

Anti-Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*

Ji Junjun^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor,, College of Continuing Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 4 February 2017; accepted 8 April 2017
Published online 26 May 2017

Abstract

This paper demonstrates that in the novel *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad consciously exposes and criticizes the darkness brought by colonialism from three perspectives, namely, Colonial Exploitation of African Land, Dehumanization of the Black African People, and degradation of the White.

Key words: Anti-colonialism; Colonial exploitation; Dehumanization; Degradation

Ji, J. J. (2017). Anti-Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*. *Canadian Social Science*, 13(5), 30-33. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/9497>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9497>

INTRODUCTION

Heart of Darkness, first published in 1899, is a story of a journey into “darkest Africa” and is considered one of the best novels in the 20th century. As a novel with rich symbolic meanings, it provokes various interpretations and is considered as “a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller’s yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and special meditation” (Watts, 2000, p.45). For example, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has written an essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, in which he argues that Conrad’s presentation of black Africa is thoroughly racist (Barnet, 1997, p.804). However, my reading is totally different.

In my opinion, Conrad in this novel consciously exposes and criticizes the darkness brought by colonialism. Hence, this novella demonstrates overtly the idea of anti-colonialism. On the one hand, the background against which the novella is written and Conrad’s personal experience can throw us the light. He is a writer with skepticism about the “imperial mission”. This skepticism is related to the facts that he was born into a Poland which had vanished from the map of Europe, and that his parents were doubted for their conspiratorial patriotism. Partly as a result of their political struggle against Russian oppression, both of them died when Conrad was still a boy. In 1890, Conrad took a steamboat up the Congo River into the heart of Africa. This nightmarish adventure made him see the horrible inhuman crimes committed by the European colonists against the African people. The evidence of atrocities, exploitation, inefficiency, and hypocrisy fully convinced him of the disparity between imperialism’s rhetoric and the harsh reality of the “vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience” (LE, 17). This experience provided a basis for the knowledgeable indignation of *Heart of Darkness*.

On the other hand, darkness is the dominating symbol in the novella. The pervasive atmosphere of the book is darkness. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks” (H, 5). However, Marlow, the narrator, remarked that “this also is one of the dark places of the earth” (H, 6). This atmosphere of darkness is reinforced at the end of the novella: “The tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky-seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (H, 132). As is known to all, London is the center of capitalism as well as colonialism. Consequently, it goes without saying that *Heart of Darkness* is a declaration of anti-colonialism. Just as Guerard quotes in his article *The Journey Within*: “*Heart of Darkness* is a comment on the

vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (1958, p.49).

This paper is going to explore the anti-colonialism contained in *Heart of Darkness* from three aspects, that is, colonial exploitation of African land, dehumanization of the black African people and degradation of the whites.

1. COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF AFRICAN LAND

Colonial exploitation of African land is first of all demonstrated in Conrad unmasking the brutal exploitation. According to Guerard, *Heart of Darkness* is "an angry document on absurd and brutal exploitation" (1858, p.49). As a record of things seen and done, it not only presents before the readers a dark and mysterious jungle, but also the corruption of colonial exploitation. In the heart of the forest, one may feel the savagery around him, "that mysterious life of the wildness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the heart of jungle men" (H, 8). However, the most shocking moment when is the so-called "civilized men" rushed into the vast black continent, plundering without mercy. As declared in the story: "The conquest of the earth-mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (H, 140).

The characteristic of economic invasion of colonialism is indicated at the beginning. For example, when Marlow bid farewell to his aunt, he "ventured to him that the Company was run for profit" (H, 29). It is obvious that this kind of trade consists of unfairness and hence exploitation. The readers are impressed that violent robbery is a much more appropriate word than trade, for even a brick-maker's room is full of "native mats", "a collection of spears, assegais, shields, knives" which are hung up as trophies. The ruthless exploitation leads to the destruction of the land. The land is "empty", the grass is "long and burnt",

down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut. The population had cleared out a long time ago. —I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. Only here the dwellings were gone, too. Still I passed through several abandoned villages. There's something pathetically childish in the ruins of grass walls. (H, 31)

This passage alone poignantly presents the desolation in the colonized land, which is the result of the systematic exploitation of African people for the satisfaction of the colonists' power, ambition and self-interest. This shows ironically that it is darkness and backwardness, instead of the flaunted progress and civilization, that are brought into this otherwise rich land. It is the brutal exploitation that transforms the "white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" into a "place of darkness". The land is as a result

"the gloomy circle of some Inferno" (H, 126). In this way, the brutal colonial exploitation in Africa is mercilessly denounced.

Colonial exploitation of African land is also demonstrated in the symbolic meaning of maps. In *Heart of Darkness*, maps appear at the very beginning. The passion for maps of the young Marlow is expressed at the outset: "Now, when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps." What draw his attention are the white spaces on the maps, to be specific, the whiteness of the polar regions: "Certainly, I have never gone there and I never will try again now." since he cannot have the whiteness of the Pole, Marlow tries to be content with the whiteness of Africa: "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river-and as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird." Desire and curiosity are represented on this geographical map where the Congo winds along,

a region given publicity not only by the explorations of H.M. Stanley but also by the Berlin Conference of 1885, which had recognized the existence of the "Congo Free State" as the personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium. (Watts, 2000, p.45)

Hence, the map takes on a symbolic meaning of conquest. With Joseph Conrad, space has been contracted to the size of a title, of a heart. It's no longer a question of the heart of the darkness but the darkness of the heart, the heart to exploit Africa cruelly.

2. DEHUMANIZATION OF THE BLACK AFRICAN PEOPLE

Another aspect of Conrad's anti-colonialism is embodied in his exposing colonialist's dehumanization of the black African people. Going far beyond the mere loot of materials, the so-called "civilized men" enslave and slaughter the Native Africans in an extremely barbarous way, which is authentically depicted in the following fragments:

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. —And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

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. The man seemed young-almost a boy-but you know with them it's hard to tell. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, and then set up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time he let his woolly head fall on his breastbone. (H, 26-27).

Conrad's indignation against racial exploitation is overtly conveyed. The savage scenes described and the

nightmarish atmosphere created here reveal fully the sin committed by the white colonists, that is, colonialists not only exploit the native Africans labor, but also dehumanize them. Their plight is tragic, the treatment to them is inhuman, and their status is reduced to that of an animal. Even worse, their identity is erased. A human being without identity is dehumanized. Does this imply that colonialism has the ambition to exterminate all the brutes? Facing this barbarous act, every conscientious person would be filled with righteous indignation and cannot help asking: Who are the real savages, the black or the white?

3. DEGRADATION OF THE WHITE

The most telling aspect of Conrad's anti-colonialism is his exploring of the degradation of the white, which can be illustrated from the degradation of Kurtz and the other whites.

Kurtz is a character portrayed through the narrator Marlow's eyes and his fragmentary impressions. He is a modern Faust, as Watts points out, who has sold his soul for power and gratification. In this sense, the title of the story refers not only to the heart of "darkest Africa" but also to Kurtz's corruption.

Kurtz was an idealist when he was young. His purpose of setting out for Africa was to get rewards of civilization and progress, and to realize his dream for fame. When he first arrived at the outer station, he bothered the manager because he thought that "each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (H, 54).

However, he turns out to be a demon-like "first-class agent" who "sends in as much ivory as all the others put together". To maintain his divine status among the tribal natives, he even practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism; to consolidate his position, he mercilessly murdered all those who dared to challenge his position and put their heads "black, dried, sunken with closed eyelids" on the fence poles around his residence for "ornamentation". The atrocity makes people's hair stand on its end. Kurtz became a thoroughgoing demon who "lacked restraints in the gratification of his various lusts".

What on earth causes Kurtz's degradation? It is held that

The presentation of Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* may suggest the Freudian conflict-model of the self by indicating that his civilized were "sublimated" versions of repressed barbaric powers which, in the wilderness, can display their original lustful and murderous nature. (Watts, 1982, p.92)

It is to some extent true to view that the causes of Kurtz's becoming inhuman are within—in his desires for power, for material interest, for being worshipped and

for destruction. However, in my opinion, it is colonialism that fundamentally leads to his degradation, for it is colonialism that reduces him into a man with nothing in mind but desire: It is colonialism that makes him a man of faithlessness and inner emptiness, hence a man without restraint. In the depth of jungle, Marlow tells us repeatedly, one is on one's own; there is no external restraint. When confronting the wilderness, a man must "meet that truth with his own stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principle won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief". Nothing remains for them except desire. "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they would earn percentages" (H, 39).

With the exposure of the degradation of the whites, Conrad attacks the idea of white-supremacy fiercely, which is effective in denouncing the assertion that the white men have a moral right to rule over Africa.

CONCLUSION

In short, Conrad's anti-colonialism is demonstrated through the colonial exploitation of the African land, dehumanization of the black African people and degradation of the whites.

In the preface to the *Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Conrad wrote: "And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth." He continued to write: "The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal" (Barnet, 1997, pp.801-802). As far as *Heart of Darkness* is concerned, this "truth" refers to the essence of colonialism—that is the root for the degradation of the white and the dehumanization of the black. Conrad successfully reveals it, reveals it as an act of racial exploitation and human nature distortion. This revelation is insightful and courageous in the closing years of the 19th century. Conrad is actually a great writer in anticipating one of the twentieth-century preoccupations. It has been proved to be ahead of its time, since the issue of colonialism is still of great significance, and the enthusiasm for colonialism never dies. For example, Paul Johnson wrote an article in *New York Times* issued on April 18th, 1993, in which he advocated that it was the responsibility of a civilized country to colonize the backward countries. Obviously, Johnson viewed that those backward countries were incapable of creating their own civilization and their civilization could only be realized through the colonization of the civilized countries. What is more, the other forms of colonization have been penetrating the world, such as the economic pervasion and cultural colonization. As a consequence, it is of high

necessity and significance to reread this novel from the perspective of anti-colonialism.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1977). An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In S. Barnet et al. (Eds.), *Literature thinking, reading, writing critically*. New York: Longman.
- Conrad, J. (1902). *Heart of Darkness*. Hesperus Press.
- Conrad, J. (1987). The preface to the Nigger of the "Narcissus". In S. Barnet et al. (Eds.), *Literature thinking, reading, writing critically*. New York: Longman.
- Guerard, A. J. (1958). The journey within. In C. B. COX (Ed.), *Heart of Darkness, Nostromo and under western eyes: A casebook*. London: Macmillan.
- Watts, C. (1982). *A preface to Conrad*. New York: Longman Inc.
- Watts, C. (2000). *Heart of Darkness*. In J. H. Stape (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.