

# Do Metaphors and Similes of Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad Reflect Colonial Mindset?

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Heart of Darkness (1902) by Joseph Conrad has been used as an example of a Euro-centric view of colonialism by critics for a long. This study will expose how the metaphors and similes of Heart of Darkness reflect Conrad's prejudice about Africa and the Africans while he considers Europe the centre of civilization. The metaphors and similes show that not only did the incidents that took place in Africa change the view of the narrators, but the views expressed were preconceived from the standpoint of a colonizer. This study will use postcolonial theories, especially the foundational texts like Culture and Imperialism by Edward Said and Can the Subaltern Speak? by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, as the theoretical framework.

## 1. Introduction

To find moral ground for the colonial enterprise, the Europeans had to form a narrative that the people of the colonized geographical areas were inferior in terms of intelligence, culture, norms, and practices. When they needed to motivate their whole nations to make the huge political and economic project a success, the European colonizers used their religious, political, and literary narratives to convince the whole nations about the moral soundness of colonization – lootings, killings, exploitations, and colossal violations of human rights undeniably involved with colonial missions. Except for the involvement of the whole nations, the colonial projects might not have brought home that much wealth, empowering the nations and individuals to the maximum. The overwhelming economic success that followed the slave trade, starting from the time of Charles I, started blurring the moral questions of human rights violation in the psyche of the British people.

*Heart of Darkness* (1902), set primarily in the nineteenth century in the height of European

civilization, is a typical example of a British literary work looking at the colonized people through the lens of the colonizer and how literary narratives justified the colonial exploitations. Singh asserts, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most powerful indictments of colonialism ever written" (Singh 41). In literary works like *Heart of Darkness*, where colonized people are sketched as inferior races deserving the harsh treatment of imperial machines, the narratives prepare a ground with the use of different literary devices to soften the pains and pangs of the colonized peoples in the eyes of the readers. From *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (1719) to *Mansfield Park* (1814) by Jane Austen, from Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* (1899) to *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad, the writers had been telling stories trying to give moral strength to the colonizers. It is worth investigating how literary devices like similes, metaphors, imagery, personification, irony, and hyperbole build the story in favour of imperialism.

From the beginning of the novel *Heart of Darkness*, similes and metaphors convey subtle ideas and hints to what the readers may encounter later in the novel. They are also instrumental in creating an atmosphere of fear and suspense. At the same time, similes and metaphors speak of the writer's motivations and how he prepares a ground to justify colonialism. This study finds that metaphors and similes built on Western ideas and objects exude a sense of superiority in the West while those associated with Africa convey a sense of evil and 'darkness'. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, in 1975, in his lecture at the University of Massachusetts, accused Conrad as a 'racist' for presenting Africa as 'the other World', 'the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization' (BRANTLINGE 363).

## 2. Metaphors and Similes

Conrad's childhood was not pleasant. He and his parents were exiled to Siberia since his father actively participated in the Polish liberation movement. As he grew up, he chose his career in ships "because he felt it would provide him with the sense of openness, freedom, and democracy he had not been able to feel in his childhood" (Singh 41). He wanted to be away from the colonial practices of European countries of his time. However, the irony is that his sea career brought him closer to colonialism. Conrad was a victim of colonialism, but the question is if he could go against the colonial projects wholeheartedly. What do his metaphors and similes in *Heart of Darkness* say? "The conceptual metaphors distilled from these can be grouped into five clusters," and all five groups of metaphors show how Conrad draws a difference between the colonized and the colonizers (Kimmel 204). In his metaphors and similes, Europe is regarded as superior to Africa and so Africa is portrayed as deserving of exploitation.

European literature exercised a kind of superiority complex about Western civilization, and the concept of superiority remains unprotested and uncontested for centuries in their literary works. In *Orientalism*, Said says, "There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas," and the writers seemed to be confident of "European superiority" over the cultures and practices of their colonies (Said 7). Since a vast part of the globe has remained under Western domination for centuries, no strong narrative defying the Western ones has emerged. Though seemingly against Belgium's colonial practices, Conrad holds high

opinions of Western civilization and education. At the novel's beginning, the sense of superiority is expressed through a simile, "but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday." (Conrad 7). Western civilization is compared to a flickering light that may be extinguished by Africa's eternal 'darkness'. Conrad wants the light of Western 'civilization' to last until the last day of human civilization. The colonizer took it for granted that the way Western theory of society evolved could be the only definition of 'civilization'. There is a possibility that "a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter" (Said 7).

On the contrary, while speaking of Africa, Conrad thinks of primitivity, evil, brutality, impenetrable mysteriousness, and 'darkness'. The waterway in Africa seems to be leading to the uttermost darkness of evil, "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. " (Conrad 128). The waterway is described as leading into "the heart of an immense darkness," foreshadowing the dark and grim experiences awaiting the characters (Conrad 128).

Since colonialism was a political mission, the political narratives gradually occupied the literary spaces. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said discovers how writers of colonial era submitted to the political desires of the nations and developed their narratives, giving efforts to form moral grounds to the colonial projects. The literature ranging from the beginning of the colonial era agreed that "the ever-present darkness could be colonized or illuminated" (Said 29). The novel, "*Heart of Darkness* is full of references to the *mission civilisatrice*, to benevolent as well as cruel schemes to bring light to the dark places and peoples of this world by acts of will and deployments of power" (Said 30). The ships that used to bring looted wealth for the country were 'jewels' for the colonizers as they fuelled the economy, empowering and enriching the nations and giving them stronger base to exploit the weaker nations more. The simile speaks of the nation's desire, "the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure " (Conrad 6). The famous Western ships of exploration and conquest are compared to jewels, since they bring wealth for the nations. They are considered precious in Western history, despite their roles in exploitation and colonization. In fact, those ships should have been regarded as the tool of exploitations, deaths and sufferings of innumerable human beings. It is all about the point of view – for the beneficiaries of the ships i.e the colonizers, they are as valuable as 'jewels' while the ships are the ignoble instruments of tortures for the colonized people.

In contrast, the journey along the river Congo is compared to the journey into the 'heart of darkness'. The continent of Africa is sketched as something savage and uncivilized and therefore, the inhabitants are not worthy with honour. This concept is not propagated by Conrad first, or Conrad only, rather Conrad continued the practice up to the twentieth century. Consequently, the farther the narrator went into the continent, the more primitive it seemed to him, "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"(Conrad 54). Africa,

to the narrator, remains as dark as it was in the earliest beginning of the world. This continent does not seem to be a match for Europe which has evolved with knowledge and wisdom. Then comes the most-quoted metaphor, “We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (Conrad 57). Edward Said pointed out the utter ‘limitation’ of Conrad, saying that, “Conrad’s tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that ‘natives’ could lead lives free from European domination” (Said 30).

There has been a misunderstanding about Conrad or Conrad has been often misinterpreted. Critics speak of ‘Conrad’s skepticism about the colonial enterprise’ and there seem to be distinct parts in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, this metaphor appears to be a clear stand against colonialism, “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing” (Conrad 8). This criticism of colonialism is categorical since this metaphor critiques Western imperialism by describing the colonization of other lands as theft based on racial differences. Even colonial administration is described as an evil, aiming at exploitation - “They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect” (Conrad 9). Western colonial administration is metaphorically described as a ‘squeeze’, which hints at the fact that its true purpose is exploitation rather than genuine governance or improvement.

Edward Said correctly points out that this reading, which highlights Conrad’s ‘skepticism’ about colonialism, does not hold much water. Instead, Said writes, “Most readings rightly call attention to Conrad’s skepticism about the colonial enterprise, but they rarely remark that in telling the story of his African journey Marlow repeats and confirms Kurtz’s action: restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness” (Said 164). The ‘strangeness’ of Africa spreads over a number of metaphors and similes in *Heart of Darkness*. In a simile, the narrator suggests the mystery of Africa, saying, “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” (Conrad 78, 79). The wilderness is likened to a destructive force that causes Kurtz’s decline. Before coming here, Kurtz, according to the narrator, was a representative of European civilization while he has been transformed into a brute in the company of the native Africans. Even the alien language sounds like something evil- “they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany” (Conrad 111). The unfamiliar language is compared to something completely alien to human sounds. The conscious part of Conrad’s mind criticises colonialism and regards it as an evil but in subconscious he represents the colonial mind-set. Said writes, “The savages, the wilderness, even the surface folly of popping shells into a vast continent—all these reaccentuate Marlow’s need to place the colonies on the imperial map and under the overarching temporality of narratable history, no matter how complicated and circuitous the results” (Said 164).

The way Conrad shows the transformation of Kurtz from a civilized European to a ‘savage’

that exudes 'horror' is a further proof of that fact that he wants to prove African as strange and its inhabitants are merely 'the Other', not eligible to be treated like the Europeans (Said 1). "Marlow's audience is English", and "Marlow himself penetrates to Kurtz's private domain as an inquiring Western mind trying to make sense of an apocalyptic revelation" (Said 164). The beating of the drums by the native African seems to be echo of 'darkness' - "The beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness" (Conrad 122). Here the narrator is a European and writing for the European Audience. Very usually, the standpoint of the narrator is that of a Western man, considering himself in the *mission civilisatrice* (Said 30). Kurtz was enriched with all the light of Europe but now, as the narrator tries to establish, has turned into an evil-doer coming in contact with the evil of Africa. In metaphor, while describing Kurtz speech, the narrator says, "his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (Conrad 77). Kurtz's speech is compared to light, signifying its brilliance but also its deceptive nature.

Conrad does not like either the resistance of nature or the resistance of the continent's inhabitants. Conrad seems to criticize colonialism, but in reality, he tolerates even the resistance that comes from nature. Said writes, "As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them" (Said 30). Conrad's denial of the rights of the native Africans asserts the fact that he wrote the novel for the European audience, who had be his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness enjoying the benefits of the colonial enterprise of Europe.

Consequently, the narrator, while going deeper into the continent of Africa along the Congo river, faces resistance from the nature itself as though the forest, river and other natural phenomena like mist were resisting the colonizer from going into the continent. The nature looked defiant in the metaphor: "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" (Said 38). The wilderness here represents a form of resistance to colonization. It remains unconquered and free, defying European control and taming. The colonial masters expected the whole continent to be under control, submissive and subservient, while the reality they are faced with is quite the opposite. Conrad's dislike for the resistance of nature is again reflected in a simile revealing the might of the Congo: "The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea like a stream of fate" (Conrad 112). The current of the river symbolizes the relentless movement of nature, a force resistant to human control, suggesting that the land and its people have their own fate, independent of colonial influence. The colonizers know that they are the infiltrators in other people's land where they are not welcomed. They are invaders not only in terms of politics but also cultures – aiming to robbing the native people of their language, custom, beliefs and practices. The feeling of guilt and prick of conscience have most probably made them think of the resistance coming from the nature.

Moreover, the simile of the land's impenetrability refers to different forms of resistance colonizers faced there. Nothing gives the infiltrators peace of mind, rather frightens them with all possible apprehensions, "The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam" (Conrad 19). The landscape's stillness is described as 'implacable' and 'brooding,' implying an unseen, unyielding resistance to the colonizers' intrusion, a force that defies comprehension or submission. "The cultural and ideological evidence that Conrad was wrong in his Eurocentric way" is evident in the narratives he has tried to create.

In addition to that, Conrad has not recognised the right of the native African people's right to resist the colonizers, and his dislikes are very obvious as expressed in the similes and metaphors suggesting human resistance of colonization. "They were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as the depths of the night advance, they became voices in the air, voices without a body" (Conrad 72). The voices of the native people seem somewhat 'unearthly' and devilish again, scaring the colonizers since the trespassers are well-aware of their intention to exploit and amass wealth from the foreign land. The people's strength and spirit are compared to 'voices without a body,' suggesting an incorporeal, indomitable presence that resists even when physically oppressed.

What about the Thames? The Congo seems to lead the narrator into the 'heart of darkness' while the Thames symbolises a constructive force, that has contributed to the development of a nation. In metaphors, the river is praised and held high in respect: "The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (Conrad 5). The Thames is fully contrasted with the Congo, which is synonymous of 'devil', 'darkness' and 'savagery'. To the narrator, the Thames does not seem to be an actor in making Britain a colonial force driving the colonial mission all around the world. The Thames does not become a symbol of an oppressive force that spread around the world with a monstrous ambition to grab lands and loot wealth. The Thames is synonymous of the country's proud history - "It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea" (Conrad 5). The history of the Thames is associated with the history of all great souls the 'civilization' has ever produced. The Thames is not a connotation of 'darkness' or the 'primitive' force of the world that as seen in the description of the Congo. "The tidal current" is "crowded with memories of men" who are profoundly related with the history of European 'civilization' (Conrad 5).

It is a fact that Conrad speaks against colonialism consciously, but in his unconscious and subconscious, he remains Eurocentric in his judgment of Africa, the Africans, and their resistance. His concept of 'civilization' is based on the standard of Europe. When the metaphors and similes are about Marlow, they exude light of 'civilization' or purity of 'Buddha.' However, when literary tools are formed to describe native Africans, they refer to 'darkness' - "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (Conrad 128).



Conrad has drawn a clear distinction between Europe and Africa, Marlow and Kurtz, and even between the two parts of Kurtz's life – representing Europe and representing Africa. Marlow is a 'Buddha' – "he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower" (Conrad 8). Again, as Buddha does, Europe refers to serenity, decency, beauty, and peace. In contrast, Kurtz is 'hollow at the core' and evokes a sense of "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 127). The concept of 'horror' becomes associated with even a European if he represents Africa because Kurtz, the European, "had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally" (Conrad 79). The reality is that native Africans are 'subalterns' who are not in a position to explain themselves (Spivak 271).

However, Kurtz, when he stands for Europe, is not only "Something like an emissary of light" but also an emissary of "science and progress" (Conrad 39). Kurtz seems dangerous to the Europeans when he becomes one of the colonized people. The case is identical to other ideas like light or sound. Sound must be related to holiness or 'civilization' if it reminds the narrator of something from Europe. For example, a good sound bears "as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country", connotating sacredness (Conrad 31). However, the 'sound' of a native African's voice evokes fear and is sketched in the metaphors of awe-inspiring ideas and objects – "sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow, I had ever heard—the ripple of the river, the sighing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (Conrad 125). Even an African woman coming abreast of the steamer is associated with wilderness: "She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (Conrad 101).

Finally, the title *Heart of Darkness* itself is one of the most suggestive metaphors. Despite different interpretations that try to establish Joseph Conrad as a critic of colonialism, this study will show evidence that the title is another way to describe the colonized people as 'the Other' as mentioned in *Orientalism* (Said 1). One interpretation is that it refers to the white colonizers whose hearts are dark – full of greed and ruthlessness (Singh 42). To illustrate the interpretation, Singh writes, "According to Marlow, the colonizers became psychologically depraved because, cut off from the norms of civilization, they turned to the lawless jungle" (Singh 43). Marlow's criticism of imperialism is superficial since he cannot eventually appreciate the resistance of the native Africans. Instead, he looks down upon them and regards their culture as "inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (Conrad 79). Even the untouched nature of Africa does not appear to be beautiful; it is a form of untameable 'savagery' (Conrad 96). Singh summarises the concept precisely, "Marlow uses the unknown, remote, and primitive Africa as a symbol for an evil and primeval force, something similar to what E. M. Forster was to do later through the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*" (Singh 43). Given the fact how Conrad describes the African and their culture throughout the novel, the metaphor of 'darkness' most logically hints at the Africans – "he uses words like *brutal, monstrous, vengeful, implacable, inscrutable, evil, accursed,*

*hopeless, dark, and pitiless* so constantly in talking about Africa that the people of Africa begin to be tinged by the qualities that these words connote” (Singh 43).

#### 4. Conclusion

The question of why Conrad, despite being a victim of Russian colonialism, utterly fails to hate the European imperial mission is to be dug deeper. Though he seems to criticize colonialism and the sufferings of the native African people undergoing suppression and repression, this apparent sympathy for the native Africans is ‘superficial’ (Singha 45). The metaphors and similes are the mirrors that reflect how the thoughts of a colonizer are processed.

The metaphors and similes of *Heart of Darkness* often stand for colonizers’ hatred and prejudice for other cultures, indicating their ‘racist’ view of the colonized country (BRANTLINGER). The light associated with Europe stands for ‘civilization’ while light, if it is African, reminds Conrad of the monstrous ‘primitive’ force. The same is true about ‘sound’ - if it is about the native Africans or Africa, it is ‘savagery’ whereas ‘sound’ associated with the Church sounds sacred. Much more digging into the metaphors and similes may reveal how Conrad’s mind works as a colonizer in a colonized land.

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