difficult for the Nigerians to counterattack their white enemies effectively without harming their fellow clansmen” (Ogbaa, 1999, p. 55). Like Achebe’s own experience, his characters in *Things Fall Apart* were fighting against each other with the introduction of Christianity and other cultural impositions of the English. Crowder believes that the English people tried to insert a message that “their own society was superior, and also that conversion of the local people would have to be not only from the traditional religion but from the whole way of life which was intertwined with it and supported it, which resulted in their effort to change everything about the native Igbo culture (Crowder, 1978, p 8). The effects of this can be seen throughout Achebe’s fictional work *Things Fall Apart*, as well as his recorded biography. However, Achebe’s firsthand experience is clearly presented in *Things Fall Apart* through his character Okonkwo’s inability to cope in his changing environment.

Analyzing Critical Response of Said to Conrad’s Work

It is indeed a blazing question why Achebe criticizes Conrad’s novella so bitterly than his contemporary authors, and why he has taken so long to raise his voice. In order to justify Achebe’s stance as a racist author, some of the popular works of white and Black authors have already been discussed in order to situate the concept of race or racism as an inevitable component of postcolonial literature. I believe there is a greater possibility that Achebe’s racial, cultural, and social background prompts him to protest racism so violently than others. Thus, his allegation of “a bloody racist” can be viewed as an individual verdict than a general judgment while *The Heart of Darkness* remained highly applauded for fifty years before he wrote his controversial essay “An Image of Africa.” It is already discussed in this paper that both black and white authors have talked much about racism, Colonialization, and color obsession in all ages. However, in order to untangle the complexities surrounding Achebe’s charge against Conrad it is important to identify how does Said defend and contextualize Conrad’s work. It is absurd to think that Said’s non-African background made him speak on behalf of an English author who has a Polish descent.

It is clear that Achebe decides to write *Things Fall Apart* as a response to *Heart of Darkness* which is framed from the perspectives of African people. Said responded to Achebe and to some extent Conrad in his “Two Visions in Heart of Darkness” where he anticipates that the “global environment and racial hatred can lead to destruction (Said, 1994, pp. 19-20). He explains how Marlow wants us to understand that Kurt's looting adventure, Marlow's journey and the narrative are linked and how they all work as a

demonstration of the Europeans act of imperial mastery in Africa. He notes that there is no way out of the historical force of imperialism because Marlow is limited to his situation: "Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West" (Said, 1994, p 24). To Said, Conrad's narrative is bound to a certain time and place because he does not see any alternative to imperialism. He also notes that Conrad is different from other colonial writers of his time due to having a background of a Polish expatriate who had to work as an employee under an imperial system. Said never considers *Heart of Darkness* as a straightforward presentation of Marlow's adventures because the text precisely reveals the heart of a wanderer in a colonial setting who tells his story to a group of British listeners at a particular time and in a specific place. That particular phase of Colonialization is mentioned by Said is 1890s when the empire simply turned into an empire of business. Different from Achebe's argument of racism, Said perceives a strong presence of an oppressive force of imperialism in Marlow's narration. Marlow repeatedly conveys a message that there is no way out of the historical force of imperialism because the empire holds a strong power to speak about everything within its colony. However, Marlow's clarity of imperialist force often makes us confused whether it is justified to make a charge of racism against Conrad. Said explains that "Conrad shows us that what Marlow does is contingent, acted out for a set of like-minded British hearers, and limited to that situation. Yet neither Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of what is outside the world" (Said, 1994, p.25). He argues that the politics and aesthetics of this text are highly imperialistic thus we cannot truly understand "someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable" (Said, 1994, p. 26). Said assumes that Conrad only used Marlow to present an imperialist worldview to describe exactly the situation of the non-Europeans of his time because imperialism has monopolized the total system of representation at that particular period.

Said examined the text in a far greater scale than Achebe by presenting various arguments that largely focus on the historical force of imperialism. He states that "Westerners may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually." Said believes that Conrad is unable to imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism in Africa, Asia, or America who were incapable of independence at that historical point. He sees Marlow's perspective as secular that cannot be viewed either as notions about historical destiny or as historical indifference and acceptance. Said criticizes that Conrad's self-consciously circular narrative can be viewed as artificial constructions that encourages us to perceive the potential of a reality

that is inaccessible to imperialism. Said also criticizes the principal characters as inexperienced of European imperialism. Conrad's characters do not admire or protest what goes in the name of imperial practice because Conrad's presentation has ample gap between how ideas and values are constructed and deconstructed. Marlow, for example, is never straightforward who rarely resists making peculiar and contradictory things. Kurtz's eloquence is viewed by Said as both enlightening and fraudulent which is filled with odd discrepancies.

However, Said admires that the whole points of Kurtz and Marlow clearly describe imperial mastery, white supremacy over Black Africans, their ivory, black culture, and black civilization. Said notes that Conrad is successful in clarifying a point that the ever-present darkness could be colonized or illuminated only by the acts of will and deployments of power. According to Said, both Kurtz and Marlow acknowledge the darkness in their own terms. Kurtz perceived "darkness" when he was dying while Marlow comprehends "darkness" when he looks back profoundly on the meaning of Kurtz's final words. Both Kurtz and Marlow are the products of their time thus they have limitations to identify what is a non-European "darkness" while it is a constant struggle of non-Europeans citizens to resist imperialism in order to regain sovereignty and independence. Said suggests that without blaming Conrad for being a racist author we can criticize him for his tragic limitations that do not allow him to conclude that the practice of empire-building could be eliminated so that the "natives" could lead lives free from European domination. Said concludes that a number of post-colonial writers reflect the humiliating pasts of the natives in their works among them "Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, and Brian Friel" are most prominent." (Said, 1994, p. 26). Said criticizes that these authors' masterpieces are often misrepresented just as European ethnography presumed the natives' incapacity to intervene in scientific discourse about them.

Conclusion

In analyzing *Heart of Darkness* Said persistently focused on the presence of an oppressive force of imperialism in Marlow's narrative rather than situating Conrad as a racist voice. Said underlined a certain stage of colonial reign in order to heighten the mercenary motives of European colonizers in Africa during which time the British Empire simply turned into an empire of business. In comparison to Said's analysis of Conrad's perspective, Achebe's charge against Conrad might be a little harsh though racism exists everywhere like an indomitable evil spirit. Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* at the end of Victorian period thus to judge him by today's standers is a bit flawed. If I want to judge Conrad by today's rising liberal opinion regarding race, then the research can systematically extend the same judgement to every author of the period and the periods that came before it. However, condemning Edward Said for his defence of Conrad is also

unfair where half of the English canon was probably racist. Said tries to situate the novella as a product of a particular colonial period thus he refused to condemn Conrad merely as a racist. Thus, Achebe's statement of "a bloody racist" needs to be re-assessed. The Victorians, as a society, were racist like most of Western society for centuries. If anyone rejects Conrad's unfathomable intellectuality simply because he is a racist, then we should dismiss many other authors too. Thus, instead Conrad, condemning Imperialism and Colonialization should be the biggest step. I would rather condemn the cruelty of colonizers who have systematically built their wealth leaving dark continent weaker and "darker."

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