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Quiet Flows the Congo: Literary Navigations through River Congo

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Abstract:

Africa's river Congo has stood witness to the sufferings endured by the African people under the institutions of slavery and colonisation. The Congo was the starting point of the transatlantic slave trade. And later in Europe's greedy 'scramble for Africa,' the Berlin Conference legitimized King Leopold II of Belgium's control over the river. In King Leopold's exploitation for ivory and wild rubber, Congo witnessed slavery, violence and death. Even in imperial discourses the river has been represented as dark. Joseph Conrad described it as "a place of darkness."

Representations of the river Congo in colonial discourses have been countered by writers like Chinua Achebe. There are also literary theorists such as Edward Said, Gyatri Spivak and Edward Soja who highlight the need to reassert and reclaim space. This paper presents Congo's flow through slavery and colonisation as represented in English writings.

Keywords: scramble for Africa, Berlin Conference, transatlantic slave trade, Middle Passage, other space, reassertion of space

...a place of darknessa mighty big river, that you could see
on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head
in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its
tail lost in the depths of the land.

- Joseph Conrad
Heart of Darkness

THEN
I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH
THE BLACK,
CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE WITH A
GOLDEN TRACK.

A Negro fairyland swung into view,
A minstrel river
Where dreams come true.

-Vachel Lindsay
The Congo

These two views of the river Congo, one seen on a map and the other experienced while travelling up the Congo, present the image of a river that has flowed through human sufferings under inhuman conditions imposed by the institutions of slavery and colonisation. Africa's river Congo has stood witness to the indescribable brutality suffered and endured by the African people in their encounter with the European world. It is ironical that the world's deepest river (750ft) should flow with stories of deeper pain. Literary journeys over the Congo navigate through stories of blood, fear and death.

African history from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century was a period marked by the horror of the transatlantic slave trade and the imperial occupation. In this tragic history, river Congo was the starting point of the Middle Passage – the long and painful journey across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas aboard slave ships.

The Middle Passage was a perilous journey where slave traders overcrowded the decks of ships with chained people, who faced merciless whipping, starvation and death. Robert Hayden in his poem *Middle Passage* describes the journey as a “voyage through death.” (*Hayden, Middle Passage, 1501*) The inhuman condition of the slave ships is described as:

... cargo of five hundred blacks and odd
for the barracoons of Florida:
That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there; (*Middle Passage: 1502*)

Death was preferred over this condition as Hayden writes:

...their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under. (*Middle Passage: 1501*)

Toni Morrison the African American writer who has given names and heartbeats to the anonymous people called slaves in her writings, recounts that there ‘were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo...that’s a wide river ... saying “We could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies.’ That’s like a log jam. A lot of people died. Half of them died on those ships.” (*Morrison, Interview*) The transatlantic slave trade was one where humans were not only traded along with gold and ivory, but very often exchanged for items such as textiles and utensils, degrading the value of human life and dignity. The horror and pain of this trade that took millions of Africans to the New World began in the sixteenth century and ended in the nineteenth century.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed appropriation of African territory by European powers in the ‘Scramble for Africa.’ In this greedy scramble, European

economic and political rivalries led to a redrawing of the map of Africa, where borders cut across traditional tribal boundaries, leading to traumatic experiences of civil wars in recent African history. The Berlin Conference (1884-85) allocated European powers 'spheres of influence' in Africa and provided the framework for further portioning of the continent.

The Berlin Conference legitimized King Leopold II of Belgium's control over the river Congo as well as the Congo basin. So when Britain ruled over the waves, here was a king who owned a river. Though the region came to be known as the Congo Free State, slavery prevailed and King Leopold's atrocities continued. In his exploitation for ivory and wild rubber, Congo witnessed slavery, violence and death and a draining away of Congo's natural resources.

Just as the people of Congo did not take part in the Berlin Conference and remained unaware of how their land and lives would be divided, they had no voice to protest the European construction of Africa as the Dark Continent – a distorted construction which reflected the darkness of the Europeans' ignorance of the African way of life. Africa's encounter with Europe went beyond territorial occupation to people and culture. In their forced administration of land and people, colonial and capitalist expansions, European ideologies and practices of racial supremacy and cultural superiority were imposed. Constructing Africa as the Dark Continent served to define European colonisers as harbingers of light. Leopold II, King of the Belgians had declared that to "open to civilisation the sole part of the globe... to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population" (*Hennessy, Congo, 13*) was a worthy crusade.

Joseph Conrad travelled through this part of the globe and witnessed excesses of economic exploitation, man's inhumanity to man and the plunder of the earth in the name of progress. The conquest of the earth here was a rush for the riches on both banks of the Congo, which was taken away with violence and murder. Conrad's *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* are both set on the Congo, but never explicitly stated. The river remains unnamed. In *An Outpost of Progress* it is part of a "vast and dark country" (*Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 5*) in a strange wilderness. The narration mentions the slave dealers and the ivory traders but nowhere is the beauty of the river described.

Even in *Heart of Darkness*, river Congo is represented as "the farthest point of navigation." (*Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 107*) it is a "place of darkness" (108) where the river was "fascinating – deadly" (110). To Conrad it is "almost featureless" (114) in a "God forsaken wilderness" (114) where the "merry dance of death and trade" (115) went on. On his journey up the "big river" (122) he saw "Six black men ... each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain" (116) and "strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed: a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory" (119). Amidst all these the "great river ... flowed broadly without a murmur" (129). To Conrad, "Going up that river was like travelling

back to the earliest beginnings of the world... The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert..." (137) Travelling "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (138) had the feeling of "wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (138). Here the "earth seemed unearthly" (139) like the "night of first ages" (139) leading to a "nowhere" (141). Congo remains a "grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessings" (176-177) leading "into the heart of an immense darkness" (187). Chinua Achebe in his essay "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*" calls Conrad a "thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe, *Hope and Impediments*, 11) for his representation of Africa and its people as "devoid of all recognizable humanity." (Achebe, *Hope and Impediments*, 12)

There have been theoretical debates by Edward Said, Gyatri Spivak and Edward Soja on the representations of geographical locations. Said's phrase "imaginative geography" (Said, *Orientalism*, 55) draws attention to the cultural politics of space and place, the geographical knowledge of the imperialists and their techniques of mapping. Spivak's term "worlding" (Spivak, *Critical Inquiry*, 756) studies the process by which colonialism defines the "other" space in its constructed colonial world. As identities of places are unfixed and multiple, cultural geographer Edward Soja highlights the need for "the reassertion of space." (Soja, *postmodern geographies*, 10)

Contestations of geographical space mapped by the myopic vision of the coloniser under the imperialist design have never drawn the complete picture. Mapping the Congo would require one to see the river as a site of cultural exchange, and not as one which enforces the colonial control over the lives of the colonised. Redefining this landscape would be to see this space as one that has been in existence long before its contact with the western world and to reassert that Congo has a history which dates back to antiquity. The river's construction as a dark landscape need not be read as its sole representation but only as the dominant western stereotyping of Africa during the period of colonial expansion.

Years before these debates on geographical and cultural locations, Vachel Lindsay wrote *The Congo*, a poem against racist violence perpetrated under Leopold II in Congo. Though an anti-racist, Lindsay was criticised for his racial stereotyping of African in the poem where he had written on what he called "*Their Basic Savagery*" in the first section of the poem. But he had devoted the rest of the poem subtitled "*A Study of the Negro Race*" to show "*Their Irrepressible High Spirits*" and "*The Hope of Their Religion*" Lindsay's river Congo is a:

A roaring, epic, rag-time tune.

From the mouth of the Congo

To the Mountains of the Moon. (Lindsay, *The Congo*, 4)

It flows through the "forest-nation" (5) past "the white-ants' hill of clay" (5) and "the marsh where the butterflies play" (5) to a "magic land" (7) where:

Coal-black maidens with pearls in their
hair,
Knee-skirts trimmed with the jessamine
sweet,
And bells on their ankles and little black
feet. (*The Congo*:8)

In Lindsay' Congo, the atrocities of Leopold II have come to an end as one can :

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. (*The Congo*: 4)

The river and the land now form a "Negro nation" (11), a "Congo paradise" (10):

Then along that river-bank, a thousand
miles,
The vine-snared trees fell down in files.
Pioneer angles cleared the way
For a Congo paradise ... (*The Congo*:10)

In this paradise "Redeemed were the forests, the beasts and/ the men" (11) and:

A million boats of the angels sailed
With oars of silver, and prows of blue
And silken pennants that the sun shone
through
'Twas a land transfigured, 'twas a new creation,
Oh, a singing wind swept the Negro nation; (*The Congo*: 11)

Thus the Congo flows with the blood of humanity sacrificed at the dark altar of the evil which the human race itself is capable of committing. Deep within the heart of the Congo lie buried stories of mindless bloodshed and unaccountable deaths, separated by years in history but connected through the pain. But just as the course of the river cannot be changed, nor can its history be erased. Only if one could tide over the dark phase of the river's history and go back to the time when, as Langston Hughes writes in his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*,

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. (*Hughes, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, 1254*)

one could recreate a time when the Congo ran softly ` Congo ran as soft as a lullaby, bringing sleep to people who were unaware of the nightmares that would bring in sleepless nights. Congo rushed down with the beats of the drums played by those, whose souls as mighty as the river would one day be sold on distant and unfamiliar shores.

Congo would then symbolise not the darkness of the soul but the triumph of the human spirit – a river which flows not only with blood but also with stories of survival, a river that does not lead to a dark world but to its mighty heart. Congo would then no

longer remain in the margins of colonial discourse but emerge as the centre of a rich and vibrant world.

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