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An Unfinished Business

Many research students certainly have unpleasant memories of their viva voce examination; however, I dare say very few can give as serious reasons as mine for doing so. I presented my DEA (mandatory research paper submitted by PhD students in Spain after two years of investigation) entitled “The ‘Other’ in the Caribbean Works of Jean Rhys” in 2003. In brief, its thesis is that the alienation, solitude, and unhappiness that characterise the protagonists of Rhys’s Caribbean works are attributable to their constant *othernisation* of other characters, that is, their tendency to view them through a series of stereotypes.

I based my analysis on an original approach advocating the transcendence of the duality of Self and Other called “Overleaping Postcolonial Reading” (OPR), and ended my 30-minute presentation by saying that one of the conclusions drawn from my research (the stereotypical perception of some characters by others hinders the establishment of satisfactory relationships between them) could even prove very useful to facilitate relationships between people of different races, origins, and cultural backgrounds worldwide. For example, it would be infinitely easier for many Africans to mingle and communicate with Westerners if they could stop assuming that all of them are exploiters; and many more Westerners would empathise with the

Africans, and start campaigning to abolish the unjust World Trade Organisation rules, if they could stop viewing them as lazy beings whose unique aim is to deprive them of their hard-won wealth.

I was certainly expecting a flow of tough questions. For instance, was Jean Rhys really suitable for a postcolonial analysis? Why was I so inclined to regard the duality of Self and Other as a necessarily negative thing? Why had I decided to view the Other as a stereotypical representation of *any* human being/character? Why not consider it a person/character used as a recipient of the undesirable aspects of the dominating Self, as prestigious postcolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said did? Was my OPR applicable to other writers or was it restricted to Rhys? I did not even rule out something as nasty as, “But who on earth do you think you are to conceive a new approach to literary texts?”

Though I was relieved by their extreme simplicity, the questions of the first two examiners disappointed me. They only revolved around the significance of female, black, and English characters in Rhys’s Caribbean works, and gave me the impression that I had been talking to a brick wall. Instead of asking questions, the last examiner made a series of derogatory remarks. He repeatedly declared that the major contribution of the concept of Other, the postcolonial studies, and my OPR to literary criticism was an “unprecedented waste of time.” I replied that long before postcolonial scholars, universally respected thinkers such as Hegel and Freud had used the notion of the Other in their works. I also said that in my view, the postcolonial approach and my OPR were no more a waste of time than the feminist, Marxist, historical, mythological, or any other interpretation. He reiterated his low opinion of everything related to postcolonialism and, after a short pause, added, “By the way, the ongoing Liberian civil war shows very well that to exterminate one

another, you black Africans have never needed the help of those whites you always tend to blame.”

For some seconds, I was tempted to tell him, “Read the history of Liberia and you will see how mistaken you are, stupid!” However, I thought immediately about a possible dreadful consequence of an outburst of anger (no DEA certificate, no authorisation to complete one’s PhD) and, like Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim, I committed an irremediable act of cowardice. I said to him that although I did not share his opinion, I respected it.

Neither the *Sobresaliente* (highest DEA mark) nor the flow of praises I received attenuated even slightly my dismay, disappointment, and anger. I had always sensed a distorted perception of black African issues on the part of ordinary Westerners, but I had never heard it so blatantly expressed by a highly educated individual. This sad episode prompted me to look more carefully at the portrayal of sub-Saharan Africa by contemporary Western intellectuals.

A year on, I am utterly convinced of the persistence of colonial myths of both black Africa and its inhabitants among the current Western intelligentsia. Whether their analysis focuses on its socio-political or economic situation, it is evident that for many, sub-Saharan Africa remains, as Chinua Achebe put it almost thirty years ago, “the ‘other world,’ the antithesis of [the West] and therefore of civilisation”¹ that needs Western colonial enlightenment. There is a widespread belief that the misery, economic difficulties, and wars that ravage many parts of this region today are attributable to the incapacity of black Africans to rule themselves, rather than to extremely appalling historical circumstances.

Nobody expresses this view more openly than Niall Ferguson, professor of History at New York University. One would have expected such a well-read scholar

to acknowledge unequivocally the direct link between Western colonial misdeeds in Africa and the lamentable state of many African nations nowadays. Far from doing so, he declares that “the world needs an effective liberal empire,” laments that the USA, “the best candidate for the job,” has a “mere 37,500” citizens living in Africa, and cites the “rapid growth of per capita in the world’s two most populous countries, China and India” to prove the effectiveness of the American-promoted globalisation.² I do not believe that nations must necessarily be overpopulated to achieve a rapid economic development. However, I find it very telling that Ferguson seems unaware that a formula considered relatively successful in India and China might be deemed a complete failure in such an underpopulated continent as Africa.

To be fair to Ferguson, his aim is not to carry out an exhaustive study of Chinese, Indian, and African economies; he just wants to urge the Americans to take up the white man’s burden. Far from weakening my criticism of him, this rather strengthens it. For he, like all the other apologists of the recolonisation of black Africa in particular,³ compares it with countries in which socio-historical circumstances are completely different. Only a person with dishonest intentions would argue that black African leaders’ misrule and corruption are the major factor responsible for the current economic backwardness of their countries. Ferguson knows full well that these practices have been, and are still, widespread among Indian and Chinese rulers. He does not want to admit that, unlike the Chinese and the Indians, black Africans have been severely crippled by more than three centuries of slave trade and decades of particularly brutal Western colonisation and neo-colonisation.

Ferguson is reluctant to highlight the negative impact of Western actions on contemporary Africa because he knows that this could ruin his argument that Western imperialism was, and can still be, a force for good. Though I am a passionate defender

of many modern Western values such as democracy and sexual equality, I take issue with Ferguson because he is as guilty of a dehumanising arrogance as were the slave-owners and nineteenth-century Western imperialists (and all imperialists, of course). He does not regard the Africans and all the people who, in his opinion, could benefit from American colonisation, as human beings capable of deciding and doing what is good for them. He might not be a slavery supporter, but it was the slave-owners' conviction that only slavery was good for some individuals that made them commit all kinds of atrocities against their fellow humans. He might not want to admit it, but it is his Western ancestors' inhumane decision to disregard the natives' wishes, and group them like cattle into artificial states, that explains why so many African countries are currently torn apart by bloody civil wars.

The arbitrary delimitation of their countries' frontiers is no less than a permanent catastrophe for almost all sub-Saharan. In many states, the forced co-existence of various people lacking the ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic homogeneity often found in other territories subjected to Western colonisation will remain a potential incendiary bomb for generations. Worse, in several countries, Western imperialists have blatantly favoured some groups over others, thus creating an explosive climate of hatred. This was, for instance, the case in Liberia and Rwanda. In the former, the shameful mistreatment of African Liberians by African-American Liberians was actively supported by the USA for over a century; in the latter, the Tutsis were viewed and treated as superior to the Hutus by the German and Belgian colonisers. Only the development of a common sense of national identity is likely to secure lasting peace and political stability in many sub-Saharan states. I am sure Ferguson's intimate knowledge of the blood-soaked history of Great Britain will

make him agree with me that this is an extremely slow process that no “liberal” empire can accelerate.

Present-day calls for Western recolonisation of sub-Saharan Africa in order to stop civil wars echo the main pretext given by nineteenth-century imperialists to colonise this region: the need to put an end to “African savages’ tribal wars.” Ferguson and his fellow neo-imperialists know full well that no foreign colonisers have compelled Westerners to cease centuries of mutual wars. Yet, their racism prevents them from acknowledging that with time and genuine political autonomy, all black Africans will achieve peace and stability too.

The racism of Western neo-imperialists is mixed with sadistic hypocrisy when they mention the need to eradicate poverty in sub-Saharan Africa as an excuse for recolonising it. They know as well as Kamran Kousari that, “behind the poverty trap in Africa lies a deep-rooted commodity trap” set up by the developed nations,

who have been extending a very visible hand to their own farmers through huge subsidies and market barriers to deflect the adverse impact of price movements, even as they have argued against similar instruments to protect far harder-hit rural communities in the developing world.⁴

Instead of advocating the abolition of these immoral subsidies and market barriers, or even the compensation of the ruined African farmers, Ferguson blames African leaders’ incompetence and corruption, and recommends the establishment of a “liberal” American empire to remedy this state of affairs.

Only those sub-Saharans suffering from chronic insincerity can even slightly deny the existence of widespread corruption in their countries. I remember being booed and called traitor by my fellow Cameroonians at a symposium in Yaounde some months ago, when I drew an analogy between present-day Cameroon and 1970s

Italy. If he were not so blinded by his imperialistic bias, Ferguson would find it neither surprising nor peculiar that in states created about four decades ago, people often lack the patriotic consciousness necessary to subordinate the interests of their own communities to those of the entire nation. There is no doubt that black Africans have a lot to gain from the elimination or, at least, reduction of corruption in their own countries. Time, not Western recolonisation, will inevitably enable them to achieve it. However, the part played by corruption in the current poverty-stricken condition of most sub-Saharan states is derisory in comparison with that played by the unfair World Trade Organisation policies. Black Africans, of whom an overwhelming majority are small farmers, suffer almost exclusively from the drastic loss of income triggered by the rich countries' monstrous greed.

Ferguson, like his forefathers, is totally convinced that he knows what is good for black Africans, and wants Westerners to use brutal force and any other means necessary to give it to them. He cites the reconstruction of Japan and Germany after 1945 to prove that American colonisation could also be successful in other countries, including the sub-Saharan ones, if the Americans were less reluctant to settle abroad and sustain a long-term imperialistic commitment. Once more, Ferguson overlooks the specificity of black African nations' socio-historical background. Unlike the sub-Saharan, the German and Japanese peoples were powerful, aware of the offensive role played by their defeated leaders in the Second World War, skilled and, above all, willing to embrace the socio-economic reforms prescribed by the victorious Americans as the only way of recovering their shattered national pride. Furthermore, while the Americans were eager to boost the economic development of Germany and Japan because of their strategic importance in the fight against communism, they, like the previous Western imperialists, have never attempted to encourage the

transformation of African states into anything other than suppliers of cheap natural resources. As Julius O. Ihonvbere puts it in his excellent *Africa and the New World Order*,

The truth of the matter is that the state in Africa was never structured or composed by imperialism to promote growth, development, peace, stability, harmony, or law and order. It was structured to continue the imperialist project of class domination, exploitation, and elite collaboration with foreign capital as part of the international capitalist order. In this project the African state has been a huge success.⁵

In other words, the appalling situation of most African states nowadays is the logical consequence of Western colonisation by proxy of Africa. As a stout supporter of Western imperialism, Niall Ferguson should rejoice because the West has never lost its hold on this continent. Far from tightening it, the direct recolonisation he recommends might break it altogether for three main reasons: the socio-cultural transformation of black Africa, Western racism towards black Africans, and, above all, the emergence of new economic powers.

The division of sub-Saharan into myriads of more or less antagonistic ethnic groups, their linguistic heterogeneity, their perverse Christianisation, and the awe-inspiring military superiority and strangeness of the white man ensured a relatively smooth colonisation of black Africa in the nineteenth century. At the present time, although the loyalty of most of them still lies primarily with their ethnic communities, the citizens of each sub-Saharan state are likely to unite and defend their nation—a common entity they did not have previously—against any Western invasion. Unlike in the nineteenth century, they are now able to communicate with each other. They often do so in the language of their former Western colonisers, yes, but this is no less than a permanent Pyrrhic victory for the imperialists.

Despite their Christianisation, most contemporary black Africans can no longer be forced into submission by the fallacy that as children of Ham, they are bound to be the whites' slaves forever. On the contrary, they are more likely to misuse Christianity in order to harass Western neo-imperialists. For instance, there are currently many warlords in Ivory Coast claiming that Jesus Christ has ordered them to kill or oust all Frenchmen and women, allegedly, the instigators of the civil war.

In the past, the incomprehensible military superiority of Westerners led almost all black Africans to regard those "ghost-like" beings as immortal gods. Nowadays, they tend to view them as mere human beings who, despite their military might, can be killed or even defeated by former colonised peoples such as the Vietnamese or Somalis. They certainly admire their technological supremacy and economic prosperity. Nevertheless, they rightly attribute them to a progressive evolution achievable by all humans.

Ferguson probably disregards or fails to see the intrinsic racism of his contention that a superpower such as United States should "do a great deal to impose its preferred values on less technologically advanced societies."⁶ In fact, he implies that the people who possess the world's most successful economy are superior to those whose economy is less successful. Why else would he condone the forced imposition of American and, therefore, Western values on "less technologically advanced societies"? The unavoidable consequence of this pernicious attitude is the dehumanising arrogance mentioned earlier. Western imperialists, utterly convinced of their racial, intellectual, and moral superiority in comparison with non-Westerners, often treat them like despicable sub-humans whose lives and dignity are worthless. In doing so, they generally tend to transform both themselves and the people subjected to their domination into insensitive beasts capable of committing the most barbaric acts.

Anybody who doubts this should take a close look at everything that has happened in Iraq since its invasion by the Americans and their allies in March 2003.

The argument that despite its numerous drawbacks, colonisation “is *good* for colonisers and colonised,” previously very effective in winning the support of Western masses, can no longer be so nowadays—not because they are less racist than their forefathers, as the current popularity of Niall Ferguson demonstrates, but because of the impact of modern media. Unlike their ancestors, present-day Western imperialists can no longer conceal their worst imperialistic atrocities from the great majority of Westerners and non-Westerners, and this will always tend to erode popular support for their actions. For instance, how many Americans can still say with pride and confidence, “America always does the right thing” after watching the infamous Abu Ghraib images? How many Iraqis still regard the Americans as godsend liberators?

Like the 1940s Western colonisers who used to ask the sub-Saharan fighting for independence why they were rebelling against the persons who had made them wear proper clothes instead of ridiculous loincloths, neo-imperialists such as Niall Ferguson can neither imagine nor believe that black Africans might value freedom and self-respect more than anything Westerners have to offer. “What sort of freedom and self-respect can people living on a daily income of 50p per person have?” they might ask with scorn.

I could answer this question by referring to my native country. But I will not do so. For Cameroon is usually regarded by many Western neo-imperialists as one of the few “relatively prosperous and peaceful sub-Saharan nations where black African incompetence and barbarity have yet to manifest themselves fully.” I could also take the case of Somalia. But I will not, as it would be very easy for the likes of Ferguson

to argue that it was America's lack of genuine imperialistic commitment that led to the early 1990s debacle.

I will advise Ferguson to imitate his forefathers and go on an exploratory trip in one of the territories he might want to recolonise, for example, Mali. In theory, this country is ideal for anybody advocating the intervention of "liberal" imperialists in "less technologically advanced societies." It is one of the world's poorest nations; many of its inhabitants subsist on foreign aid; several of its presidents have been toppled by military coups and, despite the adoption of democracy about ten years ago, nobody can guarantee that this will never happen again.

If he were to follow my advice, Ferguson would be received at Bamako, the capital, and other major Malian cities, by cheerful and hospitable officials. They would smile while listening to him, even while he was criticising their mismanagement of their country's affairs in general, and its economy in particular. Then, still smiling, they would reply that although they have made mistakes like all human beings, they have followed almost all the drastic prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Finally, they would suddenly stop smiling and tell him, "If you really want to help us and win our trust and respect, white man, ask your brothers and sisters to do four important things:

1. Eliminate all the agriculture subsidies and other dishonest policies that have proved disastrous for our economy.
2. Compensate us for the slave trade and exploitative colonisation, the great destroyers of our societies—far from us the idea of denying the involvement of many of our ancestors in these shameful practices, but it is evident that they have benefited you much more.

3. Acknowledge that imperialism is an abomination that all human beings should reject and fight tooth and nail.
4. And stop forcing us to pay back the crippling debts contracted by our corrupt Western-backed predecessors. Unless you Westerners do all this, we will always suspect that rather than improve our lot, you only want to enslave us and, consequently, we will always be prepared to do the Samory Touré⁷ whenever you decide to come back.”

Ferguson would probably refuse to believe that those officials were expressing the feelings of the vast majority of the Malian people, and would want to speak to the millions of poverty-stricken villagers. Full of confidence, he would tell them that the forthcoming Western “liberal” empire would free them from their corrupt and incapable leaders, and bring them, among many other things, economic prosperity, justice, and genuine democracy. Some villagers would ask him to show that he deserves their respect, for example, by accepting to be circumcised (if he is not) or engaging in single combat with the strongest males of their community. Others would tell him that before setting foot in Mali, Westerners should force their Israeli allies to stop oppressing their Muslim brothers, the Palestinians. Some others would declare that as proud descendants of Mansa Musa, Sunni Ali,⁸ and many other famous kings, they would rather be killed than let Westerners, who show only contempt for their ancestral values, rule their fatherland.

A substantial number of Malian villagers would even want to flog Ferguson in public for questioning the integrity and competence of their beloved president, Amadou Toumani Touré.⁹ He would give them a contemptuous look, and they would tell him, “White man, we know you consider us less intelligent and competent than you because we are infinitely poorer. That does not surprise us. You are just showing

us what a worthy child of your prejudiced and racist forefathers you are. As for us, we have the past glory of our ancestors to remind us that we are neither half-witted nor lazy, just victims of extremely adverse historical circumstances; and no matter what you racists say, we are very confident that we will overcome them in the future. We are certainly aware that you think we lack dignity because so many of us receive foreign aid. But we do not share this opinion. We see no shame in accepting our fellow humans' help because, if they were suffering and we were in a position to offer assistance, we would not hesitate to do so. Furthermore, we would consider ourselves despicable scum if, instead of offering them genuine help, we were using their misery as a pretext to enslave and deprive them of all human dignity. This is exactly what you are trying to do with us now." Ferguson would leave Mali even more convinced that the only way to bring black Africans to reason would be to use brutal force.

In addition to all the problems mentioned earlier, Western supporters of the forced recolonisation of black Africa will have to face the competence of new economic powers such as China and India in the near future. Many black Africans, utterly disillusioned with Westerners, are increasingly willing to distance themselves from the West and develop closer ties with economically successful Asian nations. They certainly know that neither China nor India nor even a coalition of the most powerful Asian states could protect them in the case of a Western military invasion. But thanks to the humiliating experiences of Westerners in countries such as Algeria, Vietnam, Somalia, and, almost certainly, Iraq, they are now fully aware of the limitations of the West's military superiority.

Furthermore, all sub-Saharan leaders know that they have a very effective weapon to stir up their subjects against Westerners: the cry, "Down with the descendants of land-robbers and slave-owners and traders!" The effectiveness of this

cry explains why Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast are still in power despite their odious flaws. Unfortunately, present-day calls for Western recolonisation of black Africa do nothing to lessen it.

Instead of advocating the establishment of a Western “liberal” empire in sub-Saharan Africa, a venture bound to be disastrous and bloody, Ferguson should advise Westerners to try and win the trust of the sub-Saharanans by treating them with justice and respect. If they persist in mistreating and scorning them as they have always done, nothing, not even brutal force, will prevent them from turning their back on the West and looking Eastwards.¹⁰ Nevertheless, given that most Easterners’ perception of sub-Saharan Africa and its people comes from their former Western colonisers, it is evident that for black Africans, the fight against colonial prejudices will remain an unfinished business for centuries.

Notes

¹ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), 2.

² Niall Ferguson, “Yankee, Don’t Go Home,” *Times Weekend Review*, 24 April 2004: 10. “In short, what the British Empire proved is that empire is a form of international government that can work—and not just for the benefit of the ruling power,” Ferguson also wrote in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 362.

³ White Africa, usually viewed as part of the Middle East—the recolonisation of which is also recommended by Ferguson—is discussed at length in my book *WMD: The Weapons of My Disappointment* (Insch, Scotland: Lipstick Publishing, 2004).

⁴ Kamran Kousari, “Deep-Rooted Commodity Trap Lies behind Africa’s Poverty,” *Guardian* 15 March 2004: 25.

⁵ Julius O. Ihonybere, *Africa and the New World Order* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 5. The constant formation, armament and financial support of black African warring factions by Westerners is widely discussed in this book.

⁶ Ferguson, *Empire*, 367.

⁷ Samory Touré (1830-1904), ruler of, among many other territories, the south of present-day Mali, offered a fierce resistance to the French invaders.

⁸ Mansa Musa, king of the Mali empire from 1312 to 1337, and Sunni Ali, king of Songhay (the empire that replaced the Mali) from 1464 to 1492, enjoyed worldwide fame and respect. I quote the *THW* because, unlike me, it cannot easily be dismissed as biased:

A number of African kings, among them Mansa Musa and Sunni Ali (of Songhay), enjoyed renown throughout Islam and Christendom for their wealth, brilliance and the

artistic achievements of their subjects. Their capitals were large walled cities with many mosques and at least two, Timbuktu and Jenne, had universities that attracted scholars and poets from far wide.

(*Times History of the World*, 1999 ed.), 140.

⁹ In 1991, lieutenant-colonel Touré led a successful coup against the cruel dictator Moussa Traoré. But he ceded power to a civilian, thus allowing the subsequent democratisation of the Republic of Mali. It was only when he was democratically elected in May 2002 that he became president. He is as popular with his compatriots as Nelson Mandela with the South Africans.

¹⁰ And that is only the most optimistic scenario. For, as I argue in *WMD: The Weapons of My Disappointment*, there is a real risk that an aversion to the West like that of the Middle East will develop in sub-Saharan Africa.