

Africa in the Eye of Colonialist Literature

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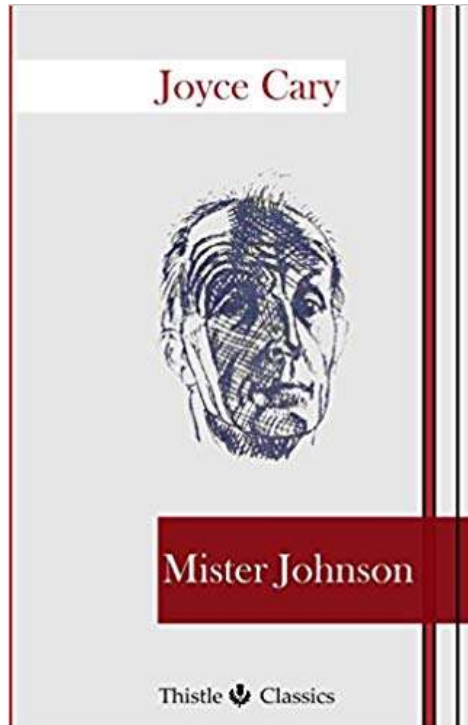
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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Mister-Johnson-Joyce-Cary/dp/1910670189>

Introduction

The journey of writings about Africa that started with the negative and derogatory depiction of Africa in the colonialist literature has been through several debates. These days it is referred as the single story of Africa. The present paper explores the colonial writers such as Joyce Cary, Sir M. Rider Haggard, and Joseph Conrad, etc. It also examines their depiction of the continent as well as its resulting reaction among the native writers of Africa.

Keywords and Phrases: Joyce Cary, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* – *The White Man’s Burden* – *Things Fall Apart* – *The Danger of a Single Story*, *Mister Johnson*, *King Solomon’s Mines*

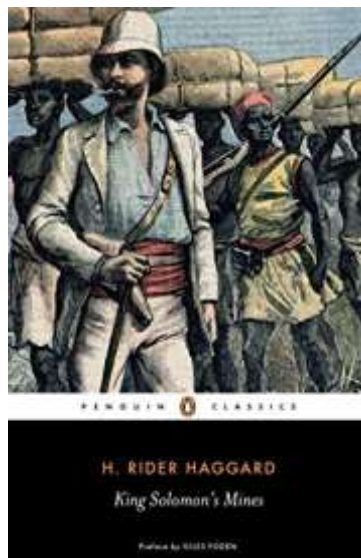
Joyce Cary

Joyce Cary, originally Arthur Joyce Lunel Cary, was a British colonial officer who had served in Nigeria. His intention was stereotypical to any colonial officer determined to bring order to the natives. Later on, he resigned and became a fulltime writer. He wrote many books like *Aissa Saved*, *An American Visitor*, *The African Witch*, *Castle Corner*, *Mister Johnson*, *Charley Is My Darling*, *A House of Children*, *The First Trilogy*, and *The Horse’s Mouth* etc. In all of these novels Cary wrote about the colonial tension, dichotomy of restraint and freedom as well as need of love and humanism. However, *Mister Johnson* remains the most discussed novel.

Most of the African scholars believe *Mister Johnson* to be an important novel in the beginning of Western Literature about the African Subcontinent. Mister Johnson, the protagonist is a young African working as a clerk in colonial administrative district office in Nigeria’s Fada district. Cary portrays him as one who has no clear idea of where he is going. Johnson is also found to be pretty graft as well as is guilty of theft. The novel reads, “Johnson walks up and down in the compound and every moment his walk becomes grander; it is like the walk of the royal guard, but a guard of poets fresh from a triumph of loyalty. Johnson slaps himself on the chest. ‘I belong for de King—I ‘gree for de King. I Mister Rudbeck’s frien’” [36]. According to Norman Rosten, “His life was full of both grandiose and real possibility. It is this possibility that endears him to us. Civilization – the rules of law, politics and prevailing morality – destroyed him.”

Sir Henry Rider Haggard

Sir Henry Rider Haggard was also an Englishman who had been to South Africa as a colonizer. Later on, returning home he took writing as his main occupation and wrote about his African experiences. He has written many novels like – *Dawn*, *The Witch’s Head*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Allen Quatermain*, *She*, and *Ayesha* etc. However, according to Onyeka Iwuchukwu, “*King Solomon’s Mines* is heavily influenced by his larger than life experiences he met in colonial Africa.” It is the first novel of African adventure published in English.



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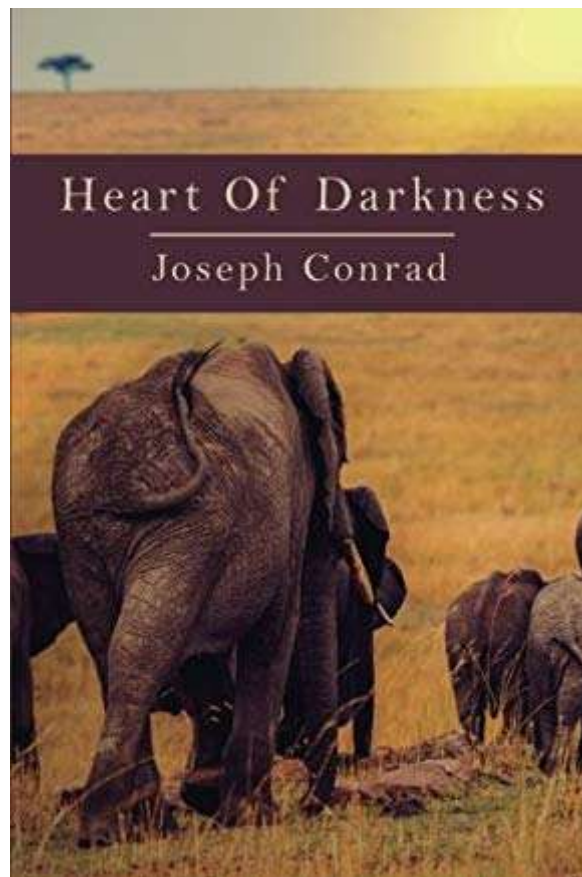
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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/s?k=King+Soloman%E2%80%99s+Mines&i=stripbooks-intl-ship&ref=nb_sb_noss

In the Introductory chapter, narrator reveals some of the reasons to write the story as, “Fourth reason and last: Because I’m going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it - except Foulata”. Whatever adventures it may be, it ignores the existence as well as the role of female Africans. Africa as the land of darkness, deserts, scarcity of water, place of death and loss of hope are some of the common scenes in the narrative of the novel.

Joseph Conrad



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Heart+of+Darkness&i=stripbooks-intl-ship&ref=nb_sb_noss_2

Joseph Conrad is regarded as one of the best novelists in English. He is best known for his novel *Heart of Darkness*. Among his other writings are – *Almayer’s Folly*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance*, *Victory*, *The Shadow Line*, *The Arrow of Gold*, *The Rescue*, and *The Rover* etc.

Heart of Darkness narrates a voyage up the Congo River into the Congo Free State in the so-called heart of Africa. Brutality of the colonialism and the superiority of the white man is the central theme of the novel. Africans in this novel are presented as mere objects. Marlow, the narrator refers to his helmsman (who is a native African) as a piece of machinery. Kurtz’s African mistress is portrayed at best a piece of statuary. Again, there are natives hired as the staff of the steamer whose intelligence goes unrecognized. The narrator describes Kurtz’s genesis as, “I am trying to account to

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myself for – for – Mr. Kurtz – for the shade of Mr. Kurtz. ... His mother was half-English; his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Mr. Kurtz” [45].

Conclusion

The colonialist literature perceives biased and uneven portraiture of the African society. It is evident that these novels present Africans and black people as people with little or no intelligence. This view of Africans as savages, uncivilized, naïve and brutal resulted into a sudden reaction among native writers of Africa. Chinua Achebe found *Mister Johnson* as superficial and reacted against it by writing *Things Fall Apart*, a seminal native African novel. Achebe says:

I know around '51, '52, I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel, set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture not only of the country but even of the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous then perhaps someone ought to look at this from the inside. (Cosmo Pieterse, 3-4)

In his famous essay 'Decolonising the Mind' Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, exposes the Politics of Language in African Literature and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity.

Thus, it is concluded that the colonial writings about Africa which began as the white man's burden to civilize the uncivilized and ended up into what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a contemporary Nigerian novelist, calls as the 'danger of a single story' about Africa. (Adichie)

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