

# **The Journey from Savagery to Civilization: A Lacanian Reading of Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes***

**Dr. Fatma Khalil Mostafa el Diwany**

Assistant Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Languages & Translation

Misr University for Science & Technology

## **Abstract**

Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) represents the struggle experienced by many within the imperial scheme or rather the scenario of the establishment of the 'civilized' world: the dilemma of reconciling with two distinct identities while trying to assimilate within the 'Other' community, or conforming to the 'Other' mirror. Through Tarzan's adventurous uprising from savagery to nobility, an allegorical representation of the journey of Man from the darkness of savagery to the light of knowledge, the narrative unfolds various binary discourses one of which is that of Us versus Them. In the light of Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' and its role in the formation of the subject's identity, the present paper attempts a reading of the novel in terms of this binary confrontation, which makes the novel an emblematic of western literature that aims to mirror the western imperial legacy. By doing so, the study aims at focusing on the role of imperial narratives in reflecting the colonial ideology. The study also highlights Tarzan's quest for identity which represents the need of many who have long suffered under reconciling their hybrid identities resulting from the colonial experience. This is done through investigating the different visual, textual and cultural mirrors he encounters in his process of evolution.

**Key words:** Tarzan of the Apes, savagery, civilization, mirror stage, imperialism, Lacan.

## الرحلة من الهمجية إلى التحضر: قراءة لرواية "طرزان القردة" لبوروز في ضوء نظريات لاكان

د. فاطمة خليل مصطفى الديواني

أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد - كلية اللغات والترجمة - جامعة مصر للعلوم والتكنولوجيا

### ملخص:

تمثل رواية الكاتب إدغار رايس بوروز "طرزان القردة" الصراع الذي يعيشه الكثيرون داخل المخطط الاستعماري أو بالأحرى سيناريو إنشاء العالم "المتحضر": هذه المعضلة المتمثلة في المصالحة مع هويتين مختلفتين أثناء محاولة الاندماج داخل المجتمع "الأخر"، أو التوافق مع المرأة "الأخرى". الرواية قيد الدراسة تدافع عن فكرة الإرث الاستعماري وتفوق العرق الأبيض تتبني في ذلك نظريات داروين للتطور الاجتماعي. ومع ذلك، تدعو أيضا إلى الحاجة إلى العودة إلى زمن البدائية والتواصل مع جذور الإنسان الأولية من خلال رحلة طرزان من الهمجية الي التحضر، وهو تمثيل مجازي لرحلة الإنسان من ظلام الجهل إلى نور المعرفة. في ضوء نظرية لاكان حول "مرحلة المرأة" ودورها في تشكيل هوية الفرد، يهدف هذا البحث الي قراءة الرواية باعتبارها رمزا للأدب الغربي الذي يعكس الأيديولوجية الاستعمارية للعالم الغربي. كما تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على دور الروايات الاستعمارية في هذا الصدد. وأخيرا فالبحث يتطرق الي تتبع سعي طرزان لاكتشاف حقيقة هويته، وهذا السعي يمثل حاجة الكثيرين الذين عانوا طويلا من أجل التوفيق بين هوياتهم الهجينة الناتجة عن التجربة الاستعمارية.

### كلمات مفتاحية:

طرزان القردة، الأدب الاستعماري، الهمجية، التحضر، لاكان، مرحلة المرأة.

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**I. Introduction**

Described as “a fantasy of reverse colonization that operates within a distinctively twentieth century American context”, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) chronicles the journey of a primitive version of a European descendance from darkness toward civilization (Jurca 480). Edgar Rice Burroughs' works have been described as reinforcing and reflecting ideologies that shape American identity. *Tarzan of the Apes*, written in 1912 and published in 1914, has been written in an era that witnessed major transformation all around the world. Although it underscores the heroic role adopted by the western countries in saving the world from savagery, the novel also reflects the questionable position of man amidst the advancement of civilization that has robbed him from his noble primitivity. Throughout the nineteenth century, the American myth of racial superiority dominated the cultural and political scene. Burroughs' sense of racial superiority grounded in his pride “of his Anglo-Saxon ancestry” reflects the American tendency at that time toward imperial expansion by Anglo-Saxon heroes who would come to displace the African wilderness (Hopkins 438). Together with their fascination by the theories of evolution, Europeans and Americans were pulled by the colonial legacy and the call for adventurous exploration which has heightened due to the explorers' accounts of the magnificence of these primitive lands. Hence, the text under study embraces and reflects these advocated images, but at the same time underscores their need for rediscovery, as if they were not created for their native residents and as if these natives are not worth of this undeserved treasure. Wealth and treasures discovered by the white people on the African colony are shown to be worthy only if transported to the European or American coasts where they can be

bestowed with value. In this sense, Tarzan can be considered a manipulated version of the British and American explorers with their hybrid identities and their ability to master these foreign nations.

*Tarzan of the Apes*, a narrative whose impact has lasted for almost a century with a multitude of re-imaginings, adaptations and translations, has mainly been studied as a text that supports racism and the United States' Imperial policy, and this has been done through various approaches. Bert Olivier (2003) tackles the novel as "imperial myth" reflecting Foucault's "notions of discourse and power-knowledge" (65). Eric Cheyfitz (1989) argues that the novel echoes Roosevelt's "invocation of blood as a determinant of racial difference" (341). Furthermore, Annia Loomba (2005) has implemented the way colonialism works to reshape knowledge and ideologies "to perpetuate an artificial sense of difference between 'Self' and 'Other'" (55). In the same sense, Hendrix contends that "the subject identifies itself in history, in response to the anticipation of the Other, and loses itself in it like an object" (1). Moreover, in his "Heart of Darkness, Tarzan", Allen Carrey-Webb (1993) asserts that Burroughs' work "is both a paean to class distinction and inequality and an expression of the unfettered freedom of its superhero" (129). Hence, the novel's representation of the imperial strategies and the colonial legacy has attracted the majority of critics and scholars as a representative of a crucial era of western expansion and scientific development.

Despite this myriad of approaches, the novel has rarely been studied for its psychological implications, and none has considered implementing Lacan's 'mirror stage' as tool of analysis. The present study, therefore, proposes Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' as a relevant approach to understanding the novel. The paper attempts to read the novel as a reflection of "the huge fascination of the west to mirror itself" (Witcherink 96). This brings us to Jacques Lacan's theories of the 'mirror stage' and the formation of the self in relation to the (m)other. The paper applies Lacan's theory on two levels. First, it reads the novel as a 'mirror' of the colonial legacy and the ideologies propagated by Burroughs as a

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representative of the colonizer; a mirror that aims to reflect the chosen image for the implementation of intended strategies. On the other level, the article puts the protagonist, Tarzan, as a prototype of this early stage of imperialism under the Lacanian lens emphasizing the role of the other's gaze in the formation of both individual and collective identities.

## **II. Lacan and the Formation of Identity:**

According to Lacan, the mirror stage is that stage in which the child starts to identify with an image of wholeness outside itself; the Ideal (I). He asserts that "the human child, in an age when he is...outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror" (Lacan 75). This recognition "is indicated by the illuminative mimicry of the Aha-Erlebnis, which Kohler considers to express situational apperception, an essential moment in the act of intelligence" (Lacan 75). This stage of mimicry gives rise "to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates- namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him" (Lacan 75). That is, the mirror stage indicates this moment of illumination when the child associates itself with an external image. Nevertheless, this image always mismatches the child's internal feeling of fragmentation. With this stage, the child initiates the recognition of this I/You binary existence.

This symbolic level thus determines the position of the subject; it involves the formation of the chain of signification; that is, the set of signs and signifiers determined by external codes and perceptions that shape one's identity. This chain is mainly constructed through language which is how the subject gets introduced to the symbolic order. That is, one understands the symbolic order through language and enters it through accepting and adhering to its rules. In other words, the world outside the

subject is shaped by language which exists before the child's birth and acts on its whole existence. Therefore, throughout his life, the subject strives to conform to the 'mirror' image found in his symbolic order and from which he only derives his feeling of unity and wholeness. That is, the subject tries all the time to satisfy this (m)other whose eyes and acceptance act as the subject's mirror; thus always questioning itself: what space do I occupy or this (m)other? There is always this confusing margin of the Other desire which the individual keeps striving to fulfil in order to see his 'whole' image.

In order to overcome its feeling of nothingness, the subject renders itself an object "at the disposal of [this] Other", let it be individuals, society or history itself (Hendrix 1). As stated by Lacan, the subject's identity is hard to be identified due to the presence of "the infinity of reflection that the mirage of consciousness consists of" (134). Throughout its process of formation, the subject encounters a multitude of mirrors, which makes the "imaginary ego identity in discursive reason ... an indefinite play of reflections between mirrors in which the speaking subject is trapped" (Hendrix 2). Lorraine Markotic argues that the mirror stage does not necessarily imply the presence of an actual mirror; he explains that "whether the infant perceives itself reflected in the gaze of the (m)other or in a mirror, it recognizes itself as a whole being" (815). To put it clearly, any 'Other' through which the subject sees itself is a mirror to itself. This 'Other' plays a fundamental role in constructing the subject's identity.

The significance and authenticity of this image depends on the importance of this mirror to the child; the child sees itself from the perspective of this significant other. More notably, the formation of the subject is only achieved through language which is a means of socialization, of becoming an active participant rather than a passive recipient. However, entering into the social symbolic order implies an act of castration or in other words alienation, which is giving up a piece of itself. Within the social scheme, there are "pre-existing subject positions within a pre-

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existing symbolic order'; positions that are already present awaiting the subject to fit in them. Hence, the mirror stage provides the child with an anchor point in this vast sea of signification and language in which it finds itself. After the mirror stage in which the child encounters his reflection in the mirror and draws associations with this imago, with some encouragement, it will "come to affix an ego to this image" (Johnson 2). According to Markotic, "the jubilation accompanying the recognition of oneself as an intact being is...tainted by the fact that this sense of self is a false one, the recognition of a misrecognition" (814). The image that the child sees in the mirror is not he child as we see it; it is rather how it sees itself in the mirror of the Other. This stage and its effect remains with the subject and accompanies him in all stages of development and formation of his identity.

### **III. Tarzan and the Colonial Mirror:**

From this juncture, reading *Tarzan of the Apes* in the light of Lacan's theory as well as a representative of the early imperial process, Tarzan can be colonialism in its infancy with the different stages of development and adaptation according to the encountered images in the unknown wilderness. Brydon and Tiffin argue that "colonial textual interpellation" happens when the colonized subject is directed through the colonial texts, media and discourse to see himself as "deviant from the European norm" (106). Colonial discourse and the ways by which it is justified and circulated act as the agent that determines how the colonized must perceive himself. The Enlightenment ideas of human rights contradicted the imperial strategies of the West. Therefore, a justification was needed to legitimize the conquest of the lands they conquer. Here comes Darwinism at the rescue. The concept of animals evolving into human beings circulated in the 1820s and 1830s as a rationalization for the interplays of human society. This concept came hand in hand with the notion of the survival for the fittest. The competition of survival must naturally be won by those who are endowed with natural divine superiority. Hence, the White

racés, with their technological powers and genetic heredity, are superior to less evolved races and bear the responsibility of bringing other races to their level of evolution. In other words, colonialism is not a choice; it is rather a responsibility.

Hence, the western need to legitimize their imperial steps has developed the urge to create strategies based on stereotypes by which their plans can be implemented; stereotypes that places the colonized in the position of the 'Other'. This 'Other', thus, becomes "only knowable through a necessary false representation" (Young 5). At this stage, the strategy took the form of a battle waged against savagery with the intention of spreading civilization as the divine role of the naturally- superior white race toward humanity. In that sense, "the West's justification for the economic exploitation of distant peoples and cultures" has been their rightful role in waging war against savagery for the sake of humanity at large (Jurca 483). According to Jeff Berglund, the novel is set "during the height of British imperialism and during the escalation of the United States' own empire-building" (79). Burroughs portrays the chosen African colony as a space populated with a language-speaking species of apes who are following the practices and rituals of earliest human ancestors. The choice of the apes as the inhabitants of this colony and their constant interactions with the African tribes reflect Darwin's theories of evolution.

Catherine Jurca asserts that *Tarzan of the Apes* is a kind of a 'mirror' to the western myth of settlement that "posits the white European as the persecuted victim of imperial aggression" (480). Albert Memmi argues that within the imperial culture the colonized peoples are reduced to "an alter ego of the colonizer" (86). In *Tarzan of the Apes*, the choice of the characters and settings is intentionally selected to represent a group of Us/Them binaries. From the opening of the novel, the narrator stresses the fact that the narrated accounts are not real and that they are based on "various agencies" from which he has "painstakingly pieced it out from" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 2). The background provided in the first lines of the narrative provides the 'mirror' by which the reader is driven to perceive the intended image:



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From the records of the Colonial Office and from the dead man's diary we learn that a certain young English nobleman, whom we shall call John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, was commissioned to make a peculiarly delicate investigation of conditions in a British West Coast African Colony from whose simple native inhabitants another European power was known to be recruiting soldiers for its native army, which it used solely for the forcible collection of rubber and ivory from the savage tribes along the Congo and Aruimi. (*Tarzan of the Apes 2*)

That is, from the very beginning, the novel advocates and staples Theodore Roosevelt's call for the heroic mission thrown on the shoulders of such 'superior' nations as the defenders of humanity and civilization whose "duty toward the people living in barbarism to see that they are freed from their chains...by destroying barbarism itself" (Burton 357). Moreover, through these commencing lines, the various colonial mirrors are manifested: "the modern and the primitive, civilized and savage, urban and wild" (Reid 150).

John Clayton is portrayed as an early European settler; "the type of Englishman that one likes best to associate with the noblest monuments of historic achievement" (*Tarzan of the Apes 3*). The journey he undergoes is said to have started in May 1888 with John Clayton and Lady Alice sailing from Dover to Africa. Tarzan is first introduced as "one then unborn such has never been paralleled in the history of man" (*Tarzan of the Apes 5*). The natives are seen by Clayton as they are seen through the colonial mirror; as savage brutes: "Clayton remonstrated against the inhumanity of landing them upon an unknown shore to be left to the mercies of savage beasts, and, possibly, still more savage men" (*Tarzan of the Apes 22*). Surely, defeating these savages require a noble hero, a "primeval man" who can courageously reform the whole setting (*Tarzan of the Apes 22*). Furthermore, the Darwinian chain of social evolution is underscored with Lord and Lady Clayton speaking of their ancestors who tamed the wilderness:

What they did may we not do? And even better, for are we not armed with ages of superior knowledge, and have we not the means of protection, defence, and sustenance which science has given us? (*Tarzan of the Apes* 28)

In that sense, Tarzan is presented as the superhero of the novel; he is this primeval man who will undergo the sacred quest from darkness to Enlightenment.

The superhero narratives are equivalent to imperial narratives that are “especially dependent on... imperial representations and divisions” (Gavaler 108). At this historical and political juncture, there started to appear in western media that characters that travel to far away laces to rediscover the origins of old mysteries. The authors who turned to such modes of character creation intended to refer to the need of resorting to an alter ego; another human version that would add to the imperial legacy. According to Berglund, Tarzan is created as an “American Adam”; that’s to say, the embodiment of the American myth of a self-made place inhabited by self-made Adams” (101). The use of the jungle as the setting of his story is Burrough’s means to stress the genetic and natural evolution of the white race, which can only develop its natural superiority when being isolated from the chains of civilization. In this sense, Tarzan provides an opposite image to the western civilization; he is the protagonist who is able to reconcile binary oppositions: He is “civilized yet savage, a man who can too easily become an animal, a modern gentleman and an anachronistic primitive” (Reid 148). He is this white noble Englishman who through accidental happenings comes to be born and nurtured on one of these black African colonies to pass with all the inherited virtues and the acquired strengths from darkness to civilization.

The jungle is a mirror of Tarzan’s own self; it is this untouched wilderness that awaits discovery. This setting shapes his identity. His ability to survive since infancy reflects his embodiment of “the supreme combination of a rugged jungle upbringing and a natural, hereditary intelligence so as to become the perfect specimen of manhood” (Burroughs *Tarzan the Untamed*

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109). Besides the character of Tarzan and his wild environment, the novel is further stuffed with stereotypes that Burroughs promotes through the pages of his narrative; stereotypes that only echo the imperial legacy. According to A.G. Hopkins, Jane “is the epitome of social orthodoxy” (439). Tarzan’s redemption from barbarism is thanks to her and her preservation of the civilized moral values. Moreover, the reunion of Tarzan and Jane “personifies the Anglo-Saxon union and gives notice of the arrival of a new global superpower” (Hopkins 439). That is, Tarzan is presented as the perfect hybridity of primitivity and civilization: “in his veins, though, flowed the blood of the best of a race of mighty fighters, and back of this was the training of his short lifetime among the fierce brutes of the jungle” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 72 ). The hybrid identity which Tarzan will cherish is concretized at the beginning by Burroughs through the initial act of Kala’s breastfeeding Tarzan: “Then hunger closed the gap between them, and the son of an English lord and an English lady nursed at the breast of Kala, the great Ape” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 50), and then by his assimilation into western civilization with the teachings of the French D’Arnot.

#### **IV. The Quest for Identity**

Tarzan’s identity is continuously defined and redefined in relation to his surrounding environment, or rather the shifting symbolic orders he finds himself thrust into. Tarzan hence is at once exposed to a multiplicity of mirrors that lead to his understanding of his position in the symbolic order. The first mirror to which Tarzan is exposed after being brought up within the jungle inhabitants has been his fellow-apes:

He was nearly ten before he commenced to realize that a great difference existed between himself and his fellows. His little body, burned brown by exposure, suddenly caused him feelings of intense shame, for he realized that it was

entirely hairless, like some low snake, or other reptile.

(*Tarzan of the Apes 56*)

With the passage of time and the development of Tarzan, the gap between him and the ape species starts to widen. From their perspective, he is weak, so slow in development that they even question “how stupid he [is]” (*Tarzan of the Apes 56*). Kala’s husband, Tublat, strives to convince her to get rid of him: “He will never be a great ape....Always will you have to carry him and protect him. What good will it be to the tribe? None; only a burden” (*Tarzan of the Apes 56*). However, if compared to normal humans, as the narrator constantly reminds the reader, he is much stronger: “Though but ten years old he was fully as strong as the average man of thirty” (*Tarzan of the Apes 56*). With the passage of time and with his struggle to assimilate within this wild context and becomes an eligible counterpart, Tarzan starts to possess a peculiar position among his fellows who think of him as having unique qualities but at the same time different from them.

Feeling unable to satisfy their gaze, he darts into wilderness in an attempt to find his real self. Tarzan discovers the cabin of his deceased parents amidst the jungle. This house emblemizes this racial friction between the various conflicting sectors on this newly-found land. In it comes his first encounter with books. He finds a child’s illustrated book for learning alphabets which, ironically, was necessarily his before his parents die, as if he is getting back to pursue his lessons after experiencing the teachings of the wild jungle. Tarzan’s human identity starts to be shaped in this stage which marks the beginning of recognition and provides an explanation for the differences he detects in himself. The alphabet book now becomes the second mirror for Tarzan: “there were many apes with faces similar to his own” (*Tarzan of the Apes 70*). He spends years and years coping with his primeval life while paying his constant visits to his parents’ cabin where their bones lay untouched. Here comes his encounter with language; the main factor for his identity formation.

According to Lacan and other theorists, “the process through which the individual becomes a speaking subject is related,

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in varying degrees, to the process through which the individual acquires language” (Holmes 5). The “function of the mirror stage thus turns out...to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to stablish a relationship between an organism and its reality- or, as they say, between the Innerwelt and the Umwelt” (Lacan 78). The subject “enters language in relationship to the other in perception, the perceived object or person, as recognized by the other” (Hendrix 1). That is, “the subject is only present in language in anticipation of a response from the other” (Hendrix 1). In the case of Tarzan, these new discoveries help him build a new identity-ego, and the ape-mirror stops being the judging scale: “No longer did he feel shame for his hairless body or his human features, for now his reason told him that he was of a different race from his wild and hairy companions” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 83). He learns that “he was a M-A-N, they were A-P-E-S” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 83). While at the beginning, through his ape-mother and the rest of the ape tribes, Tarzan finds himself ‘different’ or rather inferior to them and strives hard to fit in the symbolic position assigned to him, the books he discovers act as a textual mirror whose “gaze is directed outward toward” him and reshapes the symbolic order in which he is positioned (Holmes 21). At the age of eighteen, Tarzan reaches maturity and turns into “an English lordling, who could speak no English, and yet who could read and write his native language” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 106). Hence, before his exposure to this textual mirror, he has considered himself the ‘Other’ for the apes. However, after this new discovery, he looks at them as ‘Others’. Till this moment, there is no real encounter with human beings; only through pictures in the newly-discovered books.

The first encounter with real humans occurs when he sees the black savage who kills his ape-mother. This encounter, although painful, has introduced Tarzan to new signs of civilization: clothes and the bow and arrow. These tokens of civilization help Tarzan prove his superiority and uniqueness among the jungle creatures. This stage introduces him to the

human species while still believing his being superior to them. Later, the arrival of the Clayton family on the colony, a substitute of his deceased parents, marks the beginning of a major phase in Tarzan's identity formation. Professor Porter, his daughter Jane, Mr. Clayton and the rest of their company find the cabin and decide to bury the bones of the dead nobles and use the cabin for their own comfort. Tarzan finds in these people similarity to his own apparition; the skin colour, the way of thinking and nobility in all aspects. Meeting these similar creatures help him solve the riddle that has long puzzled him: " true it was the order of the jungle to take his mate by force; but could Tarzan be guided by the laws of the beasts? Was not Tarzan a Man? He was puzzled" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 268). Through their mirror, thus, he gains a new identity and a new position in this newly-discovered symbolic dimension.

For Jane, he was this 'god-like man...with the strength of a wild elephant, the agility of a monkey, and the bravery of a lion' who has saved them several times from the brutal jungle inhabitants (*Tarzan of the Apes* 240); a mysterious creature: "What a perfect creature! There could be naught of cruelty or baseness beneath that godlike exterior. Never, she thought had such a man strode the earth since God created the first in his own image" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 269-270). Jane represents civilization in its prime; civilization that must be protected from the apes and black Africans. Now Jane becomes the new 'mirror' in whose eyes her tries to "appear well" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 277), and the only way is to adhere to the codes of civilization. Burroughs draws similarities between Jane and Lady Alice, Tarzan's mother. She is the closest resemblance to his real mother, and thus pleasing her and gaining her satisfaction satisfies his buried child-desire to please his mother. Jane also loves Tarzan, but for her he is this 'Other' that she cannot accept as he is: "Slowly she turned and walked back to the cabin . she tried to imagine her wood-god by her side in the saloon of an ocean liner. She saw him eating with his hands, tearing his food like a beast of prey.... She shuddered" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 301). The question that always echoes in her mind is

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whether he could “ever rise to her social sphere? Could she bear to think of sinking to his? Would either be happy in such a horrible misalliance?” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 386). At this stage comes the role of D’Arnot who teaches Tarzan the codes of civilization, and tells him that he is the child of these deceased nobles.

With D’Arnot’s trainings and Tarzan’s consistent attempts, he becomes “accustomed to the strange noises and odd ways of civilization, so that presently none might know that two short months before, this handsome Frenchman... had been swinging naked through primeval forests” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 352). When Jane sees him in Wisconsin, she is dazzled by the shift in his appearance and behaviour; and this is how he meets her: “I have come across the ages out of the dim and distant past from the lair of the primeval man to claim you-for your sake I have become a civilized man -for your sake I have crossed oceans and continents-for your sake I will be what- ever you will me to be” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 399). Accordingly, reading the character of Tarzan under the Lacanian lens, the reader comes across the multiplicity of mirrors that shape his final identity; an identity which is forged through a long journey with the ‘Others’; a journey tailored by Burroughs to signify imperial ideologies and satisfy colonial ends.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Written in 1912 and published in 1914 when the western expansion was reaching its peak, Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes* is a narrative whose impact has lasted for almost a century with a multitude of sequels, adaptations and re-imaginings. Burroughs underscores the importance of genetic inheritance promoted by the imperial ideologies but concurrently questions its sufficiency. The strength of Tarzan’s genetic inheritance, which adheres to the Darwinian theory of evolution, makes him a superhero. Still, the novel stresses the debilitating influences of civilization, which, when far away from them, human



resourcefulness can fully and freely develop. The text has mainly been studied as a representation of the western colonial experience in its peak. Critics have primarily tackled it as a delineation of the United States' foreign policy, criticizing the exploitation of these foreign lands with the justification of saving humanity from savagery. Hence, if we reconsider Tarzan in the light of Darwinian theories, he is this typical man passing through darkness to light by perceiving knowledge and natural superiority: "Tarzan of the apes, little primitive man, presented a picture filled at once, with pathos and with promise- an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance toward the light of learning" (*Tarzan of the Apes* 79). His natural superiority and genetic inheritance, as a natural descendent of the White race, helps him deastly darkness in which he has been nurtured. He thus becomes the superhero who is destined to rescue the world from savagery, and rescue civilization from its brutality.

In this sense, the present paper thus has attempted a Lacanian reading of *Tarzan of the Apes* underscoring the role of the 'Other' in the process of identity formation with special concentration on Jacques Lacan's theory of 'the mirror stage'. The text is studied from two perspectives; first, as a textual mirror that reflects the exported western image regarding the colonial legacy; second, the article also traces the different mirrors to which Tarzan has been exposed. Tarzan, the embodiment of the imperial West and its evolving stages, has been positioned into multiple symbolic orders that have shaped his identity throughout his quest of evolution. His journey from the jungle to his real home replicates the Darwinian process of evolution from savagery toward civilization. The narrative also underscores the western notion of the importance of knowledge as the saviour from savagery and the notion of the divine natural selection of the superior race that is destined to save humanity. Notably, the closure of the novel with Tarzan's changing his destination by travelling to Wisconsin in hoping to marry Jane rather than going to England to reclaim his usurped estate, reflects Burrough's view that the colonial project is shifting toward the United States.



**The Journey from Savagery to Civilization: A Lacanian Reading of  
Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*  
Dr. Fatma Khalil Mostafa el Diwany**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

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