

***Abolition in Joseph Conrad's African Writings:
A Discourse Analysis***

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Abstract

This paper has studied the issue of abolition in the African writings of Joseph Conrad. Written and published in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries when the British campaign against King Leopold II's slave system in the Congo was active, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "An Outpost of Progress" and his letters to Roger Casement, the British diplomat who was charged to investigate on the atrocities of the Congo in 1903, are taken to be part of the British effort to eradicate the slavery system in the colonies. These writings are read through the principles of the British abolitionists who revealed to the world the atrocities exerted upon the natives of Africa in the name of the so-called humanitarian principle of the imperial project. Conrad's abolitionism reveals itself in his claim for an international campaign against the slavery system in Africa. It also reveals itself in his depiction of the atrocities exerted upon the Africans: inhuman exploitation, starvation, punishment and death. All these wicked aspects of the slave system are denounced by the abolitionists, and Conrad adheres to their denunciation.

Introduction

Slavery which is the direct consequence of the imperial enterprise was deeply entrenched in colonial Africa. European imperialist expansion was a wicked enterprise, and slavery revealed its most heinous aspect to the world. As a result, there emerged within the imperial powers, especially Britain, voices that strove for the abolition of slavery in the colonies. Indeed, the British were the first to voice their anti-slavery opinions to the government, and this started around the 1780s. The British Abolitionists, mainly Quakers, revealed through their writings the inhuman treatment of the slaves, which came to be decisive in convincing the Parliament to vote for the Abolition Act in 1837. This ended slavery everywhere in British colonies. Thereafter, Britain engaged in another campaign to convince the other European imperial powers of the evils of slavery. This is revealed itself in their diplomatic writings like Roger Casement's report on the atrocities of the slavery practice in King Leopold's Congo Free State in 1903. The fact that Joseph Conrad went to this state in 1890 and wrote about it later on in the century can classify him among the precursors of this abolitionist effort.

The literature on Joseph Conrad's vision of colonial Africa has tackled several issues following a variety of perspectives. With regard to the slavery issue, Patrick Brantlinger (1988) considers Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as part of the British "abolitionist propaganda" in the sense that it involves a darkening of Africa's landscape (1988: 175). It means that Brantlinger views Conrad's abolitionism more as an imperialist inclination than a humanist concern with the sufferings of the natives under the atrocious system of slavery. Yet the British, whom Conrad represents, were engaged in a campaign for the eradication of slavery in other European colonies on the basis that it destroyed the lives of the natives instead of conforming to the humanitarian principle of the imperial project. More recently, Christopher GoGwilt (2010) observes that in *Heart of Darkness*, the Belgian ivory business "fuels the slave labor and underdevelopment of central Africa" (2010: 141). King Leopold's Congo Free State becomes a "region of violence, chaos, and inhuman suffering" (Ibid. 142). Though GoGwilt does not promulgate the idea of abolition in

Conrad's novella, the quoted depiction of the Congo under the Belgians remains the very sign of his abolition, and this would be significant if it is integrated within a study of the issue of abolition as it is developed in Conrad's non-fiction and fiction writings about the Congo and central Africa.

Issue and Working Hypothesis

It is the purpose of this paper to study the issue of the abolition of slavery in the African writings of Joseph Conrad. This idea of abolition is premised upon Conrad's identification with the sufferings of the victims of imperialism, himself being a kind of victim of Russian domination of his motherland, Poland. Also, between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the creation of the Congo Free State as a personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium and the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain's abolitionist campaign against slavery knew an important reawakening. As Conrad wrote in this period of the emergence of anti-slavery voices against King Leopold's Congo Free State in Britain, there is no denying that his African narratives as well as his writings about his personal experiences there display a special abolitionist concern.

The study of Joseph Conrad as an abolitionist must necessarily be carried on his writings about the Congo. Therefore, this paper will be based upon a selection of his non-fictions writings about his personal experiences there, notably his *Congo Diary* as well as the letters he wrote to Roger Casement in 1903, when the latter was commissioned by the British government to investigate for a report against the prevalence of slavery in King Leopold's Congo Free State. Conrad's personal experience of the Congo is behind two main texts about Africa: *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and "An Outpost of Progress" (1896). These will also be important to the study of Conrad as an abolitionist. From the theoretical point of view, this paper borrows some of the ideas of the British abolitionists, especially the Quakers, and applies them on Conrad's writings.

Slavery and Abolition: Belgium vs. Britain

The issue of slavery was revealed to the British public in the last decade of the eighteenth century when the first Abolitionist reports started to reveal the atrocities exerted upon the natives of Africa.

Slavery as a practice involves a triangular scheme: the slaves being owned by the colonists are sold to merchants who in turn sell them to entrepreneurs. The latter exploit them in the most inhuman of ways. All European imperialist powers engaged in the slave trade; their African colonies offered the slaves, who came to be regarded as “chattel” or “*bien meubles* in French, property that could be bought and sold with impunity” (Révauger, 2008: 35). The Portuguese, French, Dutch, Belgian and the British engaged in the slave trade that brought the slaves into plantations everywhere in their colonies, not to mention the southern plantations of the United States.

In 1787, a Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was established in Britain so as to work for the ending of slavery in British colonies. They managed to introduce the issue into the Parliament and gradually slavery became abhorred at home. This played a crucial role in the total ending of the practice in British colonial territories in 1838. However, the slave trade and the exploitation of the slaves in other European colonies prevailed throughout the nineteenth century, and Britain became an abolitionist power that endeavoured to convince the other powers of the evils of a practice of which they were the initiators. Only in the 1890s did they manage to attract the attention of the other powers. They made King Leopold of Belgium invite the other powers to Brussels to discuss what could be done of the matter. The outcome of the effort was the Brussels Act of 1890, which “was a humanitarian instrument in so far as it reaffirmed that ‘native welfare’ was an international responsibility; and bound signatures to prevent slave raiding and trading, to repatriate or resettle freed and fugitive slaves, and to cut off free flow of arms to the slaving areas” (Miers, 1999: 19). However, the act “did not bind signatories to suppress slavery” (Ibid. 20). Therefore, despite the efforts carried out by Britain, the slave practice was to prevail throughout non-British colonial territories for further decades.

Later on in the century and the early twentieth century, the issue of slavery and the atrocities exerted upon the slaves in King Leopold II’s Congo Free State came to be of paramount importance in Liberal Britain. Henry Wellington Wack, an American, observes that

“[d]uring a residence of several years in the United Kingdom, [he] could not fail to observe the growth there of an organized campaign against the Congo Free State” (Wack, 1905: iii). This campaign was directed against the enslavement of the Africans in this portion of the Belgian empire, where human strife on the natives’ side was but daily whereas the white lords were enriching themselves increasingly out of the resources of the Congo and the inhuman exploitation of its people. The British government sent Roger Casement to the Congo to investigate upon the issue of slavery. In December 1903, he wrote “a report confirming that the Congo Free State enforced slavery” (Powel, 2008: 254). The task entrusted upon Casement by the government was preceded by the work of Edmund Dene Morel who started in 1902, the year *Heart of Darkness* was published, to devote himself “to promote the abolition of a slave system that Belgium’s King Leopold II had secretly established” (Ibid. 5).

Discussion

When the Abolition movement started in Britain, the Quakers were the leading figures in their public testimony against a practice so heinous that an end had to be brought to it urgently. In their 1784 public testimony entitled “The Case of our Fellow Creatures, the Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great Britain, by the People Called Quakers”, they suggest the idea of abolition to the government based upon the inhumanity of a “practice” that “is grown into a system of tyranny” (Abolitionist Quakers, 2007: 35). The efforts made by the Quakers have paid as they obtained the prohibition of slavery in 1807 followed by an Abolition Act in 1837. However, the practice prevailed in the colonies, especially in non-British territories like King Leopold’s Congo Free State.

Conrad observes that Britain, no longer a slave country, is redeemed from this shameful practice; yet measures should be taken against the prevalence of the practice in other European colonies. He is essentially very scornful towards the King Leopold II’s slave state in the Congo. He writes to Roger Casement that the so-called savagery and cannibalism of the African, used by the imperialists as a pretext to establish empire in central Africa, was “an enormous and atrocious lie

in action” (Conrad, 1988: 95). Instead, he witnessed another kind of savagery, this time endemic to the Belgian imperialists. The journey he made to the Congo in 1890 made him aware of the inhumanity of the Belgian imperial project there. Therefore, his *Congo Diary* and his later private letters to Roger Casement reveal the heinous aspect of the project through depicting the evils of slavery and the inhuman treatment of the natives. As the British Abolitionists associated the practice of slavery with the death of natives, Conrad in his *Congo Diary* mentions the deliberate death of the enslaved natives. What struck him most on his arrival to Matadi were the dead bodies of the ‘Backogos’. “A few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[ing] place the dead body of a Backongo” (Conrad, 1926: 241-242) and later “[s]aw another dead body lying by the palm” (Ibid. 244). Under the slave system, when the natives no longer serve the interests of the companies out of extreme labour and starvation, they are left to die without any human dignity.

The inhumanity of the practice puts a veil upon the philanthropic pretence of the imperial project, whose “benevolent purpose have [sic] been perverted” (Abolitionist Quakers, 1997: 35) according to the Abolitionists. Conrad writes to Roger Casement, “[d]uring my sojourn in the interior, keeping my eyes and ears well open too, I’ve never heard of the alleged custom of cutting off hands amongst the natives” (Conrad, 1988: 95), which means that the idea that the natives are barbarous and need to be integrated to an imperial power does not offer any justification to the atrocities performed in the name of civilisation. In another letter to Casement, he proclaims the necessity of leading a campaign against the slave trade, he deems barbarian and ignorant of international laws,

It is an extraordinary thing that the conscience of Europe which seventy years ago has put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo State to day. [...] But as a matter of fact in the old days England had in her keeping the conscience of Europe. The initiative came from here. But now I suppose we are busy with other things; too much involved in great affairs to take up cudgels for humanity, decency and justice. [...] And the fact remains that in 1903, seventy five years or so after the abolition of the slavery trade

(because it was cruel) there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European Powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration, and bad faith towards all the other states the basis of commercial policy.

(Conrad, 1988: 96-97)

Though Britain is no longer a slave power, Conrad observes that the efforts being carried by the British against King Leopold's Congo slavery are dwarfed by the other European powers' lack of interest in the matter. It follows, therefore, that Conrad establishes the issue of slavery as a historical reality that needs to be taken into account on an international scale. He adheres to the campaign against King Leopold's slavery, and this corresponds to the aims of the Abolitionists of getting the "abolition of this iniquitous practice" (Abolitionist Quakers, 2007: 36). The emergence "of the issue of forced labour [or slavery] in the Belgian Congo in the years after the Anglo-Boer War came as a welcome chance for liberal critics of imperialism in Britain" (Rich, 1990: 35). Conrad is among these liberal critiques of empire as he seizes the issue of slavery to express his critique of this aspect of imperialism.

As Conrad's experiences in the Congo are behind his two African narratives, *Heart of Darkness* and "An Outpost of Progress", within these he displays an abolitionist perspective, already mentioned in the analysis of his letters to Roger Casement. Slavery as a colonial and imperial practice is explicitly denounced in "An Outpost of Progress", where Kayerts stammers out that it "is an awful thing" (1998: 262). Conrad is against slavery and any other form of exploitation, especially when they are pushed to the extreme for the sake of personal profit. In *Heart of Darkness*, he associates the ivory business and the Company with the atrocious exploitation of the natives. This is explicit in Conrad's description of the way the natives are transformed into slaves, "each one [having] an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain" (1983: 43). Indeed, in this scene Conrad refers to an historical reality, namely the slave trade and the transformation of the natives of Africa from a state of freedom into a state of property of white entrepreneurs chained so as not to run away.

Also, the association of death with the slave trade is revealed in

Marlow's description of the "grove of death" (Ibid. 47) in the Outer Station,

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.

(Ibid. 44)

The word "now" in the above quotation is very important; it shows that the white imperialists have brought through their enslavement of the natives "starvation" and "disease" instead of civilisation and progress. Their coming to Africa under the pretexts of the civilising mission is nothing else but detrimental. Before their coming, the African natives were leading a life of their own, and this came to shake off their harmonious lives and bring them death, disease and starvation. The Abolitionists in their speeches insisted that the imperial project was demeaning the welfare of the natives instead of an allegedly "mild and benevolent attempts to civilize their inhabitants, and to incline them to receive the glad tidings of the gospel" (Abolitionist Quakers, 2007: 37). Historically, Conrad directs a critique towards the alleged establishment of the Congo Free State on the basis of the humanitarian principle of bringing the blessings of civilisation to the people of the region, which is but the smokescreen for their enslavement in the name of profit.

Conrad refers to another reality namely the punishment of the slaves for faults real or unreal. Throughout Marlow's journeys, he keeps witnessing the punishment of the slaves, which are anxiously reported. From the expressions "whacked the old nigger mercilessly" (Conrad, 1983: 34), a "nigger was being beaten nearby" (Ibid. 53), one understands this anxious reporting of the inhuman punishment of the slaves. The Abolitionists observe that "every fault, real, or imaginary, is punished with a rigour which is but weakly restrained by the colony laws" (Abolitionist Quakers, 1997: 38). These punishments are not rarely pushed into the extreme with the starving of the slaves.

Conrad emphatically observes that they are in states of “starvation [and] dying slowly” (Conrad, 1983: 44). This shows an abolitionist Conrad who reveals the abominable treatment of black slaves: they are punished; they are starved; and sometimes they are left to die because, starved and enfeebled as they are, they no longer serve the interests of the Company. The Abolitionists argue that “even the most wanton or deliberate murder of the slaves, being only punished, if punished at all, by trifling pecuniary fines” (Abolitionist Quakers, 1997: 38).

The sympathy Conrad expresses towards the suffering of the natives as he identifies with them expresses his abolitionism. While the Company consider them as “criminals” or “cannibals” so as to justify the atrocity of their treatment, Conrad identifies with their suffering using the word “fellow[s]” (Conrad, 1983: 40, 67). The use of the word “fellow” instead of the words the Company agents use to refer to the natives involves Marlow’s identification with the natives as *humans* before everything else. This identification in the terms of the Abolitionists is related to the expression “our fellow creatures, the Africans” in the title of their public testimony. Conrad like the Abolitionists transgresses from the commonplace view of the natives of Africa by treating them as fellow creatures related together by a common human destiny but separated by the burdens of history. In *Heart of Darkness*, when one of the slaves is left to die alone, Marlow says “Perhaps, you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage” (Ibid. 87).

In “An Outpost of Progress”, these issues are immediately related to slavery and the slave trade. The solitude of Carlier and Kayerts makes them aware that they are just agents working for an enslaving company. Carlier says, “You are a slave-dealer. I am a slave-dealer. There is nothing but slave-dealers in this cursed country” (Conrad, 1998: 265). This issue of slavery or “forced labour”, Paul B. Rich observes, came in the end of the nineteenth century, and the “liberal critics of imperialism” immediately started a critique of such colonial policies (Rich, 1990: 35).

Conclusion

This study has shown that Joseph Conrad is an abolitionist writer who denounces the atrocities of the slavery practice in the Congo Free State. He bears personal testimony to these atrocities as he witnessed them during his voyage there in 1890. When Roger Casement was invested by the British government to investigate about the atrocities, Joseph Conrad aspired to bring his contribution to the investigation by sending him two letters, which account for what he witnessed in the Congo. Conrad bases his two African narratives, *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress” on these experiences. Therefore, there is behind them an abolitionist feeling which is expressed through an open condemnation of the slavery practice in “An Outpost of Progress” and a condemnation of the atrocities endured upon the natives in *Heart of Darkness*. In the latter narrative, Conrad directs a critique towards the inhuman exploitation of the natives through overworking them, starving them, punishing them and even killing or letting them die without any human dignity. These issues are part of the abolitionist project of revealing to the world the heinous aspect of the slavery practice in the colonial world.

Along with the abolitionist literature like Conrad's, Roger Casement's report on slavery in the Congo Free State published to the world in 1904 combined with the work of Edmund Dene Morel forced King Leopold II's to yield to the exploitation of the region as his personal property, and the Congo was integrated to the Belgian empire in 1908, to be supervised by the government and other international observers. Slavery was to be abolished there. Nonetheless, it was to prevail in South Africa as the whites were motivated not to yield upon their self-appointed right to exploit the natives. Therefore, later another campaign was underway to abolish slavery in South Africa. One of the forerunners of this campaign was George Bernard Shaw. Shaw made his explicit opposition to it in 1932, just a few months before writing and publishing his *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*. On February of this year, during a visit to this country, he “made a radio address to the nation [...] in which he admonished his hosts to stop living off the work of slaves. The

broadcast was significant politically” (Bertolini, 2004) for the reason that its purpose was to condemn slavery. The immediate response this address received from the white community in South Africa, in a way, incited him to write the novella. The latter comes to confirm the position he takes in the radio address and to make his contribution to the campaign against slavery that was being underway in South Africa and elsewhere.

Shaw’s black girl is aware of the inhumane practice of slavery. She challenges the white people who still keep on the idea that their presence in Africa is the best thing that has ever happened to the natives. “Our guns have saved you from the man-eating lion and the trampling elephant” (Shaw, 1932: 39), says one of the white explorers. The black girl retorts with a forceful answer by reversing Europe’s mission into an enterprise for the enslavement of the natives. “Only to deliver us into the hands of the man-beating slave-driver and the trampling baas” (Ibid.), she retorts. The black girl is conscious of the enslavement and the exploitation, from which her native fellows suffer,

You use your guns to make **slaves** of us. Then because you are too lazy to shoot, you put your guns into our hands and teach us to shoot for you. You will soon teach us to make the guns because you are too lazy to make them yourselves. You have found out how to make drinks that make men forget God, and put their consciences to sleep and make **murder** seem a delight. You sell these drinks to us and teach us how to make them. And all the time you **steal** the land from us and **starve** us and make us hate you as we hate the snakes.

(Shaw, 1932: 39; emphasis added)

The emphasising of the words in the quote is done deliberately to show that Shaw is also an abolitionist writer, who adheres to the campaign against slavery in South Africa.

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