"All Colonialists Are Bad, but Some Colonialists Are Worse Than Others": Representations of the Colonial Experience in Selected Colonial and Post-Colonial Literary Texts

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Abstract

The colonisation of Africa by some European nations goes back to the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, when "the scramble for Africa" was officially launched under the Chairmanship of the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. These Europeans – "fourteen states (including Turkey) and the USA sent representatives" (Stokes 1984: 29) – decided amongst themselves how Africa would be parcelled out into colonies. Africans were not present at that conference. This was being done "to promote the civilisation and commerce of Africa, and for other humanitarian purposes," (Knappert and Pearson, 1976: 179; Asante 2015: 194-197). In reality, Europeans had long been plundering Africa since the 1500s for slaves, ivory, timber and minerals. Indeed, colonial literature even defends slavery on the grounds that the immorality and degradation of Africans could only be ended through the Africans' contact with their European masters (Irele 2009: 210). Rider Haggard, John Buchan and Robert Ruark are only three examples of defenders of the slave trade and colonisation that immediately come to mind. Using a post-colonial literary theoretical approach, whose main objective is to bring to light, in literary texts, the implications of colonial domination (Walder 1998: 3), this paper argues that as much as the colonial experience was diabolical wherever it was experienced in Africa, British colonisation differed from that of its German and Afrikaner partners in crime. After analysing canonical texts such as Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, depicting British colonialism in Nigeria, and others from the former German and Afrikaner colony of South West Africa, the paper concludes by suggesting that British colonialism was less harsh than its

German-Afrikaner counterparts. The article further recommends that both colonial and post-colonial literary texts should form a compulsory component of syllabi at schools, colleges and universities in Africa. This is one way of ensuring that we never forget our past, as we grapple with the present, and as we plan for the future (Rodney 1972: 7).

Key words: Chinua Achebe, colonial(ism), imperialism, post-colonial (literature/literary theory), John Ya-Otto, Namibia, Nigeria, Peter Ekandjo

Introduction and background information

The purpose of this article is to argue that, much as colonialism was a shared experience in Africa, literary texts, both fiction and non-fiction, can be analysed to demonstrate that this experience differed from country to country. There was Belgian, British, French, Portuguese, German, Italian, Spanish and Afrikaner colonialism, but this paper deals with only two types, the British and German-Afrikaner versions as depicted in selected Nigerian and Namibian literary texts.

It is important to explain from the onset what terms such as "imperialism", "colonial", "colonialism", and "post-colonial" mean.

In its most general sense, "imperialism" refers to the formation of an empire, and, according to Said, it is "the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory" (1993: 8). "Imperialism" is a term associated with the expansion of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century" (Boehmer, 1995, p. 2)

The word "colonial" comes from "colonia", a Latin word which means "farm" or "settlement". A simple definition of a colony is "a country or an area that is governed by people from another, more powerful, country" (Hornby, 2010: 280). Colonialism is the "conquest and control of other people's land and goods" (Loomba 1998: 2). "Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development

of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands" (Boehmer 1995:2).

Although there is no consensus on the definition of "post-colonialism", this writer prefers the definition which uses the term "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of coloni(s)ation to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989:2).

Colonial literature is "literature reflecting a colonial ethos" (Boehmer 1995:2), and examples would include texts such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or Robert Ruark's *Something of Value* and *Uhuru*. This colonial literature was specifically concerned with colonial expansion and was written by, and for colonising Europeans about non-European lands, embodying the imperialists' point of view.

Interestingly, even earlier writers such as Daniel Defoe can be classified as purveyors of the colonial mind-set for the simple reason that in their texts non-Europeans are referred to as "savages", "Negroes", "niggers", "kaffirs", "men-eaters", "wretches", "natives", and so forth, whose mental capacities are clearly inferior to that of Europeans, and therefore in need of "civilisation" and "amelioration" "pacification" by Europeans as they carry out what they regard as the white man's duty (Buchan [1910] 2009: ix). Examples of evidence of these "uncivilised" people's simple-mindedness and backwardness is provided by the narrator in *Robinson Crusoe* as he shares his experiences with fellow imperial adventurers. He tells them of his voyages to the coast of Guinea:

> the manner of trading with the Negroes there, and how easy it was to purchase upon the coast, for trifles, such as beads, toys, knives, scissors, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like, not only gold dust, Guinea grains, elephants' teeth, but Negroes for the service of the Brazils, in great numbers. (Defoe [1719] 1992: 46)

Post-colonial literature, on the other hand, is not just the literature which "came after" empire; instead, this type of literature critically scrutinises the colonial relationship. "It is writing that

sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives. As well as a change in power, decoloni(s)ation demanded symbolic overhaul. ... Post-colonial literature is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire,epecially in its early stages, it can also be a nationalist writing," (Boehmer 1995: 3). Prominent Nigerian author, Ben Okri, describes this type of literature as "literature of the ascendant spirit" (Okri 1994: 1).

The scramble for Africa

In the second half of the 1800s, Africa was transformed in European eyes from a dark and dangerous continent, to one of immense possibilities and opportunities (Knappert and Pearson 1976: 179). As already mentioned, during the 1884-5 Berlin Conference some European nations decided how Africa would be parcelled out into colonies. At the end of that exercise, practically all of Africa had been annexed into the empires of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Italy and Spain (ibid.). That is how Great Britain acquired colonies such as Nigeria, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone and the Gambia in West Africa, as well as others such as Uganda and Kenya in East Africa; Northern and Southern Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively), (Nyasaland) Malawi, and South Africa; "protectorates" such as Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho in southern Africa. Portugal annexed Angola and Mozambique, and Germany took possession of South West Africa (Namibia), among other territories such as parts of Cameroon and Tanganyika (Tanzania). After the First World War (1914 – 18), Germany was stripped of its colonial possessions, and the newly founded League of Nations declared German colonies to be mandates, that is, countries whose government was granted to other powers, acting for the League of Nations. That is how German South West Africa (Namibia) was mandated to South Africa. But the ruling National Party in South Africa merely extended its apartheid policies to Namibia, and actually treated this place as its fifth province. It took nearly twenty years of armed resistance under the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) before Namibia finally won independence from South Africa in 1990.

The colonial experience in colonial texts

Colonial literature [is] informed by theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire (Boehmer 1995: 3). It is worth noting that "the emergence of African literature was fuelled by the need to counter [these] early European texts that depict the African as a creature devoid of any dignity" (Lunga 2012: 3). Indeed, Robert Ruark, in the preface to one of his novels, *Something of Value*, boldly states: "To understand Africa, you must understand a basic impulsive savagery that is greater than anything we 'civilized' people have encountered in two centuries" (Ruark 1955: Foreword).

Tellingly, Ruark's attitude to Africans comes out even more clearly in the foreword to his other novel, *Uhuru*. At the risk of being accused of over-quoting, this is what Ruark (1962: viii) says:

> Each native African has his own concept of '*Uhuru*'. For some it is a mythical description of a round-the-corner Utopia of slothful ease, of plentiful booze and an altogether delightfully dreamy state in which money grows on bushes and all human problems are ended. To the nomadic grazier it means endless flocks of lovely useless cattle and gorgeous land-ruining goats – with infinite vistas of lush pasturage, and water galore between two suns' march. To the ivory poacher it is an absence of game wardens and stuffy restrictive game laws. To the meat-eater it is limitless meat and a plentitude of free salt; to the drunkard a sea of honey beer; to the womani(s)er, a harem which stretches to the horizon. To the peasant African farmer, it is the white man's magically rich and loamy land which will certainly be his on the magic day of 'Uhuru', when the white man is driven from the continent and all the carefully nurtured soil reverts to the African. To the wilfully lawless *'Uhuru'* is a licence to rob and steal, to kill without punishment and to flout rules of decent human behaviour with impunity.

It is no wonder, then, that the key white characters in these novels act and speak the language of racial superiority as propounded by Ruark. Peter Mckenzie, the narrator in *Something of Value*, for example, warns the new arrivals in colonial Kenya in the following words:

> In the African make-up there is really no such thing as love, kindness, or gratitude, as we know them because they have lived all their lives, and their ancestors' lives, in an atmosphere of terror and violence. There is no proper 'love' between man and woman, because the woman is bought for goats and is

> used as a beast of burden. There is no gratitude, because it would never occur to them to give anything to anybody else, and so they have no way of appreciating kindness or gifts from others. They lie habitually, because to lie is the correct procedure, or else some enemy might find a way to do them damage if they tell the truth. They have no sensitivity about inflicting pain, or receiving pain, because their whole religion is based on blood and torture of animals and each other. They think, even the best of them, that nothing's funnier than a wounded animal or a crippled animal. It's a big joke. I don't even think that they themselves feel the pain the way we do (Ruark 1955: 202).

The portrayal of an African in negative terms is the norm in all colonial literature, as is the case in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson,* and so forth. Interestingly, phrases such as "something of value" and "heart of darkness" which are titles of well-known colonial novels by Robert Ruark and Joseph Conrad respectively, can be found in John Buchan's colonial novel, *Prester John (*Buchan [1910] 2009: ix, 108). In these novels, "imperialism was as much about imposing civilisation as it was about creating economic or political power, " (ibid.: vii-viii).

It is for this reason that Chinua Achebe decided to start writing. He says that while in secondary school he and his fellow pupils read books that had nothing to do with Africa but had everything to do with England – *Treasure Island*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, *The Prisoner of Zenda, David Copperfield,* etc. "These books were not about us, or people like us. Even stories like Buchan's, in which heroic white men battled and worsted repulsive natives, did not trouble us unduly at first. But it all added up to a wonderful preparation for the day we would be old enough to read between the lines and ask questions ..." (Achebe 2009: 21).

But after maturing mentally, Achebe realised that "these stories are not innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to possess you" (ibid.). That is when Achebe decided to be a fiction writer. In his own words, this is what the man himself says:

> At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised Mister Johnson) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned. Although I did not set about consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son (Achebe 1988: 25).

Clearly, then, Achebe's main reason for writing was to set the record straight, to balance the equation, because European, colonial and racist literature concentrated only on the negative aspects of Africa and Africans. Without exception, the underlying message in all colonial texts is that "all that was beneficial in Africa was European and all that was bad was African. … [The Europeans] bring prosperity and order while [the 'natives' represent the primal forces of darkness and barbarity," (Royle 2009: ix).

The British colonial experience in selected post-colonial literary texts

This article is informed by the realisation that colonialism "was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the new comers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history" (Loomba 1998: 2). It is also worth noting that "[n]owhere was independence won easily. In some colonies, it took armed struggle to bring it about; in others it took strikes, demonstrations and protest marches" (Lazarus 1990: 4). What this means is that some countries had a worse time of it than others (Keating 2012: 21).

In Nigeria, the British practised a colonial system of government called "indirect rule". This system maintained the power of local rulers, as long as they assisted the colonial administrators.

> "According to this system, chiefs, ranging from local headmen to powerful rulers, were confirmed in their locali(s)ed powers provided that they assisted the colonial authorities" (Knappert and Pearson 1976: 194). In a way, this system left the local people with some measure of autonomy, and the colonialist's hand was not too heavy on the colonised. Indeed, imperialists such as Frederick Lugard (Lord Lugard) are known to have boasted that the presence of whites in Africa "was the greatest blessing that Africa has ever known …

since the British presence stopped inter-tribal conflicts and opened up Africa's heart of darkness to civilising influences …" (Royle 2009:ix).

But the mistake must never be made to think that the British were angels during their colonisation of different parts of the world; they were not, as can be ascertained from some of their acts of brutality, such as the massacre of entire communities. In Nigeria, for example, the village of Abame is completely wiped out because the villagers had killed **ONE** (my emphasis) white missionary. The incident is narrated to Okonkwo and his uncle Uchendu by his long-time friend Obierika when he (Obierika) visits Okonkwo in exile in Mbanta. Just because only one man was killed, the whites lay out a grand plan to execute their revenge. On a day when the whole Abame clan had converged in their big market, three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market and killed everybody, "except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose *chi (*gods*)* were wide awake and brought them out of that market," (Achebe 1958: 97-99; Achebe 1964: 47).

But even with such brutality, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* have instances where the colonial experience makes one feel that the British were really not the worst colonisers. The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* states quite clearly that from the very beginning education and religion went hand in hand (Achebe 1958: 128).

In *Arrow of God*, the colonial government constructs a new road to connect two villages, Okperi and Umuaro. There is a budget for this, a "Vote for Capital Works" in each financial year (Achebe 1964: 75), although this year (that is the year in which the story is being narrated) it is already over-spent.

Ezeulu, the chief priest in *Arrow of God*, sends his son to a missionary school to be his "eye". In addition, the British missionaries also build a vocational centre, the Onitsha Industrial Mission, where trades such as carpentry are taught (Achebe 1964: 47). In *Things Fall Apart*, the missionaries build a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. The affable missionary, Mr

Brown, takes the trouble to go from family to family, begging people to send their children to his school. He tries very hard to show the villagers the benefits of formal education: for example, that the future will belong to people who have learnt to read and write, and so if Umuofians "[fail] to send their children to school, strangers [will] come from other places to rule them. They [can] already see that happening in the Native Court, where the D. C. [is] surrounded by strangers who [speak] his tongue. Most of these strangers [come] from the distant town of Umuru, on the bank of the Great River where the white man first went" (Achebe 1958: 128).

In the end, the school expands and produces wonderful results. Even adults, some of them thirty years old or more, join the school. After only a few months, one can become a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stay longer become teachers, and others become preachers and evangelists. New churches and new schools sprout everywhere. To crown it all, the British missionaries start a teacher-training college where they send Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who changes his name to Isaac.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo attends a mission school set up by the Church Missionary Society, and later on goes to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree in England, majoring in English. The British are deeply involved in the administration and running of schools, as demonstrated by Mr Jones, the Inspector of Schools (Achebe 1960: 58). There are Federal Scholarships that enable some of the high-fliers to go and study in Britain, and Elsie Mark is so desperate to be awarded this scholarship that she offers to sleep with Obi. This desperation is expressed in the words: "Please Mr Okonkwo, I'll do whatever you ask," (ibid.: 84). Clara, Obi's girlfriend, works in the General Hospital in Lagos, which has obviously been built by the out-going colonial rulers.

At the risk of being labelled an apologist for British colonialism, all these examples point to colonial experiences that portray the British form of colonialism in a positive light.

The German and Afrikaner colonial experience in selected post-colonial literary texts

In **Namibia**, by contrast, the colonial experience was really harsh. We see this through the eyes of John Ya-Otto and Peter Ekandgo's autobiographical novels, *Battlefront Namibia* and *The Jungle Fighter* respectively. This harsh treatment is perpetrated by whites, specifically Germans, Afrikaners and Dutchmen, on black people.

Generally, the whites abuse blacks in all sorts of ways. To begin with, the German and Afrikaner karakul sheep farmers in Southern Namibia ill-treat the shepherds. In spite of the fact that these farmers make fortunes from the wool produced by black shepherds, they pay the contract workers starvation wages. The shepherds have to live with the sheep all the year round, on very little food and clothing. They have no shelter from the icy wind, and some of them actually freeze to death. When the sheep go missing, the emaciated labourers, in their rags, are subjected to severe beating from the baas (Ya-Otto 1982: 7).

One of the most atrocious incidents of farm-labourer abuse is discovered by a SWAPO member in Otjiwarongo, the heartland of Boer farming where a farmer shoots and kills two of his contract labourers just before their eighteen-month contracts are up and their pay is due. Threatening to kill other workers as well, the farmer makes them cut up the dead bodies and dump them into the cauldron for cooking pig food. SWAPO has to hire a lawyer to force the police to investigate, and when the officers arrive at the farm the bodies have boiled down to the bones (ibid.: 59).

Ya-Otto himself endures perverted forms of torture when he is arrested and sent to Pretoria for interrogation. After under-going a barrage of insults, being called a "monkey", "fucking

terrorist", "bastard", "fucking kaffir", and so forth, he is brutally assaulted with fists, booted feet, sticks and rubber truncheons. Then he is tortured, first with cigarette burns, and then with 200 volts of electricity directed on his ears, nipples, and then on his penis. Later, one of the investigating officers spits into his mouth and forces him to swallow. This officer also tugs at his penis, shouting, "This is what you want your freedom for, to ram into white women" (ibid: 92 – 101).

Apart from being subjected to physical abuse, the blacks are also verbally abused throughout the novel; they are called "kaffirs", "monkeys", "boys", "slaves", "bastards" and all sorts of derogatory names. On their part, blacks too refer to all whites as "Boers".

Ya-Otto bluntly states that his novel deals with "the truth about South African colonialism and the brutal Boer regime" (ibid: 129). He mentions the "fruitless efforts to persuade the Boers to build schools and hospitals for [black] people" (ibid: 99). As a result, modern schools, hospitals, cars and trains [are] not part of [black people's] world (ibid: 10)

Peter Ekandjo refers to "the oppressed people of Namibia [seeking] political and diplomatic assistance [from some African countries] in their quest to liberate themselves from the racist South African regime" (2011: i). He then chronicles the

> "numerous battles fought by the Herero and Nama people against the invading colonial forces and their imperialist allies of European origin in 1904 ... [as well as the expropriation of] over 13 million hectares of fertile land [by] the white minority, while the black people, from whom land was taken, were forced to settle on infertile land where cultivation necessary for their survival was almost impossible due to the barren nature of the soil" (ibid.: ii).

Ekandjo stresses the point that the South African government once tried to annexe Namibia as its fifth province, but once this failed it instituted intensive suppression of the people of Namibia through the execution of legislations meant to enforce apartheid laws which promoted racial discrimination of black people who were treated as inferior, third-rate citizens (ibid.: xv).

It should be noted that the people of mixed race were one notch above blacks, "enjoying slightly better jobs, schools and housing" (Ya-Otto, 1982: 47).

The most brutal aspect of the apartheid regime is revealed in the harsh treatment meted to Ekandgo once he is arrested by the authorities after being betrayed by a presumed comrade. For seven days, he is subjected to unimaginable torture by Afrikaner security officials, especially at the hands of one, Captain Du Plessis, and his ally, Captain Chris Neel. They take Ekandjo to the torture chamber where they interrogate him for hours on end, interspersed with brutal beatings until he loses consciousness. On one occasion they cover his head with a wet cloth-like bag before applying electric shock to his fingers, ears, genitals, and wrists in order to inflict as much pain as possible. The torture goes on for minutes before they lash him with plastic pipes, and they beat him all over the body until he can no longer scream (Ekandjo 2011: 236). Luckily, Ekandjo finds a way to escape to freedom after the seven days of brutal toture have come to an end.

Conclusion

In one newspaper article, Joshua Keating opines: "It's hard to find countries that are nostalgic for colonialism, at least among those that were on the receiving end of it. At the same time, it's hard to escape the impression that some countries had a worse time of it than others" (Keating 2012: 21). This paper has shown that Chinua Achebe's fiction paints British colonialism in Nigeria in a more positive light than John Ya-Otto and Peter Ekandjo's autobiographical novels' depiction of German-Afrikaner hegemony in Namibia. As Keating rightly posits, the mistake must never be made to create the impression that colonialism was something that those who were colonised look at with nostalgia. It was one of the worst crimes against humanity.

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