



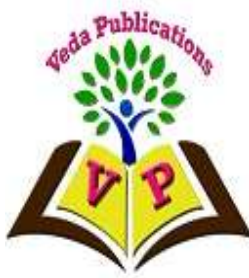
## READING COMICS: A POST-COLONIAL REVIEW OF *TINTIN IN THE CONGO*

Dr. Sanghamitra Ganguly

(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maheshtala College (Affiliated to the University of Calcutta))

E-mail: [ganguly.sanghamitra@gmail.com](mailto:ganguly.sanghamitra@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT



Comics are a medium primarily meant for entertainment. However, there are some comics that have become controversial for their content. One such album is Herge's *Tintin in the Congo* which has attracted criticisms for being racist and pro-imperialist, so much so that it has been banned from the children's sections in book-stores in Britain and in the USA it is yet to be published. There are reasons for this discontent among the post-colonial readers, for the book abounds in imagery and language demeaning to the Africans and their culture. At the same time we should keep in mind that each artistic output is a product of its time and reflects contemporary mindset. Written in 1930-31 in the heydays of European colonialism, *Tintin in the Congo* is similarly influenced by the popular opinions of the time and deserves to be treated in its socio-political and historical context as well.

**Keywords:** *Comics, Tintin, Imperialism, Post-colonialism, Ethnocentricity.*

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For long, comic strips were relegated to a kind of low-brow art compared to the high-brow art of print literature. But since the 1990s, this attitude has changed among the literati. Comics are now everywhere, filling bookshelves and multiplex screens with brilliant, innovative work, shaping the ideas and images of contemporary culture, and hence begging a more serious re-evaluation. Depending on the definition of the term, the origin of comics can be traced back to the fifteenth century Europe. However, today's form of comics, with the use of panels and speech balloons, as well as the term *comics* itself, goes back to the nineteenth century. Will Eisner in his *Graphic Storytelling* (1990) defines comics as "the printed arrangement of art and balloons in sequence, particularly in comic books" (Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling* 6). In his earlier *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) Eisner had described the technique and structure of comics as *sequential art*, "the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* 5). Comics as sequential art emphasizes the pictorial representation of a narrative, where pictures do not just show the story but are part of the telling. In *Understanding Comics* (1993) Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9), thus excluding cartoon from the purview. In all these definitions the cognitive value of comics has been repeatedly stressed, along with the fact that when we subject comics to any kind of literary or cultural analysis, both the pictures and the words have to be taken into account. The commonest forms of printed comics available to us today are the comic strips in newspapers and magazines, and longer comic stories in comic books and graphic novels. The comics not only have a great entertainment value but also act as a shaping influence on the mind of its readers, both children and adults. They are a valuable part of popular culture, and are being taken up for various kinds of readings.

There are some differences as well as similarities in the treatments of the subaltern and the dispossessed in the comics. We should remember

that the term "post-colonialism" compresses diverse eras and regions of colonialism and imperialism, individual struggles for decolonization, subsequent regimes of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, and a range of post-World War II movements of exile, immigration, and diaspora into a collective critical entity that effectively homogenizes differences of history and geography, place and politics. Hence it would be wrong to offer a generalization based on a single reading of a particular comic album. Generally the medium of comics has been used realistically, yet the "other" has usually been stereotyped. Comics dealing with the portrayal of Africans as simian-like savages abound. There was till recently no black superhero in the big-name books because most of the iconic heroes in existence today were created between the 1930s and the 1960s, when black characters were taboo or poor caricatures at best. Superheroes still tended to be white and male. Before World War II, minority ethnic groups made very few appearances in comic books. Servile sidekicks, such as Mandrake the Magician's Lothar and the Spirit's Ebony, and black additions to the casts of "Peanuts", "Beetle Bailey" and "Doodles" can be mentioned in this context. When they did show up, they tended to be grammatically challenged and roughly drawn. For example, Lothar, Prince of the Seven Sons, who was the first black character to appear in a syndicated comic, initially appeared with big lips and a Tarzan-style outfit barely covering his modesty. He was an illiterate strongman dressed in animal skins who provided brawn to compliment Mandrake's brain on their adventures. Black characters had names like Sunshine, Snowflake, Sunny Boy Sam, Whitewash Jones and Ebony White, and were usually comic foils, ignorant natives, brutal savages or cannibals. The 40s war comic "Young Allies" featured Whitewash who due to his inefficiency constantly fell prey to Axis forces providing the Young Allies with a "hapless victim" to rescue. Ebony White was another caricature whose exaggerated features and dialect provided comic relief. In one Mickey Mouse strip, the black cannibals wore ridiculous rings in their noses and ears, and bones were woven in their hair. Readers would barely come across a white character being suppressed by a character who was not white, except



as a temporary inversion of the natural order of things that the story showed being put right, as frequently found in the jungle comics such as *Phantom* in which the white jungle lord punched the faces of his African challengers to maintain order in their own realm. Different and subordinate groups were not merely described, they were debased and degraded.

*Tintin in the Congo* fits in right here for being too patronizing towards the Africans. But to understand the representation of the African people here, it first needs to be put into its historical context. The second wave of European imperialism began in the nineteenth century with the colonization of Africa. Traditional imperial powers like France and Britain, as well as emerging colonial powers such as Belgium under King Leopold II, engaged in a fierce competition to grab the resources and labour of the land. As with the previous colonial wave in the sixteenth century, heightened colonial ideology, economic pursuits and sheer greed aided by advancements in technology gave rise to this new imperialism. Equally important in the case of European imperialism in Africa were the current European attitudes and ideals of both race and civilization. As Adam Hochschild notes in *King Leopold's Ghost*, while European audiences reacted against the horrific atrocities that occurred due to imperialism, they supported, not rejected, imperialism. Their response was shaped by popular culture and mainstream media upholding European supremacy and the divine mission to civilize the dark-skinned peoples. Support for imperialism was further garnered by explorers glorifying European conquests and withholding information of the damages performed during these conquests. Greed and disregard for human life were masked by lies of philanthropy. Indeed, both popular culture and media advanced the cause of imperialism through a collective process of denial and forgetting.

This feature can be termed a form of Ethnocentrism which, according to Wikipedia, is the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture. For the idea of colonization to be made acceptable and meaningful to the European public, who at the time were heavily

steeped in prejudices, it was necessary to construct a prototype identity of colonized peoples. This led to the writing of Hergé's *Tintin in the Congo*. Commissioned by the editor of Hergé's magazine *The Little Twentieth*, it was written ostensibly to encourage the colonial and missionary spirit of the Belgian people. The fact that *Tintin in the Congo* is a comic book lightens the theme of colonization in the minds of readers. Presented as an easy, enjoyable read, *Tintin in the Congo* shifts focus away from the evils of imperialism in the Congo. We are inclined to laugh at Tintin's endeavours. Africans are drawn as monkeys and animals are personified, given the ability to feel and speak. In this comical piece, logic is defied. For example, Tintin is able to humorously escape and survive multiple attacks from lions and crocodiles. The comic book serves as an alluring and funny yet inaccurate source of information of life in the Congo under Belgian rule. Through the characterization of Tintin as a young boy, European colonizers and explorers are portrayed as good, innocent and pure in their intentions. Despite wielding a gun, Tintin never actually murders another human being. Similarly, we never witness Tintin physically enslave Africans. Rather, they appear throughout his journey unchained, free and willingly listening to his orders. The Congolese citizens, on the other hand, are drawn as simple and infantile, basing their whole system of beliefs on what they are told by the witch doctor, and then by "dat good boy Tintin". Scenes like Tintin as a European telling a group of Congolese school children how they should learn about their fatherland, Belgium, are disturbing to read. Another such example is the scene showing a Congolese woman bowing before Tintin, saying: "White man very great. White mister is big juju man". Written in an era when the Congo – and indeed the continent of Africa – were seen as places of empire-building legitimate and loot of natural resource, with dark-skinned natives who were just there to be reined in and used for manual labour, this album cannot be held accountable for the beliefs of an era, but it is hard to overlook these panels. *Tintin in the Congo* (1930-31) abound in prejudices and stereotypes. Written during the heyday of European imperialism when the Congo was under Belgian rule from 1876 to 1960, Tintin is crowned the king of an



African village because he is "a good white man", and even Snowy, his dog, is revered by the villagers. Ironically, as his name suggests, Snowy is pristine white in colour. The story shows Tintin roaming around the African countryside and spreading sweetness and light, emphasizing the necessity of the contribution of Europeans in their civilizing mission in the Congo. Crude racial stereotyping abounds, with the local people portrayed as confused and backward savages. The individuality of the African characters is erased, a complain Chinua Achebe made about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, though unlike *Tintin in the Congo* it showed the savagery of the colonial activities in the Belgian Congo. The book celebrates the ideals of Western Imperialism in its portrayal of Tintin, presuming imperialism to include a civilizing mission of the indigenous peoples through technical progress and the spread of Christianity. The image of the gentle old missionary who saves him from African wildlife is almost saintly and the school he sets up for the local children also has a great importance in the colonial scheme of things. It is an all-familiar trope in the colonial context, especially since such missions had a high importance in the process of Christianization of Africa. The album hence is a work of propaganda, even more than of "colonialism", for Belgian missionary work in the Congo, a representative of which keeps saving Tintin's life in repeated preposterous ways: first by killing a half dozen crocodiles with a rifle, then rescuing him from a roaring waterfall, seemingly unconstrained by his old age. However, though Congo was the victim of the worst colonial atrocities during its occupation by Belgium, no evidence of such abuse on the African people or any aggression from the West is represented in *Tintin in the Congo*, except the acts of gangsters in the pay of Al Capone. If the reading today from the album makes the reader feel a deep unease (even in its new version), one of the reasons might be the transposition of the colonial clichés, the collective imagery conveyed in a simplistic way: Africa is a vast paradise belonging to the pre-civilization era, land of adventure for the whites, land populated by uneducated individuals slowly being educated in the ways of Western Christian culture. The West was convinced that the black-skinned were sub-human, and hence were intellectually and

morally inferior to the white men. Collective representation of the times shows blacks to be totally incompetent, lazy, and almost incapable of speaking coherently without distorting language. Same is the case in *Tintin in the Congo*. Contemporary critics branded Hergé racist based on this album. *Tintin in the Congo* was re-published in 1946 with some alterations due to public outcry. Hergé had to rework the album to make it more ideologically acceptable with an attempt at political correctness. The first visible changes in the album are apparent at first glance. For editorial reasons, Hergé was forced to reduce his album to 62 pages from 109 pages, the size of each block being reduced. The other significant change is the introduction of full colour album. If the frame of the story has not changed, many details have been altered or simply removed to better meet contemporary ideological mood. Hergé has erased all references to colonial involvement of Belgium in the Congo. Apart from attending a missionary school, Tintin is just a reporter out to discover an exotic country. The metamorphosis of the episode of the class Tintin takes as a substitute teacher in the missionary school is revealing of the alterations Hergé made in the 1946 edition. This is undoubtedly one of the most contested fields of the album. In the original edition, Tintin replaces at short notice a sick teacher and teaches a geography lesson to small black children before being interrupted by a leopard. He tells the children, "My dear friends, I will talk today about your fatherland Belgium! ...." Belgium, according to Tintin, is their country. This is a blatant example of appropriation of land. On a symbolic plane it denies the indigenous people their right of identifying their land as independent in any way, by building the country of the colonial masters as a standard and reference. The reference to Belgium is removed in the 1946 edition, as also the term "your" which presupposes a political and cultural integration of native peoples in colonial countries. The course that Tintin teaches then becomes a mathematics lesson. In this dialectic, the reader of the new edition could legitimately expect to find major changes in the linguistic ability of the African population. However, this is not the case and they remain incoherent. The most significant difference of the 1946 edition with its predecessor





lies in the dialogues of Tintin and Snowy towards the Africans, as the authoritarian discourse against the blacks for the sake of preserving the colonial ideology are somewhat lessened. Manifestations of Western prejudices about blacks are much less stressed. The extravagant vocabulary of 1930 has also disappeared. The term "negro" appearing twice in the first version disappears completely in 1946. But generally, the attitude of Tintin toward African culture has not changed. Although he no longer treats wildlife as disposable, we see him nevertheless to continue its massacres. The white man is still considered a hero, and the representation of blacks is still very stereotypical. They retain their simian appearance and character. The scene of the collision between the car and the locomotive illustrates this point. Blacks are still presented in outrageous ways: their clothes have not changed, just as they are reluctant to go to work and get dirty, and Coco, the boy reporter is still gone into hiding after being scared. "The dirty little machine" becomes an "old-Tchouk Tchouk!"

During the latter half of the twentieth century, there was a popular outcry against this album accusing it to foster racism. Due to such on-going controversies the album was not published in English until 1991. The colour edition did not appear until 2005. When finally it was published (by Egmont Publishing), it included a cautionary cover indicating that it contained "bourgeois, paternalistic stereotypes of the period" that may be offensive to contemporary readers. The edition also had an introduction providing additional historical contextualisation. *Tintin in the Congo* again hit the headlines in 2007, when Bienvenu Mbutu Mondondo, a Congolese citizen, claimed the book was racist and campaigned to get it pulled from the shelves in Belgium. Again in 2007, the UK's *Commission for Racial Equality* called for the same book to be banned, saying it contained imagery and words of racial prejudice, calling it a "racist claptrap". The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) asked the bookstores *Borders* and *Waterstones* to stop selling the book, in response to a complaint it had received. The CRE stated that the album contained "imagery and words of hideous racial prejudice, where the 'savage natives' look like monkeys and talk like imbeciles" (*The Telegraph*, 12th July 2007). The

result of these objections was moving the album to the adult graphic novel section, sealing the content, and marking it with a warning label. In the US, plans by Little, Brown & Company to publish the colour version were abandoned altogether in 2007, perhaps on account of the controversies in Britain and Belgium. To this day *Tintin in the Congo* remains the only album in the Tintin-series never to have been published in the USA.

Blacks in the album are repeatedly represented as big children, easily-scared, lazy, incapable of any initiative, deeply gullible, naive and superstitious. The way Herge makes them speak is representative of the colonial imagery. They are shown to speak in a permanent form of grammatical imperfection, unlike even the dog Snowy who can speak perfect French. The dialogues of Tintin with the blacks are not just insulting, but very often a mark of authority or contempt. This violence is not confined only to individuals but is also extended to African wildlife: butchering a monkey, a rhino exploded with dynamite, killing fifteen free antelopes, etc. and the indifference and contempt that Tintin has towards animals are quite similar to a form of appropriation of African culture. Their beliefs and forms of power based on the tribal system are systematically ridiculed. Conversely, the power of Tintin on the natives is taken very seriously. An important theme throughout *Tintin in the Congo* is the Africans relying on Tintin and idolizing him as a holy figure. They obey and honour him to the point of idolatry. Not only do the natives welcome him with open arms, they all talk about Tintin after he leaves as if their saviour had departed. Technology introduced by Tintin is recognized as king in the M'Hatuvu, an indigenous tribe. The Africans, child-like men with wide eyes and bloated lips prostrate themselves before Tintin (as well as Snowy his dog) after he shows off such magic as an electromagnet, or quinine pills for malaria. Tintin and Snowy, for the most part, travel and explore the Congo alone. In reality, explorers of such stature such as Henry Morton Stanley traveled among large groups of enslaved Africans. In one scene, a tribe Tintin and Snowy are staying with engages in war with a rival tribe. Rather than having the Africans fight it out, Tintin gets involved and prevents any bloodshed. He cleverly dodges spears



and arrows by use of a magnet to alter trajectories. The tribe, deceived by Tintin's "superpowers," surrenders. Tintin is shown to be a peacekeeper here rather than a harbinger of death, as his counterparts once were. This also justifies European supremacy and the idea of Africans as a lesser race. The famous episode of the collision between the car and the locomotive of Tintin is one of the most striking features of the album, as it summarizes the attitude of European and African stereotypes presented above. The Congolese and their technological inferiority are first described here, since a single trans-Saharan car overcomes a locomotive and its cars and wooden crates. After a quick apology, Tintin interrupts protests claiming his natural authority over the natives, hands on hips "Come! at work! ... "" Are not you ashamed? Let a dog do all the work!" Not only is he forcing them to do labour, he is exhorting them through his dog, saying the Africans should help because the dog is getting tired. Also included in this scene's ridicule of the blacks is their desire of making their attire move closer to the ideal dress in European fashion. Finally, if Tintin is responsible for the accident, he comes out the hero despite the very little effort he personally makes to repair the train. The whole album is a demonstration of social relations between the colonists and the colonized, and the demonstration of power, condescension and paternalism of whites against blacks. The insistence of Tintin through dialogue to systematically diminish the blacks is an implicit justification of the colonizer, and we can see that this album by Hergé is active in the creation of black identity as constructed by the colonizer. An image in the last page of comic book shows the entire village praising Tintin and even his dog Snowy to an extreme level. The Africans are saying things such as, "Them say, in Europe all young white men is like Tintin..." or even a mother telling a child, "And if you not good, you never be like Tintin!" The final scenes of Tintin thus end on a positive note. They reveal that in the aftermath of Tintin's departure from the Congo, the village is now organized and structured. Even African dogs are shown to be in awe of Snowy. Conversing Africans praise Tintin as powerful, believing European audiences at home must be just as good as Tintin. Elsewhere, a child retrieves Tintin's camera but does

not steal it and claim it as his own. Instead, he is told by an elder that if Tintin does not return to reclaim the camera in one year's time, he can keep it. This is the influence of Tintin and Europeans. These final scenes reassure European supremacy. They convey the notion that Africans are bettered with European guidance. They are now civilized and strive to be like Tintin and his people back at home. In a scene in which Tintin is seen resolving a conflict between two Africans. Hergé shows the Africans talking to each other about how the "White man very fair." Furthermore, the fair "White man" even saves the Africans from other white men as when Tintin catches a European thief to protect the native Africans. In a true sense Tintin is seen spearheading the civilizing mission in the Congo. We understand from all other accounts that this was absolutely not the case when it came to the relationship between Africans and Belgian colonizers under King Leopold. The Belgian Congo was not left in this prosperous state after the imperialists left and the Europeans, represented by Tintin, most certainly were not seen as saviours in any context. This being a comic book, every situation is drawn as harmless; in reality, Europeans such as Stanley murdered and tortured anyone in their way. An account from *King Leopold's Ghost* states, "Soldiers made young men kill or rape their own mothers and sisters" (Hochschild 166). A cartoonist cannot show such scenes in a comic book such as Tintin, but the reality of the Belgian Congo was far removed from this book. We can get a glimpse of the real state of the Belgian Congo under King Leopold in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the mistreatment and oppression of the Congolese people in the hands of their Belgian conquerors are described in graphic details:

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. . . . I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a



chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (Conrad 19-20)

The chapter "The Great Forgetting" from *King Leopold's Ghost* is also pertinent at this point. This chapter discusses the complete absence of the history of the Belgian Congo in museums, novels, textbooks, and any other public outlet throughout Belgium. Before his death, Leopold ensured all accessible accounts were burned or hidden from the general public. Marchal, a retired diplomat, went around Belgium to collect information on Belgium's activity in the Congo. Hochschild writes, "The testimony papers were stamped *Ne pas a communiquer aux chercheurs* – no access for researchers. Marchal protested that it was seventy years after the commission had delivered its report, and that he was of ambassadorial rank. It made no difference. He was not allowed to see the files" (Hochschild 297). This tale of horrific exploitation should be made available to the world for future generations, yet the records have not been made public. Works such as *Tintin in the Congo* can contribute to ensure the preservation of history. Although *Tintin in the Congo* shows an inaccurate and misleading depiction of the Belgian Congo, it actually represents the Belgian government and their attempt to conceal their colonization efforts, and this comic book is an example of how Belgian artists and authors used popular media to mask reality. Therefore depending on how one uses it, this comic book written in 1930 is a great historical record.

At the same time, it is not only the non-whites, but also the whites who have been subjected to racial stereotyping in comic books, though often in a humorous way. For example, in the *Asterix* series, the British are presented as every French cliché has always imagined them. Physiognomically they are portrayed as having bristling handlebar moustaches, wearing breeches tied below the knees, and with predominant red hair. They stop for a hot-water break at five (Asterix has not yet shown them how to make tea); they drink warm beer; overwhelm their food with mint sauce; and speak with a parodic and almost incomprehensible version of Anglo-French. This racial stereotyping is a common tool of humour in comics.

After the World War II, the comic landscape began to change. Stereotypical characters disappeared, but so also did the black characters. They did not reappear till the 1960s, and the civil rights movement played a big part in the evolution of the portrayal of the coloured characters. Mention may be made of Black Panther in this context. He is both a superhero and the king of an advanced African nation Wakanda. T'Challa, his princely identity, uses his physical skills, technological prowess, and powers granted by sacred African traditions to fight evil. Initially introduced as a supporting character in the all-white *Fantastic Four* in 1966, he started starring in his own series in 1973. However, the villain fought by him often had a supernatural edge, echoing numerous white representations of African people in the "jungle adventure" genre. This, coupled with the fact that the Panther was placed in an imaginary place, lost the books the ability to comment on race relations in the western world and the powers that structured those relations. Coming to the 1990s, we come across a black superhero, Spawn, created by the Canadian writer Todd McFarlane. It was the best-selling comic book of the decade, though race is not a huge part of his personality. Recently, the release of the movie *Black Panther* with an almost all-black cast and its emergence as the most successful superhero movie of the Marvel franchise is an eye-opener for us, overturning as it does previous racial stereotyping. The African land of Wakanda is depicted as technologically the most advanced country in the world as opposed to being the most primitive one. This is a mark of the changing times. However, we should keep in mind that the kind of racial stereotyping discussed here is a part of the cultural past of western society. Mainstream literature abounds in them – in the works of Shakespeare (Caliban, Shylock, and Othello, to name a few), Dickens, Conrad, Waugh – as a reflection of contemporary society. Comics are no exception. They are a product of their times and only reflect what is happening currently around them. Hence to judge a book solely on its racial depiction might do it a disservice from the critical point of view.



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