

**The Cultural Clash in the Disturbing
Wilderness of Heart of Darkness
Dr. Bouregbi Salah
Department of English - Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba**

Abstract

*Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness** is a novel which depicts the clash between two different and differing cultures: One is seen as enlightening, right, white and European; the other as darkening, wrong, black and African. Both cultures differ in background. The first is conventional, "moneytheistic", and thus adventurous and aggressive; the second is natural, ordinary and 'savage'. So, according to the European logic, light/culture, they are equipped with, is a means to invade the other in order to save him from savagery. But these enlightened ambassadors have reverted into savagery and primitiveness they are supposed to fight. Their deeds and actions are more savage than the Blacks.*

Keywords: *Acculturation, civilisation, clash, colonialism, darkness.*

Résumé

*L'œuvre romanesque, **Au Cœur des Ténèbres (Heart of Darkness)** de Joseph Conrad, décrit un conflit existant entre deux cultures différentes: la première est vue comme éclairante, correcte, blanche et Européenne; la deuxième comme sombre, incorrect, noire et Africaine. Deux cultures qui se diffèrent fondamentalement. La première est conventionnelle, matérialiste, et donc aventurière et agressive; la deuxième est naturelle, ordinaire et 'sauvage'. De ce fait la culture occidentale, logocentrique, justifie la colonisation de l'autre. Elle voit le non-européen comme inférieur et doit être civilisé. Ces ambassadeurs éclairés se sont adonnés à la sauvagerie, qu'ils sont venus combattre.*

Mots clés: *Acculturation, civilisation, conflit, colonialisme, ténèbres.*

ملخص

حاول جوزيف كونراد في روايته "في غياهب الظلمات"، أن يلقي الضوء على الصراع الحضاري بين ثقافتين مختلفتين في الجوهر والأصل؛ الأولى أوروبية ينظر إليها بأنها تنويرية حقيقية ومتأصلة في كل ما هو مادي، وهي من هذا الجانب استعمارية بدائية في فلسفتها، والثانية إفريقية بدائية لا تمت بصلة للتقدم، وينظر إليها باحتقار. عمل كونراد في الرواية على محاربة هذا المفهوم المادي وتحطيمه ويبين أن الأخطر هو الإنسان الأوروبي الذي أسس لمفهوم حضاري استعماري من أجل احتقار الآخر وغزوه، لأنه هو البدائي في معاملته مع الأفريقي وحتى مع ابن جدته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة، الحضارة، الصراع، الاستعمار، الظلمات.

Is man's fidelity to the tradition of civilization the only avenue for freedom and safety? How strong is the hold of civilization on people? Is the civilized really civilized? Against which parameters can a 'civilized' be judged? Is the European the only moral generator, and, therefore, has the right to take in charge everything the other possesses? Can we consider the instinctive natural behaviour of the Blacks as a pure civilization, whereas the instinctively enlightened European life as savage? Who judges whom: The colonizer or the colonized; the killer or the victim?

In his book, **The Colonizer and the Colonized**, Albert Memmi describes the colonized as *another* who is everything, but not the colonizer: Every negative quality is projected onto him/her. Moreover, the colonized is both wicked and backward, a being, who is in some important ways not fully human⁽¹⁾.

The Black emerges as everything the White colonizer is not. He is not seen as an individual, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized and anonymous collectivity. In the context of the Eurocentred philosophy, he is an 'other', who does not merit to be equal to Europeans: he is in need of civilization, education and civility. In other words, he is pushed toward an object and exists only as a function of the needs of the colonizer—the White. Memmi states that "the colonialist stresses things that keep separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community. In those differences, the colonized is always degraded and the colonialist finds justification for rejecting his subjectivity."⁽²⁾

This logocentric European culture ignores both the voice and the culture

of the other—the non-European. This cultural elitism discloses the non-European and makes him inferior. Samuel P. Huntington points out that: "The West in effect is using international institutions, military power and economic resources to run the world in the ways that will maintain Western predominance protect Western interests and promote Western political and economic values."⁽³⁾ Power begets desire, and desire promotes violence and "escalation that leads to global wars."⁽⁴⁾ Western dominance legitimises the European as the master and degrades the non-European to the state of slavery. The critic George Yancy maintains that:

Through the process of ideological structuring, the colonizer and the colonized are deemed opposites in an ontologically hierarchical structural relationship. The former are deemed naturally superior and the latter are said to be naturally inferior and fit for domination. The reality, however, is that the construction of the inferior/monstrous colonized is contingent upon the construction of the European as superior and non-monstrous. The colonized is fixed, because the colonizer does the fixing."⁽⁵⁾

Heart of Darkness illustrates such conflict. It underlines the clashes between two cultures: a culture which is seen as enlightening, right, white and European, and the other as darkening, wrong, black and African. Both cultures are different at the very root. The first is light; the second is dark. So, according to the European logic, light must invade darkness. But light is wrong; darkness is right; light is illusion, darkness is truth. The Light of Europe is lost in the darkness of Africa. Such loss and failure make the

civilization of the invader sceptical, senseless and too weak to resist against the driving force of the darkness. In other words, it is only a mirage on parched sand. But how could we explain such darkness, which swallows up all the light of Europe? The only explanation, in my view, is that lies can never stand in front of truth. The values the White upholds are deprived of most of their moral effectiveness. They can never pay in the strong hold of the

naturalness of the darkness of Africa. The skulls displayed on stakes at Kurtz's compound are signs of such failure. In his book **Joseph Conrad: 'Heart of Darkness'**, Ranidji Lall writes:

The theme is partly the futility of the white men's endeavours in that dark country, the waste of their efforts to civilize the savages, partly the exploitation of the blacks by the whites, and partly the lessons which the thoughtful white visitors like Marlow could draw from their travels into the heart of darkness⁽⁶⁾.

Being there in the Congo River is no longer bringing light and culture, but exploiting land and men. In his article, "Paule Marshall: Conradian Praisesong," published in **Critical Arts**, Amani Konan justifies The Whites'behaviour claiming that evil resides in both Blacks and Whites. He writes: "In **Heart of Darkness** the darkness is found in the great cruelty, greed and ambition expressed in the Whites'behaviour but also in the natives.[...] For Conrad, darkness or blackness represents evil."⁽⁷⁾

Seemingly, Konan is partial in his judgement, or probably it is an attitude seen through a European eye because it is light, which represents evil for the Blacks. The light Europeans have

The primitive naturalness of the Blacks is a mode of life, which has its laws and dimensions. Thus, it is less dangerous compared to the European one. Europeans are primitive instinctively, that is why they are too dangerous. All of them have become what they were not. They were

brought with them is no more than a means to get the land and its richness. Darkness contains its own light, .i.e., it is from the darkness that light should spring up, but not from the outside. Light from above makes the darkness still darker, but light from within the darkness turns darkness bright⁽⁸⁾. In other words, the light of Europe is not really what the darkness of Africa needs or wants: what makes sense there cannot make sense here. There is a difference between the artificial, materialistic light, and the primitive, natural darkness. The light, Europeans bring with them, is only an illusion and the darkness Africans live with/in is the only truth.

idealists and highly humane; they have become moneytheistic fortune-hunters: "They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness."⁽⁹⁾

The ironical narration of Marlow is very significant in such darkness. Irony is truth telling, a way of unveiling the 'unsaid' and the 'should-not-be-said'. It is a kind of defence against truth-telling. But the jungle has revealed that Europeans are only bodies without soul, and what they get as civilization is a tissue of lies. "The trial of the jungle," Jacques Berthoud points out, "can be considered as a test of the degree to which civilization, understood as the sublimation of primitive energies, is more than a mere word,"⁽¹⁰⁾ or in the words of Michael Jones: "The journey up the river yields Marlow only a series of progressively radical cultural dislocations, taking him to a region where he cannot draw upon a familiar moral order to make sense out of what he sees."⁽¹¹⁾

Whites' friction with Blacks and their encounter with the unknown darkness of the jungle make their cultural hybridity turn into disaster. The Whites have reverted to "monsters who must be destroyed to repair the fragile and porous between civilization and barbarity."⁽¹²⁾

When Charlie Marlow, the narrator of the story, steps the Congo River, he discovers that Africa is unknown and mysterious, and the civilization he inherits cannot explain the mystery of such land. Marlow's accomplishments as a third voice are very enlightening. Being an ascetic wanderer, and a keen observer and, furthermore, a cultural commentator, he has learned that light should not come from the outside, but it should spring out of the darkness of the Congo River. Blacks could become victims of Europeans, but they remain the light in the jungle, while these Europeans fall into the heart of darkness. Their civilization becomes imperialism, and their idealism turns

into savagery. The critic Ross Murfin maintains that: "The imperialistic colonialism causes and caused by interpretations of a foreign world that are assumed to be rational but that in fact are erroneous and harmful decodings of impressions that cannot be decoded by Western assumptions"⁽¹³⁾. Moreover, Marlow discovers that the values the White holds are deprived of their moral effectiveness, probably because they are not essentially based on humaneness and universality. "Paradoxically," Jacques Berthoud explains, "it is because of his firm grasp of the norms and conventions of his own society that Marlow is able to recognize the humanity of the members of a 'primitive' culture."⁽¹⁴⁾

The realization of self-discovery is dialogically linked to forgetfulness of self—to observe one's self in a detached personal objective manner. Being sound within is preserving oneself from any corruption or self-interest. We cannot change and thoroughly accept what we are, if we do not accept the other. In the same context, S. M. Jourad writes: "It is not until I am real self and I act my real self that my real self is in a position to grow."⁽¹⁵⁾ Being conscious of whom he is, in this land which is not his, Marlow tries to know the other. He discovers that the difference implies recognition of the other as a separate identity in all its dimensions. He discovers, too, that this other, who is different from him, is real like him.

Marlow learns, in this darkness, that the only way to know the other is to let fall the mask of light these 'pilgrims' are equipped with. This light has darkened their duty and haunted their minds. Blacks are not commodities; they are real. "They want 'no excuse for being there'. They belong to their

environment, and their environment belongs to them.”⁽¹⁶⁾

The striking example of such reality is the responsive frankness of the voice of Marlow, when he hears the vibrating beating drums in the darkness of the jungle. Such scene makes Marlow recall and associate these sounds with the tolling of the bells on his land: “The tremor of far off drums, sinking, swelling, swelling, a tremor vast, faint ; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of the bells in a Christian country.”⁽¹⁷⁾

Marlow discovers that these ‘cannibals’ have a quality that the Whites lack. They are strong enough to stand against any driving force of corruption. They are simple, modest and do not transgress, if they are not transgressed. The defenceless Cargo of the Eldorado Expedition of the White ‘Pilgrims’ is at their disposal, but they do not attack it.

Marlow does not consider Blacks as unreal and unnatural people, because they do not transgress the frontier of the invader. He accuses, instead, the Whites of being unnatural and unreal,

because they do not want to acknowledge that their civilization is false and a lie-like. They judge the other from their own cultural background. In other words, they exclude the other. The outside masks the inside; the same as the company station, which hides the deeds of the inner station. Jacques Berthoud considers such exclusion as an attitude, which shows the failure of the White to accommodate with the Black. He writes: “Their alienation is an internal one : their inability to understand the values, which they are supposed to represent leads them to regard foreign ways as nothing more than illegitimate deviators from their own”⁽¹⁸⁾.

Time and time again, Marlow notices that Europeans have adjusted and adapted their laws in order to control and oppress the African natives. “Virtually all Europeans Marlow encounters in the Congo,” David Ray Ralph states, “are superficial, confused, or strange. Kurtz, of course, has almost completely lost his bearings and suffers from what we would today call a nervous breakdown.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Marlow is deceived by the moral cynicism of the Manager and Kurtz. He portrays them with contempt and deceit, as the following passage illustrates:

I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire ; but, by all the stars ! These were strong, lusty, red - eyed devils, that swayed and drove me—men I tell you. But as I stood on the hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak--eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly⁽²⁰⁾.

Marlow seems to be unable to judge the Blacks because there is no real moral context through which he can

judge them. Furthermore, he begins to realize that Africa becomes more incomprehensible and mysterious, and

thus, it evades his moral judgements, which are based on conventionality and selectivity.

But being neutral, objective and ascetic, one could understand such darkness. "Persons who lack confidence in the validity of their perceptions and beliefs," Ezra F. Vogel and Norman W. Bell point out, "will feel pressures to conform, to accept the beliefs of others as more valid than their own."⁽²¹⁾ These 'cannibals' have a logic that conducts their life. This logic is: if you are hungry, you must eat, and if you are accustomed to human flesh, you can satisfy the growl of your stomach. But Marlow is not accommodated with this kind of logic. Marlow admits that, "what is black in Africa is what has a right to be there." Eloise Knopp Hay comments; "If whiteness finally emerges as vacuity, blackness appears as reality, humanity, and truth."⁽²²⁾

In **Heart of Darkness**, Joseph Conrad makes us believe that these Europeans are hollow internally, and what is real is what they want to get, and the fact of being there. The critic E. K. Hay maintains that: "The European parasites are hollow, we are made to believe, because they have no personal moral vision of their inhumanity and folly, but they are also collapsible because they have nothing behind them—in their society's institutions—to hold them up."⁽²³⁾

The Danish captain Fresleven, who began as "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs," thought

"himself wronged somehow in the bargain, so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick."⁽²⁴⁾ He was murdered by a native African because of this sacrilegious behaviour.

When the native helmsman is pierced by an arrow that comes from the darkness of the jungle, and when his blood stains the shoes of Marlow, the latter gets the impression that death is one—Black or White, death makes no difference in colour. Both are alike: blood is the same. This sameness in blood makes Marlow think of the other as a brother. Such 'good-nigger' "looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary profound familiar manner, and fell upon my feet."⁽²⁵⁾ The critic, Garrett Stewart, adopts such view and considers death as a stimulus for the inner voice of Marlow. "Despite Marlow's deep-seated racism," Stewart points out, "death solidifies the sense of human commonality."⁽²⁶⁾ Though the ways are different, death is one: a spear killed Fresleven the Captain; an arrow killed the black helmsman; and madness drove Kurtz to his end.

Kurtz is full of contradictions. His words do not accord with his deeds. He is torn between his idealism as a civilized, and his aggressivity as a barbaric, vehement murderer. His behaviour is a synthesis and a product of European civilization. He kills for its name, and suffers by its name. He is a broken man. Horrors he has caused, and horrors he is suffering from are due to moral equipment, which fails to protect him against the corruptive circumstances of Africa. "Kurtz," Jacques Berthoud states, "has achieved self-knowledge: but thereby he has also achieved knowledge of mankind. His verdict against himself is also a verdict

against human life.”⁽²⁷⁾

The horror of the void is the result of the lies and hollowness of European civilization. Kurtz is lost in the darkness of another land, which is not his. Such loss shows the failure of the European light to assert itself on the wilderness of Africa.

Clearly, fidelity to lies overtakes colonialists in a lawless darkness.

What Marlow discovers in Africa is that the selfless idealism of European life does not spring essentially from man's soul. It is dictated, instead, by interest and moral selectivity. Kurtz's cry: "The horror! The horror!" is very significant and supports such claim.

Endnotes

- 1-Albert Memmi, **The Colonizer and the Colonized**, trans. Howard Greenfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967): 82.
- 2- *ibid.* : 08.
- 3-Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," **Foreign Affairs**, Vol.72, N°3 (Summer, 1993):40.
- 4-*ibid.*: 48.
- 5- George Yancy, "Colonial Gazing: The Product of the Body as 'Other'," **The Western Journal of Black Studies**, Vol.32, N°1 (2008): 1-2.
- 6-Ranidji Lall, **Joseph Conrad : "Heart of Darkness"** (New Delhi : Rama Brothers, 2001) : 37.
- 7-A. Konan, "Paul Marshall : Conradian Praisesong," **Critical Arts**, Vol.9, N°1 (1995) : 23.
- 8-C. G. Jung, **Two essays on Analytical Psychology** (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1977) : 13.
- 9-Joseph Conrad, **Heart of Darkness** (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin, 1973) :31.
- 10-Jacques Berthoud, **Joseph Conrad: The Major Phases** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) : 48.
- 11-M. P. Jones, **Conrad's Heroism : A Paradise Lost** (Ann Harbor : University of Michigan Research Press, 1985) : 69.
- 12- J. Rivero, "Alpha Behn's Orooroko and the 'Black Spaces', of Colonial Fiction," **Studies in English Literature**, Vol.39, N°3 (Summer 1999): 445.
- 13- R. C. Murphin, "Introduction: Conrad in the Eighties, «**Conrad Revisited : Essays for the Eighties** (Alabama : Alabama University Press, 1983) : 06.
- 14-Jacques Berthoud, *op.cit.* : 47.
- 15- M. S. Jourad, "Healthy Personality and Self-Disclosure," **Interpersonal Dynamics : Essays and Readings on Human Interaction**," Ed. Warren G., et col (Nobleton : The Dorsey Press, 1969) : 725.
- 16- Jacques Berthoud, *op.cit.* : 47.
- 17- Joseph Conrad, *op.cit.* : 48.
- 18- Jacques Berthoud, *op.cit.* : 48.
- 19- D. R. Ralph, "Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**: A Literary Critique of Imperialism," **Journal of Maritime Law and Commerce**, Vol.31, N°4 (Summer 2000): 591.
- 20- Joseph Conrad, *op.cit.* : 43.
- 21- E. F. Vogel, et Col., "Some Interpersonal Aspects of Self-Confirmation," **Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays and Readings on Human Interaction**, ed. W. G. Bemis (Nobleton: The Dorsey Press, 1969): 220.
- 22-E. K. Hay, **The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad : A Critical Study** (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1981) : 137.
- 23- *ibid.*: 139.
- 24-Joseph Conrad, *op.cit.* : 34.
- 25- *ibid.* : 87.
- 26- G. Stewart, "Lying as Dying in Heart of Darkness," **P.M.L.A.**, Vol.95, N°3 (May 1980) : 322.
- 27-Jacques Berthoud, *op.cit.* : 59.

Bibliography

- 1-BERTHOOD, J. **Joseph Conrad: The Major Phases**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- 2-CONRAD, J. **Heart of Darkness**. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973.
- 3-HAY, E. **The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study**. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- 4-JONES, M. P. **Conrad's Heroism: A Paradise Lost**. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985.
- 5-JOURARD, M. S. "Healthy Personality and Self-Disclosure," **Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays and Readings on Human Interaction**. Ed WARREN G., et al. Nobleton: The Dorsey Press, 1969.
- 6-JUNG, C. G. **Two Essays on Analytical Psychology**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- 7-HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. "The Clash of Civilizations," **Foreign Affairs**, Vol.72, N°3 (Summer, 1993): 22-49.
- 8-KONAN, A. "Paul Marshall: Conradian Praisesong," **Critical Arts**. Vol. 9, N° 1(1995): 19-27.
- 9-LALL, R. **Joseph Conrad: "Heart of Darkness"**. New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 2001.
- 10-MEMMI, A. **The Colonizer and the Colonized**. Trans. Howard Greenfield. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
- 11-MURFIN, R. C. "Introduction: Conrad in the Eighties," **Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties**. Alabama: Alabama University Press, 1983. [1-15].
- 12-RAPKE, D. R. "Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**: A Literary Critique of Imperialism," **Journal of Maritime Law and Commerce**. Vol. 31, N° 4 (Summer 2000): 587-98.
- 13-RIVERO, A. "Alpha Behn's Orooroko and the 'Blank Spaces' of Colonial Fictions," **Studies in English Literature**. Vol.39, N° 3 (Summer 1999): 430- 48.
- 14-STEWART, G. "Lying as Dying in **Heart of Darkness**," **P.M.L.A.** Vol. 95, N° 3 (May 1980): 318-22.
- 15-VOGEL, E. F., and N. BELL. "Some Interpersonal Aspects of Self-Confirmation," **Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays and Readings on Human Interaction**. ED.W. G. BEMIS. Nobleton: The Dorsey Press, 1969. [217-224].
- 16-YANCY, George. "Colonial Gazing: The Product of the Body as 'Other'," **The Western Journal of Black Studies**, Vol.32, N°1 (2008): 1-15.