

Heart of Darkness as the Coordinal of Western Imperialism

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Abstract

Widely considered as an anti-imperialist work, the novel's contrary interpretation is commonly ascribed to the publication of Chinua Achebe's "Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". The book, perhaps the finest source of information regarding Leopold's crimes in Congo, may be interpreted in a variety of ways; to be clear, Conrad was writing a case study of Leopold's cruel rule of the Congo, not a critique of Western imperialism in general. The purpose of this research is to interpret *Heart of Darkness* via a variety of postcolonial lenses and to locate it within the Western debate on colonialism. For it is only via contrapuntal readings of this novella that the true nature of Conrad's discourse on racism and colonialism becomes apparent.

Keywords: Decanonization, Racism, Xenophobia, Darkness, Contrapuntal Reading, Discourse, Colonialism, Decolonization.

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INTRODUCTION

There is clearly not a single doubt that *Heart of Darkness* is about Colonialism and its disadvantages. On his voyage to Congo, Conrad is devastated and disgusted by his fellow Europeans for the "treatment of the Africans" in their own land, so much so that his "health never fully recovered" (Batchelor 229). Marlow's empathetic response to certain occurrences like "old nigger" beaten 'mercilessly", the people whose faces were like "grotesque masks", "black and naked", walking "like ants", are all seemingly the critique of Europe's colonial ambition in Congo, wherein the "continental concern" of civilizing gets exposed, the "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" are corrupted and Kurtz is dying with the last words "The Horror! The horror!" All these instances are generally accepted as the fissures of European colonialism in Congo. Marlow had intimate knowledge of these events, and most critics believe Conrad is expressing via Marlow how Europe handled Congo with repression and atrocity.

This paper takes *Heart of Darkness* from Achebe's perspective; that Conrad, even if he sympathized Congolese, was an ardent racist and proponent of the imperial mission of Great Empire. I have analyzed Achebe's case against *Heart of Darkness* from his essay "An Image of Africa; Racism in

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". I contend that Conrad's discourse on imperialism is contained in *Heart of Darkness* and this novella is a testimonial of his support for racism and colonial ambitions of Europe. Even though Achebe's allegations can't be fully justified, this study reveals how Conrad used the very language that was the hallmark of imperial occupation of Europe in the 20th Century.

The Political Context of *Heart of Darkness*

The common perception about *Heart of Darkness* is that it exposes the "horrors of the Belgian's vile and dehumanizing colonial practices" (Couto xiv); the question is whether Marlow's ideas are really the critique of imperialism or it's just the critique of King Leopold's actions in Congo explicitly. It would be fair enough to say that *Heart of Darkness* "offers a powerful critique of at least certain manifestations of imperialism and racism" (Brantlinger 365), but there's always the risk of ignoring the fundamental issue, "what it says about imperialism and just whose imperialism it has in mind" (Atkinson 368). Before preceding to peril Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a rather quick investigation into the context in which *Heart of Darkness* was written is not only desirable but necessary, because "To read *Heart of Darkness* without taking into account the colonial history and the politics of culture implicit in the text, is to subvert its vision" (Couto xxi). In this case, Jan-Albert Goris's study

“Belgian Action in Congo” is vital for it gives us an impeccable context to understand *Heart of Darkness* in the light of Belgian occupation in Congo. Though Goris’s study recounts the events nine years after Conrad had finished writing *Heart of Darkness*—King Leopold was taken over by the commoners of Belgium in 1908—but whatever happened during the reign of King Leopold and Leopold II, is the main issue what *Heart of Darkness* was trying to critique.

Heart of Darkness was written at the height of Belgian imperialism in Congo—1899, the times when African continent was a hidden treasure for West—and Leopold’s atrocities caught the eye of some young men who later formed Congo Reform Association. Leopold’s began his absolute rule in Congo in the year 1885. The lack of interest of Belgian government in assisting him to set up the rule in Congo made him an absolute ruler. Thus Leopold made Congo his private property and this is the same rule which *Heart of Darkness* casts as inhuman, barbaric and repressive. In this case, Casement was sent by British administration to report on Congo. Casement, to his astonishment, found the extreme barbarity and repressions done to Congolese; Conrad had already written *Heart of Darkness* and was an invaluable asset to Casement on the information about Congo. Casement needed a collaborator like Conrad who “was highly sympathetic to the Congo cause” and who was a staunch critic of Leopold’s “rule in the Congo and imperialism in general” (65). But to Casement’s misfortune, Conrad didn’t support “any of the anti-imperialist groups then operating” (ibid.). Conrad’s silence is unknown; Hunt gives possible reasons, Conrad “despised the Marxism of the Social-Democratic Federation and likewise scorned *laissez-faire* theory of Campbell Bannerman’s Liberals and later of the Congo Reform Association” (ibid.) and this might have been one of the reasons.

Through his letter to Casement, Conrad is astonished that the “conscience of Europe which seventy years ago has put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds, tolerates the Congo State today...Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt” (Conrad 96). But his final sentences “once more my best wishes go with you on your crusade” (97) shows Conrad’s hesitation in supporting it openly. No doubt Conrad is ambiguous and probably indecisive; his denial to join the Association shows that Conrad never really was interested in anti-imperialism, as Hunt has shown, but whatever was happening with Congolese, certainly depressed him. In this sense, *Heart of Darkness* is simply a “case study of how badly French-speaking people do imperialism” (Atkinson 383). From this dimension, Conrad’s voice is against the Leopold’s rule not against the imperialism in general.

Does ‘An Image of Africa’ matter?

It was still alright until 1975, when Chinua Achebe, a prominent Nigerian author, stepped up for a

lecture and irrevocably changed the fate of *Heart of Darkness*; that Conrad was a “thoroughgoing racist.” But before analyzing Achebe’s acquisitions against *Heart of Darkness*, does Achebe’s voice matter, or would it truly detract from Conrad’s novella?

For this matter, Clare Clarke’s analysis of Achebe’s essay is important. Clark begins his answer with “With ‘An Image of Africa,’ Achebe became the first critic to challenge the consensus that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was an important anti-colonist text and a novel worthy of canonical status” (12). This is crucial, if Achebe’s article succeeds only to some degree, we still have a discourse—decanonization, as it may be termed, is breaking the discourse of the English canon in order to establish an alternative or counter-canon—that is at least effective in providing a substitute reading of the novella. This possible reading has left a space for the students—racism and colonialism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—to discuss and revisit *Heart of Darkness* through the postcolonial perspectives. Secondly, the dominant stereotypical image of Africa prevalent in the nineteenth century and perhaps still now, in the literary and non-literary circles, is exposed and deciphered. Clarke writes in his book “The essay challenges assumptions about civilization and culture that were embedded in modern critical approaches, and argued against the understanding that the set of ideals advanced in Conrad’s book were universal. It was a daring proposition” (12). If such is the case—and of course since Achebe’s essay is widely included in the university curricula at least in ‘third world countries’—his essay has then itself made a position among the canons of English literature. While Achebe’s claims against Conrad aren’t fully justified, nonetheless, his essay has become an unavoidable part of Conrad’s novella.

Achebe is true when he claims that Africa has become a wilderness and a place of gloom in the eyes of Europeans, having been projected into the collective psyche of the whole European civilization. Marlow is scared of a “distant connection” with the Africans, with their ugliness and frenzy—with a shared humanity restricted to the primitive and undeveloped. Conrad’s “flabby” language is designed to induce “hypnotic drowsiness,” but Africans can only grunt and speak in pidgin. While Marlow is first taken aback by the cannibals’ “restraint,” the idea of cannibals owning any civilization looks impossible.

In the prefatory discourse to “An Image of Africa”, Achebe attempts to highlight some peeks from Western eyes into what Africa produces for them. In his personal meeting with a visual example of the West’s projections of Africa, Achebe demonstrates how Africa is a mystery or an interest of the Western people “one of them was particularly happy to learn about some customs and superstitions of African tribe” (14). Against this discourse, Achebe provides a more true

statement: "the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions" (ibid.). Why, then, are they so taken with Africa? Can we accept that as a straightforward admission of ignorance? Achebe makes his first foray into authentic debate "Quite simply, it is a desire—one might even say a need—in Western psychology to set up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (15). That prompts Achebe to make a stunning statement: "Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work I know displays that Western desire and need" (ibid.).

V. S. Naipaul, a Caribbean novelist and Noble Prize winner, delivered a writer's viewpoint on Conrad at the University of Kent in Canterbury in July 1974. Conrad, he argued, was essentially flawed because he "had refined away, as mundane, the qualities of imagination, fantasy, and invention for which I sought refuge in novels" (Dooley 87). Conrad's narratives, whether in *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, *Victory*, or *Nostromo*, were always "a simple film with an elaborate commentary" (Moore 03) "analytically dissolving imaginative experience" (Mahanta 09). "However," he explained, "we read at various times for various purposes. We have our own preconceived notions of what a book should be, and those preconceived notions are shaped by our own needs...we might take a writer's virtue for granted and his originality...can pass us by" (Mahanta 10).

Conrad and Darwinism

There is every reason to distinguish Conrad from his character, and to see *Heart of Darkness* as a story about Marlow rather than Kurtz, whom we should pay particular attention to. Framing story seems to have the primary goal of ensuring that we are not enthralled by Marlow, but are compelled to analyze his vision. Conrad also has the listeners on the Nellie interrupt, multiple times, to bring attention to the inflation of Marlow's words. The storyteller's displeasure at not being able to convey his impressions to others who haven't been there is a good defense for him, but it shows how subjective they are. We can only perceive Kurtz via Marlow's limited perspective; therefore it cannot be a story about Kurtz itself. Additionally, we are not privy to the whole information of the two individuals who know Kurtz, since one does not speak our language and Marlow will not listen to the other.

One of the central colonial themes in *Heart of Darkness* is that Africans remain almost speechless and voiceless, and therefore Conrad fails to give voice to those he labels "savage" "God-forsaken" "wild" "cannibals" and "prehistoric". Regelin Farn in his book *Colonial and Postcolonial Rewritings of "Heart of Darkness"* gives an interesting story of how Conrad was "heavily influenced" by the Darwinian arguments

that ultimately led to these conclusions he proposed in the novella (19). *The Origin of Species* (1869) changed the long led idea that humans—distinguished by certain characteristics but "all made in God's image"—are evolved and that "survival of the fittest" only kept those alive who had the capability to live. This made twofold impacts; that people are divided inherently into different races, superior/inferior, civilized/uncivilized, capable/incapable, and that "the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races" (Farn 19). While this didn't create antagonism immediately but people in Europe changed their views completely towards the other races so that "When peoples were wiped out, theorists soon said that they would have gone under anyway, that helping them on their natural, inevitable way out actually meant a humane mercy killing" (ibid.).

Europe followed from this that neither "others" nor "descendants of others" can ever become like them. This alternate belief system, dubbed "racism," asserts that otherness is an inherent quality of particular populations, not a function of socialization, language, or culture. Racism, in contemporary vernacular, is the belief that all individuals may be classified into a small number of races with distinct characteristics and skills based on their genes or other inherited biological characteristics. It is as a consequence of this that adopted youngsters inherit the qualities of their biological parents (and ancestors) and are unable to compete with their adoptive families or society. Racism and ethnocentrism are not the same because of their varying levels of hate, the frequency with which mass killings of "others," occur, or the degree of power and exploitation exerted by the dominant group. Racism is a belief system based on the premise that the "other community" is innately inferior and incapable of developing a civilization on a par with one's own (Hirschman 389). Humanity got split into two groups as a result of this process of dissidence: those civilizations that failed to adapt to "survival of the fittest" and those that developed the ability of a civilized human. Conrad, however wasn't interested in such a theory but "he was heavily influenced by the argumentation that ultimately led to such conclusions" (Farn 19).

The Colonial Language

Like any writer who wrote in the domain of cultural imperialism, Conrad is no exceptional since he employs the very language of the culture which he set out to criticize in the novella. That is the main problem with Conrad because he employs the typical language of the empire that has been focusing on the domination of the 'other' races. For Conrad, he finds it impossible employ the language that's different from the imperialist language and culture of the Europe. It would have been quite possible for such a great stylist like Conrad to write in the vocabulary that's different from imperialist connotations. And since theorists have

elaboratively spoken about how Conrad achieved the degree of perfectly employing the irony throughout the text, it would have been not a big concern for Conrad to discern the colonial language and adapt a language that is different.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that "Heart of Darkness" transfers Conrad's response to Africanist images he read, as much as it conveys his trip and his psychological composition. Even though Conrad is seemingly writing against the Belgian imperialism in Congo but he was always writing in framework of imperialist ideology "As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them" (Said 30). In the Congo, Conrad experienced Africa through the lens of the discourses he was acquainted with, and individuals have a propensity to discover what they expect to see. Therefore Marlow believes the colonized people incapable of any kind of self-government, and the only challenge he sees is how to partition up Africa between the British, the King of the Belgians and other whites. Just as no alternative to imperialism was imaginable, there is no option to Marlow's and Kurtz's voices. Total control over portrayal of Africa belongs with Marlow, just as complete authority over representation, aesthetics and power on a global scale resided with the West. However, Conrad, like Marlow is extremely self-conscious. While Marlow cannot envisage any alternatives to empire, he does convey the brutality and the flaws within imperialism, and identifies his own narrative as restricted. Said notes that in spite of this awareness to Africanist rhetoric, "Heart of Darkness" was a part of that discourse. However paradoxically, the novella provided prejudices and alleged knowledge of Africa to modern readers who did not have an alternate frame of reference (*Culture and Imperialism* 24-26, 67-68).

The issue is whether Conrad could have avoided employing imperialistic terminology and wrote in a language that was not infused with imperialist culture. In this case, Ian Malcolm wrote an article in the same year *Heart of Darkness* was written. I'm referencing Atkinson's piece to demonstrate how there was an alternate method to talk about Africa that was nearly entirely devoid of imperial language:

Much of whatever happened to Conrad in Congo is unknown and 'And amid all this natural profusion live the negroes in their little log-huts, or, if in humbler circumstances, in bothies built of leaves and grass. They all seemed to be busy with something or another. At the doors the women were sewing or men were cobbling; here, a little darkey girl combing out her sister's hair under a great Poinsettia-tree, whose red leaves burned brilliant in the sun; there little picaninnies in a state of nature chasing chickens and pigs; now,

where a stream crosses the road, groups of girls washing linen with their sleeves rolled well over their elbows, and their skirts well up to their knees; and all along the road we passed men driving cattle or mule-trains laden with produce to the nearest market. From each and all we were certain of a "Marnin', massa." (383-84)

This is unquestionably a different style of language than that found in *Heart of Darkness*. Thus, all of the assertions that Conrad was writing in an ideological spectrum and that it was difficult for him to pick a secular language are invalidated by one fact alone.

It has been stated that Conrad's true journey was influenced by the accounts of earlier African explorers, such as Mungo Park, Bruce, Burton, Speke, and Livingstone, which he had read and which remained in his memory during his travels in Africa. He had read about African explorers as a child and created a magnificent world of discovery from their stories, but his visit to the Congo put a stop to "the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams." (332). His Diary, which he kept from 13 June to 1 August 1890, and his letters from the Congo, supply us with some clues. Both stories feature a travel up the Congo River; however, the Diary has little relation to the finished narrative, and Conrad's excursion to the Congo was omitted from the novella. No mention of Roger Casement, the Hatton and Cookson English business, the packaging of ivory for shipping, or trips to African market towns, plantations, or missions is made in *Heart of Darkness*, as the Diary does.

Conrad or Marlow, Who Speaks?

Francis Singh contrasts Marlow's apparent pity for Congolese with his disdain for their total barbarism and 'uncivilized' conduct. I'm quoting a key section from Singh;

Marlowe's sympathy for the oppressed blacks is only superficial. He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but when he sees them healthy, practising their customs, he feels nothing but abhorrence and loathing, like a good colonizer to whom such a feeling offers a perfect rationalization for his policies. If blacks are evil then they must be conquered and put under white man's rule for their own good. Marlowe is trying to have it both ways, anti-colonistic and anti-depravity with the life of blacks then he can hardly be called anti-colonial. He may sympathize with the plight of blacks, he may be disgusted by the effects of economic colonialism, but because he has no desire to understand or appreciate people of any culture other than his own, he is not emancipated from the mentality of a colonizer" (45).

This is the ideal unravelling of the paradoxes that run throughout the novella; Conrad feels sympathy for the abuse Congolese people experience at the hands of whites, nonetheless he is a soft colonizer. What he is demanding is simply for a more just colonization; he believes that the indigenous people should be treated fairly. However, this still qualifies him as a colonizer. Conrad is neither an anti-colonialist nor an anti-racist; his depiction of blacks leads us to feel they are worse than animals "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants" (HOD 23).

Yet, where is the darkness that Conrad is going to show us? Marlow continues by describing how darkness pervades Africa and Africans throughout the text. The heart of darkness lies with the "God-forsaken wilderness" (20) and "The prehistoric man" (59). So much of what he sees in the Congo as a result of colonial exploitation seems disjointed and nonsensical at first. Marlow, like Kurtz, was a liberal, according to the myth, who was produced by all of Europe. Kurtz had likewise been penning liberal falsehoods about Europe's great civilizing mission in Africa: until, in a moment of candor, he wrote across his manifesto, "Exterminate the brutes!" And that is what Kurtz, the great ivory agent, has been doing, for the greater benefit of Europe (Nazareth 175).

Few individuals, in Ford Madox Ford's opinion, had greater capacity than Conrad to "to see vividly the opposing sides of human characters (Ridley 50)." The two ladies reflect the competing forces that have power over Kurtz. The one is savagery itself, wild and terrible, beautiful and menacing; the other is faith, brilliant and lovely, a sign of the "power of devotion" that, in Marlow's words, is required when all outward limitations are eliminated. She seemed to be ready to listen without mental reserve, without skepticism, without regard for herself... She has a developed capacity for devotion and belief. "In a dimly lit chamber, "only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love," and Marlow drops his head, "before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness (ibid.)."

While there's no doubt that the culture of writing about the other races, especially Africa, in the time of Conrad was full of imperialistic implications that adhered to the ideas based on 'evolutionary anthropology', Conrad strictly followed this custom to criticize—if we are somehow convinced that Conrad did so—the imperialism from which he never managed to free himself. Even more, Conrad's other novels like Almayer's Folly—considered as his greatest anti-colonial novel—he employs the same racist language that he used in *Heart of Darkness*. The question is how can one achieve the objective knowledge of anything

without moving out of the discourse which proposes it? Thus it makes us clear enough that Conrad never really intended to criticize the Europe's colonial ambitions without using the same colonial language. There's no doubt that the language and vocabulary Conrad used to speak about Africa had ideological implications. This ideology, as we have seen was largely based upon the Darwinian theory of races in which there was light in one part and darkness at other place. So the vocabulary became inherently embedded with racist and colonial implications. Conrad nevertheless became part of this linguistic tradition.

Limitations

Even if a critique of colonialism and racism, there are still limitations in such a language that contained the vocabulary of the imperialist tradition Europe practiced then. This language inherently contained the binaries like savage/civilized which articulated the differences between a European race and an African one. Thus, even if we are satisfied Conrad was the staunch critique of Colonialism, the very language he used was limited to move beyond the culture that dominated and in result, the contradictions and confusions in the novella were never resolved.

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