

Joseph Conrad's Anti-Racism

-- A Post-Colonial Reading of Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

Heart of Darkness, written by Joseph Conrad, is mainly based on his own experience in Congo, telling the journey of the protagonist Marlow through African jungle to search for an African invader Kurtz. It has always been a controversial work for its ambiguous attitude towards racism and colonialism. In this essay, by analyzing Marlow's attitude towards the Africans and the European colonizer Kurtz as well as the African wilderness, I argue that Conrad, instead of being a "racist", is actually an anti-racist, who means to disclose the atrocity and avarice of the European colonizers and reflect his anti-racism in his writing.

Keywords

Anti-racism; Heart of Darkness; Joseph Conrad.

1. Introduction

Conrad is "a bloody racist" (Achebe 788), and *Heart of Darkness* is an "offensive and totally deplorable book" (Achebe 788). Many readers may empathize with Chinua Achebe when they are reading this novel, because in which there are too many descriptions that could be taken as Conrad's prejudice as well as discrimination towards Africa. He depicts Africans as "black bones" (32) with "sunken eyes" (32), and even the "black shadows of disease and starvation" (32). Moreover, in his work Africa is presented as a degenerated and brutal place where is the heart of darkness. Therefore, it is no wonder that Chinua Achebe, as a Nigerian writer, would feel so offended that he angrily attacked Conrad as a "racist" in his lecture "An Image of Africa".

It is generally agreed that Conrad's description of Africa is full of racial discrimination. However, different from Chinua Achebe's understanding, other critics offered opposite interpretations of these seemingly negation. Cedric Watts, in his "'A Bloody Racist' About Achebe's View of Conrad", declares "Conrad most deliberately and incisively debunks such myths" and tries to "transcend such prejudice" (Watts 208). He believes that *Heart of Darkness*, is rather than a work reflecting racial prejudice of Conrad, but an "expose of imperialist rapacity and violence" (Watts 279).

As for what he really meant in his work, Conrad didn't make any explicit comment. Just as he once said, "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel-it is, before all, to make you see. That- and no more, and it is everything" (Swisher 35). This essay therefore, resorts to his written word and attempts to see the truth lying in them. By interpreting Marlow's attitude towards the natives, and the European colonizer Kurtz as well as the African wilderness, this essay attempts to demonstrate that *Heart of Darkness* is indeed a work that tries to disclose the atrocity of European colonizers and Conrad is actually an anti-racist.

2. A Distant Kinship

Despite that Conrad adopts the first-person narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, most of the novel is narrated by the protagonist Marlow, sharing his journey through African jungle to search for Kurtz. In other words, the story is presented to readers from Marlow's point of view. Marlow is a special narrator who is located in but not confined by colonial discourse system. Though he was familiar with the essence of colonial discourse, his speech is not subject to the stance of white imperialists. Instead, his narration breaks the boundaries between the White and the Black, between civilization and savage and even between Africa and Europe, all of which are revealed in his speech as they really are. Just as Conrad tells his own experience through the narration of Marlow, he also indicates his values and ideology through Marlow's point of view. As a result, we may as well take Marlow as Conrad himself when we are trying to read Conrad's thought and views in *Heart of Darkness*.

Edward W Said once in his *Orientalism* claimed that "nineteenth-century Europeans tried to justify their territorial conquests by propagating a manufactured belief called Orientalism—the creation of non-European stereotypes that suggested "Orientals" were indolent, thoughtless, sexually immoral, unreliable, and demented" (Murfin 267). It is true for Conrad's writing about the Africans in his *Heart of Darkness*. He called them "Black shapes" (31), "phantom" (32) and "black shadows" (32). "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair" (31), "These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin" (32), such kind of descriptions are everywhere in Conrad's writing, whose "Orientals" are also morbid, diseased, intolerable and appalling as those showed by Said. On the other hand, the Europeans, the so-called superiors, are shaped as civilized, intelligent, and advanced in *Heart of Darkness*. They are "amazing" (33) with the "unexpected elegance" (32), which is a striking contrast with those "black shadows".

However, even though in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's writing about the Africans is full of negation and discrimination, and the Europeans admiration and appreciation, an observant reader may find something different under such ostensible binary oppositions. In fact, Conrad did leave some indications to readers in Marlow's narration about his journey.

In Marlow's journey through African jungle, it occurred twice to him that they, the Europeans, shared the same blood with those "black shadows" (32), which suggests Marlow's awareness of the equality between the so-called advanced Europeans and those savage natives. The first time is when he saw a lot of blacks dancing together.

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. 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. (52)

Just as Marlow relates, these blacks are too ugly and unearthly to be considered as human. But if a man is brave enough, he must admit that he has kinship with these blacks, which is actually what Marlow did at that moment. To illustrate in another way, what Marlow realizes at that moment is that no matter how savage and how ugly these black people are, that they are still human beings as the Europeans are is an undeniable fact. It can be seen that Marlow, rather than takes these blacks as "other", he considers them to be his kind, to be human beings as he is. Therefore, when he saw them dancing, howling and leaping, he generated a sense of pity and even responded to that noise involuntarily.

The second time that Marlow realized their kinship with the Africans is when the black helmsman was killed by a spear. Even though in his description, the black helmsman is "the most unstable kind of fool" (60), when the black helmsman died, he did feel pity and sorrow. "I

missed my late helmsman awfully-I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house" (67), Marlow said. People might think it strange Marlow's regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand, but for him, there is a "kind of partnership" (67) between him and the black helmsman.

It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me-I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory-like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment. (67)

Marlow's words once again show his awareness of the kinship with the Africans. He pitied them, worried them and cared for them. He is an European, but he is different from those Europeans who regard the Africans as "enemies" (30) and "criminals" (30). In his eyes, they are human beings deserving pity and care.

When Marlow referred to the atrocity towards the blacks, his narration is full of satire. The black workers were given three pieces of brass wire to buy provisions in river-side villages, but Marlow suggests he didn't see what these "extravagant salary" (57) could do any good to these workers, because there were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director didn't stop the steamer. "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us—they were thirty to five" (57), Marlow's confusion reflects his knowing about how cruel and brutal the European colonizers are. And his satire shows his hatred to the European colonizers as well as pity to the natives.

Through Marlow's narration about his experiences, we can see that in spite of the savage of the Africans, he still recognizes them as human beings and shows his pity to them. And as we discuss above, Marlow's point of view is Conrad's in fact. Therefore, we can say that Conrad, shares the same idea with Marlow that Africans have the kinship with Europeans and thus should be treated as human beings as Europeans are. And therefore, Conrad is an anti-racist. Furthermore, it could be concluded that Conrad's presenting the Africans as such kind of "Orientals" is not to show how demented and diseased they are, but to disclose the atrocity imposed by European colonizers. It is the European colonizers who exploit the Africans so greedily that the Africans are driven to such a miserable plight.

3. "The Horror! The Horror!"

Marlow's story is about his journey through African jungle to search for an European colonizer Kurtz. In the process, we have caught a glimpse of his attitude towards the Africans. To further prove his anti-racism, or we can say Conrad's anti-racism, we might as well have a look at Marlow's attitude towards Kurtz, from which we can also perceive his opinions about the European colonizers.

Kurtz was a "first-class agent" (33); "He is a very remarkable person" (33), Marlow was told like these before he met Kurtz. Everybody seemed to admire him and even envy him for his talent of stealing large quantities of ivories. Marlow's first impression of Kurtz was constructed through the words of the manager and his uncle. It is said that on his way to sending the ivories back to European, Kurtz turned his back and set his face towards the depths of the wilderness and never showed up. Marlow didn't see the motive and thought that Kurtz was perhaps "simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake" (47).

Later, Kurtz was presented as a "gifted creature" (63), who was endowed with the "gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible" (63). Marlow was so attracted by him that he was eager to meet him and talk with him. So far, the image of Kurtz appeared as a sound, which was shaped as positive and affirmative.

Not until Marlow saw Kurtz by himself did he achieve an insight into him. When he first saw the place where Kurtz lived through his glass, what came to his sight were heads, "black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids" (74). "They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in them-some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (74), Marlow explained. From his words, readers can tell that at this time Marlow was already aware of the "deficiency" (74) in Kurtz. He realized that "the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire" (31) had driven Kurtz mad and crazy. To satisfy his endless desire, Kurtz could kill the Africans as he wanted. He hung the skulls around his hut to threaten the natives who may not obey him. Faced with the atrocity of Kurtz, Marlow said, "I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors" (75). Even as an European, Marlow was appalled by the violence and devilry of Kurtz. It could be seen that, on the one hand, how brutal and inhuman Kurtz is; on the other hand, Marlow feels shameful for what Kurtz had done to Africa as well as the natives. This could be further proved from Marlow's reaction when he was told the heads were "heads of rebels" (75). "I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers- and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks" (75), Marlow relates. His words once again bitterly criticized the atrocity of Kurtz and showed his pity to the natives. He meant to say that these natives were not enemies, not criminals or rebels. Instead, they were their kind; they were innocent and harmless human beings.

In addition to disclose Kurtz's cruelty towards the natives, Marlow further described the physical appearance of Kurtz to indicate his negative attitude towards Kurtz. "I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its body head that nodded with grotesque jerks" (76), Marlow relates, "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" (76). Marlow's words on the one hand, vividly reflect the violence and greediness of Kurtz, who attempted to conquer the whole world at any cost; on the other hand, his words also inform readers of the real image of Kurtz. He was once described as the "first-class agent", "a remarkable person", and "a gifted creature". But now just having a look at his physical appearance scares and horrifies people. His desires, his lusts and his violence are not only imposed on the natives, but also imposed on himself and have driven himself mad without his own consciousness. He led a horrible life because of his endless desire; he had become "hollow at the core" (74), but he was too insatiable to stop. Just as he returned back to Africa once, he still, at the end of his life, hung on to the wilderness of Africa.

Kurtz died crying his last words "The horror! The horror!" (86). But when asked by Kurtz's Intended what he said at last, Marlow told her "your name" (94). Some critics claim that Marlow changed Kurtz's last word because he wanted to protect Kurtz's reputation as he assured the Russian, and also keep Kurtz's Intended from knowing the atrocity of her fiancé. Different from these opinions, I believe that Marlow's changing Kurtz's last word intended to highlight the contrast between the real image of Kurtz and the one shaped by other's words. Just as the "remarkable" Kurtz in people's eyes is turned out to be a brutal, inhuman, and horrible one by Marlow's own experience, Marlow meant to once again imply that Kurtz, and even the European colonizers are not as civilized as they are shaped. And they can never justify their colonialism by disguising themselves as the advanced. "The horror! The horror!" (86) is more than the feeling of Kurtz about his lusts and desires; it is also the feeling of Marlow towards the atrocity of Kurtz.

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that Marlow, even though as an European, holds different opinions towards colonialism. He pitied the natives exploited by the European colonizers, and he hated the cruelty and brutality of Kurtz and even all the colonizers. Therefore,

it can be seen that Conrad's writing about the blacks and the white is trapped in a stereotype of binary oppositions on the surface, but in fact he is trying to deconstruct the binary oppositions in his writing. The blacks actually have the kinship with the European, and the "advanced" and "civilized" European are turned to be inhuman. And Conrad's belief that the European colonizers would finally pay for their own atrocity and endless desires is fully articulated through the death of Kurtz.

4. "Heart of Darkness"

Chinua Achebe once attacked *Heart of Darkness* as "racist" for it "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world'" (277). However, like Conrad presenting the natives and the Europeans as a binary opposition just to deconstruct it, I argue that Conrad's depicting the wilderness of Africa as the "heart of darkness" is not to vilify or demean Africa, but to allude to the darkness of those European colonizers. And Conrad, in his writing, actually indicates that the wilderness in Africa is not the symbol of degeneration or disease; on the contrary, it is full of divinity.

At the very beginning of his journey to search for Kurtz, Marlow described the African jungle as an "overheated catacomb" (29). And he continued to narrate "all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders" (29). Marlow's calling themselves as "intruders" shows that he had a clear knowledge of himself and the European colonizers. He knew that no matter Kurtz, or himself were both intruders to this land. And in Marlow's opinion, this land seemed to be full of divinity for it made a lot of trouble for the intruders and tried to ward off their intrusion.

A comparison between the station and wilderness also shows the degeneration of the Europeans and the divinity of the African wilderness. "A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse" (38), said Marlow when he talked about the station. The European colonizers are described by Marlow as "faithless pilgrims" (38), and "They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands" (38). With "faithless" and "absurd" such kind of words, Marlow expressed his hatred and satire towards these European colonizers. On the contrary, outside the station, Marlow related "the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth stuck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (39). In Marlow's narration, the wilderness is something that contains the truth, "the mystery, the greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life" (41); she is silent, but she is invincible. In contrast, the European colonizers are so foolish and ignorant in Nature's eyes. They will get their reckoning due one day. The wilderness knows that well.

All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabberer about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? (42)

This is another contrast that Marlow intended to show the readers. The General Manager bragged about himself while the wilderness contemplated; the ignorant man was so conceit while the wilderness was very modest and silent. Compared to the profoundly big wilderness, Marlow once again realized the insignificance of human beings. As Marlow felt, the wilderness would one day "sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (45).

In his later narration, Marlow referred to the gaze of "stillness" of the wilderness for several times, which further reflected its divinity. "It looked at you with a vengeful aspect" (49), "I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks" (50), Marlow said. It can be seen that at that moment, Marlow as an European, was very shameful for what his kind had done to Africa and the natives. His calling the ivory trade "monkey tricks" shows that he knew

the European colonizers were doing something illegal and immoral. As someone who still could see the truth, Marlow had already noticed the premonition of the revenge from the wilderness. Kurtz, an insatiable predator, trampled on this land relentlessly, exploited this land recklessly, and mistreated its people cruelly, who finally received the punishment from the wilderness. "the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion" (74), suggests as Marlow.

To conclude, from Marlow's description about the wilderness of Africa, we can see the wilderness of Africa is presented as something full of divinity and mystery, instead of a degenerated or diseased one. On the contrary, the station and the European colonizers are demeaned and criticized through the comparison with the wilderness. As Walter F. Wright, in his 1949 essay "Ingress to the Heart of Darkness" wrote "We perceive the Africa itself, with its forests, its heat, and its mysteries, is only a symbol of the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man" (Harkness 155).

5. Conclusion

In fact, Marlow travelled through African jungle not so much searching for Kurtz as finding himself. Through his journey, he realized the African's kinship with Europeans; he learned about the atrocity of European colonizers, and he felt the divinity of the African wilderness, all of which are so different from his previous knowledge received from others. Without his own experience, Marlow might be another Intended of Kurtz, who was ignorant about the atrocity of their kind and would justify their colonialism with their hypocritical theory. Marlow's knowledge about himself didn't come late as Kurtz's, so he left this land early enough to prevent his desires from swelling. However, Kurtz, who surrendered to temptation, lusts and endless desires, proceeded towards self-destruction at last.

By presenting the natives and the European colonizers as a binary opposition and then deconstructing it, Conrad, through Marlow's point of view, reflects his negative attitude towards racism and colonialism. Just like his narrator Marlow, Conrad also found his own reality in his experience in Congo. Heart of Darkness is a story about Marlow, and it is also a story about Conrad, about how he found the knowledge about colonialism, about Africa, and also about himself.

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