

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Remarkable Trace Reflections on Colonialism and Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the issue of colonialism and racism in Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness. The researcher surveyed scholarly articles, books and other sources relevant to the area of the research, providing a critical evaluation of this work. Basically, the title carries a rich connotation which indicates darkness in the colonial European psyche, making it disproportionate to equate physical darkness with spiritual darkness. The common characteristics of savagery between the Europeans and the Africans are traced back to a mutual dark and weak civilization, which in turn makes room for the more powerful to impose imperialistic rules on the less powerful. Further, this paper shows that the European banner of 'civilization' is hypocritical and raised to legitimize the false authority of taking over the jungles of Africa. The scenes revealing their corruption, including their acts of violence and murder, are concluded to be the dominant features of the civilization which they exalt. There is too a metaphoric but ironic correlation between the Africans and the Europeans regarding worshipping idols, as the white man is praying to ivory, and the black man is practicing questionable beliefs of spirituality. Moreover, the European ignorance of the dark continent shapes the fictional perception of black people and the African landscape as "prehistoric". Besides, there is a point of distinction between the white man of culture and the black man of nature, yet this gap neither justifies conquering Africa nor disgraces the African cultural inheritance. At last, there is a parallel image presented with regard to the European empire representative, Kurtz and his alleged possessions. Kurtz's white fiancé and Kurtz's black mistress portray the gap between European ideals and African disconnection with the least implications of civilization, which both are ultimately denounced by European imperialism.

#### KEYWORDS

African, civilization, colonialism, darkness, European.

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#### 1. Introduction

قال تعالى: "وجعلناكم شعوباً وقبائل لتعارفوا إن أكرمكم عند الله أتقاكم" سورة الحجرات [13]

"And we have made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" [Al-Hujurat 13]

A verse in the Holy Qur'an, a source for one of the three Abrahamic faiths, states that God created man for all to get to know each other and communicate. However, some still have that prejudiced attitude towards other races, even those who believe in religious scripture, such as the European colonizers. The white man discriminates against the black man and considers him, at best, his servant to contribute to his development. The white man attributes his claims of superiority to the Bible, a religious reference which states that the sons of Sam are given the credit for being superior to other races. As such, the period between the late 19th century and early 20th century witnessed the peak of European colonization in Africa, consequently filled with ideologies introducing negative presentations of Africans by intruders (Agbaw quoted in Deena, 1997).

It is worth reflecting on the historical background, which serves as the framework of the time the novel was written. In 1880, King Leopold II of Belgium received word from the Berlin Conference that he was credited with taking over the Congo. He settled there and claimed the state his personal property. He argued that he was going on a humanitarian mission to develop the area, yet he practiced the most loathsome systems with forced labor, enslavement and murdering of the indigenous people. According to Morel (1970), during the Belgian regime, the Congo registered bloody records, and the real color of its humanitarian reforms came up, but Europe still appeared to mask its imperialism.

While historical records show evil events happening within the African continent by the Belgians, the literary records hold some light for the European part. It is widely acknowledged that *Heart of Darkness* is one of the great artistic works of the period. It's a novel written between 1898-1899 by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad. Scholars and critics praise it in great part for being a solid attack on colonialism. The latter can be traced back to Conrad's early life, as Singh (1978) believes. According to Singh, Conrad suffered from the suppressive practices of the Russian control over Poland, only to be exiled to Siberia later on. His profession as a sailor offered him a sense of openness to the world, so he went to the Congo to observe the situation there. The colonial system was immensely loathed by him, so his journey up the Congo brought him many psychological challenges. The sickening experience he witnessed and perhaps partook in eventually forms the story of his novel *Heart of Darkness*.

The novel narrates the fictional story of Charlie Marlow on his way up the Congo River in a steamboat to retrieve a business trader, Kurtz, and the adventures he encountered frame the story of this novel. Blake (1982) sees that the novel is not concerned with Marlow's voyage to the Congo but rather a journey into the human heart. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* draws significant attention to the false justifications for taking over the jungles of Africa, destroying its greenery, killing its people and dehumanizing them. The claim for these acts lies in that the Roman Empire had once invaded England nineteen hundred years ago; hence, it was England's turn in its place. With this in mind, Europe granted itself the authority to control the heart of the jungle, deprive the natives of their land and abuse their way of living. On the other hand, a European slogan is raised to defend the imperialistic intentions the white man carries, that is, to 'civilize the uncivilized'. As the Europeans presumably claim that the indigenous people of Africa are savage and primitive, they behave in a more barbaric way than the so-called African "savages". In other words, the Europeans practiced all ways of exploitation, robbery with violence and aggravated murder behind the banner of spreading democracy and civilization. In the report recommended to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Kurtz argues that white people are much like deities as he compares them to the so-called savage Africans.

## **2. Methodology**

The researcher used qualitative descriptive data to compile information from books, online journals, and articles, with the novel itself being the primary source. The basic aim of this study is to critically analyze the theme of colonialism and racism in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. While analyzing the novel alongside the existent literature, the researcher has uncovered a number of juxtapositions and conclusions which portray well-set Western colonial ideology. Thus, it is a way to eventually point out the various endeavors the researcher has sought to make them stand out and outline the discourse analysis alongside authentic quotations from the novel itself, accompanied by a thematic explanatory approach throughout the whole body text of the paper.

### **2.1 Data**

Conrad selects the title of his novel *Heart of Darkness*, that is, the heart of the jungle in the dark continent, particularly the Congo. It is assumed that it is called as such due to the complexion of its natives, but that doesn't mean that dark-skinned people possess hearts of figurative darkness. Singh (1978) suggests that the title itself formulates different levels of metaphors as it alludes to the geographical position of the Belgian Congo and the complexion of its native residents, the rapacious colonial doings in the Congo as well as the cruelest ways of exploiting its inhabitants.

Another level brought on by the title draws attention to the 'real' darkness that lies in the hearts of the whites who engage in colonial ventures and not the hearts of the black people. Marlow tries to find a way out of the European darkness manifest in the white man's corruption by attributing it to the African man. In other words, truer darkness lies inside the human heart that can be extremely destructive and has nothing to do with the color of one's skin. As for the black people, "they meant no harm" (Conrad 41), yet exercised against them are the most brutal systems of exploitation and murder. White people in that time, on the other hand, who may have had innocent faces, committed crimes against the blacks, stole their resources and claimed the land as one of their own possessions. Sarvan (1980) suggests that while the story might be looked upon as the journey that ends with the gloomy realization of the disintegration of a European's mind, it may be emotionally complex for some readers to look into the novel as such. This is due to the assumption that Conrad searches for an exterior counterpart for a physical setting to fit the spiritual darkness in the heart of Africa. Since the white man went to Africa carrying morbid intentions, it would be foolish to immortalize the power of his existence. Put simply, the novel revolves around the idea that white dominance absolutely has an end. The toys of the European empire, Kurtz and the 'sub-Kurtzes', who have been thrown as seeds in the heart of the jungle, work for its interests, eventually losing themselves in the process of exploiting the black people. So do their energies through excessively exercising bloody power over the natives. Besides, the complexity of the artistic symmetry, which conflates the physical setting {represented

by the dark complexion) with the psychological setting {represented by the darkness of the soul}, is superficial because this overlapping cannot be juxtaposed. It is merely the stereotypical image the mind reinforces with reference to the apparent image.

Marlow mentions that the Roman Empire invaded England nineteen hundred years ago, and he alludes to Roman dominance by saying, "Darkness was here yesterday" (Conrad 3). If this insight is reversed to be directed at the European invasion of Africa, it is certainly their darkness which prevails over the dark continent and not the darkness of the black people. England had once been weak, the thing which enabled the Romans to preside over England. Nineteen hundred years later, Europe became the imperial power that dominated the submissive wilderness of Africa. Sarvan (1980) claims that the Romans looked upon the British as barbarians. Likewise, when the Europeans call the Africans "savages", that old savagery still takes place in the European psyche. It seems that the colonized people in each reflection represent a kind of savagery related to a lack of civilization since Europe once had a dark civilization. From the Europeans' point of view, the Africans don't have the standards of civilization. Thus, it could be argued that there is a sort of resemblance between the European past and the African present, as both have common characteristics of perceived barbarity. In the name of the white man, the black man is a savage thing, and by providing such a portrayal, the white man is practicing his old savagery on the so-called "savages" as they were once archaic Europeans of a barbarous existence. This resemblance concerning wild qualities is presented in the novel as a sort of "remote kinship" (Conrad 28) from which the white man is appalled.

But what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough, you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend. (Conrad 28)

Said (1993) believes that Conrad's narrative carries an imperial attitude in depth as it is associated with the horror of the European mission on its way to the heart of the jungle where Kurtz's ivory-trading company is. The narrative touches on a sensitive issue, which is the driving force for the Europeans to invade the jungles of Africa: "The duty of the civilized man is to teach civilization to the uncivilized" (Muhammad quoted in Miyakawa 2003). Put another way; it is an imperial mission under the mask of benevolence that calls for development, civilization, cultural sophistication and industrial revolutionary manifestations as well. In contrast, the European sophistication carries in depth those atrocities done in the Congo behind the slogan of civilization and humanitarian pretexts. Moreover, Kurtz's ivory trading company is an integral part of the systematic robbery of the European empire that works with the colossal contributions of the indigenous people of the Congo to extract ivory, which is the backbone of European commerce with its several stations alongside the Congo River.

And the fact remains that in 1903, seventy five years after the abolition of the slave trade (because it was cruel), there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration, and bad faith towards all the other states the basis of commercial policy (Najder quoted in Watts, 1983).

Civilization is in no way a means to destroy the lives of others, strip them of their humanity and rather exercise against them the ugliest faces of murder to keep the remains of their bodies, be it their arms or even heads, as a symbol for European colonialism. Belgium has a museum in Tervuren near Brussels called "The Africa Museum" which unfolds the ugly and harsh reality of Belgian colonization that took place in central Africa, namely the Congo. The museum displays mummified remains of Congolese prey as well as wild animals shipped from Africa. Civilization ultimately carries the most compassionate manifestations of life, including appreciation and respect for other people and different cultures, and reflects a mindful way of thinking and tactful social interactions with others. It seems that the white man is conflating urbanization in the sense of industrial revolution manifestations and modern electronic inventions with civilization in the sense of having a cultural respectful identity. The white man is distinctly urbanized but undoubtedly not civilized because a civilized person is never a bloodsucker and a joyful murderer, so he is out of touch with civilization as he devastates it with false impressions and wrong apprehension of its concepts. Brantlinger (1985) indicates that Kurtz is devoid of civilization, a bloodthirsty cannibal whose followers make human sacrifices for his sake, and decorates the poles of his house with the skulls of his Congolese prey. It is merciless to the point of demonic transformation: "The powers of darkness have claimed him for their own" (Conrad 37). Getting rid of a human soul becomes a sort of pleasure and glorification of the corrupt nature of that European representative. Furthermore, Hawkins (1982) draws attention to the source of Kurtz's corruption, which stems from his homeland and himself, and argues that the driving force behind his going to the Congo is the theft of its natural resources. The latter is done by means of the ivory trade in the stations alongside the river, then coming back to brag about the huge wealth he collected. To clarify, it is rapacity and greed that bring Kurtz from Europe to the heart of the jungle so as to indulge himself in ivory, hoping that a promising future awaits him. Moreover, Marlow mentions Kurtz, saying, "My Intended, my ivory, my career, my ideas\_\_ these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments" (Conrad 53), in which everything is his property. He employs questionable methods to collect more ivory and exercises the most

vicious ways to "Exterminate all the brutes" (Conrad 39), from which Watts (1980) suggests that it is a reference to Kurtz's moral corruption. Once Marlow describes Kurtz as a man whose head "was like a ball- an ivory ball" (Conrad 37), these are indications of a manipulative colonial system built on something close to 'innate greed'.

The claim of superiority on the European part goes back to ethical sickness because the white man fails to understand that black people are human beings, and rather, he is ashamed of acknowledging any of the glorious manifestations of the dark continent, although he knows deep down that he is depriving the indigenous people of their vitally natural resources on which the Africans are thriving. More importantly, Kurtz recommended a report to the so-called International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to suggest a better way of dealing with the "savage" Africans. In other words, that is the hypocrisy of the European civilization. Rather, Kurtz claims that he exerts efforts to transfer those "prehistoric" ( 28) cannibals into human beings:

'By the simple exercise of our will, we can exert a power for good practically unbounded. . . All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, and by and by, I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report for its future guidance. And he had written it, too. (Conrad 39)

As for belief systems, Brantlinger (1985) suggests that while the Africans look upon Kurtz as a deity who leads them to light and impresses them with his stereotypical civilization, the Europeans are obsessed with ivory, money, power and reputation. A metaphorical image is presented in the sense that both worship idols with the contrast between a human idol {Kurtz} on the Africans' side and a materialistic idol {ivory} on the European side, including Kurtz.

We whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might of a deity' (Conrad 39)

Even though the inhabitants of the Congo have certain rituals and ceremonies that the Europeans are sarcastic of, the white man has his own 'atheist' belief system. In the name of the Cross, the Europeans are invading the Congo, yet simultaneously, they are praying to ivory. As for the pilgrims who entered the land and dissected the tribal system of the towns, they are faithless representatives of God on earth since a faithful Christian has nothing to do with the acts of bloodshed and humiliation. If the white man feels like he has the responsibility to make the Africans convert to Christianity, he can apply more responsive methods that may be appealing to them other than the horrific ones: "Some of the pilgrims behind the stretcher carried his arms—two shot-guns, a heavy rifle, and a light revolver carbine-the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter" (Conrad 47)

With reference to the analysis of the positive images the mind fosters for a mentally familiar geographical space (Bachelard quoted in Shatty, 1989), the mind automatically enhances negative images for a mentally odd geographical location. Shatty (1989) points out that this idea is worthy of examination in the European realization of the alienated setting of Africa as hostile, primitive, and messy. Conrad writes, "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad 27). Therefore, their ignorance enhances the misleading attitude concerning this space, which means that the European depiction of the dark continent, including its people and landscape, is part of their projection. Landscape is part of our identity as it unfolds the significance of our belonging to our homeland. The link between landscape and identity in relation to Conrad's beliefs about the Africans' belonging to the jungle mirrors Marlow's visualized conception of them as he alludes that they are lawlessly combined with unlimited barbarity of the African landscape including the Congo (Salih quoted in Santangelo 1999).

Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation into such mysteries either. (Conrad 3)

Let us assume that Marlow is an epitome of Europeans, which means that their visualization is bound by a prejudiced mind because there is a connection between the African landscape and the black people's identity to indicate that the so-called wild traits of the African landscape are transferred into the black people. Nonetheless, the problem is with the term 'wild' because nature in no way carries negative connotations with regard to savagery. The African wilderness is one of the greatest manifestations of nature, and it is full of extreme beauty and breathtaking creations. Similarly, Firchow (1937) notes that the Congo River is not like a snake encompassed with a prehistoric forest as described in the novel; rather, it is a vivid canal where several stations go along, including many steamers moving around while Marlow is in his voyage.

But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land (Conrad 5)

The river has nothing to do with the imaginative ugly characteristics as referred to. In the eye of a believer, it is God's perfect creation on earth, and these foul perceptions, such as untamed, dangerous and wild, are just a reflection of the sickness present in the European mentality. To attribute gruesome and evil characteristics to a landscape through imagery in the novel is an attempt at justification for the white man's visualized ugly perceptions.

Johnson (1997) states that Africa is presented as the lively image of the very first beginnings of the world and European investment in a "prehistoric earth" (Conrad 27) inhabited by a "prehistoric man" (Conrad 28)

The earth seemed unearthly.... and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces (Conrad 28)

A "prehistoric earth" as well as a "prehistoric man" are stereotyping labels used by the white man to attribute negative connotations to the Africans. While they may be primitive, they are not in the way of the European understanding. To illustrate, black people are primitive in a way that "they have a simple life" (Conrad 41) devoid of the complicated manifestations of advancements disseminated in different parts of Europe. Correspondingly, Johnson (1997) argues that Marlow's presentation of the Africans evidently sheds light on the gap between the African man of nature and the refined man of Europe. This concept is right to an extent due to the African's detachment from the norms of civilization and the Europeans' attachment to these manifestations of progress. Yet, this doesn't justify the violent exercises that took place in the Congo by the Europeans in general and King Leopold II in particular. On the other hand, nature and culture complement each other in that nature teaches us how to live life. Africans are in harmony with nature, and that gives them a sort of peace and inspiration. Nature is also the source of humanity, providing man with simple techniques to live life. Also, we learn that lesson of compassion from the experience of living in the wilderness, including its greenery, breeze, rivers and even animals, throwing away the complexity of life represented by visualized sophistication and worshipping materialism to the point of sickness. Culture, however, is the complex sophistication of the new reality of life where man is introduced to its complicated principles, including politics, economy and etiquette, as the white man embodies them, which leads him to do his best to look superior to the black people taking into account the ugly reality of the fake refined principles he carries which has no connection with civilization and humanity. Even though the Europeans are bragging about their culture, their self-detachment from the norms of civilization makes them behave in a more barbaric way than that of the man of nature because the white man is corrupted by materialism. Strictly speaking, the white man invaded the land, bragging about the complexity of his persona and the banner of civilization he raised.

In addition to the vivid association of the black people with nature, which, as claimed, strips them of culture, the Africans have a cultural identity far from the European claim on the degradation of the African cultural heritage: "We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil" (Conrad 27). The Africans have rituals which are a rich source of their legacy on the land. On top of that, Curtler (1997) refers to Marlow's admiration of the African civilization in its cultural "restraint" that has the ability to compromise the greed and foulness surrounding Kurtz. Even Kurtz gets a bit impressed by their lifestyle as he takes part in certain ceremonies the black people hold and welcomes their way of life despite his power and being much like a godlike commander. Rather, he has a relationship with a "savage but superb" black woman (Conrad 47). It is interesting to note that black people have a well-respected civilization partially presented by the introduction of a code of conduct revolving around "restraint". For instance, cannibalism is part of the African rituals, but when the black man is on-board a ship, he does not eat human flesh even if he is in a state of extreme hunger. On the one hand, the black people have the capacity to control their desires presented here by hunger, whereas the white people have no principle to restrain themselves from raping the African land and devouring its ivory: "Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (Conrad 45)

Achebe (1977) remarks that Kurtz's African mistress provides a savage parallel to his sophisticated fiancé, who is described in the novel as pale but somehow anemic. Robertson (1980) also argues that paleness and anemia are lethal symptoms of materialism, whereas the black woman is presented as "savage but superb". It seems obvious that the black woman is presented through the so-called wild characteristics of nature, where the African landscape is highly fascinating. Kurtz's 'Amazon' (represented by the Africans) is a healthy, gorgeous lady, whereas Kurtz's Intended (represented by the Europeans) is presented with regard to the tragic and deadly consequences of sickening materialism. That is, too, undoubtedly the case for European imperialism, on which its bases are built on materialism. Symbolically, Santangelo (1999) argues that this descriptive disparity in the image presented for the two women parades the gap between European ideals and wild Africa in need of enlightenment, from which both are denounced by European imperialism. As colonialism calls the African cultural inheritance in question and endangers the validity of European ideals, both sides are striving to find an identity in the face of the ugliness of European imperialism, which likely distorts the manifestations of both sides.

### 3. Conclusion

The significance of the title comes from the darkness that lies in the deeds of the Europeans rather than in the hearts of the Africans who have dark complexions. It is fallacious to equate physical darkness with spiritual darkness because the African continent has nothing to do with the horror left by the European missions, which invaded its land and exercised some of the worst immoral transgressions upon its native people. Colonialism is the real darkness, and that was applicable to the Romans when they invaded England nineteen hundred years ago, and that's now worthy of examination on the European invasion of Africa. There is a sort of correspondence between the remote past of Europe and the ugly present of Africa where both relate to the common characteristics of savagery since the Roman man once took a barbaric look at the European man, and this look repeats itself through the wild and savage impression of the Europeans upon the Africans. This means that the white man, as well as the black man, would share the same quality of barbarism. Besides, the European conquest had the plan to steal the raw materials of the African landscape and practice the cruelest ways of murder and tormenting the indigenous people for the sake of exploitation and claiming authority, and these evil intentions are hidden behind philanthropic and religious pretexts that call for bringing civilization to the "prehistoric earth". The white man, however, is cut off from the very manifestations of civilization.

"To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (Conrad 21)

There is also a sort of similarity between the Europeans and the Africans as both worship idols since the white man is obsessed with materialism, and the black people have weird spiritual beliefs, including their glorification of Kurtz: "You don't talk with that man—you listen to him" (Conrad 41). What's more, the European unfamiliarity with the dark continent, including its inhabitants, polishes their fanciful perception {represented by savagery} about the landscape and the black people. The gap between nature and culture draws a line between the white man and the black man. Europeans brag about civilization and question the cultural inheritance of the Africans, which is of extreme value. Last but not least, there is a parallel image presented to portray the barbarian but awesome Kurtz's black mistress and the sophisticated but pale Kurtz's fiancé. This portrayal displays the gap between European principles and reactionary Africa while both are fed up with the ugly reality of European colonialism.

The researcher thinks that the history of European dominance is bound by an imperial myth by justifying the legality of taking over the jungles of Africa, dehumanizing the black race and exploiting its weaknesses. Nevertheless, it is no more than void claims that white superiority prevails over other races. This false authority led the Europeans to settle in the heart of Africa, where they invaded. However, the land does not belong to them, and they have no legitimate right to rob its natural resources and strip its people of their humanity.

قال تعالى: "ان الارض لله يورثها من يشاء من عباده" [سورة الاعراف الاية128]

"Surely the earth is God's, and He bequeaths it, He gives it, to whom he will from among his servants."  
[Al A'raf 128]

That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected (Achebe 215)

Ultimately, European history is built on colonialism and discrimination and has thus become almost intrinsic that its manifestations repeat themselves in different places at different times.

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