Unhuman-Like: Congolese Natives in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

This article presents a new reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It shows how Congolese natives were misrepresented by Conrad. Conrad craftily dehumanises the Congolese natives through a systematic method that can be detailed as follows: (a) representing natives as an underdeveloped species of creatures has nothing that qualifies it to be human-like, (b) seeing such creatures only partially, that is as "heads", "faces", "eyes", "lips", "noses", "necks", "feet" etc., but not as whole human beings, and (c) asserting that "these creatures" (23), can be anything but human beings. It is through such a trichotomy that Conrad's (Marlow's) racism will be exposed.

Key Words: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Congolese Natives, Representations

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ليسوا كالبشر: صورة الكونغوليين في رواية قلب الظلام لجوزيف كونرد

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الملخص:

يفصل هذا البحث الجانب العنصري في تصوير جوزيف كونرد لسكان الكونغو وكيف أنه حاول تصويرهم أنهم وان أشبهوا بني الإنسان إلا أنهم ليسوا بشرا. يتضح هذا التصوير للكاتب من خلال تركيزه على أمور ثلاثة في تصوير الكونغوليين: (أ) تصوير السكان الأصليين للكونغو على أنهم صنف لم يمر بمراحل التطور التي مر بها باقي البشر وهم بذلك يفتقرون الى السمات التي تؤهلهم أن يطلق عليهم بشر (ب) جعل النظرة الى هؤلاء السكان الأصليين قاصرة بالتركيز على أجزاء من الجسد بعينها دون النظر لأي منهم كإنسان كامل. فيكون التركيز على الرأس تارة والعين تارة أخرى والشفتان تارة ثالثة وهكذا(ج) وصم أولاء السكان بأنهم همجيين ووحشيين واكلي لحوم بشر بحيث لا يكونوا بشرا ولا ترسم لهم صورة البشر في ذهن القارئ.

كلمات مفتاحية: رواية قلب الظلام – جوزيف كونرد – صورة الكونغوليين.

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

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Dr. Mohammad Ahmad Mostafa Alleithy

Readers of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may be tricked by some passages in the novella in which Marlow, the narrator, only ostensibly as this article asserts, sympathises with the Congolese natives. The following is one such passage that can easily take readers into believing that the Marlow adopts an anti-colonialist standpoint:

> 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 when you look into it too much. (York 7)

Elsewhere, Marlow wonders why Europeans should consider the Congolese natives as enemies. "there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!" (18). He cannot believe they are enemies anyhow as he sees how submissively obedient and silent they are. At another point in the novella, Marlow criticises Europeans for their abuse of the Congolese natives. He resents European excessive violence practiced against the Congolese. Marlow confesses that he was "appalled" (21) by what he saw, "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire" (21). Congolese natives were completely consumed by European (Belgian) labour regulations. Endless work was deadly to many of them; Marlow tells readers how some of them died at work sites. The narrator goes on to assert the horrors of what happened to such poor, submissive natives:

> Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. "They were dying slowly— (22)

Noticeably, these quotations, that show the narrator's possible sympathising with the Congolese natives, and the like of these

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quotations, occur early enough in the course of the novella. Few lines after the above quotation, Marlow defensively states that, "[t]hey were not enemies, they were not criminals…" (22). The words connote that such natives deserve mercy not enslavement, humility or death that they experience at the hands of Europeans in the Congo.

These quotations can easily mislead readers into believing that, even though he is a European, Marlow is an unbiased narrator who tries to provide a well-balanced view of what he was an eyewitness of. Here, as elsewhere in the novella, the author tried to put on the mask of wisdom and, to be more specific, that of "Buddha" (6, 118) that is alluded to two times, one time at the beginning and another at the end of the novella.

It is to be noticed that Conrad, (the author) and Marlow (the narrator) can be referred to interchangeably throughout the novella. This will be discussed in more detail later in this article. Marlow even gives an example of how kind he was to one of the Congolese creatures, "I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket" (22). Marlow mentions this to reveal one of the humane aspects about his personality, but he never mentioned his role as a facilitator of robbing the Congolese land and natives of their own resources or of manipulating the Congolese natives to carry out his (European company's evil) plans. Significantly enough, many of the "secrets" have remained unannounced. Prior to their departure to the Congo Europeans, it should be remembered, were "sworn to secrecy" (43).

Such claims of a humanitarian approach adopted by the narrator who seems, to take up the role of a fair (literary) judge can easily be dismantled and refuted through investigating of the narrator's/author's own outlook on natives as it gets unveiled throughout the novella. These stances of Marlow's, it is argued, are sheer pretentions and groundless claims. It is the aim of this article, therefore, to unveil and expose Conrad's (Marlow's) racism that is believed to be, so to speak, sugarcoated in the novella, through a thorough investigation of the text. It is only through meticulous

and careful reading that narrator's (author's) Eurocentrism and white-man's racism will be asserted.

To begin with, all through the novella Marlow avoided using the words "people" to refer to Congolese natives as much as he could. Only rarely does he use the word, and even when he does, he uses words such as "the", "these" or "his" to specify them as people of a special type, that is of a different, and even "exotic", species of creatures. Anthony Burgess must have had this idea in mind when he wrote, "[Conrad] normally writes of the English character as seen against a background of the exotic…" (212). Important words will be italicized to show how Conrad's text teems with racist words.

Examples of this proliferate throughout the novella. "[S]ometimes you've got to clear out so quick when *the people* get angry", "'I had lots of trouble to keep *these people* off,'", and "a big crowd of *his people* watched him", "I saw *the black people* run" (20), "*The people* had vanished" (10). To get a clearer picture of the author's racism suggested through using "the", "these" or "his" before the word people when it refers to the Congolese natives, let's consider the following quotation about some Europeans attending an interview, "[i]n the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. *People* were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them" (12). On another occasion, the narrator uses the word "people" , without a modifier or article, to refer to Europeans, "[i]n the course of these confidences it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary, and goodness knows to how many more *people* besides,…" (15). Conrad is a highly skilled writer, and that is why every single detail in his writing style counts greatly. F. R. Leavis considers Conrad one of the few main "cornerstones of [the English] canonical tradition" (Padley 165).

The author's racism is a stigmatising feature of the work. Even though he does not state it directly, the author does not look at Congolese natives as human beings. Indeed, they can be anything other than human beings, and, if they have anything to do

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with humanity, they can at best be looked at as an underdeveloped species of humans lagging far behind the well developed species of humans Europeans have evolved into. Significantly, the author used the word "evolutions" (102) as he described such creatures!

As a matter of fact, the narrator is by no means ready to see such people as humans. They are anything but humans beings. His connoisseurship and prowess, however, let him down in this respect. Despite his almost unparalleled craftsmanship, the author could not proceed persistently as he put himself forth initially, at the start of the novella. European givens of the superiority complex (direct.mit.edu/), being inculcated and instilled in the very genes of Europeans inevitably seeped and found their ways into the text/narration. This fact prevented the narrator throughout the novella from looking at the Congolese natives as people living on their lands. All through the work, he could never put this fact forward to his readers. On the contrary, he gradually kept degrading and distancing such people from their humanity. This would make the land without (human) owners, and Europeans can, therefore, claim the right of owning the land as well as the creatures that live on it, including such an underdeveloped species that the author/narrator did his best to avoid calling them people.

> In an often-quoted remark, Joseph Conrad writes in *A Personal Record* (1912) that as a nine-year-old boy, he placed his finger on a map of sub-Saharan Africa and determined, "When I grow up I shall go there" – to "that blankest of blank spaces on the earth's figured surface". (Myers)

At this point in the article, it should be announced that Conrad (the author) and Marlow (the narrator) can be looked at as two sides of the same coin; identifications between the two are countless. Conrad himself confesses of that, in his 1917 introduction to the novella, as he asserted, "*Heart of Darkness* is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts" (webpages.uidaho.edu). Based on this confession, the article will, more often than not, refer to the author and the narrator interchangeably, as noted above. I, therefore, think that the word

"authator" can be blended to refer to both author and narrator. This article endeavours to show that Conrad's/Marlow's outlook on the Congolese natives, as revealed in *The Heart of Darkness*, is a profoundly racist one, even though Marlow tried to play the role of an unbiased narrator.

Conrad craftily dehumanises the Congolese natives through a systematic method that can be explained as follows:

(a) Representing natives as such an underdeveloped species of creatures has nothing that qualifies it to be human-like,

(b) seeing such creatures only partially; that is as "heads", "faces", "eyes", "lips", "noses", "necks", "feet" etc., but not as whole human beings, and

(c) asserting that "these creatures" (23), or "those creatures" (113), can be anything but human beings. It is through such a trichotomy that Conrad's (Marlow's) racism will be asserted.

(a) Natives: An Underdeveloped Species of Creatures with Nothing that Qualifies them to be Human Beings

Marlow represents the Congolese natives as unhuman-like. They lack everything that can qualify them to be humans; they do not have clothes, language or houses. Time and again, Marlow reminds his readers that such creatures are naked; he describes their, "*naked* breasts, arms, [and] legs" (66). Readers are also told that, "A lot of people, mostly *black* and *naked*, moved about like ants." (19). The narrator noticeably uses the words "black" and "bronze" repeatedly as disqualifying characteristics that keep such creatures short of being recognised as humans. The context purports the question: Can such black (or bronze) creatures be humans? It is also through the contextual discourse of the novella that the answer is implied in the negative!

The following quotation goes in line with Conrad's outlook on the Congolese natives:

> the crowd, of whose presence behind the curtain of trees I had been acutely conscious all the time, flowed out of the woods again, filled the clearing, covered the slope with a mass of *naked*, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies. (101)

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Remarkably, using trees as curtains to hide behind makes such natives more like animals: monkeys or apes, rather than humans. Furthermore, the author's using of "flowed out" to describe the motion of such natives suggests the idea that such creatures are fluid-like rather than being human-like. Another time, Marlow states that the "[b]ush swarmed with limbs". This creates an image of such creatures to be apes or, at best, to be Tarzan-like ones (gutenberg.org/cache). Such are important implications divulged by the author's careful selection of words.

Absence of language is another dehumanizing feature that the author employs to disqualify the natives of being looked at as humans. The idea suggested is that it is impossible for such, so to speak, languageless creatures to be humans. Even the few words uttered by two of the natives throughout the whole text are (a distorted form of) English. Interestingly, this was a point that attracted Chinua Achebe's attention, (Achebe). Other than that, their utterings are no more than mimes (81), moans (37), groans (25, 28, 36), gestures (28, 47. 51), mutterings (31), cries and screeches! (33, 68, 77, 68, 103).

Another dehumanizing aspect employed by the author is that of absence of homes. Such creatures do not live in houses; they live in bushes or, at best, in poorly built huts, made "of reeds" (54) or "clay" (31, 33) and that makes them closer to baser species of creatures such as monkeys or orangutans than to real human beings. The following is a passage about how orangutans build their nests:

> Orangutans are arboreal mammals who are known not only as forest gardeners, but as forest architects, with magnificent nest building abilities. These primates spend their days climbing, foraging for food, and brachiating through the forest canopy. Afterwards, they build a new nest every single night to sleep in.
>
> These smart creatures carefully select branches and leaves to shape the foundation of their nest. This is done by bending and twisting the branches into a

> base structure, ensuring that it is strong enough to support their body weight. (orangutan.org.uk/)

Congolese natives are not, in any way, better creatures than such animals; "[t]hese natives are in the bush" (79). Furthermore, many a time does Conrad assert that the Congo land was almost empty. Thus, while reading the novella, readers come across sentences and phrases that state, assert emptiness and absence of villages, "There were … no villages" (60). Significantly, the word empty occurs 14 times, mostly to describe the landscape or the villages. The following are some examples of a cunning way in which the word was employed, "empty immensity of earth" (18), "[a] network of paths spreading over the empty land, through the long grass" (26), "empty and desolate station" (46), "An empty stream" (48), "the emptiness of the landscape" (89). Readers get the impression that the Congo is an uninhabited country. This goes with Conrad's own belief. As a child, he would often think of such lands in Africa as empty (Myers).

(b) Seeing such Creatures only Partially; that is as "eyes", "lips", "noses", etc., but not as whole Human Beings

Throughout the novella, the author insisted on seeing the Congolese natives as parts of human bodies; he could never think of, or accept, the idea that such parts could make up whole human bodies:

> I saw a *face* amongst the leaves on the level with my own, looking at me very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from my *eyes*, I made out, deep in t he tangled gloom, *naked breasts*, *arms*, *legs*, glaring *eyes*—the bush was swarming with human *limbs* in movement, glistening, of *bronze colour*. The twigs shook, swayed, and rustled, the arrows flew out of them, and then the shutter came to. 'Steer her straight,' I said to the helmsman. He held his *head* rigid, *face* forward; but his *eyes* rolled, he kept on lifting and setting

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> down his *feet* gently, his *mouth* foamed a little. 'Keep quiet!' I said in a fury. I might just as well have ordered a tree not to sway in the wind. I darted out. (66)

Elsewhere in the novella, Marlow sticks to the same method of seeing such natives only partially; a way that can be looked at as othering and dwarfing such people, and thence denying them their humanity and ridding them of it:

> 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. (20)

In line with the above-mentioned quotations, the following one asserts the author's standpoint that such creatures should not be looked at as human beings, "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" (102).

Thus, throughout the novella, Marlow barely considers or refers to the Congolese natives as human beings. He even goes on to see them as ghosts or phantoms. They

> were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. (23)

Natives, as seen by the author, are not people. They are "heads", "eyes", "lips", etc, but not humans! The authator (author/narrator) insists on seeing such beings only partially and avoids using the words humans, people or fellows as much as he can. Thus, while the words "humans", "people" and "men" are mentioned only few times, the words "eye(s)", "face(s)", "skin",

"bones" are, on the other hand, mentioned countless times. Indeed, the author struggled not to think of them as humans; he used the double negative mode to assert, "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).

Significantly, Conrad's mind is not qualified to see such creatures that have eyes, hands, legs, feet, footprints, knees, mouths, lips, heads, necks, chins, noses as human beings. The gestalt concept (Morner) is not at work as Conrad's mind erroneously orientates him to see such creatures to be nonhumans, or an underdeveloped species or else they can be seen even as aliens, ghosts or even insects: ants (19, 86)! This is reminiscent of Macbeth's addressing of the bloody ghost of Banquo:

What man dare, I dare:

Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,

The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves

Shall never tremble: or be alive again,

And dare me to the desert with thy sword;

If trembling I inhabit then, protest me

The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!

Unreal mockery, hence!

[*GHOST OF BANQUO vanishes*]

Why, so: being gone,

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> I am a man again. Pray you, sit still.
> (Act III – Scene IV- Lines: 99-109 gutenberg.org/files)

They can even be anything but humans. Marlow asserts that these "moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin". He focused greatly on the gleam of the eyes under the trees; he saw them to be "black bones", "shoulder(s)" resting against trees, "eyelids" and "sunken eyes" looked up at him (22). This degenerating and dehumanising outlook is really serious. This is a thing that Marlow did not want to accept as this will necessarily oblige him to accept the fact that he, as well as the gang of European "Explor[ers]" (43), or batch of "pilgrims" (90, 91, 92, 98, 102) were inhuman to such humans. Strange as it may sound but true, the weakest and the most submissive are humans, and the most tyrannical and overbearing are humans!

In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, it was sufficient for the eponymous protagonist to see footprints on the sand to reach the conclusion that there was another human being at least on the island (139). In this novella, however, all such thousands of heads, faces, necks, shoulders, eyes, lips, noses, feet, footprints, necks and limbs were not enough for Conrad, and his narrator, to acknowledge that such were native human beings who lived on their own native land!

(c) Asserting that "these creatures" (23), or "those creatures" (113), can be Anything but Human Beings.

Throughout the novella, Conrad kept referring to the Congolese natives as "brutes" (41, 74), "savages", mentioned 19 times, (75, 88, 92), "cannibals" (50), "figures" (36, 99, 116), "phantoms" (23, 52, 117), "apparitions" (92, 92), "ghosts" (71), "shapes" (22, 91, 97, 112) and "beings" (74, 89, 90). They may even be "ghost[s]" (71), but not people. They could simply be anything but human beings. Dehumanizing references to such people proliferate all through the work. They are such "[b]lack shapes" (22), "moribund shapes" (22), "Dark human shapes" (91),

but not human beings, "horned shapes stirring at my back" (112), "black shadows" (22), "savages in the bush" (70), "crowd(s) of savages" (90), "unhappy savages" (20), "those savages" (26), "paddling savages" (46), "some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief" (63), "silly, atrocious, sordid, savage(s), or simply mean, without any kind of sense" (71), "appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings" (74), and "the veriest savage(s)" (88).

He, furthermore, calls them as "niggers" and "beasts". They can be anything but not human beings. This is one of the reasons why the "gothic" element was explored by some researchers (Vandertop). Marlow (Conrad) can be proven guilty of presenting such a distorted image of such natives. As Peter Barry says, such are "the white representations of colonial countries" (197). This is the way he wanted to see them; and this is the frame he deliberately placed around such natives. He did not try to reflect on their religion, culture, traditions, tribal systems or relationship with land. They

> were *nothing earthly* now—nothing but black *shadows* of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. (22)

One paragraph that lies at the heart of the novella, can be said to represent a climactic point of this discussion. Specifically speaking, this is a passage in which Marlow (Conrad in disguise), asserts the idea that he could not think of, or accept, such Congolese creatures as fellow human beings:

> Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and

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> passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. The faces twitched with the strain, the hands trembled slightly, the eyes forgot to wink. (52)

This is, undoubtedly, one of the most serious acknowledgments made throughout this novella. Strategically, it lies at the heart of the novella. This particular quotation can stand out on its own as a distinct indictment and eloquent testimony of Marlow's (Conrad's) racism and colour segregation. It speaks volumes of the whites' asserted superiority and humanity as starkly opposed to the Congolese (black natives') asserted and degenerated inferiority, inhumanity, beastial brutality and cannibalism. The identity of the natives is craftily fashioned and wrought. Nothing about it sounds human-like, rather it is far from humanity. Indeed, other species of animals can even be closer to humans than such unhuman-like creatures. As Marlow notes:

> They were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a

> kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. (22-3)

Throughout such a fictional discourse, Malow (Conrad) did all he could to distance such beings from being looked at or considered human beings. Gradually, as this article shows, Marlow degraded the Congolese of their humanity; they are nonhuman creatures, beings with no language, clothes or houses. In addition, and equally important, he insists on seeing them only partially.

Conclusive to this investigation of Marlow's representing of the Congolese natives is that he looked at them as an underdeveloped species of human beings. This copes with his outlook as a European who denied such natives their basic rights of being humans. He always resisted the idea of seeing them as anything other than bush and/or jungle creatures. They have no relations that may relate them to the human race. The narrator, like the author himself, saw the land of the Congo as empty. It is worth noting that despite the fact that this novella takes place in the Congo, the author never mentions the words Congo or Congolese!

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