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## Post-Colonial Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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### Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* tells the journey of Marlow through the African jungle and his search for the European Kurtz who exploits the natives by imposing violence on them. It is mainly based upon Conrad's own experience in Congo when he learned how Europeans exploited and traded the natives for their own benefits during his own journey. The book is regarded as an attack on imperialism and criticizes immoral treatments of the European colonizers in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Keith Booker states that "the book deals with issues such as imperialism, capitalism, race, and gender that were very much at the forefront of the turn-of-the century European mind. Conrad's ambivalent treatment of these issues is extremely representative of the way they were treated in any number of European discourses of the time" (217). Besides, Chinua Achebe in his An "Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" comments that "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (338). Although Achebe puts forward that the novel displays colonialism, I consider that Conrad does not intend to write it to appreciate colonialism and therefore the purpose of this paper is to approach Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from post-colonial perspective by taking European imperialism and colonialism over Africa into consideration in order to clarify how Conrad has

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deconstructed binary oppositions of colonialism by subverting the general idea of the Europeans towards Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Key Word:** Imperialism, Colonialism, Civilization

### **Introduction**

Colonialism is about the relationship between colonized people and their colonizers. According to Lois Tyson, “colonialist ideology [...] was based on the colonizers’ assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded” (419). The colonizers consider that the culture of their ancestors was extremely civilized and that is why they define native people as savage or undeveloped. In other words, the colonizers see themselves as superior to the colonized people. In addition to this, colonizers think that they set up examples for the colonial people, so the colonized people “were considered ‘other’, different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human” (Tyson 420). That is the reason why, colonized countries divide the world into two different parts. While they are named as “us” (the civilized), the natives are called as “them” (the others or savages). These binary oppositions are clearly reflected throughout Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The book reflects the writer’s own ideas and experiences through Marlow who is one of the most important characters of the novel. Marlow would like to hide immoral activities of the Europeans from his listeners since colonialism proves the corruption of the Europeans in Africa.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the natives remain an element of fantasy for Marlow until he meets them. These natives represent the interruption of European fantasy for a moment, that is, they are real and a shock for Marlow (Brannigan 145). He describes the natives as;

They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now— nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin (*Heart of Darkness* 19).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All the references to the novel will be abbreviated as *HOD*.

Marlow cannot exactly define the natives; however, the only thing he is sure is that they suffer under the control of the Europeans. Besides, he is aware that the Europeans also give harm to nature in order to earn more. In other words, Marlow realizes that Europeans destroy not only the natives but also the jungle. He states,

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther (18).

The repetition of the word “devil” underlines the brutality of colonialism and imperialism that the Europeans imposed on the natives in Africa. They dominated nearly all parts of Africa to benefit from the natives. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said puts forward that:

In Europe itself at the end of the nineteenth century scarcely a corner of life was untouched by the facts of empire. The economies were hungry for overseas markets, raw materials, cheap labor and profitable land. Defense and foreign policy establishments were more and more committed to the maintenance of vast tracts of distant territory and large numbers of subjugated peoples (8).

In the extract above, Said criticizes the dominance of powerful countries over African countries in order to exploit them. Similarly, Marlow is against European colonialism. When for instance he falls in a moral dilemma before meeting Kurtz's Intended, he explains this dilemma in the book as “It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul” (*HOD* 95). Marlow as a European feels ashamed of what Kurtz has done in Congo when he learns his immoral acts, and that is why he cannot put them into words in his meeting with Kurtz's Intended. Marlow says that it is impossible to reveal the truth that he experienced during his journey, “No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence, — that which makes its truth, its meaning — its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream — alone....” (32). Marlow means that minority of the Europeans is critical about the idea of colonialism in spite of the fact that they get benefit from it. That is, they do not approve immoral acts of their citizens, since it is not appropriate to give harm to the other people for the sake of monetary issues.

The violence is indispensable part of colonialism for the Europeans and it constantly occurs throughout the novel. For example, Marlow tells that a native, thought to cause fire, has been beaten harshly: “[a] nigger was being beaten near by. They said he had caused the fire in some way; be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly” (*HOD* 27). This event is just an example of European violence against the Africans. Besides, it shows the subversion of the novel, since Conrad introduces their own cruelty to English people through an English man. The European chooses to beat the Africans to prevent probable “conflagrations” as stated in the novel;

Black figures strolled about listlessly, pouring water on the glow, whence proceeded a sound of hissing; steam ascended in the moonlight, the beaten nigger groaned somewhere. ‘What a row the brute makes!’ said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. ‘Serve him right. Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That’s the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future (*HOD* 30).

Marlow feels pity for the natives unlike other the majority of colonizers. Through the end of the novel, the African “others” are presented as the dark side of Europe. Their situation is shown as the consequence of historical distance. This explanation may seem to strengthen the concept of the Europeans “as civilized, enlightened, at a more advanced state of intelligence and ability than the African” (Brannigan 146). However, I claim that there is no distance between Europe and Africa contrary to various scholars as Conrad attempts to deconstruct this common belief in *Heart of Darkness*.

Additionally, the natives are even addressed as black shapes or shadows to dehumanize them in some parts of the novel, in that; none of the natives has proper names. The real purpose of Conrad is that he wants to remind the inadequate attention his citizens pay for the natives, since they are no more than a creature or a cannibal for the Europeans. The prospect of cannibalism appears when a group of men save Marlow on the river. These people are called cannibals by the Europeans rather than by their names. Marlow does not know whether they are cannibals or not since he has not witnessed any instance of humans eating in Congo. Although there is no act of cannibalism, it is a common belief that it exists and this is enough for Marlow to fear. He tells,

Their headman, a young, broad-chestlike black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. ‘Aha!’ I said, just for good fellowship’s sake. ‘Catch ‘im,’ he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—‘catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us.’ ‘To you, eh?’ I asked; ‘what would you do with them?’

‘Eat ‘im!’ he said curtly, and, leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude. I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry (*HOD* 50).

Although Conrad is sure that the natives cannot be cannibals, he gives evidences of cannibalism in order to manipulate the Europeans through the main character of the novel. Booker asserts that “[t]he characterization of Africans as cannibals make the European loss of life ‘civilizing’ the continent seem worthwhile, while at the same time it justified European rule of Africa by demonstrating the superiority of Europeans to their primitive African counterparts” (223). The Europeans deliberately regard the natives as cannibals so as to justify their colonialism. However, Conrad does not talk about the concrete evidence of cannibalism throughout the novel, and this is one of the best examples of deconstruction of colonialism. In other words, cannibalism is produced as the proof of the savagery of the natives by the Europeans according to Conrad.

Marlow’s relationships to imperialism are just devices with which to work more effectively in the interests of imperialist power. Said says that “*Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politics and even epistemology inevitable an unavoidable” (Said 24). Said implies that colonialism is inevitable through the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, Conrad clearly criticizes the brutal application of England.

*Heart of Darkness* reveals the violence and brutality through Kurtz who is the chief of Inner Station. Interestingly, Kurtz has a lot of abilities from art to music although he is a cruel man. Marlow says that, “[...] Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness” (*HOD* 91). Kurtz as a European thinks that he has the right to control all the natives and Marlow is critical about his meaningless authority over black people, since he does not approve of European violence brought about by European colonialism.

Kurtz is a strong symbol of order because of the fact that he is the most influential medium of European colonization. He is sure that “the ivory trade which he is responsible for is more productive than in any other region” (Brannigan 137). However, his methods are brutal. For example, his hut is surrounded by the skulls of men who do not obey him. He deliberately turns the faces of these skulls to the house since he wants his power to be recognized by the natives. When Marlow sees them for the first time, he cannot understand what they are. He explains this confusion as “Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first

result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic” (*HOD* 74). Later on, he finds out that they are human skulls. Kurtz uses these skulls to threaten the others and this shows his brutality against the natives.

On the contrary, Marlow hates the cruel treatment against the natives and he respects them as humans. He is shocked by the events he has witnessed, that is, Marlow is highly affected by the cruel treatments imposed by Kurtz on the natives that he cannot forget what he experiences when he returns back. Marlow clearly describes Kurtz’s mistreatments and greediness via his physical appearance;

I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence (*HOD* 95).

Additionally, Kurtz sees himself responsible for education of the natives besides exploiting them and says that “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (*HOD* 40). However, Kurtz tortures them rather than educating and Conrad shows this reversal in his novel.

Kurtz imposes imperialism on natives to gain more; however, his greediness and cruelty lead to his death. About Kurtz’s horrifying character, Marlow states “I had to deal with a being to which I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke himself - his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man!” (85). Kurtz does whatever he wants because there is nothing to restrict him. He also prefers to spend his time in the jungle and thus forgets his civilized life in order to earn more. Kurtz is so corrupted for ivory trade that he even loses his connections with Europe. According to Homi Bhabba, colonial mimicry “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (122). Based upon this, Kurtz can be accepted as a mimic man since he turns into a savage which is one of the criticisms of African people.

Conrad criticizes the cruel treatment against the natives and imperialism through Kurtz. Kurtz has led a horrible life due to his passion for ivory trade. He treats the natives so violently that he regrets what he has done and cries twice as “The Horror! The Horror” (*HOD* 90) before he dies. These words reflect his feeling of remorse despite the fact that he writes “Exterminates all the brutes” (63) in his report about the future guidance of the natives. I

believe that Conrad has chosen these words on purpose to criticize colonialism implicitly. Moore expresses that “Conrad hated imperialism in central Africa because of its savageness, selfishness and devastation. Kurtz’s final words, ‘the horror’, ‘the horror’, are about how a civilized man can change to savagery when there is no restriction” (127). In fact, the horror does not stem from the savagery of the natives. Therefore, Kurtz can be considered as corruption brought to Africa from Europe (Booker 223). Marlow supports this idea by stating that “I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him” (77). Kurtz’s image of savage, greedy colonizer can be regarded as the subversion of European colonialism, and his death proves that colonialism gives harm both to the colonized and the colonizer.

*Heart of Darkness* meets Europe with Africa, in that, Marlow talks about the futility of European colonialism. Said puts forward that “the whole point of what Kurtz and Marlow talk about is in fact imperial mastery, white European over black Africans, and their ivory, civilization over the primitive dark continent” (29). However, the liberal image of colonial adventures is subverted by the violence of colonialism in Europe (Brannigan 143). The natives’ views and pains are represented in a European book. For example, the worth of European modes of representation is obvious when Marlow finds a book, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, in a deserted hut. He says,

Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real (*HOD* 47).

This implies that the Europeans dominate the natives’ lands and the book stands for European discourse. Brannigan indicates that “Africa is merely the fictional projection of a European fantasy in which Europe is the only truth” (144). The natives are seen as inferior when compared to the Europeans and there cannot be any other truth for them, however, Conrad implies that this is unacceptable throughout the novel since his own experiences in Africa contradict with the common belief about colonialism in England.

Conrad chooses Marlow to explain the realities of European colonialism, that is, the situation of natives is narrated through Marlow who is also a European. In other words, he prefers a fictional character to reveal the truth rather than himself. Booker states that “Conrad’s Charlie Marlow is openly critical of much of the European activity that he observes in Africa, especially of the brutal treatment of many of the Africans by their European masters” (Booker 219). Conrad writes with English readers in mind and does not let the

natives speak. However, their silence can be interpreted as silent defiance against the European colonialism since Marlow does not regard the natives as savage unlike traditional colonizers and on the contrary, he is angry with Kurtz due to his mistreatments against the natives.

Furthermore, the title of the book is open to various interpretations. At the beginning of the novel, Marlow calls Africa as “one of the dark places of the earth” (3). In fact, it can be said that the real darkness is in Europe rather than Africa due to European’s mistreatment against the natives. Conrad gets benefit from metaphors such as “When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night” (*HOD* 49) to indicate the real darkness in Europe rather than in Africa since the Europeans close their eyes to the suffering of the natives. According to Said, both Kurtz and Marlow refer to this darkness, “the former as he is dying, and the latter as he reflects retrospectively on the meaning of Kurtz’s final words” (30). It is clear that Conrad regards colonialism and imperialism different from that of his citizens since he witnesses what the Europeans do in Congo during his journey and that is the reason why; it is possible to call *Heart of Darkness* as subversion of European colonial discourse.

Obviously, Conrad writes this novel so that the Europeans can see the reality since colonialism is just like a robbery or a murder for him. That is, he condemns the evil of colonial exploitation. Thus, it can be said that *Heart of Darkness* is different from traditional Victorian novel since the novel leads the readers to think realistically and reflects the truth of colonialism imposed by England in Africa.

In consequence, a post-colonial analysis of *Heart of Darkness* shows the readers Africa’s suffering and pain caused by European colonization. The novel generally focuses on the moral conflicts of European exploration of Africa. Brannigan summarizes that the analysis of *Heart of Darkness* “enables to locate the novel in the complex system of power relations and cultural representations which form the discourse of colonialism” (153). Conrad also shows how a civilized man turns into a savage when the profits are taken into consideration. His novel reflects the realities of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is, the Europeans regard Africans as primitive and immature to colonize them. Briefly, it can be easily claimed that *Heart of Darkness* is one of the best examples of the subversion of European colonialism since it clearly shows the brutal relationship between the Europeans and the natives.



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