

**The Last Tango in Congo:
Heart of Darkness, Tintin in the Congo and the Politics of
Eternal Deferral**

Sudev Pritam Basu

Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost,
Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host.
Hear how the demons chuckle and yell,
Cutting his hands off, down in Hell.

(Lindsay poem 193)

These lines are from the very disturbing social poem by the now forgotten singing-poet of the early twentieth century, the Illinois poet Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, published in 1914, called simply "The Congo".

Even at the height of the British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, with the world poised on the edge of the First World War and looking forward to a new era of technology and capitalism, Belgium under the rule of King Leopold the Second was exploiting the Congo in Africa at a rate and with a level of brutality seldom even evoked in battle and Empire hardened nations like Britain and Spain. A thoroughly pompous man who hardly ever related to the real world, he was instrumental in building a massive cult of the European science and technology as instrumental in colonising nations. He quotes – and it is this quotation that is forever carved into his memorial

The author is Associate Professor of English, Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati University. E-mail : sudevbasu@yahoo.co.in

monument in Arlon:

I have undertaken the work in Congo in the interest of civilization and for the good of Belgium.

As opposed to the very documented Holocaust of the Jews under Nazi reign with figures ranging anywhere between five and six million Jews; the Congo genocide crossed the ten million marks as early as the 1940s, keeping in mind that the Belgians ruled the state till as late as 1960. Belgium first exploited the Congo area between 1885 and 1908 as the Congo Free State which was the personal fiefdom of Leopold II bagged under the pseudo-philanthropic guise of colonial and humanitarian work. He used Henry Morton Stanley as his private agent and at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 he pushed through the Belgian desire to purify the Congo. The second phase of Belgian colonization was between 1908 and 1960 when the Belgian state (as opposed to the individual man King Leopold II) governed Congo under the rubric of the Belgian Congo. The Belgians mismanaged the entire region and used the colony to further its own European plans of beautification and filling up the personal and state coffers. The Katanga incident and the brutal slaying of the democratically elected Patrice Lumumba are part of the large scale of human rights violation and historical degradation at the hands of the white masters that the Congolese came to view as normal and common. The history of Congo brutality and physical and other torturous excesses – as late as the 1960s – attest to the very violent undercurrent in tribal and village level politics which take on national level genocide like this:

My eyes rested on the words “tortured him”. If you are at all squeamish don’t read on. If not, here are the hideous details. While Mulele was still alive, his eyes were gouged out, his genitals were ripped off, and his limbs were amputated one by one. (Hoare vii)

Although slavery was already a taboo word in the 1880s and 1890s in Europe and the colonies, Belgium and the Congo still had big secrets. Congo was and still remains the only colony claimed by a singular man – the so called philanthropic king Leopold the Second. This is Edmund Morel, a trusted Liverpool shipping company employee, stationed at Antwerp:

At the docks of the big port of Antwerp he sees his company’s ships arriving filled to the hatch covers with valuable cargoes of rubber and

ivory. But when they cast off their hawsers to steam back to the Congo, while military bands play on the pier and eager young men in uniform line the ships' rails, what they carry is mostly army officers, firearms, and ammunition. There is no trade going on here. Little or nothing is being exchanged for the rubber and ivory. As Morel watches these riches streaming to Europe with almost no goods being sent to Africa to pay for them, he realizes that there can be only one explanation for their source: slave labor. (Hochschild 2)

It was due to Morel's (and later Sir Roger Casement's, Arthurs Conan Doyle's and Mark Twain's) incessant clamour for bringing the international spotlight to bear upon atrocities being perpetuated in the Congo that the world can now sit in judgment to the greatest mass killing in modern history.

The history of Belgium and the Congo – interrelated through blood and tears on one side and untold riches being looted on the other – is also the surrogate story of Europe and its colonies. It was this trope of the colonial ramifications and its archetypal repetition that brought Chinua Achebe to question the Euro-centric philanthropy that was still in existent as recent as 1975 when the now famous “An Image of Africa” lecture was first delivered to international turmoil at the second Chancellor's Lecture at the University Of Massachusetts, Amherst. Locating racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and how it was responsible for the otherisation of Blackness and Africa, Achebe broke free from the Anglo-American traditions of postcolonial repression and predated Said by three short years.

According to Adam Hochschild in his ground breaking book *The Ghost of Leopold*, the title taken from Lindsay's poem of 1914, Conrad's depiction of the Congo was true in its African details. Hochschild goes one step further and identifies the man behind the Conrad's Kurtz: Léon Rom, a Belgian soldier with a sadistic streak who through sheer hard-work and savage brutality rose to the position of the District Commissioner of Matadi in the Congo Free State and later as head of the Force Publique Army. “The Museum's book had a half-page photo of Captain Léon Rom – but made no mention of his collection of severed heads, the gallows he erected in his front yard, or his role as a possible model for Conrad's murderous Mr. Kurtz.” (Hochschild 313)

It actually all began with the so-called great British Missionary Explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley. He was following in the celebrated footsteps of the legendary Scottish Medical Missionary and intrepid traveller Dr David Livingstone who was 'lost' in the dark depths of Africa and who was 'found' by Stanley with the now famous quote "Dr Livingstone, I presume?" This was during the height of the Scramble for Africa syndrome which made these two explorers political pawns in the larger game of Colony and Empire. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* begins and ends with the depiction of the unfathomable continuity of the river Thames in the heart of London. By extension these two rivers – Thames and Congo – are the binaries of the colonial worlds in collapse and conquest. Civilisations that grew up on the shores of these two rivers now mimic the human divides of Empire and Colony.

And the Thames not only encloses the action of the story which concerns that other great river, but is shown to share some characteristics of the Congo. The same kind of language is used to describe both – 'interminable waterway', 'dark', 'mournful gloom', 'flowed sombre', 'seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness' – but more important, the two rivers are drawn together by a direct comparison, a comparison of two periods of history – an early and a late colonization. 'And this also', says Marlow, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'...

This brilliant preamble to his story was suggested to Conrad, I believe, by a speech of Stanley. This explorer and colonizer was never far from the sidelines of Conrad's Congo experience both in terms of his exploits and of his ideals. The contrast between 'light' (Christian civilization) and 'darkness' (African barbarism) was very much part of Stanley's conception of the background against which he acted, the two images being taken, without question, at their face value. (Sherry 119-20)

This lengthy quotation is taken from the 1971 groundbreaking study of Conrad called *Conrad's Western World* by the great biographer Norman Sherry, more known as the author of the three volumes of Graham Greene's biography. The cover of the book is the ditto copy of the actual river steamer used by Marlow in the Congo, an archetype for all such steamers doing the daily business of travelling upstream in search of slaves, ivory and rubber. As late as the 1960s, in the violent birth-throes of several African and Caribbean national independence, Congo was embroiled in the

biter intertribal warfare and long lasting historical divisions that go back into the far reaches of time. Led and fed by the village medicine man and/or the shaman, these tribal oral traditions and culture – often violent and xenophobic in nature – had a terrible hold over all men, women and children even in the 1960s Africa. ‘Mad Mike’ Hoare – one of the most celebrated white mercenaries in Africa – in his detailed biography *Congo Mercenary* has this to say about the psycho-machinations of the tribal powers of persuasion and superstition:

It seems hard for the Western mind to appreciate that witchcraft and superstition have roots deep in the subconscious mentality of all Africans, educated or otherwise, and that a large proportion of their everyday life is governed by the witch-doctor and his mumbo-jumbo, but that this is so is an indisputable fact. Numerous cases are recorded where a Congolese has retired to his hut, fit and healthy a few minutes before, only to die in a matter of hours because his witch-doctor has pronounced this to be his inescapable fate. (Hoare 20)

The cunning witch-doctor in *Tintin in the Congo* (1931) sees Tintin as a rival in the powers of containment and control over the tribal population in the village. Both Tintin and the “juju-man”, as he is fearfully called, are equally at war with each other to impress and imprison these clueless illiterates. The medicine man uses mumbo-jumbo; Tintin uses western powers of technology and medicine. This very binary division and further essentialisation and simplification of the very hybrid space of colonial negotiations is what makes this popular graphic novel so full of the contemporary biases and prejudices of European assumptions of the colony and the colonial. Tintin in this graphic novel is seen as a Western conduit into African space. From the very beginning, he is loaded with Western superior assumptions and positions. Tintin keeps on firing at a series of antelopes in the assumption that there will be only one or two. But there will be a mountain of dead antelopes proving that the Western ideal erred on the side of too little when there was so much that the African colony had to give. It is this mother-ship – colony dichotomy that stirred Western desire and African colonization in the name of scientific, religious and technological scrutiny, conversion and superiority respectively.

Tintin in the Congo follows the colonial spirit to the maximum. The intrepid journalist in search of stories going to Africa; he takes a ship to cross the great divide.

It was this interplay with waterways and how they all tie up with the rise and fall of civilisations and man that *Heart of Darkness* proposes right at the beginning with the protagonist sitting right there surrounded by the trappings of the sea and sailing:

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. (Conrad 5)

Thus this extension made the Thames part of a larger network of waterways and rivers that brought wealth, news and exotica back Home for consumption by a hungry crowd of thrill seekers and morally uptight busybodies who thought that all things African were black and that Africa was a reductive term for a various number of plurality that lost its individuality under the conformist discourse of colonization. The African wilderness – like the Indian jungles teeming with tigers and other big game – represented the unconquerable ‘other’, an attempt by the incomprehensible phallic self to search and penetrate the heterosexual ‘other’. The latent sexuality of the African enterprise – with its secret history of organised rapes and hybrid children – is somewhat absent from the graphic novel. But in *Heart of Darkness* the sublime power of suggestion and the lure of the darkness shorn off its civilising restrictions, patterns and traditions posit a great cultural challenge for the absolute monarchical power that Leopold II and Kurtz had over the nation-state and its poor inhabitants. From a Foucauldian reading this is why these colonial spaces become the playing grounds and sites for flexing the muscles of powers of fantasy reading and narratives:

A tradition dating back to the eighteenth or nineteenth century has accustomed us to place absolute monarchic power on the side of the unlawful: arbitrariness, abuse, caprice, willfulness, privileges and exceptions, the traditional continuance of accomplished facts. (Foucault 87)

This location of the prime western figure against the black backdrop of colonial suzerainty and power display through western achievements – the heavy repeating elephant rifle, the gramophone, the movie camera, the heavy-duty magnet and the

wonder drug quinine – Tintin, like Leopold II and Kurtz, walks the thin line between the narrator *and* usurper of voices and hijacker of alibis. It is Tintin's voice that the tribal-folk follow, even when generating laughter and derision. In the infamous scene from the graphic novel when Tintin disposes instant European justice to two warring tribes men fighting over a western straw hat, he invokes the long tradition of the just ruler and benevolent despot beginning with Solomon and probably ending with the recently deceased King Leopold II. Tintin in this graphic novel is seen being treated at par with local royalty. Not only does he ride the sedan chair – a sure sign symbol of public pomp and glory, especially in the African hinterland – but even his dog is worshipped at par with white royalty. The laughter and derision is generated when one sees the black Congo King of the Babaorum holding a rolling pin instead of a scepter. The blacks in *Tintin in the Congo* desperately try to ape Western dress and traditions. To what extent this westernization had already gripped Africa in the 1930s can be seen when the anti-Babaorum king parades his pathetically ill equipped army using vestiges of western military dress and army marching formations. The desire of the periphery for the centre is seen so clearly in this panel. The tribes-people in the graphic novel wear cuffs and collars and hats whereby going naked in the main body: this essential cannibalisation of the sartorial politics reek of cultural displacement and appeasement policy.

The famed lion hunt in the graphic novel is collapsed on its head deliberately by showing the common mongrel Snowy – as an adjunct to European superiority – besting a lion and tearing off its tail. The analogy works in this way: the highest accolade that an African tribal male can boast of is the very masculine rite of passage whereby he kills a lion in single armed conflict. The legends and myths of lion-besting warriors are dime a dozen in the gamut of African studies. The latest book to make the best-selling list is the fascinating story of Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton in the cross-cultural spillover success *Facing the Lion: Growing Up Maasai on the African Savanna*:

I'm going to tell you the lion story. Where I live in northern Kenya, the lion is a symbol of bravery and pride. Lions have a special presence. If you kill a lion, you are respected by everyone. Other warriors even make up songs about how brave you are. So it is every warrior's dream to kill a lion at point or another. (Lekuton 1)

Thus even in 2005, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, lion and killing a

lion in single armed combat with traditional weapons is still seen as a sign of machismo and masculine posturing. This essential African tradition was then adapted and adopted by the whites both in Africa and Asia to devastating effect. The larger politics of locating a colonial site in hunting and big game shooting is outside the purview of this paper, but nonetheless one must admit that there is a series of animals that are killed in gruesome fashion by Tintin: alligators, snakes, elephants, chimpanzees and so on.

Works Cited:

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1899/1902. Calcutta: Radha Publishing House, 1992. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. 1976. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- Hergé (Georges Remi). *Tintin in the Congo (The Adventures of Tintin)*. 1930-31. London: Egmont, 2005 Print.
- Hoare, Mike. *Congo Mercenary*. 1967. Boulder, Colorado: Paladin, 2008. Print.
- Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. 1998. New York: Mariner, 1999. Print.
- Lindsay, Vachel. "The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race", in *New Poetry: An Anthology*. Eds. Monroe, Harriet and Alice Corbin Henderson. 1917. New York: Bartleby.com, 2002. <http://www.bartleby.com/265/193.html>. Accessed on 02 March 2014. Web.
- Lekuton, Joseph Lemasolai and Herman Viola. "Facing the Lion: Growing Up Maasai on the African Savanna." Washington D.C.: *National Geographic*, 2005. Print.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Western World*. 1971. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.