

## (Re)-interrogating the “Darkness” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: June 08, 2020

Accepted: August 15, 2020

Published: September 30, 2020

Volume: 9 Issue: 5

Advance access: September 2020

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

Over the years, many critics especially of the African extraction, have regarded and described Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a racist tale based on the manner in which Africa(ns) is/are depicted in the novella. Of greatest importance is the manner in which Africa is represented as the “heart of darkness” which provoked Achebe’s 1975 response in his article - ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’ where he out rightly discarded the work as a racist tale. “Darkness” which is metaphorically translated to African primitivity, backwardness, uncivilization, illiteracy and crudity, is critically re-interrogated here with the evidential facts surging from the text which finds strong corresponding support in *No Longer at Ease*. The aim of the paper which is in two parts is first, to articulate the first-hand information from the “first-class agent,” in the text - Mr. Kurtz by paying particular close attention on his character to better interpret the events and condition of the “heart of darkness” and; second, to examine what has been argued as “darkness” which ironically is found present in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* and even still proliferates in many present day African societies. Through the process of this metacriticism, the real deals of what happened in the Interior are found, as directly extracted from the mouth of Mr. Kurtz while the issue of African backwardness (darkness) is also found to subsist within the African life as could be located in *No longer at Ease*.

**Key words:** Heart of Darkness, Darkness, Primitivity, African Dystopianism, Irony

### INTRODUCTION

For a text such as *Heart of Darkness*, that is noted to fall “automatically into a different class – permanent literature –, read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,’ 2) and has also sustained critical relevance for more than hundred years of its publication, it is inwardly disturbing to encounter the different unbelievable ways many critics embark on the criticism of this tale – the white and black critics alike, especially the way African critics perceive it as a racist text against them. The author’s seemingly neutral position seems often to be completely ignored except for few European critics who acknowledge the work to be an exposition of the European colonial atrocities and illegal extractions in Africa. A great deal of other African critics have considered the tale along the line of ‘racism’ and distorted representation of Africa, of which, such, is the most disturbing concern here as led by Achebe in his 1975 article: “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” where he out rightly tagged Conrad ‘a bloody racist’, of which case, I ask, is that really the case in essence? Achebe whose first attempt to challenge and criticise Conrad’s account of Africa is traceable to his 1960 novel, *No Longer*

*at Ease*, still inadvertently fail to present a better African society different from the one Conrad wrote about. This case and several other issues, call for the re-interrogation of the idea of “darkness” which is seen to incubate matters of racism and African backwardness in the text.

### MR. KURTZ - THE SYMBOL OF DARKNESS

Considering the position this paper maintains, I will like to begin by saying that, of all that many critics, all over, have got to say about this “classic,” it is only from the mouth of this larger-than-life figure of Kurtz, be he of fiction or of real life, as “first-class agent” (28), that the most reliable, authentic information of what/how Africa is and what his real experiences were, could be deduced and not surfacely from Conrad who had merely about six months sailing experience along the Congo River. So what this paper does is to penetrate into the heart of the text unto Mr. Kurtz to dig out (uncover) the real issues associated with the text and Africa. So to expose the dehumanization of Africans and the activities of colonialism and exploitation in Africa, the figure of Kurtz at the general level, represents the presence of Europe in the Interior of Africa. At the deeper level, the Kurtz we encounter at this point is seen to command quite enormous power-

ful influence both on the natives and on fellow Europeans, bearing the mark of a super figure in the entire tale. Kurtz is presented to wield so much power that it seems the sole mission of Marlow, is to eventually come to meet this individual that is so much talked about. From the manager of the station, to the station accountant, to the brick maker, and finally to the Russian boy who describes him even as being 'hollow at the core', all made dignified remarks about Kurtz. That, towards the end of the tale, Kurtz whose mother is said to be 'half-English' and his father, 'half-French,' is described thus: "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz... the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him with the making of a report" (75). Being a product of such two powerful colonial powers, Kurtz's heart is seen to constitute impenetrable darkness different from what Achebe misconstrues for darkness (primitivity) of the African people. Even so, Achebe tries to use this scripture: "the people which sat in darkness saw a great light, and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death to them did light spring up" (Isaiah 9:2 rephrased) as a support to counter Conrad's portrayal. Yet, Marlow rather still puts everything correct about Kurtz when he says:

The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (77-78)

So, as an embodiment of the real darkness in Africa, Kurtz had too many things bottled up in his chest which we never had the opportunity to know. And indeed, this is where we have the missing link in the tale. At the time Kurtz is recovered from the savages, he is already too weak to give us a detail account of his activities and exploits in the Interiors, so in his deteriorated health condition is contained "an impenetrable darkness," which couldn't be easily unlocked. As a mythic figure, of high mimetic quality, the first point of contact with him, he is said to be "a first-class agent" and "a remarkable man," - the curiosity to meet this "remarkable man" permeates the entire work as well as sustains both the interest of Marlow and the readers, to the end of the tale even though by the time we eventually meet the *great* Kurtz, he has already been reduced to a mere 'voice!' Yet as the true symbol of heart of darkness, consider the extent of Kurtz's unbelievable transformation in the African life here:

but this— ah—specimen, was impressively bald. 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 initiation.(79)

So, in other words, Kurtz, at this point has already become transformed into something else: another creature and this gives him the advantage to perpetrate all the illicit, dehumanizing atrocities and the forceful extraction of ivory from

Africa to Europe. With this type of intermingling with the people, especially with the Interior natives, Kurtz is able to terrorize the people and deify himself thereby making himself a god to them. So, herein, then lies the import of the first part of this paper, that, with all the devilish and wicked activities perpetrated by Kurtz in the Inner station, lies the darkness in his heart, his sole aim being to see Africa exploited into extinction and its humanity completely annihilated. Imagine the frenzy with which Kurtz exploited the area with madness: "and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people— forget himself—you know.' 'Why! he's mad.'"(94) Indeed, this chap was crazy with greed: ivory-drunk (capitalistic) and wanted to suck the motherland dry.

Considering the text with every critical consciousness, it would rather be superficial to read such a text as just a mere racial indictment of Africa because of the physical cum human descriptions that Conrad saw along the Congo River banks, compared with the real activities of forceful extortion and extraction of ivory from natives by Kurtz, now all to himself and no longer to the Company that sent him into the interior, to the extent that they plot to hang him. With this condition so far, the manager comments about Kurtz thus, that "his method is unsound" (104) and that he has "done more harm than good to the Company" (105). Regarding Kurtz's demonizing powers over the people, the Russian lad tells us that:

'he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know— and they had never seen anything like it—and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no! Now—just to give you an idea— I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me, too, one day— but I don't judge him.' 'Shoot you!' I cried 'What for?' 'Well, I had a small lot of ivory the chief of that village near my house gave me. You see I used to shoot game for them. Well, he wanted it, and wouldn't hear reason. He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased. And it was true, too. (93 – 94)

The major key words that truly explain the real person of Kurtz are in these expressions: "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man"... "He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory... because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased. And it was true, too." I hope by now one can frankly imagine the thick 'impenetrable darkness' that suffuse the heart of Kurtz which is of more serious concern and worthier of critical attention than the case of racism. It is important to note here that, the case and practice of what happened here are not cases of colonialism only; it is a matter of... an attempt to annihilate a people and cart away with everything they have, if possible. The unexpected arrival of 'the Eldorado Exploring Expedition' group provides great conviction to this callous intention while the report on Mr. Kurtz here: "...that he had collected,

bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together," (77) as reason for his fame, concretizes the perpetration of the said act. The act of '...killing whom he jolly well pleased,' finalizes the whole point and ought not to be taken casually. The above is really the *in* thing and not the matter of racism that has been on ground in Africa long before now.

## ADAPTATION

Very important development again that calls our attention on Mr. Kurtz is his penetration into the hearts of the natives, to assume the place of a demi-god, in which situation we find a full show of an honorary ritualistic reverence, at the point of relinquishing his body to Marlow and his crew. Apart from the fact that, he came to the people with "thunder and lightning," and that, "they adored him," there is a moving dramatic show of respect and awe with the sudden appearance of the native to submit the body of Kurtz. It is with that awe that Marlow announces:

'Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility. (98 – 99)

Despite the unimpressive, negative presentation of Africans in the above extract, the point remains that Kurtz was deeply into them... could command and communicate with them. This is as driven by greed and his dark heartedness to accumulate everything to himself and through that process he even becomes lord over the people. This same show of respect was demonstrated at the departure of Mr. Kurtz by another set of stream of black beings in a form of strange pseudo-military parade orchestrated and led by "the Strange Woman." Though Marlow is in deep surprise with the sight, but Mr. Kurtz beams a smile of recognition to the men which all show a great deal of intimacy and understanding of the people. This is indeed, the controversial Mr. Kurtz at his best. This kind of show of strong bond and affiliation between Mr. Kurtz and the natives cannot be taken ordinarily. But whether it was for love or fear of him, that, we do not know. One thing stands out very clear here, and that is, inside the heart of the dying Mr. Kurtz, is locked up a lot of things (darkness) we do not have idea of, both about the people and Mr. Kurtz himself since he could hardly muster intelligible statements at this time.

## SHADES OF DARKNESS

At another distinguishing dimension of this tale, Conrad presents two categorical frames of 'darkness' – first, the

physical, geographical darkness, (which constitute Africa cosmo-cultural darkness often interpreted as racist). He describes it thus: "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly.... Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell" (57). This is where Achebe anchors his argument to describe *Heart of Darkness* as a racist tale about Africa, still, I am yet to see the problem with this description as if it is any different from the descriptions we know about Umuofia, Umuaro and their neighboring villages in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* respectively. The second category captures the inward human kind of darkness represented in Mr. Kurtz as discussed earlier, hence: "the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (78). The two categories of darkness mentioned now, bear deep meaning in *essence* to us in this paper, because it is both to reveal the kind of person Mr. Kurtz is, unveiling his illicit, evil activities of exploitation in Africa as well as to capture the cultural backwardness of the people as is obvious. The case with Mr. Kurtz's dark-heartedness is completely laid bare in his last few depressive words when he laments thus:

This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do—resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.'... He wanted no more than justice—no more than justice. (123 – 124)

With this we see the personal selfish interest he has; as well as the pains, suffering and agony that Mr. Kurtz has been through... "it is a difficult case"... and the unfair treatments he has suffered in the hands of his European superiors. At this point, he has already emerged an instrument of terror on one hand and a victim of the same institution that sent him, on the other. In his frustrations and misery he desires only one thing..., "justice." Certainly, there are more that have happened to Mr. Kurtz than we know, such that when he breathed his last, he cries out, "The horror! The horror!" This leaves us with a lot of imaginings of what he must have actually been through in the Interiors. This truly, gives him the true image of heart of darkness, both as a perpetrator of different evil acts in the Interiors as well as a victim, in his attempt to owe everything to himself. Most baffling is the degree of Mr. Kurtz's greed... the extent he desires to lay claim to everything, hence, Marlow says, "You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him" (80). This is completely indeed who Mr. Kurtz is – everything to himself including his Intended English wife. Without moving out of the context of this text to infer what this European presence of Mr. Kurtz symbolizes in Africa, we can starkly see this monumental presence of selfishness... self-centeredness either to the individual person (that embodies the heart of darkness) or to a continent, hence Marlow closes with this: "Everything belonged to him— but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what

he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own" (80). Of greater importance to us is to understand the number of 'powers of darkness' at work in the African continent through the instrument of individuals like Mr. Kurtz rather than the mere description of what the people and their environment look like. Even when that is to be of some concern, the important question remains: since after these depictions, what significant improvements have we made assuming Conrad was not correct in his depiction? The answer which is none, finds its better explanation in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

### ON AFRICAN PRIMITIVITY

Regarding the first category of darkness which has to do with the undignified description of the human and environmental conditions of Africa(ns), Conrad who employed sophisticated symbols and highly poetic language began this tale based on his insistence in his 1897 "Preface" to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, that his creative task was "before all, to make you see" (Bloom, 2), thus he gives the following description about one of his sights:

On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom. (2)

Here, Conrad's language is lucidly luminous, concrete and tactile in his explication of what he witnessed along, and at the Inner Station of the Congo River – 'the dark part of the earth'. Although Conrad employs pejorative terms to describe many of the 'mysterious' sights/events and black creatures he encountered, describing them in their "'primitivity'... as being uncivilized, with flat nose; nigger, black and naked, moved about like ant...black rags.... I could see their rib;... lusty red-eyed devils..." (44). With all these said about the black beings he encountered, Conrad goes further to give the worse depiction in the following extract, which can only lead to the conclusion that the whole presentation of Africa in the text is clearly indeed with a racial calculation. So here Marlow narrates:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair....And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin.... (25 – 26)

As frankly annoying and depressing as this sordid depiction here is, Conrad speaks nothing to drag the black image completely to the mud. However, there seems to be a very

close, similar condition in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* where Obi's mother's health condition so deteriorated for lack of adequate medical care and abject penury, thereby creating a similar scenic ambiance as captured by Conrad including the general poor living condition of the Umuofia people. This raises the question of chronic diseases that are still prevalent in the continent. As a traveler, whom Achebe described as, "undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller" ('Image of Africa,' 2), I strongly believe that what Conrad does, is to articulate and vividly capture what he saw as much as his strength can carry him. So, if we have to be sincere regarding Conrad's depiction above, the question that requires immediate answers here are: has the conditions of misery, hunger, poverty, starvation and chronic diseases been addressed in Africa as Achebe tries to justify in *No Longer at Ease*? Is similar case of starvation and hunger not found in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*? How come Conrad's depiction is branded 'racist'? How much has the case of improving (African) human conditions been tackled in Africa? This general human welfare questions have remained unanswered and unattended to for many years now.

Now regarding Achebe's 1975 essay in which, he references two major points where Africa was so pathetically presented, I crave your patience to (re)present those portions here:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. 'The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; (57 – 58)

Beginning with this, first: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" even

as Conrad is unsure about what ritualistic muttering this was, the first question that comes to mind is, how is this remarks racist? If the prehistoric man cursed the intruders out of his wonderment of who they are, or his knowledge of their dehumanizing, exploitative activities/presence in the hinterland, is anything wrong with the (re)actions of the black creatures? Now, on the contrary, the same 'man' 'prays' and 'welcomes' the strangers to show the act of friendliness towards the white intruders. Again Conrad even in describing the "conquered monster" form they encounters, acknowledges that "they were not inhuman" towards them rather they were "free". Achebe's particular point of concern which he says summarizes the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* - "what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity— like yours.... Ugly" still calls for serious reconsideration. Conrad, despite describing these creatures in their manner of movement as, 'howled,' 'leaped,' 'spun,' 'and made horrid faces,' still acknowledged one formidable fact- their 'humanity,' that is, in one way or the other no matter how 'ugly,' they bear the quality of human. At the point where Marlow loses his helmsman to the attack of the savages, Marlow, on their way back to Europe still expresses deep pain for the loss of the chap. This affinity based on humanity is of higher importance than anything else, higher than any reductionist interpretation of the text based on race and racism.

At another point where Achebe in his article noted that Conrad summarized the African in two expressions, "one about *silence* and the other about *frenzy*," there are still a lot left to be said about that. Generally speaking, it is in the nature of Africans to be spirited in their activities... life-style. This being the case, it is not out of place for Conrad to acknowledge same. As for about 'silence,' at this time Africans couldn't communicate in the language of the white man efficiently, so they spoke little but could communicate effectively amongst themselves in their native tongue. Even the Russian boy acknowledged that when he said: "they are simple people," that they are 'simple people' didn't make them *silent*. This same argument explains Achebe's indictment of Conrad in denying the 'savages' power to speech, only making them say: 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us'... 'Eat 'im!' But in every sense of it, there is no way one would expect the natives who are encountering these Europeans for the first time, at this early stage to be proficient already in the use of the foreign language. Using that as a point of comparison with the 'Intended' who is a native speaker of the English Language is completely out of place and incomparable. Even at the mid twentieth century when *No Longer at Ease* was set, not quite many Africans could still interact effectively in the English language. People like Bisi, Mr. Omo, Obi's house boy and many others especially the illiterate members of the Umuofia Union, could only manage to speak Broken English. Many Africans still, at this time have not learned the white man's tongue adequately except the few 'been-tos'. The arguments

and issues raised here against Achebe's position in *Heart of Darkness* about Africa as indeed the image of darkness, are the realities still confronting the African society which they have failed to admit or address and; a great deal of that barbarity are seen to manifest in the cultural disposition of the Africans as reflected in *No Longer at Ease*.

## CONCLUSION

Achebe in *No Longer at Ease* presents again, a scenario where his characters, Isaac and Obi Okonkwo, are entrapped by the same ways of the 'prehistoric man' (their custom) to the point of utter disregard and abandonment of their professed Christian faith and western civilization respectively. It is at such point that Isaac Okonkwo lamely submits thus:

'My son,' said Okonkwo, 'I understand what you say. But this thing is deeper than you think.'

'What is *this thing*? Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man *osu*, a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children for ever. But have we not seen the light of the Gospel?' Obi used the very words that his father might have used in talking to his heathen kinsmen.

There was a long silence. The lamp was now burning too brightly. Obi's father turned down the wick a little and then resumed his silence. (101)

Exactly what has been the aim of this paper, Isaac admits it that, their fathers lived in darkness and ignorance which is similar to the things Conrad saw and describes them as "darkness" indeed, which Achebe himself calls "*this thing*." Strangely, this same condition of characteristic darkness and ignorance are seen to hold both father and son spell-bound to the point that even Obi's misfortune is misconceived and superstitiously linked to the curse placed on his father (Isaac) by his grandfather (Okonkwo). And this is not presented to us in any different light as what Conrad describes as a people of "accursed inheritance." So the matter here absolutely has nothing to do with racism but about a race, a continent that is plunged into total darkness. The "long silence" between the two men gives room for a lot of pondering as to what *this thing* is.

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