Conrad’s Negotiation: An Interpretation of Heart of Darkness from the Perspective of New Historicism

Kedong Liu¹,a and Yingjing Zhou²,b

¹Harbin Institute of Technology School of International Studies, Harbin, China
²Harbin Institute of Technology School of International Studies, Harbin, China

aRoykliu@126.com, b750104346@qq.com

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Abstract. New Historicists hold the belief that literary texts should be interpreted under given historical contexts and that rebellion is set strictly by the rebelled powers. That is to say, a writer has to deal with different discourses in his work in order to meet the needs of both readers and the official power. In Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, two conflicting discourses unfold respectively, namely anti-colonialism and Euro-centrism. Conrad’s anti-colonialism ideology comes through the exposure of the white’ hypocrisy as well as the criticism of environmental destruction while the dominant discourse, Euro-centrism shows its presence by depicting Africa as a savage other world along with African people to be animal-like, silent others. It is demonstrated that Conrad not only expresses anti-colonialism to challenge but also strengthens Euro-centrism to compromise the dominant ideology of his day under the perspective of new historicism.

1 Introduction

Born in Russian occupied Poland in 1857, Joseph Conrad is one of the greatest writers in Britain in the late 19th century. During his writing career, he has written many great works, which can be divided into three types: sea novels that are full of jungle scenes, ocean storms and romantic atmospheres; jungle novels which deal with the conflict between the white intruders and the natives, between the good and the evil of human nature, and political novels dealing with social and political subjects.

Based upon his experience of sailing for Belgian interests on the Congo River into the heart of Africa in 1890, Joseph Conrad wrote this world-famous work Heart of Darkness which is the representative work of Conrad’s jungle novels. In the novella, two kinds of journey are present: one is a geographical journey by the hero, Marlow’s river journey into the heart of dark Africa, Congo, to find the legendary trader Kurtz; the other one is a symbolic journey which symbolizes Marlow’s journey to the darkest core of human evil and human misery.

New historicism is a dominant approach in the 1980s in the US to interpret literature from the political, historical and cultural perspectives led by the initiator—Stephen Greenblatt. In his Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980), he conducts new historicist studies and has found the relationship between literary texts and history. To be more specific, literary text is shaped by and also shapes history. Greenblatt examines the work of English Renaissance writers, for example, Shakespeare by reading many more marginal contemporary documents as supplement, and finds that writers fashion their personal identities amid the cultural context of the Renaissance England. What’s more, he acknowledges that even his interpretation of the self-fashioning of Renaissance writers is also conditioned by his own project of self-fashioning in the late twentieth century [1:282]. In other words, any literary text is shaped by history; therefore, it should be interpreted under given historical contexts. Among Greenblatt’s conclusions, a most significant finding is that rebellion is set strictly by the rebelled powers. Writers’ fashioning of their identity is through their relationships to official power and conforms to outside authority. That is to say, their rebellion is set strictly by the powers against which they rebel. Shakespeare is such a conventional writer who hides his resistance against official power in the extreme conventionality of his drama which in its
extremity undermines convention. While compromising to the authority, he still insists on conveying the common people’s voices in his plays.

Two conflicting discourses are present in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which manifests Conrad’s challenge against and compromise towards the dominant ideology of his particular era.

2 Anti-colonialism: Conrad’s challenge

Conrad, as a writer of consciousness, reveals the hypocrisy of the colonizers and criticizes the environmental destruction, thus he challenges colonialism. That is to say, his anti-colonialism thought is conveyed in his challenge to the prevailing ideology, by exposing the greedy nature and cruel governing of civilizing enterprise and by criticizing the environmental disruption.

2.1 Exposure of the hypocrisy of civilizing enterprise

On the one hand, Conrad challenges colonialism by exposing the hypocrisy of civilizing enterprise, including their greedy nature and cruel governing in Africa. First of all, Conrad exposes the greedy nature of the white colonizers. In the name of spreading ‘civilization’, the colonists come to Africa; however, their coming actually is to satisfy their own greed, enormous and selfish desires. They not only ruthlessly kill animals, especially elephants for ivory, but also plunder and extract the gold, land, and other resources of the colonies to constantly satisfy their selfish and inflated desires.

European colonists satisfy their growing desires through the plunder of ivory. To search for the scarcer ivory, more white settlers go deep into the African hinterland at the risk of dying. As claimed in the novella, “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse,” ivory is what almost every white men on this continent is yearning for [2:30]. In the novella, Conrad brings out the greed and brutality of the colonists through the characterization of Kurtz who is the representative of the white colonists. Kurtz is the agent of a trading station located in a real ivory-producing area in Africa. In order to obtain ivory, Kurtz robs, kills innocent people and even shows no mercy to the Russian who worships and cares for him. Moreover, Kurtz will often go far into the deep woods alone at the risk of his life in search of ivory. The habitation where Kurtz lives is abundant in ivory, as described in the novella, “heaps of it (ivory), stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it.” [2:68] Nevertheless, as a representative of the greedy colonists, Kurtz is not satisfied and he continues to hunt elephants for their ivory by any means he could find, indicating the colonizers’ greedy nature.

In addition, the white European colonists plunder not only the ivory of Africa, but also the gold and land of Africa to continually satisfy their desires for wealth. At the beginning of the novella, Marlowe says: “Hunters for gold or pursuers of frame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire.” [2:5] In Marlow’s quotation, ‘they’ refers to the early European colonists, who go overseas in the name of passing on the ‘civilization’ fire but with the real purpose of searching for gold. In a word, the white European colonialists plunder the natural resources of Africa in order to satisfy their own maliciously inflated desires.

Equally important, killing and plundering are also important means for colonists to demonstrate their military force and imperial authority. In the novella, it is not easy to capture elephants for the native who do not own guns; however, it will be quite easy for colonists who have advanced weapons. The colonists hunt an elephant, the huge beast which the aborigines are afraid of, in order to demonstrate their imperial power and authority.

Except for exposing the greedy nature of the “civilized” enterprise, Conrad also reveals the whites’ cruel governing over African people. For their enormous greed and desires, the European colonists cruelly enslave, oppress, and exploit the indigenous people in the name of ‘civilization’. The native black people are called “criminals” and treated inhumanely. As Marlow claims, the indigenous people “walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads…” I
could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.” [2:20] In the novella, Kurtz, as the representative of the authoritative white colonizers, enslaves and mutilates the native inhabitants by all means. He even brutally murders those who challenge his authority and hangs the head of those rebellions on the stake in front of his hut as a warning to other aborigines.

In some words, Conrad mercilessly denounces the hypocrisy of civilizing enterprise by exposing their greedy nature and cruel governing of African people, which reflects his doubts on the so-called advancement of civilization and demonstrates his strong anti-colonization consciousness.

2.2 Criticism of environmental destruction

On the other hand, Conrad challenges colonialism by criticizing the arbitrary destruction of African natural environment by European colonizers.

European colonialists carry out large-scale colonial expansion in Africa for the benefit of material wealth, ignoring the environmental damage and leaving the African continent in ruins. At the beginning of the novella, a beautiful landscape is presented in front of readers: “In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint” nevertheless, the author then describes a picture of capitalist industrial civilization of pollution: “The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.” [2:3] This sharp contrast makes the reader have an intuitive look at the serious damage and pollution of the African continent caused by the white colonialists. In the novella, colonizers’ destruction on environment is directly shown in Marlow’s aimless explosion in the jungle, and this kind of arbitrary destruction of the environment is conducted only to emphasize the white’s authority to make black people afraid. In addition, the colonists drive steamboats, the symbol of modern civilization, into Africa. Some parts of the sea become “greasy” because of steamboats. As he left the trading post, Marlow says, “two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air.” [2:95] The fact can be concluded that the steamboat not only brings settlers in and ivory out, but also pollutes the land.

Conrad directly shows how the natural environment in Africa is severely damaged and polluted by the European colonists; therefore, he criticizes the colonists’ destruction of African environment, questions the process of western colonization and the so-called civilization advancement, and carries his anti-colonialism ideology as well as his ecological views.

The literary text is put in connections with the historical and cultural context. As Wang Xia puts, “the history of Africa in the late 19th century is a dark and traumatic history of colonization and conquest... As the largest colonial empire at that time, with the stance of self-styled civilization and progress, Britain regarded the colonies as ignorant, barbaric, backward and uncivilized ‘others’ who are waiting to be saved, developed and civilized. This provides a justifiable basis for killing, possessing and exploiting the colonies.” [3:207] Conrad takes full advantage of his Heart of Darkness as the vehicle of ideology to reflect the evil of colonialism with the mouth of Marlow, namely the hypocrisy of civilizing enterprise and the destruction of African continent. To further illustrate, by describing the colonialists’ plunder of ivory and gold, Conrad reveals the greedy nature of the white colonizers. Through the description of how the black being exploited, the white’s cruel governing is revealed. In addition, colonial expansion, with the help of advanced techniques, causes a huge damage on the environment. Thus, Conrad criticizes the colonization and questions the process of western civilization.

In this sense, Heart of Darkness is the product of Conrad’s challenging the dominating colonialist ideology.

3 Euro-centrism: Conrad’s compromise

Nevertheless, the anti-colonialism ideology reflected in Heart of Darkness is merely an
expression of rebellion within the boundary of official restrictions. In Conrad’s age, the prevailing thought in Westerners’ minds is Euro-centrism which is to regard themselves to be superior to the Oriental people. In spite of challenging the colonialism, Conrad still compromises to the dominant ideology by conveying the rooted Euro-centrism thought. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Euro-centrism ideology is expressed through the depictions of Africa as savage other world and African people to be animal-like, silent others.

3.1 Depictions of Africa as “savage other” world

On the one hand, the Euro-centrism ideology is expressed through the depictions of Africa as savage other world. Westerners think the west is advanced and superior while the Orient Africa is primitive, mysterious, and dangerous. In *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is depicted as a dark, barbarous world in comparison with the West. The Thames, a symbol of western civilization, is described to be splendid and beautiful. As presented in the novella: “The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peoples its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth,” the old river, representing the West, is praised for its holiness. [2:4] In other words, to praise the holiness of the river is to praise the greatness of the West.

However, Congo River itself, representing Africa, seems wild, mysterious and unapproachable, unlike the grand Thames. As described in the novella, “Going up the river was like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the 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 overshadowed distances,” the dreary scenery of the Congo River can be imagined when Marlow travels up along the river to find Kurtz from the Central Station to the Interior Station. [2:48]

What’s more, almost every phenomenon and landscape on African continent is distinctly different from what is observed in Europe. The latter is advanced and superior while the former, as Achebe described, is a place “where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.” [4:15] Marlow describes what comes into his eyes when he arrives at his first destination along the Congo River, “I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass…It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails.” [2:19] Conrad creates formidable and dangerous atmosphere by using unpleasant adjectives and disgusting, dingy objects. The unpleasant adjectives, namely, “decaying, rusty, feebly” as well as the disgusting, dingy objects, such as, “wallowing boiler and undersized railway truck” are used to express his shock by the unimagined scenes he has witnessed. Kurtz’s place of habitation in Africa is also worth mentioning. There are “no signs of life” in the whole atmosphere, besides the ruined roof, the long mud wall.

In a word, the descriptions of Africa is different from what is described in the West, the former being inferior and backward while the latter being superior and advanced. As Hammond and Jablow in 1977 claimed: “The British view of Africa appears to be, at least, quite absurd…they have merely been ethnocentric…the absurdity lies in the nature of ethnocentrism itself.” [5:16] That is to say, the different images of Africa and the West are actually the reflections of ethnocentrism which is Euro-centrism ideology, aiming to distort the real image of Africa.

3.2 Depictions of African people as animal-like, silent other

On the other hand, the Euro-centrism ideology is expressed through the depictions of African people to be animal-like. To begin with, Conrad presents a generalized description of African people: “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….They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity…Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough.” [2:51] The vocabularies that Conrad uses to depict the natives are “monstrous and ugly.”
African people are being wrongly looked in such a twisted way that they are just like the ugly conquered monsters, and even their actions are animal-like. Dominated by Euro-centrism ideology, Westerners think the blacks are ugly, barbarous, and strange. Therefore, Conrad’s rooted ideology is reflected in his choice of diction. According to Xie, such a way in which Conrad depicts is to “attract more attention from presumably Westerners eyes.” [6:23]

After having shown Africans as a collective picture, Conrad then uses an example of an individual African, an “improved” fireman on the steamboat to further illustrate: “And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap.” [2:52] He is the improved one because he has been trained by the black, which makes him different from other Africans. However, his difference does not help him escape the fate of being discriminated and dehumanized by his white masters even though he is trained by and works for them. Conrad conveys the thought of blacks’ inferiority in Euro-centrism in the descriptions of the fireman, referring him to be “below.” The fireman has been discriminated to be lower because the lower position symbolizes the inferiority in blacks’ identity. In addition, the fireman has also been dehumanized by being compared to a “dog”. To summarize, Conrad expresses the rooted blacks’ inferiority in Euro-centrism through the whole and a more specific picture of black people.

Moreover, the Euro-centrism ideology is also expressed through the depictions of African people to be silent. The African natives have been deprived of opportunities of speaking. They seldom speak, even when they speak, the sound they make are “like animal moans.” [7:21] According to Fanon, language is always a matter of politics. [8:18] Similarly, language can also be an issue of human identity. Blacks’ being silent reflects the fact that they are not treated as human beings at all by the white Westerners, and that they are losing their human identities. Through the whole novella, there are only two occasions on which they have their own voice. The words they speak for the first time sound strange and not like the one spoken by a human being, namely “Catch ‘im.” “Give ‘im to us.” “Eat ‘im!” [2:57] The second and also the last time the black man is allowed to speak is when announcing Kurtz’s death saying “Mistah Kurtz - he dead.” This time they speak to prove how Africans are inhuman compared with the Westerners by deliberately describing the boy’s tone in “scathing contempt” and his “insolent black head” when announcing one’s death. [2:99] The given period has endowed the work with the inevitable dominance of the Euro-centrism. Literary texts are cultural artifacts; therefore, it is obvious that Conrad compromises to the ideology of his day by incorporating the discourse of Euro-centrism. Text itself is part of the interplay of discourses, thus it is proven that Conrad’s age is a period of time which consists of the dominating ideology of Euro-centrism as well as the awakening ideology of anti-colonialism.

4 Conclusion

Two conflicting ideologies are demonstrated in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, namely anti-colonialism and Euro-centrism. The author’s exposure of the hypocrisy of European colonialists and his condemnation of the environmental destruction in Africa express his anti-colonialism ideology, reflecting the challenge of Conrad to the mainstream thought; Influenced by the mainstream Euro-centrism ideology, Conrad describes Africa as savage other world and African people to be animal-like and silent, which reflects his compromise attitude in addition to his resistance. In other words, Conrad’s rebellion is to challenge the dominating ideology while his rebellion is within the official power, which is realized in his compromise.

The reason for both compromise and challenge is the author’s dual identities, namely the Polish ancestry and his British citizenship. To be more specific, his Polish ancestry fosters his anti-colonialism and motivates him to challenge the dominating ideology. Born in a highly patriotic, noble Polish family in the time of Poland being controlled by Russian Empire, young Conrad not
only inherits Polish people’s pursuit of freedom and democracy but also experiences being exiled and dying because of his father’s patriotic efforts and his parents’ death during the banishment. He completely knows the feeling of the colonized by the imperialist countries; therefore, he criticizes the imperialists’ crimes fiercely, indicating his challenge.

However, his being a British citizen makes him deeply influenced by British prevailing thought, including Euro-centrism and imperialism, suggesting his compromise. Dominated by the deeply rooted Euro-centrism, Conrad accepts the prevailing imperial culture where colonialism is regarded as a way to civilize the “primitive and mysterious” Africa and Africans. Therefore, he observes the colonies from the viewpoint of a colonist, and still compromises to the dominating ideology while expressing his anti-colonialism.

To conclude, Conrad’s challenges and compromises are the results of his dual identities and reflect the fact that rebellion is set strictly by the rebelled powers.

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