

## البدائية و صورة الأفارقة البدائية في رواية قلب

### الظلام ل جوزيف كونراد

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قسم اللغة الانكليزية - كلية: الآداب - جامعة: البعث

#### الملخص

يحاول هذا البحث دراسة البدائية في رواية قلب الظلام ل جوزيف كونراد. يكتب كونراد عن الأفارقة و حياتهم و يصفهم ب الكلاب و الخيول و الوحوش و أكلة لحوم البشر. انهم يعيشون على أرض ما قبل التاريخ و يمارسون السحر و الشعوذة. و يصور لنا الرقصات على أنها مخيفة و مجنونة و أن الأفارقة يملكون وجوها مخيفة. انهم وحوش و أعداء متمردين و أكلة لحوم البشر. ينصح كيرتز المجتمع الدولي لاضطهاد العادات الوحشية أن يقوم بسحق كل الوحوش و هو يقصد الأفارقة.

كلمات مفتاحية:

البدائية، أكلة لحوم البشر، عادات متوحشة، وحوش، متمردين، أعداء، أرض ما قبل التاريخ.

## **Primitivism and the Image of Primitive Africans in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness***

### Abstract

This research tries to explore the theme of primitivism and the image of primitive Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad writes about the Africans and the life they live. They are described as dogs, horses brutes and cannibals. They live on a pre-historic earth and practice witchcraft and magic. They have savage customs and worship their own gods. The African dances are terrible and the natives have horrid faces. They are savages , enemies, rebels and cannibals. Kurtz advises the International Society for the Suppression of the Savage Customs "to exterminate all the brutes."(p.74).

Key words: primitivism, cannibals, savage customs, brutes, rebels, enemies, Pre-historic earth

## Primitivism and the Image of Primitive Africans in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

In this paper I will try to explore the theme of primitivism and the image of the primitive Africans in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Primitivism in *Heart of Darkness* is shaped by the contours of a journey into what Marlow calls the heart of "primeval" savagery where civilization is constantly threatened because "all the mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungle " stirs also" in the heart of men" as the sea closes over a diver"(48). Marlow and other colonizers seem not to acknowledge that order existed in other cultures. Primitive societies, in spite of lack of written legal documents, were highly organized. They had their courts and their systems and their attorneys. Sanctions and punitive actions did exist in this society which were highly moral. But colonialism , not knowing the moral principle of the native people, presumed that the white people were above all other people. The whites believed they would exploit and behave as they pleased. Marlow, in his description of the landscape of the Congo, suggests that the white men are swallowed up by the jungle of Africa. It is then a corruptive jungle. But what is so corruptive in the African jungle? The land or the people or the absence of any artificial or external restraint by which civilized man curbs and remains unaware of his worse instincts. Marlow seems to suggest both. His description of the people and landscape of the Congo hints at deliberate contempt. I agree with Susan Lorsch when she states that Conrad uses nature in *Almayer's Folly* "to connect the landscape to sexuality" and in *Heart of Darkness* ,"the hidden

wisdom of nature turns out to be that it has no wisdom, that there are no moral truths"(109-110). As a matter of fact, everything concerning nature in *Heart of Darkness* is described as horrible. Conrad introduces his jungle story as follows:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings 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 warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distance.( 48-49)

Marlow is describing his trip up river as a trip into the darkest part of the world, a journey during which nature has nothing pleasant to offer, not even the sunshine that most colonizers adored in Africa. Can this description be from a Romanticist or a worshipper of nature? African nature, according to Marlow, corrupts the colonizers psychologically, and its lawless jungle releases their depravity as it did with Kurtz. Was not Kurtz equipped with Christianity and high moral values? Was not Western civilization superior to the devilish ceremonies of the jungle? How could a superior being fall so low as to exercise abusive dominion over other humans.

Describing the effect of the jungle on Kurtz, Marlow writes:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball, an ivory ball, it had caressed him, and—Lo! He had withered , it had taken him, loved him,

embraced his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation ( 71).

Kurtz, as the above citation reveals, has fallen prey to the dark jungle of Africa. It is an evil which he cannot escape because it is internal more than external. He becomes so entangled in the system that he claims possession of everything: "everything belonged to him....you should have heard him say, 'My ivory, my Intended, my station, my river, my...'" ( 72). Marlow notices the fact that everything belonged to him "was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own"(72). Kurtz, Marlow claims, had become the tool of darkness. When the dying Kurtz crawls to some ritual ceremony, Marlow says:

I tried to break the spell-the heavy , mute spell of the wilderness-that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations, and this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspiration(100).

Then Marlow describes what he sees within the wilderness:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough(99).

Cedric Watts comments on this passage in his article "Heart of Darkness" published in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* : "Marlow seems usually a sceptic...Marlow seems willing to endorse a belief in supernatural evil-and that evil is specifically associated with the people of the African jungle"(54).

Marlow uses the unknown and remote jungle landscape, its unseen dangers and its unexpected obstacles in a mythic manner that carries us back to the beginning of time and human origins to emphasize the primitive state of the lands:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness...we were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil...(51).

For the Europeans to experience Africa is to experience the fall of man

and the curse borne by Adam and his descendants. The earth here had nothing similar to that of Europe. Marlow here echoes Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the description of the fall of man and his expulsion from Eden. The use of words such as "accursed inheritance," "subdued," "anguish," and "excessive toil" reflect Conrad's inability to transcend the Western popular belief of the about the Bible's anecdote of Ham and his cursed descendants.

Primitivism is also seen in the description of the African woman who comes abreast of the steamer. Marlow identifies her with the wilderness. He says of her: "She stood looking at us without a stir, and, like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose"( 92). This citation recalls Marlow's earlier observation that the stillness of the jungle was "stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention, which looked at you with a vengeful aspect"( 56).

Describing the natives, Marlow associates them with pre-historic beings. Men who had not belonged to recorded human history. Marlow writes:

We were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone , leaving hardly a sign –and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly . We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster , but there-there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was 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( 52).

It is the human form of the native Africans that compels the Europeans to accord them a measure of humanity, but it is a troubled measure of humanity that impelled this thought of their remote kinship. The Africans might be human, but they were ugly to look at. With a description like this , would any reader doubt of Marlow's racist feeling? He is reflecting the

mid-nineteenth century view on race. The view produced protracted discussion of African physical characteristics.

Marlow is not qualified to judge Africans: "The pre-historic man was cursing us , praying to us, welcoming us-who could tell?" (52). The question mark at the end, Singh suggests, proves his lack of understanding(44) Also his doubts whether Africans are cannibals show his refusal to go deeper in matter concerning Africans. Marlow does not understand the language of Africans. Sometimes he lets us feel that Africans are the innocent victims of the white man's heart of darkness, and other times he would have us believe that blacks have the power to turn the white man's heart black. This is where he equates the primitives with evil and their skin complexion with a spiritual evil.

Another manifestation of primitivism that has turned Kurtz into a devil is his participation in certain tribal ceremonies which seem to have involved human sacrifice, cannibalism and headhunting. Marlow calls the rites "unspeakable" and later declares, "I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz"( 87-88). His refusal to try to understand the significance of the rites of Africans originates from his personal bias. Here Marlow joins the colonialist side in his refusal to know the otherness and hence he finds only sinking nature. This is what Jan Mohammad calls "Manichean opposition". Thus, Marlow's sympathy for the oppressed black cannot be accepted as completely sincere. He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but their very nature and their customs inspire nothing but abhorrence and loathing.

The peak of primitivism and savagery in the text is found in Marlow's upstream journey. He travels with "a crew of cannibals." Why did he call them cannibals although he did not witness any cannibalism at all? Was it just prejudice, or the desire to create sensation? Let us hear Marlow himself:

I do not pretend to say that steamboat floated all the time. More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face... (50).

But later on in the novel, Marlow contradicts himself by saying that the cannibals' restraint surprised him, as they did not eat the white men on board. The text reads:

Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they did not go for us—they were thirty to five—and have a good tuck in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences... And I saw that something restraining ... (60).

Marlow feels that cannibals have restraint. They have no intention to eat him and his fellows. Fresleven's corpse which was abandoned in the bush was not consumed. The pilgrims were not butchered by the hungered crew of cannibals so why then did Conrad keep treating Africans as cannibals?

Marlow's ignorance of cannibalism is manifest. If primitive Africans ate each other, Marlow would not find any living creature in the Congo and would not find starving people at the first station. Had Marlow spent more time with "indigenous" tribes, he would have known that cannibalism is practiced as a form of voodoo. It is a belief in sorcery and fetishes and rituals in which participants communicate with dead ancestors who, for reasons of vengeance of greater power, require that the living , under certain mystical practices, name more persons as possible victims. The designated living person is figuratively eaten while still alive. Physically, he falls sick. Once his flesh is symbolically consumed, he then dies.

Marlow himself witnesses a similar ritual when Kurtz disappears in his presence in a night ritual.. Marlow expresses his wonder in this way:

I glanced casually into the little cabin. A light was burning within, but Mr. Kurtz was not there. I think I would have raised an outcry if I had believed my eyes. But I didn't believe them at first-the thing seemed so impossible...how shall I define it?...The moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second...( 97).

The citation refers to the scene in which Kurtz at midnight joins a group of some sorcerers, some witch-men no doubt to practice their night rituals. Panichas comments, "The scene

itself is an extension of a speaking nightmare, as Marlow's narrative details dramatize the "incredible degradation" of Kurtz's condition in body and soul, of the madness that has captured him and commanded him to repudiate "the bounds of permitted aspirations"(166).

All through the novel, Marlow rationalizes his ignorance of the truth by defining it as the result of circumstances rather than choice. First he argues that being a passenger on the French steamer prevents him from confronting the truth of things. Another time he refuses to go on shore because of his work and lastly, he considers the murmurs of the "crew of cannibals" after the death of his helmsman as a sign of regret for not giving them up the dead as their meal. He pens this:

What they wanted to keep that body hanging around for I cannot guess. Embalm it, maybe. But I had also heard another , and a very ominous murmur on the deck below. My friends the wood-cutters were likewise scandalized, and with a better show of reason---though I admit that the reason itself was quite inadmissible. Oh, quite! I had made up my mind that if my late helmsman was to be eaten, the fishes alone should have him( 76).

Without knowing the language of the cannibals , how does he jump to the conclusion that they wanted that human flesh to eat?

In *Heart of Darkness*, Africans are not given any principal role. Conrad was certainly expressing their actual

puppet role during the colonial period. But when he presents his helmsman as a lusty cannibal and his native helpers as a band of predators ready to jump on any being, Conrad has confessed his biased attitude towards Africans. This can be confirmed by his description of the black workers as animals. The native fireman looks like a "dog" as the narrator puts it: "to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and feather hat, walking on his hind legs" ( 51). The helmsman looks "like a reined-in horse" ( 66). The African dances are a cacophony and during his trip on the river "a wild and passionate uproar "of the natives meets him. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces" at him.( 52) This implies that they are hostile and ferocious. It is a misinterpretation on the part of Marlow. African people go to the river bank whenever they hear oncoming boat. They go to admire "the big huge house" rolling on a river, and to wave to its crew that they imagined came from the land of "wonder," the land where dead people resurrect and lead a normal life once again. The wonderland was Kinshasa, the main city. It was from that city that a skull spoke through their radio receivers and it was from that city that the white men put a skull into the phonographs they were enjoying ; in short, those crews came from the end of the earth. Who knew if one would not meet there a dead parent, brother, among the crew? Besides, the boats were the only links between the main city and the rest of the country as is still the case today. Boats brought manufactured goods from Kinshasa and in turn, they loaded the local commercial products, such as wood and "punga" fiber to transform into clothes and many other wonderful things. In fact, most captains enjoyed the gathering

of people around their boats and would whistle for a long time to announce that they would anchor. So boats drew, and still draw, all the riverside populations, spectators, and businessmen, for trading.

Many critics like Robert Lee believe that Marlow has grossly exaggerated his depiction of Africans. The story itself carries suggestions that the evil which the title refers to is to be associated with Africans, their customs, and their rites. Marlow talks, for instance, of the "satanic litany"( 102) of Kurtz's followers. He uses words like "brutal, monstrous, vengeful, implacable, inscrutable, evil, accursed, hopeless, dark, and pitiless" so often talking about that continent that the native people begin to be tinged by the qualities that these words connote. Robert Lee asks this question: "To what extent are Marlow's attitudes Conrad's? Conrad's attitudes toward colonialism are ambivalent and contradictory. Contradictions reveal the nature of Conrad. He says two things at the same time affirming and denying.

Conrad tried to please the two currents of opinion. For those who advocated colonization, Conrad supported their view by his negative depiction of the natives. And for the ones who opposed the institution, he joined them by his apparent criticism of it. As Africa, at the time, had no voiced opinion, and while man tried to hide anything positive about Africans, their dark racial pigmentation was then exploited by writers such as Conrad.

A careful observation of Conrad's attitude towards native Africans reveals his racist attitude towards blacks. His portrayal of Africans proves his inability to transcend popular

belief in racism. Gene Bluestein argues that" the term race ought to be strictly limited to the notion of humanity. In zoological parlance, race means separate species and since we are clearly one species—homo sapiens—the idea of a white, black, yellow or red race has no scientific meaning"(152). Ethnologist Hertz, arguing against the notion of race difference and superiority formulates his position that:

Race is a term used in natural science. It denotes a subdivision of the species which inherits its characteristics. Living creatures are usually reckoned to belong to the same species if they breed successfully when crossed, and if their offspring possess the same capacity without limits.(200)

Some biased scientists and ethnologists have tried to fabricate evidence in order to validate a ridiculous theory of Anglo-saxon superiority"(Bluestein 153).

*Heart of Darkness* has become one of the Western clichés about Africans. Whatever African writers may write about their continent, the cliché will never fade away. In an article entitled" An Image of Africa," Chinua Achebe writes:

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization , a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. 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... But the actual story takes place on the River

Congo, the very antitheses for the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old age pension.' And Achebe asks: 'is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are different, one good, the other bad?'... the point of my observation should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist(288-9)

Achebe also comments that Conrad's racism has not been raised by the Western critics because it is part of their thinking and world. Most Western critics pretend that Conrad's concern was not African. Achebe concludes that a novel "that dehumanizes a great portion of human race " cannot be considered "a great work of art." Patrick Bratlinger agrees with Achebe that Conrad's portrayal of Africa and Africans is racist. Why did Conrad not mention the evils of the Arabs who were Leopold II's rivals ?The reason is "evil is black and black is cannibalism and because of their light skin, he could not mention them"(*Anti-Imperialism*"371-2).

Responding to the Third World writers, Hunt Hawkins acknowledges the facts raised by these different writers, and he suggests that Conrad's attitude was complex, critical, and hinting at racism. Conrad's story concerns more Europeans than Africans, and it should be noted that some missionary and other Westerners' reports of the period mention the practice of cannibalism. Besides, Conrad's description of Africans is very positive, but Achebe and others fail to mention it (Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism"163-8)

McClure argues that no Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are as voracious or brutally aggressive as Kurtz or other

Company agents as he erroneously writes that Africans are presented with sympathy and respect and that Conrad was not addressing the colonial people.(37).Linking Africans with cannibalism and using bestial imagery when referring to them hardly, constitutes sympathy. Marlow has described Africans as brutal, violent, and ferocious but it is the young Russian who reminds him that "the Africans are simple people"( 79).

*Heart of Darkness* is about Marlow/Conrad 's first contact with Africa. I do not dissociate the narrator with Conrad . I agree with Achebe when he says "Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence."(p.787).

*Heart of Darkness* is a vision of evil, mostly that of imperialism embodied in Kurtz, but its author remains unequivocal in his position about the natives of the Congo. It is true that at that time the Congolese were not what they are today, but they were not a "pre-historic" people as Marlow/Conrad keeps repeating again and again. Had he tried to socialize a little bit, he would have known that Portuguese were in the Congo since 1483 as traders and the very first African Catholic Bishop was a Congolese. Marlow himself knows that Belgians had built many stations inside the country where "the cannibals" could see and admire the white man.

Conrad's distorted representation, deletions and unexamined assumptions about Africans have been formed into collective stereotyped images of African patterns of behavior. The past distortions of Africa by novelists such as Conrad, Haggard, and Kipling appear to be intact in the minds of the great majority of Westerners. Their works, mostly those of Conrad and Haggard are not only prototypes,"they have been

incorporated into the mystique of Africa. It has become standard literary practice to cite them as if the mention of their names added authenticity and heightened effect to the account'(Hammond and Jablow 118).

So *Heart of Darkness* had a polemical intent both towards the white man's moral meanness and the jungle's "crew of cannibals" with suspect rites. Primitive societies, in spite of lack of written documents, were highly organized. They had their courts, their systems and their attorneys. White men consider the African jungle corruptive. Kurtz was corrupted by the jungle despite the fact that he was equipped with Christianity and moral ideas of some sort. He fell prey to the dark jungle of Africa. But in assessing Conrad's position, we must admire his boldness in treating the problem of imperialism at a time when the notion of anti-imperialism was not articulated and the general public strongly supported colonialism and imperialism.

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