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A Eurocentric Reflection in Josep Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

The two continents, African and European have been in conflict for centuries and their hostility and aggression are derived from two distinct perspectives and portrayals on both sides. The African continent, especially with the start of the exploration of Africa as a matter of colonial and imperial concerns and interests, became a place mostly identified with perceived negative aspects of the country from a European perspective, such as savagery, primitiveness, inferiority, political instability, and conflicts especially in Western literature (European literature). As it is described in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness by the narrator Marlow travelling along the Congo River, Africa is a 'dark place' of the earth. On the contrary, European Continent, namely the Western World is depicted through predominant Eurocentric perception thanks to which Europe has been looked upon by many people as a privileged place in the world. Eurocentrism is a way of seeing the world from a European point of view situated at the high pillar constructed by the European ego. From this high pillar, the European superior ego looks down upon the others who are expected to suffer from a sense of inferiority.

Keywords: Eurocentrism, Greek heritage, Western identity.

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There has been a widely held assumption about the cultural superiority of the Western World. This is due to some extent to the impact of Greek heritage, which Europeans claim as their own. With respect to this heritage, they lay claim that “there is something special about the West, its history, its culture, and its ways of dealing with the natural and the social world” (Helmu Heit, 2005: 726). Ancient Greek stories that address these cultural achievements have been widely read ever since and adopted while constructing the West’s sense of a superior identity. Even today, the Greek legacy is still believed to be fundamental in the definition of Western identity. The Greek legacy is claimed to have created the basis for the Western culture taking into consideration the following aspects:

Premise 1: “Greek culture is exceptional”

Premise 2: “Greek culture has universal standing”

Premise 3: “Only the West inherits Greek culture”

Conclusion: “The West is exceptional and has universal standing” (Heit, 734).

Pointing out the prevailing impact of Greek heritage upon Western identity, Bruno Snell indicates:

European thinking begins with the Greeks. They have made it what it is: our only way of thinking; its authority, in the Western World, is undisputed. When we concern ourselves with the sciences and philosophy, we use this thought quite independently of its historical ties, to focus upon that which is constant and unconditioned: upon truth; and with his help we hope to grasp the unchanging principles of this life (Bruno Snell, 1948: vii).

The fundamental ideology behind the Eurocentric vision bases upon some points such as Western philosophy and science which are claimed to be reasonable modes of thought. They are developed by the Westerners as the unconditioned truths. It was in Ancient Greece where the first trials of these sciences took place and then were inherited by the Westerners. It has been constantly claimed by the European historians that “only the West inherited the Greek legacy by means of an independent and continuous historical tradition” (Heit, 733). Today, even in modern European culture:

Western culture is understood as the most prominent and only legitimate heir of the Ancient Greek discovery of mind. By the use of such rhetoric procedures a certain way of thought is described independently of its historical and cultural ties and as Western at the same time (Heit, 733).

All of the above claims made by Europeans are used to construct the Western identity and Western self-understanding. Thanks to the formation of a Eurocentric vision, Europe defines itself as the center or core of a wide range of nations due to its achievements and developments in world history. The center revolves around the idea that the Western mind, Europe, is the center out of which an outward projection of impressions, hierarchies and prejudices are dispersed. They define the European culture in opposition to other cultures.

Europe is not centered upon a specific nation or geographic region. It is a conceptualization of Western values and thoughts considered good and exclusive. The superior image of the European is constructed by the European mind. The following passage clarifies the meaning of Europe from multiple perspectives:

Europe is primarily not a geographical but a cultural concept, moreover a political and ideological one; indeed, many people attach a cultural meaning to the geographical concept. [This concept] symbolizes modernness, ‘civilisedness, development, pluralism, and freedom, ...to Europeans and a kind of superiority and inferiority, subordination and domination, a centre-and-periphery situation. This, moreover, is not without foundation, since the centuries that have elapsed since the end of the 15th century have been marked by Eurocentrism (Zsolt Rostovanyi, 1998:119).

The root “Euro” used in “Eurocentrism” “somehow overlaps with the word “West” or with the term “First World” (Heit, 726). The word “Eurocentrism” refers to a particular European self-understanding that proclaims and justifies the supremacy of European civilization. Helmut Heit claims that:

Western civilization is distinguished from all other civilizations by the fact that it has science... Science is a unique feature of our civilization; and we owe it to the Greeks (Heit, 734).

Meolefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama regard the term Eurocentrism as a “political, social, and economic world system that emerged with the expansion of Europe during the voyages of conquest from 1492 to 1600” (Meolefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, 2005:235). Rajani Kannepalli Kanth in his *The Challenge of Eurocentrism: Global Perspectives, Policy, and Prospects* defines the theory of Eurocentrism:

This is a tendency toward giving disproportionate attention to European and Western achievements in the arts, philosophy, science, technology, and governance. This includes European voyages of exploration and claims of how certain European adventurers “discovered” Victoria Falls or Mt. Kilimanjaro, or the source of the Nile-or whether Christopher Columbus discovered America (Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, 2009:xii).

To some critics, Eurocentrism is seen as a system and intellectual convention imposed upon others to pave the way for:

[T]he advancement of the European ideal, but in another sense, it may be seen as imperialism, exploitation, and the promotion of greed. These two senses of the same phenomenon have created tension between Europeans and other peoples (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 1995: 84).

The encounter between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Africa in a new periphery marks a shocking, traumatic, and tragic confrontation. The results reinforced prejudices that culminated in racial hatred and discrimination that found inspiration in Eurocentrism. From this perspective, such theory is a propagandist approach rather than an approach that depicts Europe as a geographical boundary. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam indicate that:

Eurocentrism, like Renaissance perspectives in painting, envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally “belittling” Africa (Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, 2014:26).

All in all, the subjectivity of the issue itself is worth discussing within the context of this paper by revealing the practices of the Eurocentric perspective within the context of the African continent and assessing to what extent it has been a leading force in the creation of a civilized Africa. The motivations that prepared European colonialism and imperialism promoted the priority of the European (white) over the non-European. To be able to establish European rule, culture was used to apply imperialism as a method to colonize Africans. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said brings forth the idea that colonial literary texts, one being Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “were immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences” (Edward W.Said, 1994:12).

Joseph Conrad has been one of the most controversial literary figures of his time. His controversy continues today and his works have made a great contribution to the development of postcolonial studies. Regarding Conrad’s novel in relation to the literature of his time, Goonetilleke stresses the idea that:

Heart of Darkness takes off from the tradition of late nineteenth-century romance and adventure, and would be read on this level by the majority as readers of Conrad’s time (D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, 2007:12).

Conrad's novel also directly and indirectly influenced many postcolonial writers such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Gayatri Spivak. He wrote *Heart of Darkness* at a time of European colonial expansion. Conrad's critics illustrate many different responses to *Heart of Darkness*. It is simply related to the stance each critic takes in the discussion upon this novel. The diversity of their criticism results from the ambivalence of Conrad's position as a writer and his approach to controversial issues of the nineteenth century, such as colonialism, imperialism and racism. To some critics, the novel is an attack on colonialism and imperialism, while for the others, Conrad favors too keenly the racial ideologies of his time and of several critics. Considering the projection of Congo in *Heart of Darkness*:

Conrad's (and Marlow's) Congo journey took place at the high tide of imperialism and racism in European history (1889-1920) (D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, 17).

Colonialism, imperialism, and racism are few of the major subject matters of the novel. By the 1890s, Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and Portugal were the great European imperial powers that were in conflict with each other to take over the 'dark places' of the world to extend their colonial boundaries. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

[Marlow] presents imperialism at its most horrific and ugly moments, also reconstructs the Western belief about natives in the way they are described through Conrad's eyes: dark, mysterious, weak, threatening, unconscious, and lacking comprehensible speech (Shimrit Peled, 2010:360).

Edward Said derives two different discussions about the novel in his essay "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*". In one of these arguments, he implies that despite leaving their old colonies, Westerners "retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually" (Edward W.Said, 25). Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* writes that:

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end (Edward W.Said, 25).

Contrary to the depiction of the heroic character, Marlow, as 'the self', the representatives of Africa, especially the chained slaves of the Congo River, are presented as inferior objects:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. 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 (Joseph Conrad, 2012:17).

As illustrated above in the portrayals of black people who are used for the railway construction, these are the slaves living in poor conditions as 'the other'. The image of Africa portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* is an image of another world and an opposite image of Western civilization. In other words, it is the encounter between the 'self/Us' and the 'other/Them' as described by Achebe:

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 (wildness)... (Chinua Achebe, 1978:3).

The priority is given to European superiority instead of handling both European and African values equally. Charlie Wesley states that:

Much of the criticism that surrounds this novella [...] is focused on the European subjects of the text, and therefore renders Africa and its native peoples as a kind of backdrop (Charlie Wesley, 2015:20).

Cannibalism has been acknowledged as an act of barbarism from the European perspective which leads to the inhumane treatment of the African natives. Black people are presented in such a humiliating way that they are likened to wild creatures living in a jungle and called 'cannibals'. Despite including references to cannibalism several times, Marlow never sees the Africans do anything cannibalistic in reality. He often depicts the Africans as if they were cannibals:

Twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing... Fine fellows-cannibals-in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them (Joseph Conrad, 43-44).

Because it is the general tendency of the Eurocentric perception towards Africa, Africans are presented with all possible negatives.

Chinua Achebe in his essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" illustrates the following European viewpoint:

[Q]uite simply it is the desire-one might indeed say the need-in Western psychology to set Africa 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 manifested (Chinua Achebe, 13).

Edward Said puts forth the idea that European superiority or hegemony ignores the 'others/Them' and adopts a Western perspective which permits Kurtz's imperial acts. He criticizes Conrad by saying that:

He writes as a man whose Western view of the non-Western world is so ingrained as to blind him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations. All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West, in which every opposition to the West only confirms the West's wicked power. What Conrad cannot see is an alternative to this cruel tautology. What Conrad cannot see is an alternative to this cruel tautology. He could neither understand that India, Africa, and South America also had lives and cultures with integrities not totally controlled by the gringo imperialists and reformers of this world, nor allow himself to believe that anti-imperialist independence movement were not all corrupt and in the pay of the puppet.

The setting of the novel is described as a strategic place by the Thames outside London from which the story of savagery, wilderness, barbarism and primitiveness is narrated by the spokesperson of the great European civilization. It is a perspective of the point of view from which the Western civilization looks down on the Africans: "In fact, for an English sailor the mouth of the Thames would mark the point between the light of civilization and the unknown ends of the earth (Jeremy Jericko, 1984:31)".

Eurocentric propaganda was created to exalt what Europeans have achieved as a civilization and to portray that Africans have remained "cannibals, savages, and inferior, uncivilized, backward, primitive people, devoid of knowledge and culture and possessing evil traits and desires" (Linus A. Hoskins, 1992, 248). Such adjectives with direct negative detonations have been translated into a connotative impression which has taken Africa and Africans as the least form of inhuman existence. When the distance of hierarchy between the West (white) and Africa (black) as the binary opposition is so distinct, the relationship between these groups has become a master-slave relationship.

Achebe acts as a mouthpiece for the viewpoint that affirms Conrad's Eurocentric vision in his novel. Conrad is controversially denounced and criticized harshly as being "a thoroughgoing racist" by Achebe in his "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*":

Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art (Chinua Achebe, 1978:9).

Achebe also deviates from his early accusation of Conrad of being a racist by highlighting the fact that Conrad was the product of the Western imagination which he could not eliminate from affecting himself:

Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his mind to bear on it (Fadwa AbdelRahman, 2005:185).

The problem of comprehending Conrad and his approach to Africa is the problem of determining whether he is a racist, a Europeanist, or a man of literature with artistic sentiments.

When Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, there was a growing European interest in remote and virgin land which could be exploited economically. The period marks imperialistic expansionism of the European core towards the virgin periphery. The result became colonialism in Africa which is exemplified by the undeniable white presence there. It was at this time that colonialism reached its peak. Slavery was accepted as an established institution and was considered to be a rightful action by the white man who was then considered to be the only representative of human civilization.

The novel may seem to claim a Eurocentric point of view because it is based on the depiction of a white observer of the dark African environment. The darkness is ironic in that the European eye is not yet used to perceiving the darkness with the European eyes that are trained in using the light in order to distinguish details. The European Marlow is such a visitor who needs some time to get his eyes adjusted to see the facts that lie underneath the domineering darkness.

If the novel is claimed to be Eurocentric, it is to a certain extent, but only superficially observing the other land with eyes that have not adopted the required capability to see deeply into it. Marlow as the narrator needs to spend some time in order to see or perceive the environment by adopting an African perspective and by adapting himself to the reality of this environment. Therefore, the novel is Eurocentric in the first phase when Marlow reaches Africa and starts his journey along the Congo River.

The more he proceeds with his journey, the darker it gets. However, the more he covers distance, the better he begins to see in darkness. After being able to penetrate into the depth of the utter darkness, he could see and understand better the devastation of the black people:

They were dying slowly-it was very clear. 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 (John McLeod, 2000:20).

Finally, he understands the limits where Eurocentric sentiment can reach and finally yield to some African reality. Conrad's approach is to depict the Africans through the European lens before setting out on a

voyage to the Congo. However, during the journey, the transformation of Kurtz into becoming what once he has been “a primeval being” demonstrates to what extent the European lens projects the African reality.

Conrad’s approach to the African reality is not racist but it is Eurocentric until Marlow proceeds halfway through on the Congo River. However, it is ultimately artistic which yields deep psychological aspiration on the transformation of a European who has been brought up with the myth of European civilization but who remains utterly inarticulate at the moment when he falls into the depths of his eternal darkness.

Joseph Conrad set out on a journey into the darkness of Africa with his own thoughts in his mind as Jeffrey Meyers states in his book about Conrad’s biography:

Conrad at first believed the high-minded propaganda about bringing the benevolent light of civilization to the Dark Continent. Only after he reached the Congo and seen the brutal exploitation of the resources and the people did he realize it was "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (Jeffrey Meyers, 1991:96).

He gained many experiences while sailing when in Africa, which he recorded in his *Congo Diary*. This later turned into the widely known novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Peters states that:

Despite the colonial enterprise being depicted in Europe as a humanitarian endeavor, Conrad found a great deal of greed, waste, and chaos... Conrad’s experience in the Congo had an enormous impact on him. Despite its relative brevity, it would affect him for the rest of his life and as much as anything else influenced his outlook on civilization and human existence itself. His criticism of the abuses and disorder he witnessed was unrelenting, as evidenced in his various writings on the subject (John G. Peters, 2006:4).

Marlow narrates the story as he follows Kurtz who is the European representative. He calls Kurtz “the poor chap” (Joseph Conrad, 6). At the same time, based on his own experience in Congo, he recounts his arrival into the colonial environment where Kurtz exploits the Africans and becomes the ruler of an African tribe. Marlow brings to light the characteristic European treatment towards Africans by means of Kurtz’s acts (Shimrit Peled, 2010:341).

Jeffrey Meyers suggests considering the novel as the first important text in English literature because it opposes:

The idea of progress, which had been a dominant idea in European thought for the past four hundred years, and to question the very foundations of Western civilization. It shows the antagonistic interests of civilization and colonialism, portrays the disastrous clash between the white man and the African, and suggests the humane values that are needed to survive this conflict. Marlow, who represents the European conscience that Kurtz has abandoned in the depths of the jungle, measures colonial experience in human and moral terms. Unlike Kurtz, he is sceptical about what Western materialism can do for the Africans, and recognizes that colonialism is a completely destructive practice (Jeffrey Meyers, 191).

While depicting the portrayal of Africa, it is inevitable to encounter a European centered creation, interpretation and myth relying on the European civilization which defines the 'self' (Europe/ the West) in comparison with the 'other' (Africa/ the East). The orient is positioned into an inferior place to justify the mission to civilize those inhuman African natives.

To conclude, the European vision has been formed using the superiority of one race. It indisputably places the white race over the rest of the savages that were located in an invisible periphery of a center that was purely white. This vision was blocked by European privileges, such as imperialism, colonialism, and slavery.

As one moves away from the center, the racial color scale begins to get darker, eventually becoming purely black.

As consequences of these European systems, Eurocentrism imposed exploitation, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Being exposed to this European ideal, the African was considered as an object in an inferior position. Rajani Kannepalli Kanth claims that:

Eurocentrism shortchanges the achievements of other peoples and cultures... Almost all Eurocentric histories of religion ignore entirely indigenous African traditional religions, although these beliefs and values continue to influence millions of people to the present day (Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, 13).

However, only one characteristic 'blackness' could not have been bleached by the European efforts. As long as blackness remained a permanent color of skin, it continued to be a single identity which caused further use of power of Europeans, as well as an unbearable torture of the blacks since "Eurocentric ideology has refused to accept Africans on the basis of their humanity because of the color of their skin" (Linus A. Hoskins, 248).

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