

**“THE GODS DISAPPROVE OF THE MINGLING OF  
PEOPLES”: CONRAD, ACHEBE AND GORDIMER  
ON THE PLIGHT OF EUROPEANS IN AFRICA**

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*ABSTRACT*

The quotation above, from Virgil's *Aeneid*, serves to illustrate the ill-fated relationship between Europeans and Africans since the times of colonization. Literature reflects how this meeting of races has not been a successful story. Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe, now considered classic figures in the portrayal of the African plight, denounce in their work the abuse of the African population, a phenomenon which costs many lives and has since then represented the most revolting aspect of the European intervention. As we will see in this paper, the supercilious colonists, paradoxically enough, had also to undergo physical and spiritual ordeals. Conradian figures as Kurtz, Carlier or Kayerts attest to the hardships imposed on them by the hostile landscape and their own moral disintegration. Nadine Gordimer, writing at the end of the XX century, reflects how the inheritors of those European explorers, merchants and officers, now living in a post-colonial African context, are suffering a similar plight. They have become a marginal minority, feeling the rejection of the citizens of the newly-independent countries and being the easy target of the demagoguery of the post-colonial rulers. Very often, they are also weighed down by the burden of the feelings of guilt over the colonial abuses or by their own futile attempts to cling to old positions of privilege.

In Virgil's *Aeneid* the young hero who will found Rome lands on the African coast and falls in love with Dido, the Queen of Carthage, but we learn that Jupiter will

not approve of the mingling of peoples from opposite shores of the Mediterranean; as Venus says: “*miscerive probet populos aut foedera iungi*” (4. 112). These words are turned into the official motto of the Central African city where the action of V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* takes place, although substantial transformations are introduced so that the meaning is completely altered: “*miscerisque probat populos et foedera iungi*” (68); here the god is made to give his assent to the settlement in Africa. The narrator of *A Bend in the River* is justifiably surprised at such gross manipulation: “Twisting two-thousand-year-old words to celebrate sixty years of the steamer service from the capital” (68).

The rest of *A Bend in the River* will confirm the deviousness of the motto. As can be expected in Naipaul, the settlement in the African continent will prove difficult and painful for those involved in the experience. But this perception is not exclusive to the Trinidadian writer and, as we will analyse, can be traced back to Conrad, being also partially shared by authors as Chinua Achebe or Nadine Gordimer.

The colonial experience was first perceived by the Europeans as an adventure, a series of discoveries, a fascinating encounter with distant, strange, exotic lands. Europe had known little or nothing of the other continents for most of its history. America did not enter Western history until the end of the XV century. Northern Africa had been colonized by the Romans and it was later the bridgehead of a Muslim invasion of Spain, but the rest of the continent was virtually unknown to Europeans. As Geroge Lamming writes, quoting Hegel, “Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained ... enveloped in the dark mantle of night” (31). Discovery is the term which, from a eurocentric point of view, designates the process which leads the Western civilization to establish contact with other parts of the world, until the contemporary vision of the Planet is finally conceived. The great age of discoveries marks also the beginning of the settlement of Europeans in the new territories when, either for spiritual, scientific, political or economic reasons, many people started to travel into the promised lands.

At the beginning of the colonial enterprise the newly discovered regions were readily put under the sovereignty of the country sending the expedition. The presence, and later the collision, of rival European powers was the only limit to this practice, giving rise to treaties which established areas of influence within which each country was free to colonize. In this process the key word was *domination*. Even those who traveled for scientific reasons or for the sake of adventure, adopted similar attitudes, as Mary L. Pratt refers, alluding to the myriads of British explorers who shared an attitude of “monarch-of-all-I-survey” at the time they were *winning* for England their geographical discoveries (201).

Thus, when the pioneers met the first natives they had mixed feelings about these people they were not really expecting and who might prove a hindrance to their claim on the land.<sup>1</sup> In turn, these inhabitants had to face the reality of a strong and determined invasion which was ultimately to take control of their lives. Both Conrad and Achebe deal in their works with the first stages of colonialism in Africa, showing how the Europeans won a quick and overwhelming victory over small tribal groups.

There is an obvious temporal gap between Conrad and Achebe but the most conspicuous difference lies in the perspective from which they tell their stories. Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, adopts the point of view of the white man involved in the colonization, the natives being mere background; Achebe, on the contrary, dives into the feelings of the black population which is being attacked by an outside force, giv-

ing us a detailed account of their attempt to fight the invasion and, later, to adjust to the new situation.

In *Things Fall Apart* Europeans are portrayed as powerful oppressors, as the representatives of a well-organized society with the means and the determination to conquer the new lands. Emphasis is placed on the explanation of how traditional African society is eventually defeated. The message the white man carries with him cannot be more contradictory; he has come to talk about human fraternity "because they were all sons of God" (102) but, at the same time, he is underlining his superiority by asking the natives to abandon their gods and beliefs and embrace the Christian faith.

The first settlers gained converts by preaching and also by showing the excellence of their civilization; this was imposed by force when persuasion was not enough. When a delegation of natives comes to talk with the District Commissioner he welcomes them with kind words: "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy" (137). His speech, after having them handcuffed and arrested, is an outrageous display of cynicism. In fact, torture rather than kindness awaits them: "The six men ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together" (138).<sup>2</sup>

Therefore we can say that Achebe records, as many other African writers, the devastating influence of white men on traditional African societies, therefore the portrayal of the trespassers cannot be positive; as R.N. Egudu points out: "The image of the white man in Nigerian literature is a consistently negative one" (120). In *Things Fall Apart* this characterization depends mainly on the association between the European invaders and wrongdoing; little attention is paid to the actual description of the deeper layers of their psyche. Mr Smith, one of the missionaries, is summarily presented as a prototypical supercilious colonist: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil" (130). This work, narrated from the perspective of the oppressed and concerned mainly with the denunciation of injustice leaves little space for a thorough description of the white man's inner self. However, there is recognition of the different personalities involved in the colonial adventure. Thus, Mr Brown is portrayed as a compromising man: "He made friends with some of the great men of the clan and on one of his frequent visits to the neighbouring villages he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity and rank" (126). When he suddenly disappears from Umuofia, Achebe's fictional land, we guess that either he disagrees with the methods employed by Europeans in their conquest or that he is considered unsuitable for the task of domination. In this way we are given a hint of the plight of the white man who conceives his role in Africa in terms other than domination or force.

Conrad clearly denounces in *Heart of Darkness* the practices of the Europeans in Africa and similarly points out the absurdity of an enterprise which is also taking its toll of Europeans.<sup>3</sup> The most striking figure in this work is Kurtz, a man who has been able to entice the natives into making them believe he is a god. He has lost his mind by taking too far the idea of the white man as an absolute ruler of lands and people. However, as David Ward has stated: "In the arrogance and insecurity of the European consciousness Africa appears again and again as a place to find one's self" (11). For all the power he holds, Kurtz gets a fleeting glimpse of his inner soul; he is aware of his degradation as a human being and eventually commits suicide. Before that, as

Marlow reports, he “pronounced a judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth”; this self-analysis of an exhausted, vanquished man has a simple verbal expression: “a cry that was no more than a breath- ‘The horror! The horror!’ ” (100).

Much critical attention has already been paid to Kurtz but the analysis of other minor characters also throws significant light upon the experience of the white man in Africa. In *Heart of Darkness* someone who is in charge of the upkeep of a road wears an unbuttoned uniform, showing his relaxation at seeing himself free from social intercourse. Marlow points out scornfully the contradictions of the colonial adventure: this man is doing nothing in Africa because there are no roads to take care of and the neglect of the environment leaves him enough spare time to maltreat human beings, as the body of a native shot to death indicates. However, idleness also leads this European to get drunk so that we can see how the colonial enterprise in which he supposedly assumes the role of victor and master is degrading him as a human being.

In “An Outpost of Progress” two white men, Kayerts and Carlier, are in charge of a neglected trading station in a remote area of the continent. One of their predecessors has died of fever and they will suffer from it on several occasions too. However, in this short story as well as in *Heart of Darkness* physical suffering is surpassed by the spiritual plight of the white man who, overwhelmed by solitude, soon misses the comforts and protection of his society: “they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness” (58).

Although we know that when the Europeans first arrived in Africa their basic goal was to conquer, to dominate, in Conrad’s work we can see how their supremacy and power may sometimes appear as limited and conditioned by some kind of voluntary surrender on the part of the natives. Jeremy Hawthorn has stated: “From the start of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ it has been apparent that Makola —the ostensible servant— is actually far more in control than are the two white men” (160). Furthermore, in this tale we see how the representatives of the company depend on the supplies offered by local tribesmen. When these feel alienated and interrupt that help Kayerts and Carlier face starvation, living on boiled rice without salt. The narrator wants to emphasize how precarious their situation has become, preparing the reader for the description of the ensuing physical and moral degradation: “One must have lived on such diet to discover the ghastly trouble the necessity of swallowing one’s food may become” (74). Kayerts and Carlier will eventually be exasperated by the hostile physical environment, especially the suffocating hot weather. In this “overheated catacomb” (20), being punished by “the blinding sunshine” (23) they will curse “the company, all Africa and the day they were born” (74). Kayerts’ desperation will eventually lead him to commit suicide after killing his only fellow European in the forlorn trading station.

Thus, we can say that Conrad’s colonists appear as trapped, stranded individuals unable to cope with the difficulties they found in the places they were supposed to dominate, the journey into the continent becoming “a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” as we can read in *Heart of Darkness* (21). We may wonder, then, why all these people have embarked on this adventure. Stanley echoes the imperialistic ideology of spreading a superior civilization, as the alliterative “redeem” “relieve” or “rescue” indicate: “God chose the King [Leopold of Belgium] for his instrument to redeem this vast slave park ...to relieve it of its horrors, rescue it from its oppressors, and save it from perdition” (Hennessy 13). Similarly, King Leopold himself refers to

a mission which should "continue the development of civilization in the centre of Equatorial Africa" (Hennessy 13).

However, the spiritual intention of the king and the explorer quickly turns out to be a cover-up for overt economic exploitation; as the words of the Belgian monarch indicate: "They must accustom the population to general laws, of which the most needful and the most salutary is assuredly that of work" (Hennessy, 86).<sup>4</sup> When Marlow asks one of the European colonists "what he meant by coming here at all" the answer is as simple and sincere as "To make money, of course" (29). Similar prosaic reasons have moved Kayerts ("to earn a dowry for his girl"), and Carlier ("having not a penny in the world he was compelled to accept this means of livelihood." 60).

Nadine Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour* deals with a period (late 20th century) in which the colonial process has nearly finished, independence having been granted to most of the former European territories. Some of her characters follow the pattern of the white merchants who seek merely an economic interest in Africa, as seen above. Gordon Edwards, for example, manages to carry on with his trading activities, disregarding or minimizing the effects of socio-political turmoil as well as the changing racial roles in the post-colonial states. His stay in a continent he does not identify with is justified only by the need to earn his living. When Gordon blatantly says: "White men don't hang around in Black Africa for their health or anybody else's" (282) he is claiming Stanley's or Kurtz's inheritance as colonists.

Gordon is obsessed by the idea of distancing himself from his social environment. He scorns his wife's plan to teach the local African language to their children: "'This's no place for my boys to grow up ... Who's going to understand their Gala?'" He laughed, 'In England? In France? In Germany?'" (290). By moving constantly from country to country Gordon avoids any undesirable commitment to any of them. However, this attitude exposes the futility of his life as a runaway who is unable to develop any lasting social or family attachments, prolonging his stay in Africa in spite of feeling exiled from Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Gordon is only one of the many Westerners who miss the protection of the former colonial European administrations, considering themselves expatriates in the post-colonial societies. After independence, the old regimes which put whites on top of the political, bureaucratic and economic ladder were replaced by black administration. Most of the population of European stock did not want to face the new situation and left for Europe or tried to maintain the *status quo* by moving to Rhodesia or South Africa. As Nadine Gordimer reflects in *A Guest of Honour*, those whites who remained in the newly-independent countries as farmers, businessmen or even as civil servants had to adjust themselves to the new balance of power somehow or other. Mrs Mackintosh who is reported to "accept an African government as she had to accept the presence of ants in the sugar" (206) adopts, as Gordon Edwards, an attitude of rejection to the changes brought about by independence. Both are cast in the mold of the arrogant white colonist portrayed by Conrad and Achebe. However, Nadine Gordimer's novel attests to the existence of a richer typology of Western characters in contemporary Africa. This opens the possibility of finding different, and perhaps more positive, accounts of the white man's presence in this continent.

Hjalmar Wentz is a businessman whose main concern is the management of his hotel at a time of instability and economic difficulties, when the new African bureaucracy and an unmotivated workforce increasingly endanger his finances. His attitude to Africa is totally different to Gordon's or Mrs Mackintosh's; although he is

very careful to engage in conversation about local politics, we must understand this as a mere ploy of a man who is trying to preserve his economic interests by not interfering in public affairs. He seems to have understood the message the president has sent: “we are the employers, and they are our employees, now” (324). Unlike Gordon Edwards, Wentz appreciates the country and the people where he lives. He shows his sympathies with the new regime; even when socio-political chaos pervades the land and many other Europeans are preparing to leave he is busy doing some minor home repairs, as a reflection of his entrepreneurial personality, but also of loyalty to Africa. However, he is not able to widen his circle of acquaintances to include non-Europeans and when his family is no longer willing to stand the turmoil of the post-independence period he is left in a pitiful situation of loneliness, only relieved by the company and hospitality of Colonel Bray.

It is not a coincidence that these two characters, Bray and Wentz, end up by being together since both play the roles of romantic idealists. Bray has left his peaceful, uneventful retirement in Wiltshire to accept the invitation of the African government which wants to acknowledge his contribution to national liberation. Although he repeatedly realizes that his position of social authority belongs to the past he never shows any hint of displeasure over the new political and racial status quo. Eugene Goodheart has even said that “he regards the fact of his being a white man as liability” (113), in this way complying with his model of white liberal in the contemporary post-colonial scenario: “Only the undoing of white supremacy can disburden him of guilt and free him to live openly and expressively in society” (112).

Given his past as a colonial officer who was bold enough to support the independence struggle, he probably expects now to enjoy the comfort of seeing his ideas triumph. The invitation tendered by the black government should be both a recognition and, what is more important for a man overwhelmed by retirement, a way of asking him to take an active part in the building of the country. However, he is sent to a remote region to carry out some theoretical research on school organization without any executive powers. No doubt, the man of action he has always been must resent this ceremonial position. Soon after his arrival he realizes he will face unpredicted problems, the most serious being his rejection of the way the president, his long-time friend and protégé, carries out his duties, departing from democratic practices and socialist ideology. A long series of ambiguities in their relationship starts, so that we guess that Bray might eventually engage in some kind of conspiracy or guerrilla action against the government.

In spite of Bray’s emphasis on saying that his stay will be short and temporary he puts off any decision to return to his home. No doubt, he loves the continent (unlike most Westerners he speaks local languages) but his affair with Rebecca Edwards is probably one of the main reasons for extending his sojourn. By the end of the novel he is a multiple traitor. He has betrayed his wife, his political patrons, to whom he is still their *guest*, and his own ideas. His well-intentioned action to smuggle Rebecca’s savings out of the country ignores the monetary policies and the national interest of the newly-independent country. His allegiance to the cause of Africa succumbs when he puts his love for Rebecca first, an action which must be understood too as an indication of his mistrust of the future of the continent. Bray’s difficult stay in Africa ends abruptly. For an otherwise conventionally narrated novel the way in which we are informed of his death is striking. A sentence never finished is the syntactic contribution to the idea of the unexpectedness and absurdity surrounding Bray’s killing:



“and then something burst in his eyes, some wet flower covered them, and he thought, he knew: I’ve been interrupted, then-” (492).

The position of some of the whites born in Africa, as Rebecca Edwards, is even more precarious than that of Western visitors, who may consider their stay as temporary. They are now strangers in their own land, the newly-independent countries and regimes being readily identified as black. Rebecca cannot pledge her allegiance to any other land in the world; as she says to Bray: “You live in your beautiful house stuck away in England as if your life’s over. I mean, nothing awful ever happens, you read it all in the papers, you drive away from it all in your nice car”; on the contrary she says about herself: “I was born here. No choice” (262).

At the beginning of the novel Rebecca seems to be fully integrated in the post-colonial society. She lives harmoniously as the guest of a black family and works as a civil servant, dutifully obeying the black authorities without any hint of resentment. She never has the idea of leaving Africa and even at the critical moments when Bray decides to send her money to a Swiss bank she suggests she is not willing to go away. However, Rebecca’s life is not accomplished either. Her lack of confidence in the present and future of post-colonial Africa is exemplified by her plans to send her children to a South African boarding school, so as to avoid enrolling them at a local integrated school where “the standard *has* dropped like hell” (249).

Eventually, she will be forced to leave her African homeland only to find out that Europe does not mean anything to her. Once there, she is not able to recognize the landscape: “a feeling of intense strangeness came over her” (512). Ironically enough, she is presented as one of those colonials who come to the metropolis for the first time, discovering aspects of a reality they had only read about in schoolbooks: “She had never seen a chestnut tree before but she recognized the conkers children played games with in the English storybooks of her childhood” (516). Rebecca had regarded conkers as an exotic, mainly literary, reality in the same way as a West Indian might consider the snow described by Dickens or the daffodils in Wordsworth’s poetry. In Europe she feels uprooted and confused: “she seemed like one of those hitch-hikers who let the world carry them, at home with anybody in having no home, secure in having no luggage, companionable in having no particular attachment” (242).

This image of a forlorn Rebecca, somehow similar to that of the other characters discussed above, suggests we should reappraise the process which brought to Africa many Europeans. As a conclusion we can say that, although Conrad and Achebe present Europeans as rulers of the conquered territories, we also see them having to face unpleasant realities. The danger may loom inside themselves since absolute power and the lack of restraining social laws corrupts and destroys their souls. Physical suffering and self-inflicted death are some of the penalties endured by the naïve trespassers who are not prepared for the difficulties they will find or who misunderstand the nature of the imperial task they have engaged in. Nadine Gordimer reflects how their plight has been partially inherited by the citizens of European stock born in the former colonies or living there as expatriates after independence.

Thus, it is clear that colonialism, based on injustice, had unhappy results not only for the vanquished population but also for the metropolitan invaders. Different as the roles of Europeans may seem in the historical periods portrayed by Conrad, Achebe and Gordimer, they all somehow share the condition of cast-aways. Rather than as successful conquerors or powerful masters, they appear as frail guests. Borrowing Michael Thorpe’s words, we have to ask ourselves: was their journey really necessary?<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. Brook Thomas points out how “Europe’s encounter with the non-European, so poignantly portrayed by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, played a part in one of the most important aspects of modern thought: Europe’s discovery of ‘the Other’ within himself.” “Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*,” Ross C. Murfin, ed. *Heart of Darkness* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 243.
2. The brutality of Europeans is well documented; Patrick Brantlinger refers to “the revelations of atrocities that began appearing in the British press as early as 1888 and that reached a climax twenty years later, when in 1908 the mounting scandal forced the Belgian government to take control of Leopold’s private domain. During that period the population of the Congo was reduced by perhaps one half; as many as 6,000,000 persons may have been uprooted, tortured, and murdered through the forced labor system used to extract ivory and what reformers called ‘red rubber.’” “Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?” Ross C. Murfin, ed. *Heart of Darkness* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 279.
3. Conrad had first thought of having an African adventure himself when he was just a school-boy. When he is finally given the chance to fulfill his childhood dreams he is disappointed to find out that Europeans have turned this glamorous adventure into “the vilest scramble or loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.” Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay and Last Essays* (London: Dent, 1955) 17.
4. King Leopold in a speech given at Antwerp in 1909 is more explicit about the commercialism of the enterprise: “The Colonial Law provides that the product of customs receipts and taxes shall be exclusively devoted to the needs of the colony. But apart from these budgetary resources, is the nation not free to give to its sons the right of obtaining from the lands as yet unappropriated and from the mines as yet untapped, the resources which will increase the openings available to their activity?” E.D. Morel, *Great Britain and the Congo* (London, 1909) rpt., D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, ed. *Heart of Darkness* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1995) 215-216.
5. We can recall the figure of the accountant in *Heart of Darkness* who placed an extraordinary emphasis on wearing an immaculate outfit, staying permanently inside his cabin, only occasionally coming out under a protecting parasol. In fact, from the very beginning of their stay in Africa white men felt threatened by the hostile environment and sought different kinds of isolation. Thus, when colonial exploitation required large numbers of white workers for the thriving companies these created residential areas described by Gordimer as a “neat, neutral environment for white employees” (396). Even Bray and Rebecca, who show the utmost degree of communion with Africa live their happiest moments at a lake island where they achieve a perfect stability and harmony, only disturbed by the prospect of knowing this is only a temporary haven.
6. Title of a paper given at the 1992 ACLALS conference held in Kingston, Jamaica.

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