

An Analysis of Orientalism in *Heart of Darkness*

HUANG Min

Correspondence: College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

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Abstract

The world is commonly divided into the West and the East, two parts that are inherently not alike in many aspects but are tied in one way or another. However, the clash between the two led to the superiority of European powers and hence created a point of view from which Western imperialists understood the Orient and the relation they had with it. Edward Said gave the term “Orientalism” to refer to this mode of representation of the Orient from Western imperial powers’ imagination, while Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a novella that is exactly centered around the interplay between colonialist and natives from the colonial viewpoint, or in other words, their Orientalist prism. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad shows much sympathy for Africans’ suffering and harsh condemnation of the imperialism. However, at the same time he unwittingly assumes sort of Western White’s superiority and commits the myth of imperialistic ideology by distorting the images of African land as wild, dark, barbarous, mysterious and backward, African people as barbaric, savagery, greedy and primitive while African culture as wicked and horrible.

Keywords: orientalism, *Heart of Darkness*, African land, African people, African culture

1. Introduction

1.1 Edward Said and Orientalism

Edward W. Said is one of the greatest pioneering founders of postcolonial criticism (Bilgin, 2021; Said, 2014). His masterpiece *Orientalism* “construes the long history of Franco-British-American writings on the Near Eastern Orient as a massive, systematic, disciplinary discourse engaged not merely in depicting but also in structuring and ruling over the Orient in a consistently racist, sexist, and imperialism manner” (quoted in Zhu, 2001). He argues that the Orient is “almost a European invention, and [has] been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 2001). Contrary to the West, which is depicted as rational, ordered, virtuous and civilized, the Orient is stereotyped as irrational, disordered, depraved and barbaric, a mirror stage of what is alien and inferior to the West. The Orient helps to define the West as its contrasting images, idea, personality, experience and hence the Orient exists for the West and is fantasized and constructed by the West. Indeed, Orientalism is “a manner of regularized or Orientalized writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and Western ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient” (Li, 2004). By making statements about the Orient, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, Orientalism in short is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (Said, 2001). Therefore, through distorting the imagery of the Orient, the Western imperialists claim their justified ownership of the Orient under the mask of bringing civilization to these primitive backward savages.

1.2 An Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness, as a typical representative work for postcolonial studies, is a novel based on “Conrad’s voyage to the head-waters of the Congo and his personal impressions of the geographical and social conditions of that exploited country” (Beach, 1971). The author, Conrad, who lived in an age of Europe’s largely uncontested imperialist enthusiasm and “whose Western view of the non-Western world is so ingrained” (Said, 2002), is blinded to other cultures and other histories. Therefore, his novel on the one hand renders fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, on the other hand paradoxically embodies some kinds of “paternalistic arrogance of imperialism” (Said, 2002). To some extent he is both criticizing and reproducing the imperial ideology of his time (Said, 2002). In *Heart of Darkness*, he shows much sympathy for Africans’ suffering and harsh condemnation of the imperialism. However, at the same time he unwittingly assumes sort of Western White’s superiority and commits the myth of imperialistic ideology by distorting the images of African land as wild, dark, barbarous, mysterious and backward, African people as barbaric, savagery, greedy and primitive while African culture as wicked and horrible.

2. The Distorted Representation of African Continent

Conrad, as the creature of his own time, subconsciously depicts the African continent as a land of wilderness and darkness, disease and death to satisfy the exotic tastes of Western audiences.

2.1 *A Place of Wilderness and Darkness*

In the novel Conrad drains his vocabulary to present us a picture of “wild and dark” African continent. When Marlow has just arrived at his African destination, what comes into sight is a boiler wallowing in the grass, boulders and an undersized railway-truck lying on its back with its wheels in the air and even one of the wheels off. The adjectives used are decaying, rusty, dark, feebly and dull, all unpleasant. Besides, stepping on the land is compared to wandering “on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet” (Conrad, 1994) and a general feeling of isolation arises. Furthermore, the land is even “unearthly”, like “a thing monstrous and free” (Conrad, 1994). All natural settings on the land, such as the woods, the bush and the vegetation are primeval and mysterious: “[the] great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence” (Conrad, 1994). The oppressive and incomprehensible mysteriousness of the land is repeatedly emphasized and therefore suggests a menacing force which encircles all forms of civilization, a presence of universal destruction (Liu, 2008). Under Conrad’s pen, the African landscape, primitive and backward, is “a place of darkness” (Conrad, 1994).

Even the Congo river, the river fostering millions of African people is depicted as mysterious, horrible and “fascinating—deadly—like a snake” (Conrad, 1994), appearing to be “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, 1994). Marlow recalls that “[going] up that river [is] like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warts, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine.” (Conrad, 1994) The journey along the river is like “a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” and the water exudes the smell of primeval mud (Conrad, 1994). Thus African land is described falsely as a primordial continent, mysterious, barbarous, evil and dangerous, “an imaginary fantasy of an unexplored piece of land which [is] made up by Westerners” (Xie, 2010). It is served as a foil, remote yet a familiar antithesis of the West and hence the powerfulness, distinctive civilization and exclusive superiority of the West are able to be exhibited.

2.2 *A Place of Disease and Death*

The vast continent Africa is presented as a place of “darkness” haunted by disease and death. In the novella, diseases rage in Africa to the extent that lack of disease is considered remarkable. And the exact reason why the manager wins his position at the station is that he is the only man who doesn’t seem to get ill since “triumphant health in the general rout of constitutions is a kind of power in itself” (Conrad, 1994). Besides Africa is also depicted as a place plagued with death. Such a point is foreshadowed in the dialogue between the doctor and Marlow. When the doctor asks to measure Marlow’s head due to his habit of measuring the crania of those going out there, Marlow asks casually and thoughtlessly: “And when they come back too?” The doctor’s answer is thought-provoking: “Oh, I never see them...and, moreover, the changes take place inside” (Conrad, 1994). In such a remark the danger of going to Africa is implied and warned. Another episode contributes to strengthen that Africa is a place haunted by death. In a chat with the captain of a little sea-going steamer, Marlow is informed that a Swede “hanged himself on the road”. As for the reason, “[who] knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.” (Conrad, 1994) Some deadly scenes Marlow witnesses himself later on further confirm that African land is a place haunted by death. After landing at the mouth of the Congo, Marlow runs into a grove filled with dying Negroes, too broken in health to work on their chain gangs any longer. They’re ominous and wear an expression of “deathlike indifference of unhappy savages” (Conrad, 1994). Conrad drains his vocabulary to bring the “insoluble mystery”, barbarity and desolation to the reader’s mind. “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” (Conrad, 1994). Marlow is assailed with the scene of death once again on his way to the Interior Station, where he observes one of the most astonishing and horrifying scenes: the symbolic stakes with human skulls on them. As Xie asserts, “Those heads on stakes, with many other similar objects, indicating the savage and cruel deeds conducted here are parts of what are in Africa” (2010). Everything the narrator Marlow encounters on his way to Africa is imbued with ominous omen and deathly stillness.

An overwhelming fantastic and sinister atmosphere is created in Conrad’s untrue and improper depiction of African land. In this way Conrad caters for Westerners’ fantasy of the Orient. Thus, Conrad’s adoption of sort of imperial beliefs and attitudes and his conspiracy with imperial culture are revealed.

3. The Distorted Representation of African People

3.1 *The Distorted Representation of African Men*

“An Oriental man is first an Oriental and only second a man” (Li, 2004). This is how African men are similarly depicted in the novel. Through Marlow, who is no more than a technical device with which Conrad subtly and impressionistically develops his story, Conrad unconsciously marginalizes African men and shows his prejudice towards them by misrepresenting, fragmenting and totalizing and silencing them. Firstly, African men’s image is distorted as prehistoric, primitive, ignorant savages with no civilization. On the trip down Marlow gets his first glimpse towards African people: “black and naked, moved about like ants” (Conrad, 1994), in great contrast to his reference to the Westerners as “the pilgrims” in the novel (Conrad, 1994). The African is termed a “madhouse”, contrasting sharply with the Westerners’ depiction as “sane men” (Conrad, 1994). To the Whites, African men are “prehistoric”. In many cases they are even dehumanized as horrible “savages”, “cannibals” and “brutes” without humanity. To speak plainly they are even turned into animals: “the men were—no, they were not inhuman. Well you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman” (Conrad, 1994). Here Conrad is assuming the European has a faint suspicion that the African after all may be human, which is perhaps even worse than a statement that simply states that African are inhuman. We could dismiss a statement that says Africans as inhuman as just hyperbole, but to suggest “this suspicion of their not being inhuman” has an edge that seems even more racist. Besides they’re cunning, lazy and dishonest: “[a] nigger wad being beaten by. They said he has caused fire in some way” (Conrad, 1994). Under the brutal colonial rule, no matter how hard the African work for their masters, they’re discriminated against and oppressed (Li, 2004). Even the fire man on the ship, the only one who has been trained by the Whites and thus is considered as “an improved specimen” of his barbarous black African kinsman, cannot escape the discrimination and dehumanization from the White masters.

What’s more, under Conrad’s pen Africans are highly fragmentary and totalized. They, instead of being viewed as whole human beings, are fragmented as just “a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage” (Conrad, 1994). Instead of being viewed as individuals they are totalized, with individuality deprived: “[they] howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; 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” (Conrad, 1994).

Worse still, African people are deprived of a discourse to defend themselves in the face of such unfair and untrue accusation. Throughout the novella, the only few sounds made by the African are just like animal groans. The voice of the black people is conspicuously absent from the text. There’re only two times that they are granted to “speak”. One is when confronted with the attack launched by the tribesmen, a nigger bestially and brutally groans: “[catch] ’im...catch ’im. Give ’im to us...Eat ’im!” (Conrad, 1994) What the Africans are allowed to express is their desire to eat their own kinsman. Thus their primordial and brute nature is brought out. Evidently Conrad means to cater for Westerners’ imaginary fantasy of African natives that they are no better than cannibals. The other time they’re granted to “speak” is at the death of Kurtz the manager’s boy “said in a tone of scathing contempt—‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead.’” (Conrad, 1994) According to Li, the reason why an African is allowed to speak this time is that Conrad wants to “prove how native Africans are silly, dumb, emotionless, and inhuman in contrast to Western Whites” through their own spoken words (2004).

As Conrad misrepresents, fragments and totalizes African people and deprives them of their voice, his Western white ethnocentrism and Orientalist beliefs are woven into the story.

3.2 *The Distorted Representation of African Women*

An investigation of the distorted images of African women may further interrogate Orientalist beliefs and imperialist ideologies embodied in the novella. Among the altogether five women characters mentioned in Marlow’s narrative, only one is black, Kurtz’s mistress in Africa, a character contrasting greatly to Kurtz’s Intended. Although Conrad quite unexpectedly spends considerable descriptive development of her, she is portrayed and presented as wild, savage, gorgeous and sinister, just like all African black men.

The first time she appears, she is presented to the reader as a “wild and gorgeous apparition” (Conrad, 1994). To the Westerners, “[she] is less a woman than an unworldly vision” (Wei, 2006). In describing the appearance of the savage woman, through Marlow, Conrad gives the reader a detailed depiction of the “barbarous ornaments” on her, instead of her body, evaluating that “[she] must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her” (Conrad, 1994). Obviously, as Wei notes, the woman’s body here is highly commodified rather than viewed as a full human being, becoming the thing on which value is displayed (2006). Furthermore the African woman also symbolizes the mystery of the jungle. Marlow relates: “[the] immense wildness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (Conrad, 1994). With the jungle personified, the black woman, “like the wilderness itself” (Conrad, 1994) is equated with “the image of its

[jungle] own tenebrous and passionate soul". As Xie argues, the black woman becomes a symbol of the mystery of the jungle and "What she presents are 'ominous' atmosphere and 'barbarous' behaviors, which is totally beyond the white's comprehension" (2010). All these are contrasted sharply with the depiction of the graceful Intended, who is "beautiful and refined, and stands as an image of the goodness, beauty and elegance of the West" (Wei, 2006).

Not only is her appearance distorted, but her voice is also silenced from start to finish. Unlike Kurtz Intended who is able to speak and to express herself to her content, the mistress is kept dumb and totally deprived the right to speak from beginning to end. Among the deprivations is also her right to express her affection and her lamentation towards Kurtz. To some extent Conrad unwittingly condemns Kurtz's African mistress for she helps complete his degeneration and his doom while he praises his Intended, who drives him to seek wealth so that he will be financially worthy of marrying her, for her love of Kurtz and her determination and glory in Kurtz's belief (Li, 2004).

4. The Distorted Representation of African Culture

Apart from African continent and African people, African culture is also distorted as primitive under Conrad's pen. On the trip upstream the white men catch glimpses of villages where ceremonial rites are being performed. Marlow describes: "we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse... They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces, 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" (Conrad, 1994). In Marlow's eyes, the Africans are mad men performing mad rites, which even degenerate into a fiendish row, as is revealed a little further on in the novella (Wei, 2006). The ceremonies which are part of African indigenous culture are distorted to be the performance to invoke the powers of darkness and the call of wilderness inside human beings. Meanwhile the African are labeled as the devotees of the dark power. By making Marlow go ashore to devote himself to his work, Conrad implies that the appeal from the wild rites must be quenched, and the temptation should be resisted. With an ingrained Western view of the non-Western world, all Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West (Said, 2002). In his eyes other cultures are all corrupt.

Furthermore, Conrad attributes Kurtz's moral degeneration, corruption and sinning to his overexposure to the "darkness" of African culture and a physical and mental isolation from Western civilization. From Marlow's later account of various talks about Kurtz, we get to know that Kurtz was originally a person of exceptional talents and culture with a promising future, "a universal genius" (Conrad, 1994) before he set foot on the barbaric African land. Indeed he appears to be the very embodiment of that civilization which the African wilderness has so comprehensively annihilated. "All Europe contributed to the making of Mr Kurtz" (Conrad, 1994), says Marlow.

Nevertheless, after he comes to Africa and embraces African culture, he descends abruptly to greed and commits numerous crimes despite that he has been equipped with Western civilizing ideals. After "it [the wilderness] had taken him [Kurtz], loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation", Kurtz is reduced to a devil who spares no efforts to acquire the ivory, even with violence, deception, and other shameful methods instead of legitimate trade. The "darkness" of African culture is incisively further brought out by an incident that sick Kurtz tries to escape from his Western fellows to rejoin his tribesmen. The primitive African culture, imbued with wilderness, becomes the embodiment of "darkness" that awakens the white men's "forgotten and brutal instincts by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions" (Conrad, 1994). Kurtz, infected and swallowed by alien African primitive and barbarous culture, is a typical victim drawn and seduced to depravity due to his irresistible possession of an awakened fiery thirst for African lawless gratifications. In the face of the seduction of barbaric and mysterious African culture, Kurtz is incapable of fidelity to the Western civilized values he has professed and of fulfilling the divine mission of civilizing the barbarous Native, just as he is incapable of restraint from human weakness—greed and therefore he indulges in his "African lusts" (Berthoud, 1978). Surrounded by primitive African culture, even such a civilized man can't stand the test of evil and could be reduced to a devil. Thus, the wilderness, savagery and darkness of African culture, as a ghostly antithesis of civilization, are highlighted.

By distorting, criticizing, and condemning that savage African culture is corrupt and should be blamed for Western White's degeneration and corruption, Conrad's Western White's superiority is subconsciously showed.

5. Conclusion

According to the above analysis, the novella *Heart of Darkness* is imbued with an Orientalist mode of representation of the African continent, African people and African culture in Congo all improperly and untruly represented from the European imagination. To satisfy Western exotic tastes, the African landscape is twisted into a mysterious and dark place haunted by disease and death; African people are misrepresented as savage and barbaric cannibals with their voices muffled and their identity marginalized in an exclusively Westerners-centered realm; African culture is distorted as corrupt, primitive and blameful. To conclude in Said's words, "[the] Orient [is] almost a European invention" (2001).

We can similarly say that *Heart of Darkness* that represents Africa is also a European invention.

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